The Internet: a new scenario for violence?

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In recent years, the extent of Internet coverage and the number of users throughout the world have increased exponentially. Coupled with this phenomenon, we have witnessed other technological developments which modify the links between people and make it possible to send messages more anonymously.

As tools and platforms emerge which enable the self-generation of content and the free exchange of information – thus promoting children’s right to freedom of expression – at the same time, new scenarios appear in which different expressions of violence come into play, not only towards children, but also between peers, and from children to adults.

The existing generation gap with regard to knowing how to handle these tools causes adults to remain unaware of the uses to which underage persons put the information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet. Adults are largely ignorant of its potential and risks. This leads to a loss of power in terms of their capacity as reference points in the process of supporting adolescents in this area, and in establishing limits in the use of the Internet and access to its content. This happens both to parents and to educators and other adults.

Awareness-raising and informative activities regarding the benefits and risks associated with this new social setting make sense if families as well as educators are to acquire the tools with which to support and protect children.

For its part, the international community has expressed its concern at the different ways that the rights of children can be threatened by means of ICTs. Although the commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the ways in which violence against children emerges, there are other forms of social and interpersonal violence online which should not be neglected when thinking about how to protect children in these new environments.
The Internet as a new social setting

Together with the expansion of the Internet, a great deal of literature has emerged, which addresses it from the viewpoint of different disciplines and theoretical and methodological positions. To summarize these interpretations, we can say that there are two broad, and opposing, schools of thought: the technophilic versus the technophobic.

For the former, ICTs and the Internet are the means to achieve the goals humanity has long desired, which range from greater and more active political participation, to the emancipation of oppressed peoples. They have been attributed with affording an opportunity to eradicate poverty by providing access to strategic information for large contingents of the population, thus correcting the “defects” of the labour market and constituting a source of hope due to certain features which are supposedly inherent to the network: its open, diffuse and non-hierarchical characteristics, or its tendency to foster cooperation between different actors.

On the other hand, for “technophobes” the Internet is practically a catastrophe. They argue that ICTs and the Internet only perpetuate old forms of domination and cultural supremacy; they provide yet more means for the élites of the world to extend their economic, political and cultural power, aggravated by the fact that they can now use a system which watches over and controls all of the users on the planet (Barindelli, 2010).

One of the more optimistic authors is Manuel Castells (2001), who considers that the Internet and all aspects of social life are so strongly interwoven that it makes no sense to attempt to separate them. At the start of his doctoral course on the Information and Knowledge Society, he points out that: “The Internet is the mesh of our lives at this time. It is not the future, it is the present. The Internet is a means to everything, which interacts with the whole of society and, in fact, despite being so recent, constitutes its societal form.”

At present, a joint construction involving social relationships and technology is taking place. These extreme views regarding both the brilliant and the terrible effects of the Internet, do not take into account the huge margin for variability which exists in the network, nor the influence which both producers and users exert on this variability.
Jesús Martín-Barbero (Bonder, 2008: 920) has said that, “The Internet is not only a means of communication, but a new social space”.

Children are the “natives” in this new social setting. Marc Prensky (2001) proposes a provocative distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants: the first are individuals for whom digital technology constitutes their socialization environment and the second are those who have had to adapt to a new language, but who think and process information in fundamentally different ways from “natives”.

“Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures”, says Dr. Bruce D. Perry (...) ... it is very likely that our students’ brains have physically changed (...) But whether or not this is literally true, we can say with certainty that their thinking patterns have changed” (Prensky, 2001:1).

For the new generations, the Internet represents a route to the acquisition of knowledge and cultural incorporation, which is different to that which was available to their parents. Although understanding the world through play is not the exclusive purview of contemporary children, the middle ground created by the Internet displays special features of its own.

The process through which children incorporate the social structure (socialization) is carried out in the different social settings where they interact: one of these, which is becoming more significant day by day, is the Internet. “For the first time in history, the generation of children born between the mid-1990s and early 2000 are incorporating the media (culture, the world, subjectivity) through a digital intermediary (...)” (Piscitelli, 2006: 182).

Children experiment with social roles on the Internet and constantly update the image they have of themselves. The Internet is a setting which has taken over from “the block” or “the playground”; it is a public place where adults do not dominate interaction and where teenagers socialize and define themselves together with their tribe, their gang, their equals. The non-presence of adults, particularly of parents, is a constant and is what adolescents seek.

It is in this setting, which belongs to them and to which they belong, together with their peers, where the individual identity of adolescents begins to take shape. Interaction is the focus of interest and it is for this reason that the latest developments
in technology and its applications are more and more attractive and meaningful to them.

At first glance, it appears that in interaction through the Internet there is a greater chance of “rationing” or controlling the signs through which one introduces oneself. It is possible to handle one’s level of exposure, by hiding information, or through technological resources which are not always made available, or not to just anyone. However, is face-to-face interaction so much more committed than online interaction?

