

## THE RISKS OF WEB SURFING AND THE PARENTAL CONTROL

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**Abstract:** Nowadays the new media are addressing the processes of cognitive learning and teaching in much the same way as the traditional agencies of primary and secondary socialization. To analyze the characteristics at the root of the relationship between an individual and technology, we will focus the attention on young web users, who are engaged in shaping their own identity among a multitude of choices available on the web. New elements of socialization are especially born out of close-knit youth groups: we are witnesses of a socialization with no mediation whatsoever, where the subject employs the interactive channels to establish its own path. Such journey encounters many risks: weak measures of protection of privacy together with infinite possibilities of interrelationship, due to the debut of Web 2.0, can expose young web users to a series of violations whose finalities can include the cloning of the sensitive data of their virtual identity. These actions, carried out by the cybernetic hackers, often make the headlines because of the pervasive and persistent ability of the perpetrators who feel safe behind the wall of anonymity built around the Web. This survey conducted by administering a questionnaire to secondary students of the metropolitan area of Bari highlights the measures are meant to protect the interviewed while surfing the web by further analyzing the different typologies of parental control and the sense of awareness perceived by these young people. The research also looks into the risks linked to the use of Internet, such as the embezzlement of sensitive data.

**Keywords:** Internet; young people; risks; identity; parental control

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The information technology and the advent of new media systems have severely weakened the link, once inseparable, between physical and social place: in fact, it is possible to interact with one's own groups of belonging without being present in the same physical location. From this innovative element comes a redefinition of contextual frameworks of reference in which we build and carry out social actions and that determine specific roles played by each individual, as well as their behavioral requirements. The web modifies the geography of social situations and, consequently, the interpretation of individuals of their own spaces and roles. Let's consider, for example, the “places of being” tied to identity: the group has a reason to exist only by recognizing an entity other than the group, then, a definition of otherness based on a lack of sharing both of a certain amount of information and of an interpretative background, typical of the group itself (Meyrowitz, 1995). In this way, it is determined, for example, the difference between males and females, religious people and atheists, groups that show an

internal cohesion stemming from a strong and exclusive core information. With the web, these identifying boundaries tend to weaken, allowing a sharing of information that lead to consider as blurred boundaries and environments at one time considered unapproachable.

Therefore, the virtual space is a frame, a place that can contain information from different groups and communities, able to redefine the concept of collectivity and group, in contrast with classic definitions of real space; space and cyberspace relate to each other in an informational osmosis, which keeps distinct the two cultural systems and, at the same time, exert mutual influence on personal identity (Dodge, Kitchin, 2001).

The concept of web has been changing and interweaving deeper and deeper with social reality: initially, it was used for simple informative consultations by means of static websites, without any possibility of interaction (Web 1.0); in time, the evolution of information systems brought to a change of the virtual space understood as a place of social interaction generated by users, who have the dual role of users and manufacturers: the Web 2.0. At that

effect, the evolution of the web along with the advent of digital media have defined the peculiarities of this breakthrough: portability, namely the availability of mobile devices to connect anywhere, at any time; interactivity, that is the possibility of interaction between users through a communication flow no longer unidirectional but multidirectional; generativity, then the opportunity for Internet users to switch from being spectator to be author of media products (Rivoltella, 2008:4-5). Examples of this last one are *wiki-s*, software that allow to create sites where anyone registered can contribute to the production of content: the most known is Wikipedia, the most consulted encyclopedia on the Net.

The cybernetic spaces are thus medial spaces, which can be used as a means of contact and comparison; are spaces of communication between users in different locations and realities; are cultural and organizational spaces, connectable to each other, in a complex mosaic that can determine specific characteristics of identity. They become part of the cognitive processes of learning and teaching, alongside the traditional primary and secondary socialization agencies. This creates new possibilities for interaction, especially in the case of strongly cohesive youth groups: we see a socialization without mediation, in which the subject uses the web's interactive modalities to build a personal path (Bennato, 2011).

