Internet, children and space: generational attributes and boundaries revisited

Ana Nunes de Almeida (coord.)
Ana Delicado
Nuno de Almeida Alves
May 2014

http://www.crinternet.ics.ul.pt
1. a research project

- 2008-2013, at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa (ICS-ULisboa)

- funded by Fundação C. Gulbenkian. Aims to understand Portuguese children’s uses and representations of the internet, at home and at school, giving them a voice

statistical evidence

1) (Eurostat): the widespread diffusion of new ICT. Portuguese households with children rapidly adopted ICT
   2004: 39% 2012: 82% (EU: 89%)

2) (EU Kids Online survey): PT children are intense and competent ICT users
three different methodological stages

- 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2008: \textit{survey} (#3049)

- 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2009-2010: \textit{interviews} (#158, 8-16 years old)

- 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 2012: \textit{home observation, collection of visual material (photos, printscreens), interviews and focus group discussions (30 children)}
2. space as a generational marker

“Children, perhaps more than any other group of people, are regulated by place and space” (Jenks, 2005:419)

- modernity and the **binary categorisations** of the world: “us” vs “others”; public vs. private; adults vs. children
- **hard, closed** spatial **frontiers** indoors vs. outdoors; the control of border posts

**nowadays, however**…
- children: from their “**proper place**” they navigate online, **crossing** private, local, material boundaries of the home
- Indoors-outdoors dichotomy (spaces, generations) **eroding**
- “offline” and “online” domains: opposite, discontinued and closed “real” vs. “virtual” spheres?
3. the starting questions…

….opposing essencialist and neutral views on technology …

– how do offline and online worlds (once domains set apart by a sharp frontier) intertwine and become part of the same whole through children’s appropriation of the internet?

- how do children daily fabricate fluid and mobile space arrangements where “virtual” and “real” are juxtaposed, mutually breeding each other?
...four levels of articulation

“a particular children’s experience of space” in and out the home private boarder (Ansell and Smith, 2006)

- time spent on media use
- favourite activities and interests
- communication activities and everyday relations
- participation in social networks
4. to be *and* not to be online: ICT in everyday life activities…

- Internet *always on*, available, to be used “at will”
- transcending physical home border to get into the cyberspace, casual mode or a routine

  *The desktop computer is always on, we connect my laptop in the morning, afternoon and evening! … When we arrive home at six-thirty, my dad fetches me [from school], I connect the internet 3G dongle and my father also connects his laptop to the internet*  
  
  (Mafalda, 8 years old)

- media abundance, “*dispersive multitasking*” (online-offline, online-online)

  *Sometimes I watch TV and I’m on the internet and I’m playing and doing several things at the same time and talking to a friend [on instant messaging]* (Manuel, 16 years old)

  *Everything at once. I turn ch on the music and then I’m on Messenger, listening to music. … and every once in a while I open a game or the horoscope … I always have background music and I always check my email.* (Andrea, 11 years old)
Online surfing integrated in a scheduled, compartmented agenda: intervals between school-other home-leisure activities

- [I use the computer] in the evening, at 7 o'clock, because I go to the [activities] centre always in the afternoon. In the morning I’m at school. When I get home, first I organise my backpack, then I take a bath, then I go [to the computer] a little before dinner and after dinner some more. … I use it for an hour and a half (Tiago, 11 years old)

- On Saturdays [I don’t use the internet] because I usually play sports … When I come home, if I don’t have anything else to do, I spend the rest of the day online (Manuel, 16 years old)
5. **online activities and offline interests**

What is the internet used for?

- **visited** webpages connected to their **offline activities** (sport, hobbies, animals, cars, “idols”, tv programme and series)

[I often visit] the webpage of the club in which I play rugby. … Club news, the matches I’m going to play, the scores in different leagues. It has rugby videos (Bernardo, 14 years old)

I do gymnastics, so I sometimes watch gymnastics videos with my brother, competitions and stuff (Ana, 9 years old)

I like to look for animals for adoption, because I love dogs, only since I live in an apartment building, I’m not allowed to have dogs (Tiago, 11 years old)

‘I always check out the blog of my favourite singers, I adore them, my mom says I’m addicted to them, I have twelve hundred pictures of them.’ (Flavia, 14 years old)
online games and the gender divide

**boys:** games with football, cars, fights, strategy

‘I like to play football games, war and stuff’ (Ivan, 11 years old);
‘Games, shooting games. With blood!’ (Bernardo, 14 years old);
‘I play racing games, airplanes, sometimes strategy games’ (Diogo, 14 years old)

**girls:** play with dolls, dressing them up, using makeup, running hairdressers and shops

I play games with dolls, with makeup, sometimes it’s decorating a house’ (Ana, 9 years old);
‘Fashion games, cooking games’ (Priscila, 10 years old);
‘I play] hairdressing games and sometimes I go to a website that has models, different cinema characters and we dress them up’ (Francisca, 12 years old).
6. Online communication and face-to-face sociability

- A core place in their online activities: **the first thing** they look for, always on..
  
