Generational gaps in internet use in Portugal at home and at school: implications for media literacy

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Summary

In the 2006 Eurobarometer, Portugal had one of the lowest rates of Internet use by children and adults within the European Union. Children lead Internet use in Portugal (38% compared to 27% of adults), and act as pioneers over their less experienced parents and other adults, including teachers.

This paper discusses the impacts that such generational gaps have on the traditional positions and relationships involving children and adults, at home and at school with particular reference to perceptions of risks and opportunities of online experiences. The paper presents findings from recent research on the media practices of children aged 9-14, and on perceptions of risk, on the part of both children and their parents. It examines how the “generational divide” affects parental safety-related responses and it suggests that media literacy is a key issue for both children and adults.

A glance at the gap

All over the world, in contemporary societies accessing to the new media, there is much talking regarding the digital divide between youngsters and older generations. In Portugal, this gap presents some peculiar characteristics, namely due to cultural and educational contexts as well as the literacy skills that affect how adults and children consider their access and uses. This challenge urge us to go on a path of discovery: how do we work on that gap? How do we teach grown-ups and youngsters to deal with the new media, with Web 2.0, and with the fear surrounding the whole matter?

Placing the Portuguese society in the European context, we will briefly characterize two main spaces of accessing the online: schools and households. Crossing information and data from recent research, we will present how children and young people consider themselves as online users, how they consider their ICT learning and experiences at school and at home. This will be the starting point for thinking about the challenges of media education and questioning the dominant (and insufficient) notion of digital inclusion, adding the notion of info-participation. We finish with a media literacy design that implies an active role for young people.

Portugal: the educational gap that still remains
As pointed in the Portuguese report for EU Kids Online (Hasebrink et al., 2007) in the last 50 years, Portugal has undertaken a modernization process at several levels, but the nation remains to some extent in a certain in-between position. Although it has evident features of most modern countries, it still reproduces some of its pre-modern patterns of development. Education provides us some indicators of this picture. In 1960, 1 in every 3 Portuguese was illiterate, whereas in the 2001 census only 9% of the population had no literate skills.

However, in 2006 when compared with other European countries, Portuguese adults (male and female) in the age of being children’s parents presented the lowest level of schooling, with the majority reaching no more than 8 years (Graphic 1)

**Graphic 1: Adults (30-55 years): Years of Schooling**

![Graph showing years of schooling for adults in 30-55 years across European countries.](source: European Social Survey Round 3 (2006))

In the Portuguese society, working skills and professions structure also reflects previous discrepancies and contradictions. There is a clear growth of “intellectuals and scientific professions” (1960: 2,8%; 2001: 8,6%), and a reduction of agriculture and related labour (1960: 43,6%; 2001: 4,1%) while the weight of “manual workers, craftsman and operators remains practically the same (1960: 31%; 2001: 30,3%). Most agriculture decline was not replaced by a corresponding growth in technological sophisticated industries and services, but depends instead and predominantly on a traditional transformative sector, low skill “personal services” sector (restaurants, hotels, etc) and “social services” sector (public administration and police forces included).
With the end of the dictatorship (1974), Portugal moved from a “closed” society to an “open” one. This “openness” is related to profound changes in the availability of cultural goods, linked to an increase in production and distribution of all sorts of products and services, namely free media. However, once again, structural features like a persistent level of considerable illiteracy explain the rather low levels of consumption (for instance, low reading habits\(^1\)). This last feature explains, at least partially, the low penetration of Internet and why most people are reluctant to use it, particularly among adults with low education levels and elderly people. In 2006, Portuguese Internet users (aged 15+) were 36% of the population. Economic and educational contexts lead the option of having or not Internet access at home. The 16-24 age group leads the Internet access (83%). For the whole population using Internet, 36% use it 1-5 hours daily; 17% use 5-10 hours; 10% use 11-20 hours and 14% declare to use more than 20 hours daily (OBERCOM, 2007).