The age represents a discriminating factor capable of affecting the use and perception of the web, which allows to identify that part of population defined as "digital natives", who "do not have yet detectable phenotype differences, but are different as for cognition and behavior. They act and think with a degree of parallelism unattainable for us" (Honsell, 2007:13). What characterizes new generations, on one hand, is their inability to perceive distinctly the virtual space from reality and, on the other hand, the adoption of a new style of knowledge and learning. The natives, in fact, learn with a form called multitasking: they study while listen to music and, at the same time, keep in touch with friends through Facebook, while the TV is on with its background of images and words; they share and create knowledge; they learn by searching, playing and exploring; they prefer browsing instead of reading; they prefer to draw on multiple sources instead of stopping to the authority of a single text.

The way of communicating changes: vocal and personal communication are often substituted by the communication through innovative and always less expensive software of instant messaging, which make the person always reachable and which also change the alphabetic codes of communication. Also the information assumes a new face. They are the

most active on the web scene, capable of eroding the boundary between real and virtual, until overlapping spaces to create multiple representations of their own Self, adaptable to the emotional state of the moment: the mediation of the computer allows the subject to define time after time the characteristics of their own *avatar*, which becomes the representation or nemesis of his creator. By browsing, from an empty element and devoid of interest, the *avatar* acquires thickness representing the characteristics of his creator and his innermost desires; on the other hand, "in cyberspace it is always "night". Because communication is mainly text-based, people cannot see one another" (Danet, 1998:131).

Therefore, the *avatar* plays a dual role: that of a visible object in the virtual reality and that of subject, when becomes the bearer of actions and behaviors that belong to the individual background, perfectly concealed behind the mask of their own virtual character (Goffman, 1979). Wearing these masks representing various types of their own Self, the digital native rides quite naturally the cybernetic wave of Internet, living a second life without limits of time, space, communication and amount, along with an absence of social boundaries or privacy. Browsing the net breaks down temporal barriers, grants the possibility to tap into an information immediately; cancels territorial limits, opening to the comparison with the global world, as the only spatial perimeter is outlined by the bandwidth; anytime, anywhere users can be either one, none or a hundred thousand; they develop an omnivore, bulimic and multitasking attitude toward the information wealth of Internet; they do not recognize limitations in socializing and sharing of opinions and experiences, for example, through social networks.

Another face of using the worldwide web is represented by parents, teachers, educators, those who belong to a class of "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001:1-6), who often watch warily the development of technologies and see in them a dangerous regressive space, sometimes even as an obstacle to the work of education and training. The generational gap is indeed remarkable: diversity of language, difficulties in communication and a lack of skills in the use of new technologies, make the immigrants increasingly unable to read and interpret the needs of the natives.

## 2. THE CASE STUDY

The complicity of the exponential evolution of technological tools that allow the dissemination and sharing of personal data on line, sometimes means taking risk behaviors, such as the invasion of privacy and, therefore, the so-called identity theft

phenomenon. The study analyzes the incidence of similar behaviors within a cohort of young people defined as digital natives, grew up, in fact, during the period of greater diffusion of new information technologies and of Internet. While it is true that for young people the misuse of the Net poses a number of risks, it is equally known the importance of education to an aware and correct use of the web. A crucial role lies with parents who can monitor timing and method of use of the web by their children, in order to stem improper use of the instrument. This awareness led to inquire about the perception of young people about the parental control on their navigation. The investigation has involved students enrolled at higher education institutions in the metropolitan area of Bari, during the school year 2015/2016. To build the sample, it was adopted the non-probability sampling methodology based on quotas (Corbetta, 2014:345-348). The universe was divided into subgroups based on two variables: the gender and the address of the studies, distinguishing between technical or professional institutes (TPI) and high schools (HS) (table 1). Once the size of samples was set at 1,005 units, we have defined the quotas, i.e. the number of subjects to interview, proportional to the size of each subgroup of population (table 2).

