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# Maddie is online: co-creating with young people for safer and resilient online connectivity.

MARTZOUKOU, K.

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## Introduction

Dr Konstantina Martzoukou, Associate Professor at Robert Gordon University, shares with us her amazing work related to keeping children safe online and building on their understanding so they are empowered through the information in the resource.

## Main Text

According to the World Health Organization (2024) "Children's lives are increasingly blended between the digital and physical worlds, intertwining virtual and real experiences in their daily routines. Ensuring online safety for children is becoming a growing concern within the WHO European Region". This is because most children grow up using digital devices from a young age and are used to continuous connectivity. While there are many advantages and opportunities created in the online world, it still presents significant online harms which may have an impact on young people's development both at a physical and mental health level.

School nurses play a pivotal role in the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, working closely with other school staff and parents to identify needs, ensure prevention, provide points of intervention, and offer timely access to available services and resources, instilling important skills and knowledge. School nurses' specialist roles in encouraging a healthy and resilient lifestyle also expand to the online public health landscape. They are key in supporting children and young people to develop important skills (such as problem solving, communication, digital resilience) that are vital for navigating the online environment, building awareness and knowledge of online safety and encouraging positive online interactions with confidence. In these efforts, young people should be partners of proactive and evidence-based service development, within a constantly evolving online environment that presents many learning and creative opportunities, but also several risks.

'Maddie is Online' is an innovative educational project that engages young people as partners to critically explore both the dangers and the opportunities of online connectivity, using creative storytelling to produce open learning and teaching material on digital literacy, digital citizenship and online safety. It comprises of fun and engaging animated cartoon video stories, aimed at children aged 9-13 years old, following co-creation and an inclusive pedagogy that empowers young people to express their voice and critically engage with challenges they may encounter in their experiences of online connectivity. School nurses, educators, parents and anyone who engages with young people can use the educational resources to open dialogue with young people about ways to protect themselves online, recognising online threats and building a healthy lifestyle with awareness of when to disconnect and setting boundaries for resilient and safe online connectivity.

The co-created animated video stories, which have been developed with the contribution of young people, narrate the online adventures of a pre-teen girl, Maddie, who experiences online challenges and navigates an online world of both opportunities and dangers. The stories are freely available on [YouTube](#) with different cartoon characters, real voice-overs, step-by-step scripts, scenes and expressions. The stories are also accompanied by openly accessible online educational toolkits (with Creative Commons Copyright Licenses) that contain learning activities and resources.

Currently, the project has four series: Series 1. 'Online Resilience', Series 2. 'Misinformation', Series 3. 'Copyright' and Series 4. 'The Ethics of Online Safety and Security'.



Recently the project also created a new [website](#), which offers easy navigation to the available content, with links to download the free online toolkits, to order a print version of the toolkit, if required, and to book a consultation, which explains all the steps to follow for using the resources at school or at home. As the project is not-for-profit, booking a consultation helps to support the development of new topics in the series recruiting young professionals to work on the series and offer incentives to young people to engage with the series donating their voice-overs and creative talent.



The project is linked to Robert Gordon University's strategy to deliver innovative research that makes real impact to society through the interdisciplinary research themes of 'Living in the Digital World', 'Inclusive and Creative Societies' and 'Health and Wellbeing', strengthening collaboration with the public sector and transforming people and school communities. The work supports young people with digital citizenship skills, an area that requires urgent interventions for positive societal impact and with implications for children's safety and wellbeing. It builds upon the concept of "trust" of the Scottish Government ['Ethical digital nation' strategy](#), and its policy on ['Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)'](#), engaging young people "in digital decisions that affect their lives" and with respect to human rights, preparing the future creators of a safe, trustworthy, ethical, inclusive and participatory online society.

The work was developed over the past four years with the direct creative input of more than 50 people in the community (with voice-overs by young people, librarians, academics, university students and parents) and focuses on the digital citizenship skills of young people to navigate safely, effectively and ethically their online environment. 'Maddie is Online' has been rolled out to schools in Scotland since 2020, collecting research data from hundreds of children in schools. These results have been published in academic and professional journals.



