

The Internet and Children. A look at online risks among adolescents¹

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Abstract: Internet, smartphone and social networks are a crucial part of daily life for children. Today these new “social machines” represent the main pathway to knowledge and relationships. While not underestimating the growth-fostering aspects offered by these new social machines, our study here focuses on the risk factors inherent in the very dimension of knowledge and relationship characterizing them. In this new, fast-evolving context, the risks need to be monitored. Research based on a sample of 1700 adolescent between the ages of 14 and 19 years, residing in northeastern Italy, has enabled us to update and clarify online risks, offering the possibility to elaborate indications useful to the adults and policy-makers involved.

Keywords: Internet; Social Media; Adolescent; Risk.

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Introduction

Children today are born and grow up alongside Internet and cell phones; the new media are part of their daily life. Research shows that 93% of children between the ages of 9 and 16 go online at least once a week (while 60% do so every day, or nearly so) (Livingstone, 2010). They begin and end sentimental relationships via sms, chats, or social network profiles; on Internet they seek information about friendship, affection and sex. They create parallel lives for themselves in virtual reality games; they educate themselves by using such instruments to supplement traditional teaching; often they even construct or invent their future profession by way of the internet (Rivoltella, 2006). Accessibility, sharing and creativity are several of the many traits which the new technologies allow us to experiment. For children, the web provides a channel through which they can acquire relational competencies, seek out and exchange information, create blogs, and make and publish films and photographs, sharing their abilities with others (Colombo *et al.*, 2012)

The new media thus emerge as powerful “social machines” (Scanagatta and Segatto, 2007) contributing to the construction of children’s identity. Their value is not simply one of efficiency, but is linked to the importance which subjects attribute to them within a network of social relations.

For some persons, such instruments are important for their growth-fostering capacities, they represent a way of developing one’s relations, capacities and knowledge (Colombo *et al.*, 2012; Caronia and Caron, 2010; Livingstone, 2010; Riva, 2010; Borgato *et al.*, 2009; D’Amato, 2006; Tapscott, 1998). For others, instead, they threaten reduction: they seem to cause a lessening of one’s profound selective attention and individual critical thought; a weakening of one’s capacity for reflection and imagination; they threaten to cause dependency, and to expose users to contents unsuitable for their age; they may even lead to illegal acts (Livingstone, 2011; Mascheroni *et al.*, 2011; Verlato, 2011; Vallario, 2009; Biddle, 2008; Leung, 2004; Rajagopal, 2004; Bisi, 2003; Griffiths and Wood, 2000).

Risk emerges in three different dimensions (tab. 1). We find risk linked to unsuitable contents, whose children viewers become passive targets; risk linked to actual contact, where children is a participating actor; and risk

linked to production, in which the children becomes the main actor (Mascheroni, 2012).

Table 1. Risks linked to the use of Internet

<i>Dimensions Vs themes</i>	<i>Content Child as targets</i>	<i>Contacts Child as participants</i>	<i>Behavior Child as protagonists</i>
<i>Violence</i>	Violent content	Bullying, molestation, stalking	Bullying peer aggression
<i>Sexuality</i>	Pornographic content	'Grooming', exploitation or sexual abuse	Molestation, 'sexting'
<i>Values</i>	Racism/ incitement to hate	Moral subjugation, manipulation	Harmful user-generated content
<i>Commercial exploitation</i>	Embedded marketing, hidden persuasion	Abuse of personal data	Gambling, copyright violation

Source: Mascheroni (2012)

The risks do not necessarily lead to harmful experiences: most of the young Internet users queried do not say they have become disturbed or upset while online. However, we must not underestimate that 12% of children who declare they were bothered or perturbed by content encountered on the Internet (EU Kids Online, 2011). What disturbs young internet users are elements such as pornography, bullying, sex-linked messages, and offensive UGC (user-generated content) (tab. 1).

In terms of access and use, Italy presents several distinctive features that pose particular challenges for policy initiatives aimed at promoting safer internet use. Though internet use is increasing, Italy remains largely a 'low-risk' country: risk estimates for Italian children are among the lowest in Europe. Italian children are less exposed to online risks compared to children in most European countries because they engage in fewer online activities and tend to benefit from a narrower range of opportunities. Italian children are also less equipped, and lack basic safety skills. Reducing their exposure to risks may therefore result in a persistent digital exclusion (EU Kids Online, 2011).