Table 1. Students enrolled in secondary high schools in the metropolitan area of Bari during the school year 2015/2016: universe (absolute values and percentages)

	M		F		Total	
	A.V.	%	A.V.	%	A.V.	%
TPI	20,77 7	32.8	11,91 6	18.8	32,69 3	51.6
HS	11,56 4	18.2	19,14 4	30.2	30,70 8	48.4
Total	32,34 1	51.0	31,06 0	49.0	63,40 1	100.0

Table 2. Students enrolled in secondary high schools in the metropolitan area of Bari during the school year 2015/2016: sample (absolute values and percentages)

	M		F		Total	
	A.V.	%	A.V.	%	A.V.	%
TPI	330	32.8	189	18.8	519	51.6
HS	183	18.2	303	30.2	486	48.4
Total	513	51.0	492	49.0	1,005	100.0

In order to detect any significant difference in behavior due to the different age of interviewed people, the study involved students of first (modal age 14 years), third (modal age 16 years) and fifth classes (modal age 18 years). Therefore, the quotas identified for the whole sample were equally distributed among the three classes, represented respectively by 335 students. The survey was conducted between April and June 2016, by giving

an auto filled printed questionnaire. At the end of the survey, the operations of entering and processing the data were carried out through the SPSS software, to calculate uni-variate descriptive statistics, with distribution of frequencies, and those bi-variate with tables of contingency. To evaluate the significance of the relation in double-entries tables, it was adopted the  $\chi^2$  test, considering only those tables for which the  $p$  value resulted lower than 0.05. The detection of variables under consideration returned satisfactory data since there are no missing data.

The research involved 1,005 students enrolled at secondary high schools in the metropolitan area of Bari, of whom 513 male (51%) and 492 female (49%). 51.6% of the students attend a technical or professional institute and 48.4% are enrolled at a high school.

### 3. THE RESULTS

The appropriation of someone's identity, sometimes for damaging his reputation and embarrass him, making public violated contents, is a phenomenon that affected, as perpetrators or victims, even students in the metropolitan area of Bari (table 3). For both males and females, the most frequent abuse of which they were target concerned the theft of login credentials by subjects that are so hidden behind the new stolen identity: almost two of ten interviewed people say they have been victim of this (17.1%). Furthermore, it resulted that one on ten students (10.1%) underwent the violation of their privacy through third-party access to private messages, own email or profile within a social network, with the subsequent publication of their contents. Boys (12.5%) have lives similar experiences on the Net to a greater extent than girls (7.7%). The shield of anonymity, prerogative of the network, a weapon not only in the hands of others, but that sometimes becomes a tool of prevarication at the mercy of the interviewed themselves. The 14.5% of the students declare to have become in possess of the personal passwords of another person without any permission. It is an unlawful act committed to a greater extent by males (17.2%) than females (11.8%). Then, there is a contained, but not negligible, team of those who clearly stated to have shared information, contents and experiences of others, which they have acquired by accessing mails, profiles and chats of unwitting subjects (5.9%). Even in this case, the authors of such acts are identified more among male students (8.6%) than among female students (3%).

Table 3. Did it happen to you ... (%)

	Yes	No	Total
	%	%	%
That someone has used your password by pretending to be you	17.1	82.9	100.0
That someone has hacked your profile, your email and then your private messages to make them public	10.1	89.9	100.0
That you have used the password of someone else pretending to be him	14.5	85.5	100.0
That you have violated the profile, email and private messages of someone else to make them public	5.9	94.1	100.0

N=1,005

Subsequently, the focus shifts to protective factors that enable young people to develop a critical awareness about the usage of the web. In fact, in the allocation of rules to control the modalities of the use of Internet, the parental presence is a fundamental element. The survey, through the perceptions of interviewed students, highlighted two aspects related to the figure of the parent in the context of using the web: on one hand, has given rise to fears and concerns of mothers and fathers for their “always connected” children and, on the other hand, about measures of parental monitoring on the usage of the Net.

In connection with the first point, about four out of ten students believe that their web usage does not upset at all their parents (37.8%), against a larger amount of students, six out of ten (62.2%) that consider this as a matter of concern for mothers and fathers. According to the students, their parents fear that the world wide web, with its endless potential, could constitute a source of distraction from the study. It is a fear that relates primarily to the parents of males. Another cause for alarm has to do with virtual friends, in particular, the possibility for young person to come in contact through the Net with dangerous subjects, a situation for which the parents of girls are more sensitive. In the opinion of interviewed students, their parents fear that they might develop a real addiction to the Net, that they may run into all kinds of inappropriate contents, that they may become victims of fraud – fear related especially from boys – and finally, that while being on line we cannot distinguish between public and intimate sphere, easily sacrificing the confidentiality to provide information about ourselves (table 4).