At political level, technologies like the Internet are seen positively as one of the ways to ‘catch up’ to other European states. In fact, in the last years the Government is bent on causing a sort of “technological bump” as it is called, and so several initiatives are trying to interleave computer usage and several areas of public life (taxes, businesses, schools and so forth).

While the Internet access at home has been rising significantly in the households, in 2005 reasons for not having Internet at home were: the high cost (40,1%), lack of knowledge on how to use it (23,1%) and on its usefulness (13,3%) (INE, National Statistics). In 2006 (OBERCOM 2007), 56% of those without Internet justify their option with the absence of utility/necessity of this kind of technology, showing a higher level of resistance. In second place, ex-aequo, comes the high cost of the equipment and the absence of technological skills. The high cost of accessing (51%) and linguistic problems (33%) were also arguments. This situation occurs mainly in households without children and young people.

There are also clear asymmetries in the Internet access by region. In 2006, Lisbon leads with 53% of rate penetration and 24% in broadband penetration, while Alentejo, a poorer region in the South with an aging population, reported figures of 35% and 16% respectively.

If the educational and cultural capitals strongly influence the self confidence to deal with new situations and challenges, other sign of resistance may come from the low level of social confidence and autonomy expressed by Portugal, in comparison with other European countries in surveys such as the European Social Values.

This picture should be taken into consideration since children and young people grow up surrounded by adults, in their families and schools. The way how adults deal with ICT, how

\(^1\) In 2003, only 44% of Portuguese population declared having read a book recently, whereas 77.5% mentioned that they usually read magazines and newspapers. In the top of Portuguese leisure preferences comes watching television (99,4%) or being with families and friends (93,8%) – (Cardoso et al, 2005: 202).
they are considered and charged by meanings is certainly presented in the everyday life and influence adults’ mediation.

Anyway, the Portuguese Government is not regarded as being responsible for Internet safety, compared with industry, school and parents. In general, the issue of Internet safety among children has not been strongly highlighted. The focus, at least at governmental level, has been to promote the pedagogical advantages of the ICT.

**Mind the gaps at school**

One of the aims of *Connect Portugal*, the realization of the Government’s Program, is to multiply the number of computers in schools, to reach an average of 5 students per computer by 2010. This Program stresses that “the transformation of the school environment, creating virtual work environments for students and providing all necessary study materials in electronic format, simplifying the follow-up of students by parents and teachers, and the active participation in national and international learning projects, is an opportunity that is important to promote, thus assuring the qualification of the Portuguese citizens along the best international practices, and encouraging the involvement of every family in the modernization of Portugal”.

Under the public policy for a digital inclusion, a national program allows students of low-income families to access to a laptop and an internet connection. A teachers’ training program was also deployed in the end of 2007, which intends to prepare the teachers to make their students interact with technology. The ICT curriculum (Internet, e-mail, WP, PP and Excel) starts at the age of 13-14 (8th grade). ICT and Internet use is considered part of the learning processes and as a tool for different curricular areas. There is no indication for using computers and Internet in the classroom before this grade, and the national curriculum don’t include media education as a content.

The dominant discourse is focused on technologies in a top down process that places children as relatively passive recipients of knowledge passed on by their teachers. Children are also seen as “natural promoters” of the info-inclusion of their parents, ignoring conflicts and tensions between different uses and generations. At school, the classroom is the main social space associated to uses, oriented to “learning and teaching”, without a reference to the needs of Media Education. Internet literacy in a broader social frame continues absent from the curricula in 2008.

Schools constitute the first place for the Internet and computer experience for more than the half of the Portuguese children, and have a “strategic relevance in what concerns the promotion and rising of info-literacy and the fight against info-exclusion” (Cardoso et al, 2007: 113). In 2006, all public schools in Portugal had access to a broadband DSL connection to the internet through the Science Technology and Society Network. However, in the same year, 1 in 4 young people (8-18) had not yet used the Internet, with girls more excluded than boys. The digital exclusion varied with the age: 43% of the 8-12 year olds, 16% of the 13-15
year olds and almost 1 in 5 among the 16-18 year olds. In the end of the compulsive schooling the access was broader, associated with the inclusion of ICT contents in the curriculum (8th grade).

