
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: NAVIGATING OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS OF ICTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of ICTs and widespread use of social media have significantly influenced children's human rights in the digital age. These technologies offer benefits such as improved access to education, social connectivity, and freedom of expression, but also pose serious risks, including cyberbullying, privacy violations, online exploitation, and digital inequality. This paper highlights the dual impact of ICTs and social media on children's rights, emphasising the need for a balanced legal approach that maximises benefits while mitigating risks. The study underscores the importance of strong legal frameworks, responsible online behaviour, and robust digital child protection laws to safeguard and empower children in the digital era. As digital platforms become increasingly integrated into children's daily lives, understanding the complexities of their online experiences is essential for effective policy-making. The research draws attention to the evolving nature of digital threats and the need for continuous adaptation of legal and regulatory measures. It also considers the role of parents, educators, and technology providers in fostering a safe and supportive online environment. Ultimately, the findings advocate for collaborative efforts among stakeholders to ensure that children can fully enjoy the opportunities of the digital world while being protected from its inherent dangers.

Keywords: Children's Rights, Digital Age, ICTs, Online Safety, Social Media.

Introduction

The rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the pervasive influence of social media have transformed the landscape of children's rights in the digital age. Children today grow up in an environment where digital technologies shape their social interactions, access to education, and means of self-expression. However, it provides various opportunities, but it also has significant risks that emerge, which include cyberbullying, privacy violations, digital inequality, and online exploitation¹. We have the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which provides a robust framework for safeguarding children's rights; its provisions were not developed before which can directly deal with the protection in the digital era, necessitating a reassessment of how these rights apply in an increasingly digitised world².

ICTs have facilitated unprecedented access to information and communication platforms, allowing children to engage in civic discourse, acquire digital literacy, and exercise their rights to freedom of expression and participation³. However, the same technologies also pose challenges in ensuring children's safety, particularly as they become vulnerable to commercial exploitation, data breaches, and harmful content online⁴. The absence of comprehensive global policies explicitly addressing children's digital rights has led to inconsistent protections, with significant disparities between the different countries' laws⁵.

This paper explores the dual impact of ICTs and social media on children's rights by analysing the benefits and risks associated with digital engagement. It aims to investigate how digital technologies affect children's rights to education, participation, and self-expression while identifying emerging threats such as cyber threats, online abuse, and data privacy concerns. Furthermore, this study examines international legal frameworks, policies, and best practices to ensure a safe and empowering digital environment for children⁶.

¹ Eva Lievens, Sonia Livingstone, Sharon McLaughlin, Brian O'Neill & Valerie Verdoodt, *Children's Rights and Digital Technologies*, METROLOGY 1 (Wei Gao ed., 2018).

² Amanda Third, Sonia Livingstone & Gerison Lansdown, *Recognizing Children's Rights in Relation to Digital Technologies: Challenges of Voice and Evidence, Principle and Practice*, in RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY 376 (2019).

³ Sonia Livingstone & Monica Bulger, *A Global Research Agenda for Children's Rights in the Digital Age*, 8 J. CHILD. & MEDIA 317 (2014).

⁴ Susan Tregeagle & Michael Darcy, *Child Welfare and Information and Communication Technology: Today's Challenge*, 38 BRIT. J. SOC. WORK 1481 (2008).

⁵ Lievens, *supra* note 1.

⁶ Livingstone, *supra* note 3.

As digital technologies continue to shape modern childhood experiences, it is essential to assess how they contribute to both the empowerment and protection of children. While ICTs provide unparalleled opportunities for learning and social interaction, they also introduce challenges that must be addressed through legal and policy interventions. To fully understand this dynamic, it is crucial to examine the positive contributions of ICTs and social media to children's rights before evaluating the present risks and challenges.

Literature Review

The literature highlights both the opportunities and challenges that ICTs and social media present for children's rights. Fischer (2002) discusses the global digital divide and its impact on children's access to technology. Ifyanyi-Ajufo (2013) and Livingstone & Bulger (2014) emphasise that digital technologies can promote children's rights to information, participation, and expression, but also note the need for updated legal frameworks to ensure protection.

Several studies, including Kravchuk (2021, 2022) and Macenaite (2016), focus on privacy and data protection, identifying new risks for children in digital environments and evaluating the effectiveness of regulations like the GDPR. Pavlovic (2017) and Savirimuthu (2011) analyse national and regional efforts to safeguard children online, stressing the importance of harmonised laws and digital literacy. Other research, such as Tilovska-Kechedji & Rakitovan (2018), Virat (2023), and Tregeagle & Darcy (2008), examines the influence of digital technologies on children's education, well-being, and social participation. Collectively, these works call for a child-centred approach to digital policy that balances opportunities with robust protections.

