



Children and youth safety on the Internet: Experiences from Czech Republic and Poland[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to present research results concerning sharing confidential data and risky behaviors that are derived from it among the young Internet users. The analysis of the topic was depicted on the basis of quantitative research carried out in Poland and Czech Republic. According to the analysis, behaviors connected with sharing the sensitive data on the Internet determine a range of further risky behaviors in the virtual space and the real world. In the article, the type of data shared on the Internet, ways of interpreting risky behaviors by young people were determined and the attempt to distinguish factors that condition dangerous behaviors was made. The research is of comparative character and its aim is to present the specifics of the analyzed phenomenon in the perspective of the two biggest countries of the Visegrad Group. The article includes the examples of educational actions which aim is to improve the awareness of children and youth in the matter of improving their own level of safety on the Internet. These actions serve as good educational practices and are the answer of the education environment to e-threats presented in the paper.

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1. Introduction

Polish and Czech children start to use new media earlier and earlier. According to the research results, systematic use of the electronic media begins already at the age of 7–11 (Kirwil, 2011; Lange and Osiecki, 2014; Tomczyk and Wąsiński, 2014). Changing styles of media use are mainly connected with transformations of the information society (Eger, 2005; Cornish, 2014). Constantly growing number of electronic devices, the occurrence of new information solutions that make the everyday life easier, intuitive character of new applications and domination of leisure e-services set mainly on entertainment, favor the emergence of new mechanisms which determine the use of technical solutions (Magyar and Karvalics, 2000; Latrup-Pedersen, 2002).

Since the 1990s, intensification and range of the use of new electronic media use by children and youth has been growing systematically. However, this is connected mainly with entertainment and communication functions offered by this type of devices. The majority of significant others (e.g. parents, grandparents), equipping their pupils with electronic devices, assume that electronic media are to support their development, learning process and observation skills (Tomczyk, 2014).

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Compared to their European peers as for the equipment (such as PCs, laptops, smartphones and tablets) owned, Polish and Czech children and youth can be located among the EU average (Kirwil, 2011). At the same time, there is a visible dependency showing that along with equipping the youngest network users with information solutions, their procedural knowledge regarding the use of software and hardware (identified with technical use of the equipment and applications) increases (Kwiatkowska and Dąbrowski, 2012; Moreno et al., 2013). This phenomenon is intensified thanks to the school curriculum of one to several hours of communication and information technology per week, realized from primary through lower- and upper-secondary level. In addition, the development of e-services as well as such features of new media as their polysensory character, easy access to information, common availability of access points (open wi-fi, home and school networks, data packages offered by mobile phone companies) and constant presence of peers in the virtual space foster continuous “being online”.

It should be underlined that the above mentioned tendencies change along with a development of information society. Contemporary users of new technology devote more and more time to being online in order to realize professional tasks or tasks connected with studying or developing their own interests, communicating with close ones, shopping or using other, equally popular e-services. This tendency forces media educators, adult educators, parents and teachers to reflect on how the achievements of technology can be safely implemented in everyday professional and private life. The analysis of numerous challenges (especially threats) posed by the omnipresent new media is a significant phenomenon as the majority of changes take place in a relatively invisible and dynamic way. The research connected with psychosocial influence of media conducted few years ago, currently seem to be out-of-date in some areas due to the dynamic process of information society development and the appearance of new threats, e.g.: “happy slapping” (Siuda and Stunża, 2012; Chan et al., 2012), “cyberbaiting” (Davison and Stein, 2014; Nixon, 2014; Norton, 2011), “hating” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2014), improper use of media in education (Chudý et al., 2015; Glassman and Burbidge, 2014), risky contacts on the Internet (Blau, 2011).

Not so long ago, widespread admiration over the possibilities offered by new media was noticeable. Currently, in countries such as Poland, Czech, Slovakia or Hungary, we can observe a systematic growth in the number of research as well as critical and reflective publications regarding the analyzed topic. Obviously, new media offer incredible possibilities not available in the world of old media, however, they also bring a range of threats to which parents and guardians should be sensitive. In the light of this fact, it is necessary to include in curricula and everyday upbringing in the area of media and information education a complex module on saving one’s privacy on the Internet. Young Internet users should be aware of how new media mechanisms work, how quick the information spread online and legal consequences result from using the Internet in a manner not compliant with the netiquette or the law. It is particularly justified action, since the image of a young person is an element of his/her identity, particularly sensitive to negative information from the surrounding – especially during adolescence. For a large group of young people their own, sometimes unaware “public relations” in social media, are an important, reliable reflection of their social status among peers. Young Internet users build their positive online image for many years; damaging it, however, may take place within a very short period of time. Protection of network image requires, first of all, developing a certain level of competence among the youngest generation – according to the principle that says “information, picture, file once uploaded stays on the Internet forever” (Tomczyk, 2014).

According to L. Kirwil who is involved in the EU project Kids Online “*in Poland, the insight of others, especially adults, into the way in which kids use the Internet at home, is less than European average. Most likely, less parents know how their children use the Internet at their friends’ homes. Greater “privacy” of connecting to the Internet by children entails the risk of more frequent experiencing the Internet threats of every kind and smaller insight of parents into what their children do on the Internet. This suggests a necessity for Polish children to be better educated about how to handle the Internet threats whereas it imposes duty on Polish parents to monitor how their children use the Internet*” (Kirwil, 2011). Such statement requires actions to be taken in a systemic way, that is, not only through media education carried out in schools, but also within the frame of adult education in the non-formal and informal dimension. Improving the competences of significant others may be successfully realized also through the use of the potential of social campaigns and grant actions financed by socially engaged companies.

From the perspective of occurrence of the e-threats listed in the article, participation of young people in the cyberspace, as proven by the research carried out during the last years (Kirwil, 2011; Huk, 2014; Tot and Grubor, 2014; Lorenz et al., 2012; Mascheroni et al., 2014), takes place either in a safe or risky manner. Unfortunately, many parents and teachers do not have enough competences in handling the e-threats. Parents should play a special part in shaping the knowledge among the youth as for what information shared online may generate the high risk of occurrence of another e-threats. However, according to the conducted research, too much parental interference in setting boundaries in using new media by their pupils brings less desired results than when parents apply the strategy of full communication with minimized control (e.g. through parental control applications) (Liu et al., 2013).

Modern Polish teenagers are much more like their peers in other parts of the globe than two decades ago. Life in the world dominated by new media made the psychosocial functioning of the young people similar. People born in the time of new media domination are in many aspects a homogeneous group, regardless of their place of residence. The average American teenager spends 50 h in front of the computer weekly. The same tendency may be observed in many European countries (Tomczyk and Wąsiński, 2013). The number of hours spent online is much bigger than the average time spent by an adult person in a full-time job during the week (Malikha and Servaes, 2011). Functioning in the information society gives the opportunity for a quick access to the exchange of information, but also determines human behavior. One of the areas that

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