

How do children think about technology?

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Children growing up in the West today cannot imagine a world without mobile phones. They use high-tech gadgets without thinking much about them. An international research project will now examine what these skills mean for the society.

"We call them 'power users of [technology](#)' – I haven't found a good Norwegian expression for it yet," says Barbara Wasson, Professor at the Department for Information Science and Media Studies and researcher at InterMedia.

The project is an initiative in cooperation between the Education Development Center in the USA and The United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP).

"It is about children and young people who have developed sophisticated technological skills. My 10-year-old knows for example much more about mobile phones than I do. It comes naturally to them. A lot of efforts have been made to teach children to use computer tools at school, but those who are young now have totally different skills than we can imagine," she explains.

"The first thing people tend to think about is computers, but to be a "power user" involves much more than that. Let's take Game Boy, for example. If you are a child good at Game Boy, it comes with a certain social status. Children call their friends to discuss Game Boy. They have a completely different field of activities than adults and it is a challenge for us to understand how these skills influence institutions, companies and society as such.

"We wish to find out how they think about their own use of technology, and it is important to look at it from many different points of view: development, economy, sociology, learning and cognition, etc. It is an international and interdisciplinary approach which is very exciting," says Wasson.

The UN puts great emphasis on using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for development purposes. While developing countries accounted for only 2 percent of the world's internet users in 1991, this figure has risen to 23 percent in 2001. It can be observed that children who are granted access to communications technology develop the same skills regardless whether they live in developing countries or industrialised countries.

"The project focuses on the special significance ICT has for the economy in developing countries. India, for example, has almost taken over the development within programming because the country offers inexpensive and extremely skilled technical labour," Wasson points out.

Many adults watch the children's mass consumption of technology with scepticism. In newspaper parents are constantly encouraged to pay attention and to limit the time kids spend in front of the computer.

"But if the child was sitting on the couch with a book or a board game, we would be happy, of course. We have an idea of what is good and what is bad, and, for example, this computer issue is linked to research that claims that children get too little physical exercise because they sit in front of the computer instead. However, other research shows that those who use the computer are also often very engaged in sports, meaning that one can be involved in several areas. It is a nuanced picture and there are many research challenges here."

The technology changes society and the patter how we interact with one

another. If you ask a young person how many friends he has, the answer may be one hundred. It is the number he has in his address book in his phone.

Professor Wasson's task will be, among other things, to stimulate research in this field in Europe.

"Just at UoB we have several researchers interested in these issues and I'm going to encourage Norwegian researchers from various institutions to develop projects as part of this research initiative."

Source: The Research Council of Norway

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