  I turn on the computer, I connect the 3G dongle, I go on Messenger, I talk a bit with M. and then I talk with my cousin. Then I talk again with M. and I connect the video camera. While I’m talking to her with the camera, I go to Google and search for games (Mafalda, 8 years old)

- **emails**: fresh news, events, dates

- **Online messaging**: **continuation of offline conversations**…”hanging out”
  
  ‘[We talk] about girls, about school grades, about life, about websites and games’. (Tiago, 11 years old)

  I’m not with them every day. Even though my cousin lives next door, I’m seldom with her, because she’s now in high school and we are seldom together, we talk online. When she wants to tell me something very funny, or sometimes she says ‘Bárbara., lend me this, lend me that’, I go to the window and I lend it to her… Because her house and mine are joint. (Bárbara, 14 years old)
Online conversations: preferable to face-to-face ones…disembodied interaction, keeping face in embarrassing situations, facilitating communication of emotional content (romantic, disputes, misunderstandings). 

I’ve been talking with a friend who likes another friend of mine and that friend also likes him, but he hasn’t got the courage to say it. Today he was going to declare his love for her and was telling me to set things up, Messenger is very convenient. … It is! Because the things we are embarrassed to say in person, we can say it there, with less embarrassment, because we can’t see the other person’s face. (Margarida, 11 years old)

people who are angry at each other end up talking just the same on Messenger and they work things out on Messenger and the following day everything is all right (..) Messenger makes everything so easy, we say things, people read it. It’s just that deep down we don’t really say them, we just write them. (Lurdes, 16 years old)

Overcoming the barriers of physical distance

My parents are separated and my father is living at my grandmother’s house. When I go to my grandmother’s, to stay with my father, I sometimes talk with my mother through Messenger’ (Tiago, 11 years old).
7. Online and offline social networks

- Facebook and Hi5. **Add and multiply** peer exchanges in the “real world”

- by **suggestion** of members of their offline networks

  *I joined Facebook because I received an invitation from a cousin that lives in the US, she did her Facebook [profile] and sent me an invitation to share photos because it’s easier to see photos on Facebook than through MSN.* (Teresa, 14 years old)

- **“online friends”?** Relatives (younger children), friends and schoolmates (older ones)

  *My father, the daughter of my father’s friend, the wife of my father’s friend, my stepmother, my stepfather, my mother, my stepmother’s sister and no one else. And the girl from the café, but that one I know too well* (Isabel, 9 years old).

  *Mainly people I know from school. People with whom I have already spoken or people I usually speak with. And the friends I have outside school* (Maria, 13 years old)
and making new friends…

On MySpace I have about 50 [friends], in Facebook 47. … I don’t know all of them personally. I know them from wrestling stop-motion animation (Joaquim, 11 years old)
8. final remarks…

- children combine the “real” and the “virtual”, fabricating hybrid spaces of their own;

- more general issues: binary categorisations of space, linked to generations put into question; territorial markers of generations are eroding;

- The changing scope of childhood space perimeter;

- online-offline borders increasingly porous, permeable and discontinuous. Virtual and real: not single or unified blocks. Conjugated and fragmented by children’s agency. A sponge effect.
- **the nature** of space (from a children’s perspective): from a micro, limited and familial setting…space that accumulates macro, plural, anonymous and unforeseeable dimensions. Identity to be constructed not in relation to a single, one-dimensional place, but by **migratory** movements in, out and around multiple and co-existing spaces.

- from a child’s standpoint: line virtual vs. real is an artificial frontier. Contemporary childhood: its intense, permanent, **fluid forms of de-territorialized mobility between virtual and real spaces.**
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Ana Nunes de Almeida and Ana Delicado
University of Lisbon, Portugal

Nuno de Almeida Alves
University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL), Portugal

Tiago Carvalho
Cambridge University, UK