Running Series 1 'Online Resilience' in schools in East Renfrewshire in 2021

The work has been funded by the Scottish Government (and supported by Digital Xtra Fund), the Scottish Library and Information Council and the Robert Gordon Innovation Accelerator. The work was also included in the European Erasmus+ primary schools project, 'BRIDGE' with 6 EU countries and has been disseminated in other European countries, such as Greece and Romania in invited presentations and conferences.



'Maddie is online' overall, aims to empower educators, school nurses, parents, school librarians and young people with rich and impactful material and with a design that places pupils at the heart of learning as co-creators, fostering their fundamental human rights for online safety. The co creation and co-research methods used in the work, make a positive impact on young people's agency, motivation, learning, expression, feelings and experiences about their online realities, directly engaging them with the themes, helping them to develop knowledge and exercise their creativity, opening dialogue and the way towards building resilient and healthy digital communities.

After developing three series (Series 1. Information Resilience, Series 2. Misinformation and Series 3. Copyright) with the support of Scottish Library and Information Council (2020-2021), 'Maddie is Online' was one of only three projects selected in 2022 by [Digital Xtra Fund](#) to develop a fourth Series, Series 4. 'The ethics of Online Safety and Security', based on the Scottish Government's ['Building Trust in the Digital Era' report](#).

The first phase of Series 4 invited secondary school pupils (in S1 and S2 classes) to write short stories of 500 words aligned to the themes: Online Behaviours, The Internet of Things, Online Terms and Conditions, Identifying Phishing and Scams and Private and Personal Information. Five stories were selected to be animated by young people. The winning story, '[Lucy the Influencer](#)', which includes lessons on setting up safe passwords, (chosen by an expert panel) was announced at an [online showcase](#). The 'runner-up' was a story called the '[Yphone Scam](#)' which was about the dangers of phishing scams online, and the 'audience choice' award was given to the story '[Friend Finder](#)' which addressed the dangers of using online apps and services that are not aimed at young people.



Phases two and three The second phase of the project involved 25 primary and 115 secondary school pupils taking part in online workshops and two careers' talks related to the project's key themes, attended by more than 500 people and, finally, phase three included the publication of an online toolkit with resources and activities that accompany the stories. The educational material include 'Lead in Questions' for opening critical discussions in class, an 'Activity Plan' linked to the written stories, 'Ideas for Educators' with curated learning resources globally and 'Did you Know' sections, where projects and research are introduced. The project was completed in October 2023. More information is available here: <https://www.maddiesonline.com/>.

The project engaged hundreds of young people nationally and internationally, supporting their development of confidence, teamwork, leadership, and employability skills as they designed and created their own projects, opening dialogue about their digital experiences and expressing their own voices. It fostered young people's digital literacy and animation skills development (60% female participation) and inspired them with digital careers workshops. The work engaged not only the education community, but also the nursing profession, with an invited presentation to 150 nurses ('UK wide Community Children's Nursing online forum') and it was endorsed by the Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland. 'Maddie is Online' is now delivered in the MSc Advancing Nursing Practice course (Robert Gordon University) with the kind support of Dr Elaine Allan (Lecturer, Nursing MSc Advancing Practice).

*"During session 2021-2022, pupils in S1 at the school engaged with Series 2 of Maddie is Online during a unit of work that focused on Digital Research & Information Skills. They found the cartoons/episodes to be thought-provoking and encouraged them to think more about how they conducted their own research, along with finding information that was reliable. The episodes were used principally as starters to get thoughts flowing and were then used as the basis for further discussions and tasks throughout the unit".*

*-- Testimonial by PT Digital Learning Teacher at Ellon Academy*

Series 1 engaged librarians, teachers and 269 pupils in S1 classes in Scotland, via workshops on cyber-bullying also conducting interviews with 18 school librarians. Series 2 engaged 206 pupils (Ellon) and 90 pupils in

Anatolia College in Greece. Series 3 was co-produced online during the pandemic engaging students, parents, and academics.

Series 4 was co-produced with 8 teachers and 49 pupils developing "digital resilience, increased confidence" and promoting "online safety & security". It helped pupils "avoid getting scammed online". Series 4 established collaboration with [Mesomorphic Ltd](#) a digital transformation company, offering 6 online safety workshops as well as 2 career talks on [online gaming](#) and ethical hacking (with the Universities of Abertay Dundee and Glasgow).