Besides their limits namely in what concerns target ages, these Educational policies risk to be considered too optimistic and influenced by a “technological determinism”, since they are not accomplished by programs of risk prevention, including media education and its social dimensions. As seen, social safety or the social potentialities of the online and the web 2.0 are missed subjects in the ICT curriculum. Mobilisation of teachers and schools show a slow pace of adhesion that goes against the dynamics of the “technological shock”. Another ongoing initiative is the training of 360 trainers in Security on the Internet, associated with the SeguraNet Project, part of the Portuguese Awareness Node in the Safer Internet Plus Program and acting since 2004. In 2008, only 15% of the public schools were participating in this network focused on safe uses.

**Mind the gaps at home**

In 2007, a national survey on Portuguese Media Audiences, for the Communication Regulatory Entity (ERC) that included a focus on children as a special audience, pointed out that more than 60% of the parents of 0-14 year olds had reached only 9 years of compulsory education (18% with only 4 years of school), 1 in every 4 reached 12 years (Secondary grade) and only 11.5% attended the University (ERC/ISCTE, 2008). Most parents didn’t use the Internet, such is the case of 77% with just compulsory education.

For the same purpose, a local survey conducted in 11 public schools in the Lisbon area (Ponte and Malho, 2008) showed a higher level of education and Internet inclusion among parents. Almost half of the parents of 9-14 year olds had attended the Secondary grade and 1 in every 4 had reached the University. These parents were also mainly digital-included, and declared to be familiar with the Internet. Most parents agreed that the benefits from using the internet surpass the dangers, with only 3% of the parents completely disagreeing with this view.

In spite of the differences in accessing and using the Internet, both groups of parents share a positive view of the Internet for children, focused on its (future) job opportunities and contributions for learning and scholar activities.

The comparison between the answers from these mostly info-included parents and their children in the Lisbon area shows clear differences in the ways online uses are considered, at home and at school:

- 70% of the children declare to use frequently Internet at home, and considers the access at school sparse or inexistent, both around 35%;

- Half of the children place themselves as the Internet experts at home, ahead of their siblings, fathers and (further ahead) mothers. This happens in spite of their age: most of the younger children (9-11 years) consider themselves as the Internet experts, a
consideration and position that is ignored by their parents, who consider that they know more than the child.

- 43% of the children declare that they had learnt how to use the Internet by themselves. Fathers, aged peers and older siblings come next, further ahead of mothers and teachers which were only pointed by around 15%. Personal and peer’s experiences lead, ahead of adult transmission of skills (parents or teachers).

- Asked about where they find information on safety issues, almost an half of the children points to the school, followed by parents and peers (around 37%). Television and Internet comes next. For 8% there is no available information.

- Main parental worries were focused on protection children from contact with strangers (90%), giving out personal information (76%) and avoiding them from visiting pornographic sites (71%).

- Graphic 2 presents on line activities experienced by children, and compares how children and their parents considers their presence in children’s life.

**Graphic 2: On line activities experienced by children**

Source: ERC/ISCTE; Ponte e Malho (2008)
The picture quite clearly points out a dissonance between reported usage (by the youngsters) and supposed usage (done by the parents; based on guesswork, it seems).

Parents overestimate the Internet use for scholar purposes (homework, “searching information”) and, with the exception of MSN, clearly underestimate children’s uses associated with leisure and communication as well as other social and cultural experiences, namely creating sites or editing, downloading and uploading contents. Some uses are deliberately refused by parents, such as considering that their children are interested and visiting pornographic contents, even if pornographic contents were one of their top Internet worries. Parental perspectives follow the dominant discourse, centred in the Internet as a tool for scholar activities and learning; they are much less sensitive to other opportunities, such as those related to creativity, social identity and social participation/involvement.