Objectives

1. To identify how ICTs and social media create new opportunities for children.
2. To examine the risks and challenges children face online.
3. To explore effective policies and practices that can protect and promote children's rights in digital environments.

Methodology

This study employs a doctrinal research methodology, relying solely on secondary sources such

as legal frameworks, international treaties, judicial decisions, scholarly articles, and reports from organisations like UNICEF and the UNCRC. A systematic review of existing literature and case law is conducted to assess the legal implications of ICTs and social media on children's rights, with analysis of statutory provisions, policy documents, and judicial interpretations.

Benefits of ICTs and Social Media for Children's Rights

The digital age has reshaped how children access and exercise their fundamental rights. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media have become powerful tools for enhancing education, self-expression, participation and protection. The integration of these technologies into daily life has not only expanded opportunities for children but has also introduced new mechanisms for safeguarding their rights in various ways. ICTs and social media contribute to children's rights across multiple dimensions.

Enhancing Access to Education and Digital Learning

One of the most significant benefits of ICTs is their role in expanding educational opportunities for children, particularly those in marginalised communities. Digital learning platforms provide interactive and engaging content that enhances traditional education methods. According to Livingstone and Bulger (2014), digital tools enable children to learn more personally and efficiently, bridging educational gaps between different socio-economic groups. Online resources such as virtual classrooms, e-books, and educational apps have become critical in ensuring children have access to quality education, even in remote areas⁷. During the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen that ICTs played a crucial role in ensuring educational continuity. Schools transitioned to online learning, highlighting the importance of digital literacy and access to technology⁸. Governments and international organisations have recognised the necessity of digital education policies to support children's right to education in a rapidly evolving technological landscape⁹.

⁷ Srishti Virat, Child Rights in the Digital Environment, 5 INDIAN J.L. & LEGAL RSCH. 1 (2023).

⁸ Elena Tilovska-Kechedji & D. Rakitovan, The Digital World Affecting Children's Rights and the Effects of Internet Governance, 2018 J. E. Eur. Crim. L. 140.

⁹ Joseph Savirimuthu, The EU, Online Child Safety and Media Literacy, 19 Int'l J. Child. Rts. 547 (2011).

Promoting Freedom of Expression and Participation

Social media and ICTs provide children with platforms to voice their opinions, engage in discussions, and participate in democratic processes. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Instagram empower young people to share their perspectives on social issues thus promoting civic engagement. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasises the right of children to express their views freely, and ICTs have facilitated this on a global scale¹⁰. Studies have shown that young activists use social media to advocate for climate action, gender equality, and human rights, amplifying their voices to a global audience¹¹. Furthermore, digital platforms enable children to participate in policy discussions through social media to interact and share their opinions, which can reach decision-makers and contribute to shaping laws that impact them.

Strengthening Child Protection and Online Safety

While digital platforms expose children to risks such as cyberbullying and online exploitation, they also provide essential tools for protection and awareness. Governments and non-governmental organisations have implemented digital literacy programs to educate children about online safety. It is important to highlight that digital reporting mechanisms allow children to report abuse anonymously, ensuring swift intervention from authorities¹². Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) and content moderation tools on various platforms like Facebook and YouTube help to detect and remove harmful content, creating safer online spaces for children¹³. The European Union has also introduced legal frameworks to ensure stricter regulations on data privacy and the online protection of minors¹⁴.

Bridging the Digital Divide and Promoting Inclusion

ICTs can potentially reduce inequalities by providing children from disadvantaged backgrounds with opportunities for growth and development. According to Fischer (2002),

¹⁰ Livingstone, supra note 3.

¹¹ Nnenna Ifeanyi-Ajufo, Human Rights and Access to Information and Communication Technologies, 4 Int'l J. Advanced Legal Stud. & Governance 47 (2013).

¹² Zorana Pavlovic, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) Based Children's Protection in Serbia, 2017 J. E. Eur. Crim. L. 124.

¹³ N. Kravchuk, Privacy as a New Component of "The Best Interests of the Child" in the New Digital Environment, 29 Int'l J. Child. Rts. 99 (2021).

¹⁴ Savirimuthu, supra note 8.

addressing the “global digital divide” is essential to ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, can benefit from the digital revolution. Various initiatives have been implemented to promote digital inclusion, including free Wi-Fi programs and affordable mobile devices. Organisations such as UNICEF advocate for policies that provide children with equitable access to digital resources, particularly in developing countries. This ensures that children from low-income households and rural areas are not excluded from the advantages of digital connectivity¹⁵.

