Material 2 English version

Security for Children in the Digital World: From Interaction and Content Risks in Online Communication to Participatory Models of Platform Design

Interview with Dr. Ingrid Stapf, researcher for media ethics and children's rights at the University of Tübingen

Dr. phil. Ingrid Stapf is writing a habilitation on media ethics, and particularly their relation to children, in the digital age. She teaches media ethics at the FAU Erlangen and the FH Potsdam, and she was for many years spokesperson for communication and media ethics in the DGPuK. She is editor of a series on media ethics for Nomos publishing.

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The interview was conducted by Laura Schelenz during a conversation with Ingrid Stapf at the University of Tübingen.

LS: Dr. Stapf, you are a researcher in media ethics and children's rights at the Center for Ethics at the University of Tübingen. Can you briefly describe what you do in your daily work?

IS: Well, I observe social and technical developments and develop research questions about them. And in this context, I also develop projects that take up these questions, also with the aim of stimulating discourse on them in society. And the scientific idea behind this is also to create awareness of various challenges or areas of tension that I find ethically relevant, ultimately to enable people to act as self-determined individuals and promote their own well-being and social and political participation - whether as teachers, educators, parents or media actors in their own right, but also as media providers [e.g., platforms].

LS: And you are currently working on the issue of security for children in digital environments. Why is this issue topical and important?

IS: We know from empirical data such as the KIM or JIM studies that children are using digital media earlier and earlier in their own media biography. And this has to do with the fact that information and communication technologies are more easily accessible, that they are simply present in households and that children can use them relatively independently. But they very often use digital media unaccompanied, especially as they get older, unaccompanied by parents or other guardians. Being accompanied means, for example, talking about experiences. What does it do to you when you had a negative or harmful experience online? What does it trigger? What do you want to do now to strengthen your self-confidence and deal with the experience? All of this requires a lot of interaction and good relationships.

Furthermore, digital media, tools, and apps are often not designed for children, and they often don't take into account the interests and particular vulnerabilities of children. That is why we

are increasingly finding security hazards in the digital marketplace of opportunities without children being aware of them. And it is also about the different interests and behaviors of children (in social media, in online games, in obtaining information, in creating their own content), so there is a very complex interplay of factors here and this must also be taken into account when designing for children.

For example, and we may come to this later, we can talk about security risks. These are primarily variations of sexual harassment and assault. They are phenomena such as cyber grooming, cyber bullying, hate speech, but also privacy violations. And what makes this issue of child safety in the digital world particularly relevant and urgent is that there is still too little regulation in the digital environment, especially when it comes to platforms. In other words, we have regulatory vacuums that simply mean that children are not sufficiently protected.

LS: You have already pointed out the risks. I am now interested in the interaction risks, in particular, that is, the risks that occur when you exchange information or communicate on the Internet. There are also content risks, which relate to content that is harmful to children and young people. Perhaps you could say something more about these two groups of risks.

IS: Yes, that's a very good question. Traditionally, we have a framework for child and youth media protection, which has constitutional status in Germany. This means that the media freedoms in Article 5 [of the German constitution] are restricted, among other things, by the general protection of privacy, but also by child and youth media protection principles. And Germany really has a very nuanced child and youth media protection framework. When we talk about content risks or youth media protection in general, then there is a social consensus, so to speak, about what we *don't* want children to consume because it might disturb them in the long run. This can be frightening content but also the glorification of violence or brutalization. And then we look at, for example, extreme depictions of violence or pornography.
I am myself an inspector at the FSK and the FSF, that evaluate the suitability of films for different age groups. And we have different levels from simple endangerment of minors to serious endangerment of minors. And this is where the classic content risks appear. This is classic child and youth media protection.

But with the emergence of social media, it has become clear that we also need to think much more about interaction risks. What happens *between* children or between children and adults in the context of communication or interaction online. In public discourse, we also speak of online risks. And here we can already see the interplay between education and regulation: one cannot succeed without the other. Because these online risks are no longer the classic scenario of the child sitting in the living room and the parents having control over the remote; rather, children are often immersing into these digital worlds by themselves and can do so from anywhere. And that's why we need to empower and strengthen children so that they can deal with these risks.