Research objectives

Our study on adolescent and cross-mediality aims to produce instruments fostering awareness— both on the part of children and of parents, teachers, and other adults involved—concerning the changes in progress in the world of new technologies. Such awareness should serve to clarify both risk and resources. While aware of the important positive value represented by the new media in the life of children, we shall concentrate here only on results relating to the risk factor linked to the use of new technologies, the internet in particular. The topic of risk, which has always accompanied research into the new technologies, is less prevalent in research compared to the level of alert present among adults, especially parents and teachers. In any case, it presents forms in continual evolution which need to be updated and explored in greater depth so that we can understand their nature and their relation to the cultural changes now in progress, and so that we can prepare effective safeguarding instruments.

Instruments, method and research sample

In order to reach our research objectives we prepared an ad hoc questionnaire in light of several national and international studies, including:

1. Research report, "*Le nuove macchine sociali*" (Scanagatta e Segatto, 2007);
2. "*Princeton Survey Research Associates*" (Pew Internet in American Life Project, 2009);
3. "*Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults*" (Pew Internet in American Life Project, 2010).

In its final form, the questionnaire entitled "Young people and cross-mediality" is composed of 71 questions subdivided into 5 thematic areas:

1. General information and styles of consumption, enquiring into the socio-personal data of interviewees and their styles of consumption;
2. Cell phone and computer, enquiring into the modes of using these objects and styles of control used by parents;

3. Social networks, enquiring into the ways of using these relational instruments, with reference to times, modes, online identities, public and private dimensions;
4. New technologies and risk, exploring the presence of risk connected to use of the internet;
5. Internet and the future, looking into adolescent's opinions concerning the use of digital media in relation to their future career and to the promotion of Internet throughout the territory.

In this article we shall focus on the questions relating to the area of “new technologies and risk”. The questionnaire was issued from April to June 2011 by way of CAWI techniques (Computer Aided Web Interviewing) and, after a phase of attentive data quality control,³ 1700 interviews became available. The sample is made up of 1700 adolescents between 15 and 19 years of age, residing in the territory of the Veneto Region.⁴ The male gender prevails in the sample, at 68.9%, while females make up the remaining 31.1%. The gender imbalance in the sample reflects the type of school most closely participating in the project, i.e., technical institutes (66.5%), followed by lyceums (31.4%) and finally, professional institutes (2%).

Risks online

Contacts and behavior: child as participants and protagonists of risk

We have attempted to determine, first of all, whether and in what ways adolescents had been participants or protagonists in risk-prone behavior. The topics discussed will involve identity theft, bullying, and finally, sex-linked behavior such as encounters with strangers or exposition of body parts. In all three of these areas we have examined both the role of the participant (e.g., in cases of identity theft, reception of offensive messages,

³Data quality control involved mainly the age and origin of respondents, times of compilation, and the “response set” of the “array questions”.

⁴In order not to make statistical errors caused by gender imbalance in the sample, we chose to analyze the two samples independently of one another.

or reception of appointments with strangers) and the role of protagonist (e.g., stealing credentials, posting offensive messages, or requesting photographs of intimate body parts).

As regards the theft of credentials (tab. 2), the adolescents were asked whether anyone had ever stolen their password and, if so, whether once their password had been stolen, anyone had pretended to be they or done things unpleasant to them. 23.6% of the adolescents declared that someone had stolen their password to gain access to their personal data or profile; in 18.2% of cases those thieves had also pretended to be the owners of the stolen profile, while in 12.7% they acted in ways unpleasant to the profile owners. This practice appears to be more widespread among males than among females; however, what surprises us here is the specularity between genders as regards the undergoing and/or enacting of identity theft: 22.9% of the females and 25% of the males have both stolen passwords and undergone password theft.