Here we have an older population that does not suffer (so much) from info-exclusion, and a younger population that suffers even less from it. And although it would certainly be an exaggeration to say that this is the best case scenario one can obtain in this country and that it’s downhill from here, it’s no exaggeration to point out that the target population of this study has somewhat more privileged (social and technological) conditions than many other parts of the country, both regarding parents and children.

It is as this point that we should look again to the concept of digital inclusion. These parents, these children, they are part of the digital included and, nonetheless, the discrepancies demonstrated by the study are striking.

The two points of view herein presented cannot be reconciled: what the parents perceive as benefits and risks for children, and what they think on competences are shaping the way they educate their children; also, the self-perceptions of youngsters will also affect that very same education. Such a discrepancy may affect the children negatively. And as it has been shown to be evident here, it isn't digital inclusion that's going to solve the problem.

So, we have to move beyond the concept of digital inclusion. The idea of digital inclusion approaches the new media, information technologies and internet access as something essentially statistical, and static. Looking at the number of computers per capita, or at the number of people that have broadband access definitely has its usefulness. And the access to broadband eliminates some constraints that can influence (albeit in a small manner) the kind of things youngsters use their computers for. But none of that makes digital inclusion the key-element in that same usage.

We prefer, in face of this, to introduce a new concept that we believe to be a more precise analytical tool to address the matter at hands. It is the idea of digital integration.

**Digital Integration**

What is digital integration? By means of this concept, we intend to highlight the way the users interact on a personal and social level with information technologies and with the new
media, how they use them to alter their vision of the world, their life. Digital integration doesn't address any specific technical competences, it relates to the human/technology level of interaction and how the first element reacts with the second one.

Both digital inclusion and digital integration may be considered part of media education, especially in the context created by the Web 2.0, which is now starting to open up a lot of perspectives on how many different kinds of tools and life styles can interact. We have then to know what kind of media education has been done, how we can characterize good media education, what principles should be used as guidelines and what objectives should be sought.

By starting from some basic principles, related to digital inclusion, with digital integration and the potentialities of new information technologies, as well as their risks, we can reach an equilibrium, linked to the agency capacity of the young users, their capacity to learn and to recognize the characteristics of the wide online realm that can interest them and move them the most.

**Media education – up and down**

In Portugal, as we've explained before, the government is attempting a so-called “technological shock”, by distributing laptops and 3G internet connections (almost free of charge), and by preparing teachers to teach their students how to use the tools deemed necessary for their school chores. Although this is a valid contribution, it is also based on the top-down model of “communication as transmission”, from the center to the periphery (Carey, 1989). Knowledge is thus supplied from the top, by temporary transmitters, unspecialized but extremely (read it “too much”) focused on a particular point of view – teachers, that is – and delivered in a context of strict and formal education.

But the primary usages by children aren't all that connected to mere usefulness or formality, as seen in Graphic 2. Therefore it is hence fair to assume that the knowledge acquired in this context has little to do with their empirical and day-to-day experience. So, if it's true that the objective of increasing digital inclusion is achieved, it's not so sure that one can claim that concrete efforts are being made to give youngsters the necessary cognitive tools to handle correctly their experience of digital inclusion. That's to say that there are no evident concerns with their digital integration.

An alternative model is to look at the base – to the agents of the online experience, to those who can benefit the more of this education. If there is so much potential in what youngsters do with computers and the Internet already, then there's nothing better than to go from there and start building a good layer of media education. If they're the ones who deal with the new media all the time, many times proactively, productively, then the best way to accomplish a good awareness campaign should engage with the things they like to do more, the things they'll do no matter what.
To educate is to integrate

Nonetheless, attempts are being made to supply the children with media education oriented to how they live their online lives, in a program to form young trainers, designed by a consortium (Portuguese Institute of Youth, the Ministry of Education, Children's rights movements, amongst others) in which we are actively participating.