Table 4. What aspects linked to the use of the web are of concern for your parents? \* Distribution by gender (%)

	M	F	Total
	%	%	%
Fear that distracts you from the study	69.7	62.7	66.2

Fear that you might know dangerous subjects	26.8	51.9	39.2
Fear that you may become dependent on the web	24.6	26.0	25.3
Fear that you may come across inappropriate contents	18.9	19.8	19.4
Fear that you might be a victim of fraud	19.2	12.7	16.0
Fear that you cannot distinguish between intimate and public sphere	9.1	9.7	9.4

N=625

\*Multiple choice question

However, there seems to be not a high level of alert that corresponds to such awareness of their parents’ apprehension. In fact, according to the interviewed young people, their parents are concerned but not necessarily they really check on their time of navigation or on contents to which they have access. Seven out of ten students say that their parents have not installed any navigation control or restrictive system (70.2%), and a little over two out of ten do not know if this may have happened (22.2%). Only 7.6% declare for sure that their navigation is supervised and modulated by fathers and mothers who, on devices for connecting to the Net, have set up programs to know what their kids watch on line through the identification of visited sites, filtering systems to prevent the visit of web pages with certain characteristics and, finally, specialized software to limit the time spent in Internet. It also emerges that more control is perceived from younger ones interviewed, attending first classes (table 5).

Table 5. Have your parents set up a system to control or limit your navigation? Distribution based on classes (%)

	I	III	V	Total
	%	%	%	%
No	60.3	69.8	80.6	70.2
Do not know	27.8	23.9	14.9	22.2
Yes	11.9	6.3	4.5	7.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

N=1,005

Those examined so far are preventive measures to limit the risks associated with the use of the Net implemented through specific programs or systems. It is also possible using alternative methods or additional navigation monitoring of one’s own children. Compared to a majority of interviewed people who reported not being controlled by their parents in their activities on the Net (69.1%), three students out of ten declare, instead, to perceive the existence of a parental control while they are on line (30.9%). The group of these last ones diminish with increase age, being greater among students of first (35.8%) and third classes (34.3%), compared to those of the fifth

classes (22.7%). Particularly, the young ones that feel under control while being on line refer to know about the habit of their mothers and fathers to check their personal social web page. Follow those who state that their parents are used to track the time spent on the Net, see the history of visited sites and even see their chats. Among fathers and mothers of interviewed people, it is less common the custom to access through their credentials at the contents of social pages or electronic email of their children (table 6).

Table 6. Usually your parents control:\*(%)

	%
Your social profile, limited to information you choose to make public or share with them	47.3
Your time of navigation in the Web	32.8
The history of the sites you frequent	20.6
Your chats	19.9
Your social profile, by using your password to access it	11.3
Your electronic mail	10.6

N=311

\*Multiple choice question

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In light of the findings, monitoring the young people's behavior while locating the possible gray areas represents a necessary precondition for a proper and efficient prevention. The avatars, chosen by young people to disappear in the anonymity, encourage them to engage in risky behaviors. Despite the interviewees' young age, some of them have already been involved into cases of identity theft, either in the role of the perpetrator or the victim. Thus, regardless of the advent of new forms of social networking or aggregation, the role of supervisor falls once again to the parents, who must shift their attention from the everyday reality, in which their child operates, to a virtual one where the students are subject to endless possibilities and threatening worlds, that can damage the process that leads to the discovery of their own identity.

The parents show undeniable concern with regard to the use that their children make of the Network; however, according to the interviewees it seems that most parents don't adopt the right measures to ensure their safety during web surfing, trusting instead the few available information accessible on social media profiles or gauging approximately the time they spend online. The possibility to provide the parents quality tools for a smooth control during web surfing is indispensable

to allow the young Internet users to search the web in the safest way possible.

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