Facilitating Social Connectivity and Mental Well-being

Social media and digital platforms allow children to maintain relationships with family, friends, and communities, especially in times of isolation. Studies indicate that online communities provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, which is crucial for children facing social difficulties or disabilities¹⁶. Moreover, digital platforms provide access to mental health resources, including counselling services, self-help tools, and peer support networks. Programs designed to offer psychological assistance via chatbots and virtual therapy sessions have shown promising results in improving children's well-being¹⁷.

Risks and Challenges in the Digital Environment

The rapid expansion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media has introduced significant risks and challenges for children in the digital environment. One of the most pressing concerns is cyberbullying and online harassment, where children face threats, insults, and harmful content spread through social media platforms. The anonymity of the internet often emboldens perpetrators, making it difficult to trace and punish offenders¹⁸. Cyberbullying has been linked to severe psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and even suicide, requiring stronger legal frameworks and awareness initiatives to combat this growing issue¹⁹.

¹⁵ Livingstone, supra note 3.

¹⁶ Tilovska-Kechedji, supra note 7.

¹⁷ Natalya V. Kravchuk, Privacy of a Child in the Digital Environment: New Risks Unaddressed, 3 Legal Issues Digit. Age 73 (2022).

¹⁸ Pavlovic, supra note 10.

¹⁹ Third, supra note 2.

Another critical issue is privacy concerns and data protection. Many online platforms collect vast amounts of personal data from children, often without their full understanding of the implications. This data can be misused for commercial exploitation, identity theft, or unauthorised surveillance²⁰. While legal frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union provide some safeguards, enforcement remains a challenge across different jurisdictions²¹. The lack of digital literacy among children and their guardians further exacerbates privacy risks, highlighting the need for stronger education on data protection.

Online exploitation and child grooming also pose significant threats, as digital platforms provide an easy avenue for predators to manipulate children into inappropriate relationships. Grooming, sextortion, and child trafficking have become widespread issues, requiring governments and technology companies to implement stricter safeguards²². While international legal instruments, such as the UNCRC's Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, aim to curb online exploitation, enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly in developing nations²³.

The digital divide and inequalities in access to technology further exacerbate these challenges. Children in low-income countries or rural areas often have limited internet access, restricting their ability to benefit from digital education and social opportunities (Fischer, 2002). This lack of access creates an imbalance, where only children from privileged backgrounds can fully leverage the benefits of ICTs. Additionally, digital literacy remains a significant challenge, as many children lack the skills to safely navigate online risks²⁴.

Beyond these tangible risks, digital technology's psychological and social impacts on children are becoming increasingly evident. Excessive screen time and social media use have been linked to reduced attention spans, self-esteem issues, and mental health disorders due to unrealistic portrayals of life online²⁵. Moreover, decreased face-to-face interactions caused by digital dependency can hinder children's social development, making it difficult for them to

²⁰ Kravchuk, *supra* note 15 at 73.

²¹ Milda Macenaite, *Protecting Children's Privacy Online: The Role of the GDPR*, 29 Int'l J. Child. Rts. 99 (2016).

²² Pavlovic, *supra* note 10.

²³ Third, *supra* note 2.

²⁴ Livingstone, *supra* note 3.

²⁵ Third, *supra* note 2.

build real-world relationships²⁶. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended digital well-being initiatives, such as screen time limits and digital literacy programs, to mitigate these adverse effects.

While ICTs and social media offer immense opportunities for children, they also present significant risks that must be addressed through comprehensive legal frameworks and educational initiatives. Governments, technology companies, and civil society must collaborate to strengthen child protection laws, enhance digital literacy, and promote responsible online behaviour. Without proactive measures, the challenges posed by the digital environment may undermine children's fundamental rights and well-being.

Balancing Children's Protection and Participation Rights

Balancing children's protection and participation rights in the digital environment requires a legal framework that safeguards their well-being while upholding their rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and participation in digital spaces. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly Articles 13 and 17, guarantees children the right to access information and express their opinions freely, while Articles 16 and 19 emphasise their right to protection from harm, including online risks such as cyberbullying, data exploitation, and digital surveillance²⁷. However, excessive restrictions, such as blanket bans on social media or strict parental control measures, may infringe upon these rights, limiting children's ability to engage with digital platforms for education, socialisation, and activism²⁸.