Starting from an identical educational curriculum, applicable to all ages, the young trainers will be especially aware of the specific differences of their trainees, based on their personal experiences. This is because although it's possible to establish a few usage patterns based loosely on age limits, experience tells us that the real usage profile depends on several other factors: the presence of older siblings, the quality of the available equipment, the kind of parental mediation, and so on.

The main focus will rest on how to join the technical elements (free software, anti-malware, on-line safety, for example) and the social elements (what precautions to take on social networks, chat rooms, instant messengers, privacy usages). The trainers will concern themselves with how to adapt the explanations they want to do to what their trainees do, by questioning youngsters about what they do, by encouraging them to speak rather than trying to impose a specific behavior. To stimulate children’s agency and empowerment is not to hand them strict manuals of good behavior, it's to make them able to take chances and risks consciously and to take full advantage of the opportunities given to them. It's neither possible nor desirable to eliminate the risks associated with using these new technologies, just like it's not possible to eliminate the creative and developmental possibilities.

Likewise the more technical details won't be a separate part of the curriculum, they'll be approached in the specific usage context where they can be useful. Just to give an example, malware isn't just a technical issue, it's also a privacy issue that's getting more serious as it gets more evolved, and usually privacy is only related to social online practices, in chat rooms and social networking sites.

But why all of this concern with young trainers? Basically, what we're trying to avoid are the effects of the generational gap in the process of knowledge transmission. People that are of a not so different age than those receiving the training can relate to the youngsters' experience, and be seen as possible peer. Often the linguistic differences between trainers and trainees (with specific slang, for instance) create an insurmountable wall between them; ditto relating to technological and real-world usage knowledge, which leads us to the question that there young trainers must also be knowledgeable and efficient in certain areas of IT. This isn't because they are going to simply transmit that specific knowledge, it's a background requirement, and it’s another way to bridge the gap, or at least try to.

A youngster that, through this initiative, acquires new and improved competences (both in the context of digital inclusion and digital integration, in what one can do with a computer and the internet, and how to look at these media) is in a much better position to help friends, colleagues, people he or she knows. And given that the online system of communication
works according to a reticular pattern, the retransmission of this training on a personal basis is also an overall goal of the philosophy behind the initiative.

Another question concerning places of discourse power is the physical space in which the activities can take place, and the necessary infra-structures. This training has to be essentially practical: youngsters have to be able to interact with the equipment, they have to be able to demonstrate what they do, how they do it, and they have to be able to experiment with what they’re learning in an engaging and interesting way.

This makes one thing obvious: the training must be provided far away from the usual institutionalized places, in libraries, youth centers and other places without the weight of a heavily hierarchy looming from above, that frames children as inferior, as subjects, as students, rather than as competent agents capable of dealing with what’s being made available and of coming up with their own notions of the tools they have. Schools can also be used, but only on an after-classes schedule.

**Spreading information, spreading integration**

It’s not just those who receive the training or their peers that can benefit from this initiative. The gain here is in the intrinsic possibility of them being able to train their own parents and educators, thus accomplishing in the most efficient way the conveying of their own mindset, improving how media education can be made, both at home and at school.

This is another side to empowering youngsters as agents: their technical skills and the way they are digitally integrated (which usually far surpasses those who supervise them) may be more easily mobilized into a relation of convergence. Whereas one usually sees a bipolar divide between the current and future paradigms (youngsters don’t see why they should let go of their PC’s for a few moments, and adults don’t see why they should pick them up for a few moments too) what we’re trying to achieve here is a coming together of these extremes. And it won’t be all that complicated: in spite of what is usually said about young people not caring about interpersonal connections, and being anti-social, but the matter of fact is that chat rooms, on-line collaborative applications, instant messaging and social networking sites are ways of being social, very actively so.

But some work should also be done by the parents. They should come in direct contact with how their children actually use these devices, they should think more about understanding, their discourse should be less about prohibiting and more with interacting with how the youngsters conceptualize technology and make it a part of themselves.

References

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Sites

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