True, it is easier, in a way, to begin and end interaction, there is less of a preamble. In some programmes, it is possible to block contact with certain users and above all, there is a feeling of freedom and impunity in everyday situations, such as being able to conduct simultaneous conversations with more than one person and at the same time, eat and watch the news. Such activities would be considered bad manners in face-to-face interaction.

Nonetheless, this does not make online interaction a rule-free environment. If we bear in mind that for adolescents and young people the Internet is a means of widening their interaction and communication networks, belonging to groups, increasing their employment and economic opportunities, as well as their independence, acquiring knowledge through short and cheap training opportunities (low-cost certification) and feeling on the “crest of the wave” of a global process which envisages a possible and desirable\(^1\) future, they are obviously strongly motivated to try to produce the best possible presentation of themselves.

Bernárdez Rodal (2006:78) asks: Why, if cyberspace is such an ideal place in which to dispense with one’s body, does so little “deception” take place? “When we enter a chat room and observe the conversations taking place, we see, above all, what a great effort adolescents make, in the first place, to control the image they project of themselves, and secondly, to interpret correctly the information they deduce from the data provided by others, because, when all is said and done, building an attractive identity on the network seems to be almost as hard as it is in face-to-face interaction.”

\(^1\) Cf. Research findings in: Bonder, 2008:926
We can attempt to provide some answers to the author’s question: a) most online interaction is a kind of continuation of face-to-face interaction, to the extent that it is carried out with friends, or with “friends of friends” (acquaintances); b) children and teenagers must appeal to socially agreed attributes in order to define online situations and introduce themselves in them, and these definitions are as important for the construction of their own identities as they are in other areas of socialization; c) because for years the user has been the focus of design and the producer of content on the web, and therefore child users are immersed in a social setting which is highly interoperational, interactive and instantaneous; where footprints are many and easy to follow; d) because by using a symbolic code of words, much more is said about whoever uses them than what is literally expressed (Barindelli, 2010).

In short, when children interact on the Internet, they do not “deceive” much, partly because they are not interested in doing so, and partly because they cannot.

However, online interaction is not the same as face-to-face interaction. The choice of a virtual body and skills, nicknames, the ever-increasing opportunity to customize applications, and other elements, are options which, unlike the physical world, the virtual world makes possible. Many voices have been raised to highlight the opportunities provided by the Internet for freedom of expression and for experimenting with multiple identities, particularly on behalf of groups suffering from oppression or different forms of discrimination.

This all takes place in an area where human beings express their inclinations and violent impulses, in keeping with their condition, in a way which is supposedly freer than it is in real life. Violence in adolescence takes shape in ways related to the need for self-affirmation, for the magical transformation of the world. We should bear in mind that the foundational myths of cultures and nations always include violent episodes, which are idealized as epic achievements; meanings and values are based on them which leave a mark on future generations.

In adolescents’ search for their own identities, in how they shape the way they belong to groups, violence towards others is endowed with cohesive features which strengthen the self. This would seem to be consistent with the findings of several studies: aggressive content which affects children and teenagers is usually produced by other adolescents.
It is this feature of the network, that of enabling the creation of “false” identities, which is so worrying when attempting to protect children on the Internet. For example, grooming, or “online preparation”, is a violent activity based on hiding the identity of an individual who seeks to gain a child’s trust through the Internet, in order to subsequently reap a sexual benefit from the child.

A study carried out by the Paniamor Foundation (2009) on computer-mediated violence provides elements to be borne in mind. The study enquired into the latest research on adolescence, cyberspace, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and violence, on the basis of reports made by formal, reliable and significant secondary sources, published over the previous five years. After analysing ten publications from eight different countries, the following conclusions were reached:

- Social violence is acknowledged to exist in the virtual spaces frequented by children, although research focuses on different forms of interpersonal violence, principally sexual and/or emotional violence.
- Expressions of violence are identified in which underage persons play a major role as receptors, but also as producers and reproducers of violence.
- The following forms of interpersonal violence were identified in the ten studies analysed: child pornography, morphing, grooming or sexual solicitation, flaming, cyberbullying, theft and fraud, and spamming (harassing people with undesired content). Morphing is a special effect used to modify a person’s face until it becomes someone else’s. This effect, which has been used in films, is used to retouch adult pornographic photographs, or even non-pornographic photographs, turning them into scenes of child sexual exploitation. Flaming is hostile and insulting interaction on the Internet. People who introduce controversial subjects in a violent manner, and who provoke violent exchanges, are known as “flamers”.
- An increasing tendency was detected amongst adolescents to indulge in unsafe sexual behaviour in interactions through CMC. Prominent amongst these forms of behaviour is sexting, a practice associated with child pornography. It consists in the exchange of photographs and/or text with sexual content amongst teenagers, unmediated by third parties. It often begins as a game and eventually becomes a means of blackmail.
- The studies analysed emphasize the scope and influence of this new context in the socialization process of teenagers. This is associated with the unique features of the virtual environment: greater geographical range, accessibility,
indefinite and uncontrolled permanence of harmful and/or illegal material, indiscriminate and unquantifiable access available to underage persons, anonymity, and the feeble regulation of inappropriate behaviour, with impunity as a result.