There are areas, where we are in complete agreement in society about what must not happen under any circumstances. And this is also regulated by law. And this is primarily extreme violence that denigrates human dignity, objectifying pornography, abuse or sexual exploitation, but also extremist content and radicalization. This area is particularly protected by the law. But then we have a huge grey area where we always have to see from a cultural or socio-cultural perspective, where we can generalize and say that this has a negative effect on children. And because we often don't know the answer, we also have to ask the children themselves about their experiences.

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LS: This leads me to another question I would like to ask, namely, the participation of children and youth. How does that work? How can children and young people be involved in the design of online media?

IS: Well, the children's rights framework considers children as acting subjects and not just as those whom we have to protect. Children are seen as experts of their own life who are at the same time still developing. This is what is meant by "evolving capacities" in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that children are still developing skills and abilities, and this is what makes them vulnerable, but that this does *not* mean that we should decide paternalistically about them. This is precisely what Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is based on: involving children in all issues that affect them.

At the same time, it is important to know that there are different levels or degrees of intensity of participation. There is strongly symbolic participation, where children are taken into consideration because it is somehow wanted or looks good. But we also have much more profound forms of participation, where children can help guide the processes themselves. Children have a right to participate, but they must neither be overburdened nor underchallenged and certainly not instrumentalized. And that's why it's important - and I think this is particularly important for the design of digital media solutions to have a research ethics concept that helps work together with children in a longer process. And then there is another important question when working with children in a participatory way: *Who* is involved? Are we representing many different, perhaps also marginalized children, or are the participants children who, let's say, are already heard anyway?

When we talk about the design of digital media for children, it is also important to realize that children often use a completely different language than adults. For example, coming back to the security risks, children would not necessarily talk about abuse. They would perhaps talk about it in a different way, and we first have to learn to identify these terms and find a common language.

LS: My last question is related to responsibility. Where do you see the responsibility of online platforms?

IS: From an ethical point of view, freedom and responsibility are always two sides of the same coin. In other words, where freedom exists, responsibility begins. Responsibility is always the responsible freedom of individuals or companies in view of the freedom of others. And that means that whoever acts, whoever triggers consequences, bears responsibility. Anyone who acts in the public sphere is accountable to those who are affected by it. And that is why platforms are also accountable, as they produce digital media solutions that have consequences for those interacting with them, especially children and young people.

At the same time, it has to be said that the structures have changed a great deal. In media regulation, we used to have editors-in-chief of newspapers who were personally responsible for a newspaper. With platforms, it is much more difficult to communicate with those who are responsible. An interesting example that really got me thinking was the United States Senate hearing in January 2023 on "Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis", where all the platform owners spoke. Mark Zuckerberg faced many critical questions from a senator on whether he compensates families affected by sexual abuse in digital environments on his platforms, or whether he has apologized personally to those affected. And then, but only

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because this pressure arose and because this was all over the media, he turned around in the room and personally apologized to the parents and relatives of children and young people who had experienced something like this. Of course, this is an ideal case where a person takes responsibility for the consequences of what happened on their platform. However, it is not enough for platforms because the accountability measures must also be transparent, enforceable, and structurally safeguarded. And here we have what I meant earlier with the regulatory vacuum. We are slowly addressing this in Europe with regulatory measures such as the Digital Services Act.

And then, there is always the responsibility of the users themselves. And this includes children and young people. I think it's also very important for them to learn that their actions have consequences for themselves and for others. And that they have to take responsibility for these consequences. This is important again with regard to interaction risks. Children are not only victims but often perpetrators themselves. So, when we talk about hate speech or cyberbullying, for example, we often find this in a school context and we have children as perpetrators, but also as victims and bystanders. And this is exactly where individual responsibility is relevant, that children know what harassment is and how to take responsibility for it, that they perhaps point out to others their responsibility, e.g., to bystanders. And, in case they are victims or survivors of an assault online, they seek help. This is also part of personal responsibility.

Finally, it is important that there are positive incentive systems that make it more likely that responsibility will be taken by platforms. Perhaps we can take these ideas of safety by design, security by design, and rights by design a step further to the issue of responsibility by design. So how can responsibility be embedded into platforms? And yes, I believe that all of this can only be accomplished in a network of responsible parties working together. No one can solve it alone.

LS: Thank you very much for your time and these interesting insights.