Table 2. Percentage distribution, risk of identity theft according to gender

Within a social network, has it ever occurred...	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
that someone used your password to access your personal information?	22.9%	25.0%	23.6%
that you used someone else's password to access their profile?	22.9%	25.0%	23.6%
that someone used your password pretending to be you?	14.3%	25.0%	18.2%
that someone used your personal data in a way you didn't like?	11.4%	15.0%	12.7%

The issue of bullying (tab. 3), dealt with privately or within a social network, shows its face in our sample: while privately it touches 40% of the males and 31.4% of the females, within the social network the incidence decreases to 30% for males and 23% for females. However, as regards the issue of social network bullying, it is the females who reveal more “active” behavior: 20% of the females admit they have posted offensive messages against other persons, while for males the percentage is 5 points lower (15%). As regards the question of bullying, the reciprocity between acting and undergoing seems to involve females to a greater degree, while the males appear more as victims than perpetrators of such behavior.

Table 3. Percentage distribution, risk of bullying according to gender

<i>Within a social network, has it ever occurred...</i>	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
that you received direct messages insulting or offending you?	31.4%	40.0%	34.5%
that you saw posted messages insulting or offending you, which anyone could read?	22.9%	30.0%	25.5%
that you posed insulting or offensive messages?	20.0%	15.0%	18.2%

Let us now deal with the issue of sexuality. This is the most delicate, most sensitive issue when it comes to online contents: the risks of grooming and pedo-pornography continue to demand the attention of the scientific community and civil society. Our data shows (tab. 4) the considerable percentage of adolescents (36.4%) who say they have received a proposal to meet a stranger, while 10.9% say they have been the author of an invitation to meet a stranger. It is boys who are more frequently subject to invitations from strangers (45%), while girls (11.4), more than boys, tend to invite strangers to go out with them. Our sample seems to reveal “unexpected” behavior, showing girls as being at less risk than boys of being invited (though to a low degree), while they are more active than boys in extending invitations. Girls seem to have understood that invitations from strangers should be avoided; in this situation, they have developed effective strategies for protection, e.g., by limiting the visibility of their profile and personal data (tab. 5), while they do not seem to perceive the risk linked to taking the initiative of inviting strangers. It is as though they experienced their active role in invitation as implicitly self-protective.

16.4% of the male interviewees, instead, say they have received or do receive photos or videos in which the intimate body parts of a person are visible. Only a small part of the sample (3.6%), however, declare they have posted or sent photos showing the intimate parts of their own body. Analogously, 12 % report they have received proposals to privately show their intimate body parts, and only 5.5% say they have asked someone to show their intimate body parts online. Here again, males are more likely to be the object, rather than the subject, of such requests.

Table 4. Percentage distribution, risk of sex-linked behavior according to gender

Within a social network, has it ever occurred...	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
that you received invitations to meet a stranger?	31.4%	45.0%	36.4%
that you received photos or videos showing someone's intimate body parts?	14.3%	20.0%	16.4%
that you received a proposal to privately show your own intimate body parts (web-cam)?	11.4%	15.0%	12.7%
that you asked a stranger for a date?	11.4%	10.0%	10.9%
that you asked someone to privately show you (by web-cam) their intimate body parts?	2.9%	10.0%	5.5%
that you posted or sent photos or videos showing your intimate body parts?	2.9%	5.0%	3.6%

As regards the cases examined, and all embarrassing, difficult or dangerous situations one may encounter when using a social network, the adolescents were asked what strategies they most frequently use to defend themselves.

While 40.7% of the sample say they have never been in a difficult situation as participant or protagonist, we must suppose that approximately 60% of the sample (57% males and 64% females) have been. Compared to those who have been involved in a role as participant, we enquired into the strategies used to protect themselves from unwelcome behavior. The protective strategy most frequently used is blockage of the person (24.7%); in second place, adolescents simply cancel messages and content sent them (9.9%). To a much lesser degree, children have notified web administrators (8.6%). Clearly, such events have no weight in removing children from the social "plaza" of social networks. Following on a negative experience, only 2.3% (mostly males) chose to stop using a social network: we may well suppose that they are the ones who experienced events in the most painful or traumatizing way.

In conclusion, the adolescents were asked with whom they had discussed the risky situations encountered: 21.6% confided in friends (32.1% of the girls and 16.8% of the boys), while only 6% say they spoke to their parents (9.6% of the girls, 4.3% of the boys) and 3.7% to their siblings.