• Studies underscore the absence of adult support, or the ineffectiveness of their intervention.

• They especially call attention to the dangerous behaviour adolescents indulge in, with little reference to protective conduct. This particularly concerns Paniamor, since it is often teenagers themselves who exercise violence against their peers.

The final points analysed by Paniamor lead to the conclusion that the role of education is paramount. Despite this, there are few specific tools and actions available to help teachers in their educational role with regard to ICTs, their possibilities and their dangers.

Chicos.Net (2009), an Argentine association, proposed an analysis of the use adolescents make of Web 2.0 platforms, on the basis of a specific social network. Their study confirmed that most teenagers have large numbers of contacts/friends, which suggests that these connections exceed the number of relationships they have in real life.

The study analysed 250 Facebook profiles of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18, who live in Buenos Aires and belong to high and medium-high socio-economic sectors. Some of its principal findings were:

• The older teenagers have more friends/contacts, and girls have more contacts than boys.

• Three quarters of the adolescents publish up to 200 photographs. Female adolescents publish more photographs than male adolescents and attach a greater importance to being attractive to others through the image of themselves depicted in their photographs.

• With regard to personal information (scattered about their walls, profiles, comments on photographs and groups), nearly all of the teenagers have published their full names, the schools they go to, their neighbourhood, date of birth and e-mail address; many of them have uploaded pictures of their homes.
In several cases, they have published their mobile phone numbers; in a few cases, they have also published their fixed-line telephone and home address.

This level of exposure leads researchers to conclude that the teenagers analysed use the social network as a public place in which to show and express themselves and meet their peers. One wonders whether “digital natives” have a new concept regarding what is public, what is private and what is intimate.

Studies emphasize the factors which enhance risk and place adolescents in an unprotected situation. Some of the most significant of these are the lack of regulation, the absence and/or ineffectiveness of adult support and the scant training of teachers in this area (Paniamor, 2009). This is associated with and is enhanced by the perception of omnipotence and invulnerability at this stage of human development.

**Recommendations**

A premise which is common to all recommendations is that children have the right to be protected with as much determination in a virtual environment as in the physical world, and that, therefore, public authorities are responsible for making decisions, designing laws and policies and/or ensuring that they are enforced. They must become involved in the development and implementation of public policies and institutional good practices which seek to protect and defend the rights of children in this context.

It is recommended that national awareness-raising campaigns be carried out, targeting parents, teachers and organizations of underage persons, or those who work with them, and the general public, in order to create an awareness of the advantages of using ICTs safely and responsibly, as well as of the risks entailed by careless and abusive use.

Above all, children must be provided with information regarding how to protect themselves, and the strategies which children are already using for their self-protection must be strengthened and disseminated.

It is also recommended that education for the media should be carried out in schools and homes, training teenagers to adopt a critical attitude as receptors and producers of content in the various formats the means of communication make available. The
responsible use of technology should be included in the programmes of primary and middle schools as a cross-cutting focal point, not specifically restricted to the computer skills area, but linked to content involving ethics and civic education in order to mainstream the problems arising from its use.

The generation gap calls for specific action. Adults should be made aware of these matters, emphasizing that they continue to be responsible for their children’s comprehensive protection, even though they lack knowledge of the technology they use, and fostering recognition of the potential of the Internet for the development of all. This will encourage parents to approach the use of these technologies, and promote discussion with their children.

Children’s participation is key at all stages of the implementation of a policy for the protection of their rights. This becomes particularly important when hazards arise in a virtual environment in which they feel “at home”, whereas their adult protectors do not.

It is particularly important to promote an attitude of self-protection amongst children, as they are very often alone when they make decisions while interacting on the network. Children should be trained to identify risk, encouraging their active participation in activities designed specifically for each context and age.

Awareness-raising campaigns should provide specific messages with a positive outlook, not based on fear; that is, similar to the daily experience of children on the Internet. Messages should be different when they are targeting younger children or teenagers: as in the physical world, online activities vary significantly according to age. Children should be included in the design of these messages and strategies, starting with the language used in them.

The development of educational programmes should incorporate in all of its stages, as an essential requirement, the meaningful participation of underage persons. To know and respect the operational rationale of children on the Internet is basic in order to respect them as individuals and protect them from the risks they encounter in this environment.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


