

Study finds global support for new UN framework for children's rights online

June 29 2017, by Mark Smith



The global push for a new international framework governing the rights of children online has gained new momentum, after a multinational study found governments and NGOs are calling for formal assistance to recognise and address children's digital rights.

An estimated one in three [children](#) worldwide already uses the internet, and the proportion of users under the age of 18 will grow significantly in

the short term in the southern hemisphere.

"In an era of rapid technological change, children's rights are both realised and infringed in new ways. This poses new and broad-ranging challenges for states when they try to meet their responsibilities to secure children's rights," says the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield OBE, who commissioned the study.

To gain an insight into the current international regime concerning the rights of children online, international experts at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Western Sydney University, along with a leading child rights consultant, conducted a literature review, and interviewed children and key experts from across the globe.

The study, conducted by Professor Sonia Livingstone, Associate Professor Amanda Third and independent consultant Gerison Lansdown, found that states around the world are struggling to respond adequately to the implications of digital environments for children's lives and society more broadly.

In addition, it found governments and organisations that work with children are themselves calling for a coherent, principled, evidence-based framework with which to recognise and address children's rights and best interests.

To help provide this formal guidance, the study recommends a General Comment by the United Nations on children and the digital environment.

"Many countries face the problem that 'fast-paced, widespread growth often occurs far ahead of any understanding of what constitutes safe and positive use in digital contexts,'" says Professor Livingstone, the lead researcher on the study.

"A General Comment would provide urgently needed guidance on the interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and provide an important mechanism for enabling states to safeguard children's provision, protection and participation rights in an era of rapid technological change."

Ms Julie Inman-Grant, the Australian eSafety Commissioner, whose role is upheld internationally as best practice for government approaches to safeguarding users online, says it is important that the global community works collaboratively to share learnings and to proactively involve young people as part of the solution.

"Any new framework should seek to preserve the extraordinary opportunities digital media offers children, whilst minimising online harms and risks. Recognising that the internet is global and laws local, there is a need for frameworks to be consistent and flexible to ensure children's rights in the digital age are safeguarded effectively," says Ms Inman-Grant.

The study recommends:

- An international regime that balances children's participation and protection
- New digital literacy education resources, with child-centred design
- A mechanism to embed children's voices and concerns in developing and implementing new digital resources
- Any business-led innovation be subject to effective national and international regulation that recognise children's rights.

"Without the guidance of a General Comment on these issues, states will continue to struggle to meet their obligations to children," says Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England.

"Taking action now will enable states to face the challenges of the digital age in its early stages. Whilst generating a General Comment on these issues is a complex task, the groundswell of international support on this makes it realistically achievable, and important to try."

More information: The Case for a UNCRC General Comment on Children's Rights and Digital Media: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/~/media/ChildrensCommissioner/Reports/2017/2017-06-Global-Framework-Childrens-Rights-Online.pdf

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