Table 5. Percentage distribution, protective behavior according to gender

Sometimes you might be in difficulty or embarrassed because of a situation created in a social network. Has it ever happened to you? If so, how did you react?	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
I blocked the person sending me certain material.	33.1%	21.0%	24.7%
I cancelled all the messages and material sent me.	11.5%	9.2%	9.9%
I reported the problem to the social network administrators.	8.8%	8.6%	8.6%
I changed my privacy settings.	13.0%	6.6%	8.6%
I stopped using the social network at least for a while.	1.5%	2.7%	2.3%
It never happened to me.	35.9%	42.9%	40.7%

Girls seem to turn with greater ease to their network of friends or family, while the boys seem less willing to declare the difficulties encountered; indeed, they are also the ones who, though to a low degree, decide to react to problems by renouncing their network of friends or relationships within the social network. The age variable seems to indicate that the youngest are less subject to this type of risky behavior: risk seems to increase with age.

Contents: child people as receivers of dangerous or risky messages

We then asked the adolescents whether they had voluntarily or involuntarily been exposed to disturbing or dangerous messages: if they had ever entered into contact with sites, groups, messages, forums or blogs promoting particularly deviant or risky behavior. Our sample shows (tab. 6) that the issue of violence prevails, as perpetrated against animals (37.7%) and persons (34.3%). In second place are messages suggesting eating disorders, affiliation with extreme political groups, drug use, and participation in acts of pedo-pornography, bullying or suicide.

As regards gender, it appears that girls tend to enter more frequently than boys into contact with contents promoting violence against animals and eating disorders. The boys, instead, show a greater tendency to encounter extremist political content and pedo-pornography. The girls have had more frequent contact than boys with material linked to bullying. Drug-

and suicide-related contacts seem equal in frequency for both genders. As regards the school year attended, it is first-year high scholars who are most highly exposed percentage wise to risky material, especially involving pedo-pornography, bullying, religious sects, drug use and suicide,. The older youths, instead, have more frequently come into contact with material involving political extremists.

Table 6. Percentage distribution, exposition to risky messages according to gender and school year

Using the internet, you may encounter messages, groups, forums, blogs promoting particular behavior; have you unvoluntarily encountered sites, etc. advocating or involving:	Gender		What school year?			Total
	Female	Male	1 st yr.	3 rd yr.	5 th yr.	
Violence against animals	46.3%	33.9%	38.8%	36.3%	37.2%	37.6%
Violence against persons	35.7%	33.6%	34.0%	34.5%	34.4%	34.3%
Eating disorders	37.9%	26.9%	29.5%	30.1%	32.6%	30.4%
Affiliation with extremist political groups	22.8%	32.2%	26.9%	29.1%	34.4%	29.3%
Drugs	26.5%	26.7%	27.7%	23.1%	30.5%	26.8%
Pedo-pornography	16.2%	24.5%	27.4%	19.5%	15.4%	22.1%
Bullying	23.0%	19.8%	23.7%	17.9%	19.9%	20.9%
Affiliation with religious sects	13.4%	21.5%	19.1%	17.9%	20.5%	19.0%
Suicide	9.4%	11.1%	13.1%	8.1%	9.1%	10.5%

The adolescents who had come into contact with such material were then asked whether they had spoken to anyone about it, and if so, with whom: 37.8% report they have spoken with no one (30.4% of the girls and 41.8% of the boys). 22.7% confided in friends (25.2% of the girls, 21.7% of the boys) and 9.6% in parents (11% of the girls and 9% of the boys). Small percentages are attributed to siblings, other relatives who are not parents, and teachers. Generally, however, it is girls who speak more openly about the problems they encounter online.

Finally, we enquired into the perception of risk and/or disturbance among adolescents relative to such material (tab. 7). We find that 39.2%

recognizes that such messages are dangerous, and wish they were controlled and blocked by the authorities, against 17.9% who do not seem to grasp their risk, and who stress, instead, that they might anyway be a source of information. Around 10% recognize the possibility that such messages might significantly affect the person coming into contact with them, and therefore ask that they be blocked. It is surprising and worrying that a meaningful 18% of the interviewees have no opinion regarding such issues. It is the girls whose attitudes show greater perception of the risks involved for themselves and others, while it seems difficult to draw an age-linked profile for interviewees regarding this aspect.

