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Digital divides and new "private" frontiers: children and the internet

Theoretical debate
In an age of intense diffusion of new media, namely the internet, both in schools and among families (particularly those with young children), traditional digital divides tend to change: from inequalities in the access (to “have” or to “have not”) to the modes of appropriation, the quality of use of the internet by different actors involved. Much is discussed in literature about the negative or positive effects of new media on contemporary childhood. Are they responsible for the death of childhood? Are they at the origin of a new skilled technological generation? Essentialist or one-dimensional perspectives are, however, problematic: social contexts of use still matter and sociology has a word to say on that. Finally, technological innovation and the privatization of new media by families, ICT use for educational purposes and concerns with child safety in a dangerous outside world, have been undermining traditional frontiers between private and public spaces.

These are the three theoretical issues that inspire the project in which this poster is based.

The research project
This poster is based on an ongoing research project concerning children and the internet in Portugal (Almeida et al. 2008). Inspired by contemporary sociological debates on childhood and information society, departing from children’s perspectives, the main goal is to describe and explain the use and the appropriation of the internet by children and the values and representations they share. Two socialization scenarios are considered: family and school. More specifically, the project aims to capture the ways knowledge about internet is transmitted to children (moments, sources, places, actors involved); to describe the daily contexts where it is used (spaces, time, rhythms, combinations with other technologies); to understand their uses (a school subject, school/ family work, communication, information or peer culture tools); to reconstitute children’s representations about the internet and its impact in generational relationships; to understand and explain how usages and representations vary according to age, gender, family origins and regions.

Here are some of the results of a survey launched in May-June 2008, applied to 3049 children (aged 8–17 years old) studying in the final grades of each level of compulsory education (4th, 6th and 9th grades) at Portuguese public and private schools located in contrasting areas of the country.

Profiles of internet users
One of the main objectives of this research project was to identify and test internet use differences between children, hypothetically according to the children’s family economical and cultural backgrounds. Several statistical procedures were used: recoding variables into indexes, reducing them through a principal components analysis, recoding into typologies and finally grouping the results via a cluster analysis. Thus, three different clusters or profiles of internet use practices were identified, resulting in the following typology of young internet users (being the profiles named after the dominant activity executed by the young users included in each cluster): “diligent students”; “tenacious gamers”; and “all-round cybernauts”.

Conclusions
Two main conclusions can be drawn. The mass use and democratization of the internet among Portuguese children and their families, as well as its universal presence in schools, cannot mask the diversity of practices, which affects the quality of its uses and builds a contrasted social landscape. Moreover, diversity is not randomly organized. The three clusters are internally consistent and related to specific demographic contexts (e.g. gender, age, parents’ educational backgrounds or professions), styles of use or frameworks of rules and representations.

References