

CAMmer in the Spotlight

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Getting to know... Sonia Livingstone

What are you currently working on? A few months ago I began working on a new project called [Parenting for a Digital Future](#). It draws together ideas of the risk society, parental mediation and childhood agency to ask how children and young people, along with their parents, carers, mentors and educators imagine and prepare for their personal and professional futures in a digital age. It's part of the [Connected Learning Research Network](#) funded by the [MacArthur Foundation](#) until 2017. It builds on my recent one-year ethnography of the living and learning lives of a class of 13 year olds (see [The Class](#)), but now the focus is on parents – especially those who hope or fear what the digital future may hold for their children. The idea is not that the future is inevitably or even substantially 'digital' but, rather, that many people for one reason or another are seizing on the potential of digital

media to actualize a particular vision of their children's present and future. Think for instance of parents who enroll their kids in coding clubs, or whose children have special educational needs, or who find their kids are growing into geeks even if the parents don't get exactly why. I'm now engaged in a series of really fascinating qualitative case studies, so am deeply immersed in fieldwork in homes, schools, coding clubs and digital media arts centres, which I love. We've also started a blog to link our project to that of other researchers and to link up with practitioners and policy makers who work with parents. It's just launched at www.parenting.digital and I'd love to [hear](#) from possible contributors.

What has been your most memorable project, and why? It has to be the EU Kids Online network, which has been my major focus – both

pleasure and pressure – over the last ten years. This has grown from a network of 21 countries to now 33 countries, enabling me to work with a wonderful group of colleagues and friends from diverse disciplines, countries and research cultures. I say ‘pleasure’ because I have learned so much from this research – intellectually, empirically, and in terms of working with policymakers – and I’m proud that together the network achieved so much, while also managing to have quite a lot of fun! I say ‘pressure’ because the effort of coordinating a simultaneous survey of 25000 children and their parents in 25 languages, on ethically tricky issues and to a policymakers’ timetable of ‘always urgent’ nearly killed me. I hope the website at www.eukidsonline.net provides an inroad to our multi-lingual, multi-method, multi-phased research mapping the online activities, skills, risks and opportunities for European children and young people.

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why? I think it’s being the keynote speaker for the first (and so far the only) Day of General Discussion on digital media and children’s rights held by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva last year (the official report is [here](#)). For me, this reflects the fact

that, in the last few years I’ve been thinking how to reframe my work on children’s online risks and opportunities in terms of children’s rights. More widely, I find it fascinating that both child rights and internet governance organisations have recently begun to take note of each other’s activities and concerns. In other words, child rights organisations are grappling with the fact that the internet is becoming embedded in many dimensions of children’s lives, and internet governance organisations are belatedly recognizing that one in three internet users is aged under 18 and so users cannot be blithely assumed to be adult.

What would be your work motto? I have several. One is always seek to communicate! That comes from being an audience researcher, so that whether I’m teaching or interviewing parents or talking to policy folk, I try to figure out not what I want to say but what I want the audience to understand, given their contexts and interests. Another is to stay balanced! That means not



losing sight of teaching quality when research gets intense, or trying to stay a good citizen at work even when policy makers want me to travel around Europe and, most important, never leaving it too long before getting back into fieldwork with children. The last is quality! I may not always achieve it, but I aim always to have the highest expectations of myself, and that helps in avoiding regrets or excessive self-doubt.

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why? Hmm, perhaps my first authored book on children and media - *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment* (Sage, 2002) – one chapter is online. Though I've written lots about children's mediated lives since, this was when I was first working out my framework for researching this field, and I really enjoyed discovering and contributing to the ideas and insights on offer. It's where I worked to bring together the reception, mediation and domestication theories that shaped me as a media audience researcher with the theories of late modernity, public sphere, and the new sociology of childhood that I find most productive in theorizing mediated childhoods. And it reports on a sizeable body of empirical work that –

though I say this myself – remains remarkably fresh even after 15 years of socio-technological change.

If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why? That's quite a timely question, because I've just designed such a project! It would be to research children's rights globally in the digital age. But as I argue in the report of a recent international seminar I held with UNICEF, this would have to be a project conducted dialogically with other researchers around the world, with multiple points of coordination and no top-down vision of the 'right' way to go about it. That in turn demands a process of intense, reflexive and collaborative networking. I do think this is now urgent. Children are now going online in many parts of the world, far beyond the particular gaze of Anglo-American researchers writing in English. This poses many challenges and traps for researchers interested in understanding their circumstances, comparing mediated childhoods across contexts, scoping and supporting children's digital opportunities and figuring out whether and how to intervene in the risks associated with internet use. Perhaps that's what many CAMmer's can work together on in the future?

If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be? Work on what really interests you – irrespective of benevolent advice about fundable problems or what’s important to others. And be really clear about why your topic is interesting, to whom the answers from your research really matter and how you can engage with them, whoever they are. It’s hard enough being a young academic in these competitive and under-funded times without also lacking confidence in your research topic. And conversely, if you love what you do, you’re much more likely to find a way to convince others and figure out a pathway ahead.

Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why? I’d love to nominate Kirsten Drotner, from the University of Southern Denmark. Kirsten has long been my friend, colleague and co-author, for which I’m fortunate. However, I nominate her both for her many and impressive achievements in the field of children and media and because of her rigorously ethical stance as an intellectual, an academic, a spokesperson for children’s interests, a feminist and a European. I have learned so much over the years from observing Kirsten’s ethical commitments in action – from her detailed attention to the politics of everyday life to her national and international efforts to ensure academic work makes the contribution she – and I – think it could and should.