Table 7. Percentage distribution, opinions on exposition to risky material according to gender and school year

Regarding such material, do you respond	Gender		What school year?			Total
	Female	Male	1 st yr.	3 rd yr.	5 th yr.	
that it should be controlled and blocked?	44.6%	37.3%	36.6%	42.9%	39.8%	39.2
“I don’t know” ?	13.4%	20.1%	19.4%	19.0%	14.3%	18.0
that it may be a source of information, anyway?	17.2%	18.4%	17.1%	18.4%	19.4%	17.9
with no answer?	12.6%	11.1%	11.8%	10.9%	12.5%	12.3
that it may significantly affect a person’s life?	10.1%	9.5%	11.8%	5.7%	11.1%	9.6
Other	2.1%	3.5%	3.2%	3.0%	2.9%	3.1

Conclusion

The results of our research show that the older youths (third and fifth year of high school) are more highly exposed to risky behavior (as protagonists) and contact (as participants) implying complex, dangerous dimensions and issues. The younger ones, instead (first-year students) seem more vulnerable to risky content as receivers. The older youths seem to possess greater capacity for control over the new technologies: they, indeed, encounter risk because they experience it directly or participate in

it, whereas the younger interviewees apparently encounter risky content by chance, in a non-premeditated, unexpected manner.

If we examine such issues underlying the online risk factor as safety, bullying, sexuality and values, different risk profiles emerge according to gender. The boys are more emergent in undergoing and perpetrating identity theft, while in the area of verbal violence and bullying, boys tend to be the victims, and girls the perpetrators. As regards gender, boys seem more highly at risk of receiving invitations to meet strangers, sex-linked photographs, and requests for sex-linked photographs produced by themselves. It is surprising that the girls are tend more frequently to expose themselves by asking to meet even persons they do not know offline. Such behavior, though marginal (11%), indicates, on one hand, an important change in the style of approach to seduction by girls, and on the other, that their behavior may lead to dangerous or unpleasant encounters. However, the girls also show greater attention in safeguarding their privacy, by limiting access more prevalently compared to the boys. In addition, the girls seem to be more capable of asking for help when they find themselves facing complex, dangerous situations.

As regards the issue of exposition to risk-threatening material, the data show that pedo-pornography, bullying and suicide are the issues most frequently presented to the smaller youngsters online. The older ones, instead, appear to be more highly exposed to extremist political messages and (though less dramatically) to messages from religious sects. If we observe the gender factor, we see that girls are more highly exposed to material concerning violence toward animals and eating disorders (confirming the strongly gender-linked aspect still remaining in such areas), whereas boys seem more highly at risk from messages linked to religious sects, pedo-pornography and extremist political groups. Pornography, an issue which has always been associated with the world of females, instead appears more emergent, as an active or visual experience, among boys rather than girls.

As regards exposition to such issues, the older youths reveal an ample, adequate capacity for self-protection. They say they are more rarely disturbed by situations encountered online, and demonstrate that they have acted in a protective manner by cancelling inappropriate messages or by excluding the disturbing person from their online networks of

acquaintances. On the contrary, the younger interviewees seem to be disturbed or upset more frequently by situations encountered online.

Though they show little difference with respect to results reached through research by EuKidsonline (2011), our results show that today, Italian children, as well, appear vulnerable to online risk, to a degree comparable with that in other European countries. We also see that males, especially the younger ones, are more highly at risk not only of online dangers, but also of greater impact from risky material, since they are not prepared to deal with certain issues confronting them, are not always able to protect themselves autonomously, and are often unwilling to ask for help within their own network of relationships.

Our results offer important points for reflection and relevant indications for the various stakeholders committed to promoting online security. Since few people say they have encountered dangerous situations online, but above all, since few declare they were bothered or upset by them, we see how important it is for future policies fostering safety to address population sectors which are most prone to risk: that is, the youngest ones. Attention must shift to youngsters in middle and primary school. The adolescent, including males, must be involved in assuming responsibility for their own safety. Particular attention must be dedicated to fostering their autonomy, along with all cultural requisites necessary in exercising awareness in digital citizenship. At the same time, however, efforts must be encouraged in the world of adults, among parents, teachers, and web administrators, to support and encourage positive online content and web safety. Not only must we implement technical instruments capable of blocking, tracing, and filtering navigation; we must also raise awareness of such instruments' existence, facilitating their accessibility and improving their usability.

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