

Cyberteens @ risk?

Opportunities and risks of teens' ICT use analyzed

About 6 out of 10 teenagers would miss the internet should the connexion fail. Half of them also make new friends on the internet. 4 out of 10 would even find life boring and empty without the internet. Even though teens can no longer imagine a life without internet, they are sometimes confronted with certain risks as well, e.g. when they are surfing or chatting.

A carefully balanced image of the opportunities and risks of ICT for teens is what results from the research project TIRO, "Teens & ICT: Risks & Opportunities", that was presented in Brussels on the occasion of Safer Internet Day.

In the framework of the Society & Future programme of the Federal Science Policy research teams of three universities have united forces to carry out, for the first time in Belgium, a participative enquiry in which various methods were integrated in order to study opportunities as well as risks of the ICT use made by teens: in-depth interviews with teens and parents, focus groups with teenagers, parents and teachers, brainstorming sessions with teenagers and a survey among teens and parents.

Opportunities

Not only the survey results, but also the qualitative panel results show that the use of ICT mainly takes place in the adolescents' **private world**. Indeed, nearly all the interviewed teenagers (92,8%) use the internet at home. And at the houses of more than half of the teenagers (56,0%) the computer they most frequently use is installed in a separate room, most often their bedroom or study, hence the **bedroom culture** (and bedroom privacy).

The need for teenagers to have their proper cultural space in their parents' home, and more specifically in their proper bedroom where they can look for their own identity, is not new. In the most recent years, however, since the introduction of GSM, computer and the internet, the bedroom has become a **connected room** from which girls and boys can continue their social interactions with peers as well as their participation in the youth culture. Adolescents spend more and more of their leisure time at home with media channels in their private space instead of in a family or shared room.

Contrary to the uniform and homogeneous image that certain visions on adolescents and the internet put forward, the qualitative enquiry among youths shows **a rather fragmented youth**, presenting very contrasting profiles with regard to their practices as well as to the sense given to these practices in their society life. In order to pinpoint these differences we have determined a typology with eight profile types. First of all there are four typical profiles for rather conventional adolescents: the forager, the tribal blogger, the ex-time blogster and the (female) Net babblers. It is in this more conventional group of profiles that we find the majority of the youths that were observed in the framework of this study. When we look further than these **more conventional practices** we find profiles of adolescents with practices that are more exploring, more dangerous sometimes and very time-intensive. These profiles are the *free rider* of the Chat, the *club member*, the *player mercenary* and the *DOFUS fanatic*. It is on the level of these **more exploring profiles** that the risks are bigger and regulation is more difficult.

Risks

In the survey with teens and parents among others there was not just a study of the opportunities offered by ICT, but also of the risks young internet users can be confronted with. Three categories of risks were dealt with: **content-, contact- and commerce-related risks**. Hereafter just some results with regard to the confrontation with certain web contents and negative chat contacts.

Teenagers can, want it or not, come in contact with explicit sexual images. 6 out of 10 adolescents declared that they already by accident came across web sites that showed nude images (61,2%) and half of the interviewed group already arrived at porn sites (52,6%). 6 out of 10 adolescents (60,7%) were also already confronted with images that they considered to be horrible or disgusting or with pictures/films of violent actions (57,0%). 1 out of 4 young internet users was already confronted with racism on the net (26,3%).

The teens referred to certain situations in which they were confronted with porn by accident as a result of - what at first sight appear to be - innocent search terms, hyperlinks in spam, but also pop-ups that appear on the screen.

Chatting is a fully integrated practice in the lives of most of the teenagers. Half of the interviewed group (52,2%) chats sometimes with contacts they know only virtually. 1 out of 5 has already had experiences with a grown-up pretending to be an adolescent in a chat-room (21,2%). The large majority of the teens have not ever been confronted with questions of a sexual nature yet. Nevertheless, it appears that 1 out of 6 teens (16,1%) did already receive requests of that nature from a much older person and that 1 out of 10 (10,6%) was already asked to perform sexual handlings.

Sometimes there may even be negative contacts between teens. 1 out of 3 (34,3%) testify that they have already been bullied via the internet or GSM at least once.

Recommendations

The research project also formulates a number of recommendations for the various involved parties. A first recommendation underlines the importance of the access to and the appropriation of ICT in view of the development among others of a (digital) media literacy in the broad sense of **information literacy**. Access to ICT remains a point for action, but the emphasis is on training initiatives aimed at stimulating a critical and responsible use of ICT. The development of **citizenship and internet etiquette (netiquette)** deserves particular and permanent attention and involvement of all the stakeholders (parents, educators, school, public authorities etc.).

ICT-regulation by means of **a judicial and/or repressive approach** alone is not enough. Quite the contrary is true. Therefore, we need to look at more than technical solutions alone and give the necessary attention to self- and co-regulation as well.

There is need for **parental implication, interest and inter-generation dialogue**. The researchers noted at several points how the adolescents find their parents' role essential in this field as well and how they appreciate their parents' interest and concern. This means that even when parents consider themselves to be really ICT uninitiated, the adolescents still appreciate a (constructive) dialogue about ICT activities and experience more than choosing for a repressive approach in this field. The other side of the coin is that parents must fulfil their regulating role.

A fourth recommendation pleads for the acquirement of an **ethical reflexion and reflex** when using ICT. All stakeholders carry a part of the responsibility.

Qualitative ICT use, experiences and explanations are based on a **long-term shared responsibility** of all the stakeholders, in which every party has its role to play and nobody can really be relieved from duty: adolescents, parents, educators, the school, internet service providers, telecommunication companies, the media, the administration,

Therefore, a **multi-stakeholder platform** should be created in view of the set-up of a short-term, middle-term and long-term action plan.

About the TIRO project

In the framework of the Society & Future programme of the federal science policy, this research project is a co-operation between SMIT VUB, CITA & CRID FUNDP and OSC Universiteit Antwerpen.

The SMIT VUB and CITA FUNDP have closely followed 17 Dutch-speaking and 17 French-speaking teenagers through in-depth interviews and a 'hotline strategy' or open line with the researchers. Apart from that the teens were asked to keep a time use diary of log in order to obtain insight in the embedding of the internet and GSM use in their every-day life.

There was also a survey carried out by the OSC Universiteit Antwerpen among 1318 adolescents aged 12 to 18 and 571 parents. In this survey teens and parents answered questions about their ICT use, about risks that teens are confronted with, but also about arrangements between the teens and their parents and about the way certain risks are dealt with. Moreover, there were 21 focus group discussions and 12 brain-storming sessions with teenagers, parents and teachers participating.

The legislation about teens and ICT was examined by the CRID FUNDP and recommendations were formulated for all the concerned stakeholders.

More information about the research sections can be found in the summaries.

Survey:

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Qualitative research:

Cyberteens: de betekenis van ICT in het dagelijkse leven van Belgische tieners

Contact: Prof. dr. Joke Bauwens, jbauwens@vub.ac.be, + 32 (0)2/629.18.29

Des pipettes du net aux dofuiens... Une 'tribu jeune' aux profils contrastés

Contact : Prof. dr. Claire Lobet-Maris, clo@info.fundp.ac.be, +32 (0)81/72.49.91

Legal aspects & recommendations :

Les ados entre autonomie et responsabilité : vers une utilisation de qualité des TIC

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