The sessions had 502 participants from the U.K., Ireland, Greece, New Zealand, Brazil, USA, Canada, India and Africa and from the School Library Association, Scotland Police, Amnesty.org., the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, Westminster, and the European Central Bank. The project was circulated by Police Scotland to the Children and Young People team and the local Crime Reduction Officers and the Cybercrime Unit, by Aberdeen Council to young people's services (17 secondary schools which serve around S1 2,300 pupils) and by University of Augusta in the US to its students in the Paediatric Faculty. The project was featured on BBC 'Sunday morning Live Show' on [Scotsman](#) and several conferences, while the resources reached [Portugal](#), Greece, Romania and [Luxemburg](#).



We are grateful to everyone who has so kindly and wholeheartedly supported the project and contributed to it directly over the years. We have ideas for a follow up series that will address additional themes of online safety, resilience and connectivity (within the fast growing theme of generative artificial intelligence). We believe that not enough is done to engage young people directly with these themes and more support is required around empowering them with digital skills for a healthier, more resilient, ethical, creative and safe online environment for all. With special thanks to [The Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland](#) and to the [School and Public Health Nurses Association](#) for supporting this project and its values.

Please contact us via email ([tomaddieonline@gmail.com](mailto:tomaddieonline@gmail.com)) if you have any questions or require more information on the project.

## References

World Health Organisation, 2024. [Making the WHO European Region the healthiest online environment for children: position statement.](#)

## Journal Papers

MARTZOUKOU, K. PANAGIOTAKIS, I., HERBERT, N. GREY, E. MACDONALD, N. 2023. ['Maddie is Online': a creative learning path to digital literacy for young people.](#) Computers in the Schools

MARTZOUKOU, K. 2022. "Building a Media, Digital and Information Literate Scotland", Autumn Gathering, organised by the Chartered Institute of Information and Library Professionals in Scotland (CILIPS). 'Young People and IL – [panel discussion](#)' 8th September 2022.

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MARTZOUKOU, K. & GEEKIE, J. 2021. UNESCO Global MIL (Media and Information Literacy) Week 2021 in Scotland: ["A look at the Media and Information Literacy Alliance \(MILA\) and the 'Maddie is Online' Digital Literacy project.](#)

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MARTZOUKOU, K. 2019. [The role of the public library as an enabler of accessible and inclusive information literacy.](#) Keynote at the 2019 PMLG and ILG national conference (PMLG Conference 2019), 4 October 2019, London, UK: ISSUE 3 Autumn 2014 (ymaws.com)

## Campaigns

MARTZOUKOU, K. 2023. [Maddie is online.](#) Presented at the 2023 Aberdeen Business School Women Entrepreneurship Week, 30 October – 3 November 2023, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen UK.



MARTZOUKOU, K. 2021. 'Maddie is Online' CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) Campaign #LibrariesAreEssential with the hashtag #LibrariesAreEssential 4-10 October 2021. Available from <https://www.cilips.org.uk/librariesareessential-maddie> as part of Libraries Week <http://librariesweek.org.uk/>

MARTZOUKOU, K. 2021. Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals Social media takeover (Twitter and Instagram) for Libraries Week, 4-10th October 2021. " Taking Action, Changing Lives" Available from <https://www.cilips.org.uk/advocacy-campaigns/libraries-week-2021/>

## Professional Magazines / Groups

Blog post: [Maddie is online – ethics of online safety for children](#) | SAPHNA – School And Public Health Nurses Association

[School Librarian Magazine](#) The School Librarian 69-3 Autumn 2021. A blog post on the project, published by the Scottish Library and Information Council

A blog post on [Young People and technology](#), CILIP Information Literacy Group

Glow Scotland DigiLearnScot promoting the workshops:15 December 15:45, [Private and Personal Information with Maddie is Online](#)

## Appearances on Media

Interview by Holly Hamilton live on BBC BBC One – Sunday Morning Live, [Series 13, Episode 18](#) (12th February 2023) averages 1,200,000 viewers

[Information Literacy Blog](#) by Sheila Webber: Sheffield University Information Literacy Weblog: Maddie Is Online in an elementary school #ECIL2023

That's TV Scotland interviewed by Conal Tracey (8th February 2023)

Articles in [The Scotsman](#), [Press & Journal](#), [Grampian Online](#) and FutureScot