Legally, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union has set important precedents by mandating stricter age verification and requiring parental consent for children under 16 to use digital services. However, critics argue that such regulations must not exclude children from beneficial online experiences²⁹. Similarly, initiatives like the Safer Internet Programme by the EU promote child-friendly online environments without compromising their digital freedoms³⁰. The challenge lies in ensuring a regulatory balance by

²⁶ Tilovska-Kechedji, *supra* note 7.

²⁷ Livingstone, *supra* note 3.

²⁸ Pavlovic, *supra* note 10.

²⁹ Kravchuk, *supra* note 15 at 73.

³⁰ Savirimuthu, *supra* note 8.

integrating child protection laws with provisions that empower children as active digital citizens. A rights-based approach that combines legal safeguards, digital literacy education, and ethical technology governance is necessary to create an environment where children can safely explore, learn, and participate online while being shielded from digital harm.

Strengthening Digital Rights for Children

Ensuring children's digital rights requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates legal, technological, and advocacy efforts. As digital platforms increasingly shape children's education, socialisation, and privacy, it is imperative to establish comprehensive frameworks that not only protect but also empower young users. Strengthening digital rights for children involves enhancing legal policies, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, and addressing emerging challenges in the digital landscape.

Developing child-centred digital policies that align with international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is crucial to strengthening digital rights. Article 17 of the UNCRC recognises the importance of children's access to digital information while advocating for their protection against harmful content. Governments should enact robust data protection laws tailored to children, ensuring that digital services operate transparently and with child safety at the core³¹. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union serves as a model, offering strict guidelines on children's data privacy and requiring parental consent for digital engagement. However, global inconsistencies in digital policies call for more harmonised international regulations and enforcement mechanisms.

Another essential step is interdisciplinary collaboration between legal experts, technology developers, and child rights advocates. Policymakers must engage with technology companies to enforce ethical design principles prioritising children's safety, such as age-appropriate content moderation, default privacy settings, and AI-driven risk detection systems (Livingstone et al., 2014). Moreover, partnerships between governments, educational institutions, and civil society organisations can facilitate digital literacy programs, equipping children, parents and educators with the knowledge to navigate online risks safely. International organisations such

³¹ Macenaite, *supra* note 19 at 29.

as UNICEF have emphasised the need for cross-sectoral efforts to integrate children's rights into digital governance strategies.

Looking ahead, future challenges and emerging trends in digital child rights protection require proactive responses. The rise of AI, deepfake technology, and virtual reality presents new risks of misinformation, child exploitation, and surveillance concerns³². Additionally, the increasing commercialisation of children's data by tech companies necessitates stricter regulatory oversight. Governments must adopt a future-proof legal approach, ensuring that child protection laws evolve alongside technological advancements. Strengthening corporate accountability and implementing child rights impact assessments for emerging technologies will mitigate unforeseen risks³³.

Conclusion

In the digital age, ICTs and social media have profoundly impacted children's human rights, offering opportunities for education, self-expression, and global participation while simultaneously exposing them to risks such as cyberbullying, privacy violations, and digital exploitation. Legal frameworks like the UNCRC and GDPR provide a foundation for safeguarding children's digital rights, but their implementation remains inconsistent across different jurisdictions, even lacking the proper specific child legislation. While efforts to strengthen digital child protection laws have improved, a holistic, rights-based approach is necessary to balance protection with participation.

To achieve this, interdisciplinary collaboration among legal experts, policymakers, tech companies, and child rights advocates is essential. All Governments must implement future-proof policies that evolve alongside emerging digital risks, including AI-driven child exploitation and data privacy concerns. Additionally, educational initiatives should equip children, parents, and educators with digital literacy skills to navigate online spaces safely.

Looking ahead, a multi-stakeholder approach will be crucial in shaping a child-friendly digital ecosystem where technology empowers rather than endangers young users. As digital advancements continue, policymakers must remain proactive in ensuring that children's rights are protected, promoted, and prioritised in all aspects of digital governance. We can create a

³² Kravchuk, *supra* note 15 at 73.

³³ Third, *supra* note 2.

safe and inclusive digital world for future generations only through strong legal mechanisms, ethical technology design, and global cooperation.

In conclusion, strengthening digital rights for children requires a balanced approach that upholds both protection and participation rights. Governments, industry stakeholders, and civil society must work together to create a child-friendly digital ecosystem where children can safely explore, learn, and engage. Policymakers can ensure that children's rights remain safeguarded in the ever-evolving digital landscape by prioritising legal reforms, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and anticipating future digital risks.

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