Bulgaria: Are children empowered to benefit from the internet?

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Image source: Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre

The recently completed national representative survey of 1000 Bulgarian children aged 9 to 17 years and their parents reveals that intense internet use and having technical digital skills does not necessarily translate into using the full range of online opportunities or being able to respond proactively to upsetting online content. In a context where children access the internet independently at an ever younger age, often unsupervised, this raises important questions about the balance between online risks and opportunities and children's online safety.

The average age of accessing the internet for the first time in Bulgaria has dropped to 8 years old over the past 6 years and by the time children reach 10 years old, 90% are already online. Children also go online more often and spend more time using the internet than they did 6 years ago. Over 9 in 10 children (93%) use the internet daily and the majority of these children (79%) spend at least one hour online.

Children in Bulgaria go online predominantly via a smartphone (80%), which creates not only opportunities but also risks due to relatively unsupervised access. More internet access comes with higher exposure to online risk and the safety of children when they are online depends on their digital skills. Better skills also allow children to take more advantage of the opportunities that the internet affords them.

About 70% of Bulgarian children report that they learn new things from the Internet every week and almost all of them (96%) agrees that the internet offers a lot of useful things for children of their age. About half children use the internet for schoolwork (51%) and to look for news online (45%) but looking for health information is rare, even among older teenagers. In fact, children in Bulgaria use the internet most often for leisure and entertainment activities, such as watching videos (89%), listening to music (86%), and visiting social networking sites (73%). Playing games and posting pictures and comments are also popular.

While children in Bulgaria use the internet to create content rather rarely, they seem competent internet

users. Most know how to save a photo they found online (86%), find it easy to choose terms for their online searches (78%), or how to install an app (77%) and check mobile app prices (67%). They are also able to access their information from various devices they use (70%) and know how to change the privacy settings of their online profiles (73%).

However, having the skills does not translate into making use of the existing opportunities. For example, while nearly 80% of children know how to record and upload a video online, only 23% have done so in the past month. While the internet is a popular place for socialising with friends, very few children use it for civic participation. Most of the children do not engage online with local charities or organisations (7%), campaigns or protests (4%) or in discussing political or social problems with others (6%). Similarly, using the internet for school preparation is considered highly useful (the second most useful online activity after using the internet to play games), but is the 12th most frequent online activity they actually engage in – only 50% of children use the internet for schoolwork at least once a week and nearly a quarter (24%) have not used done so over the past month.

The increased use of the internet, however, has created more exposure to risk, especially for older children. Over the past year 15% of children in Bulgaria have experienced something online that bothered or upset them compared to 9% in 2010. About one third of all survey participants have seen online pornographic content, which was upsetting for almost half of these children. A third of the children have encountered online hate speech or seen violent online materials, including images and videos of murders and executions, which was exceptionally or very upsetting for nearly half of the children.

Most children talk to family and friends when they experience something negative online but nearly one in 5 children do not speak to anybody. Parents and carers are the main source of support (70% of children turn to them), followed by friends (36%) and siblings (12%). Teachers or other professionals are very rarely sought for support in such cases (respectively 4% and 1%). In addition, a significant number of children (18%) do not talk to anybody and this proportion has increased considerably since 2010 (4%). When to cope with upsetting content, the most common strategies are closing the unpleasant, disturbing or unwanted website or application (44%), ignoring the problem (32%), blocking the person (28%) or deleting the messages (14%). Very few children report the incident (5%)

Georgi Apostolov, the coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre which carried out the survey summarises the challenges:

> *Today's 9-17 years old Bulgarian children are real digital natives. Most of them use internet and mobile communications almost all the time and often have digital skills superior to those of their parents. This is probably the main reason why parents seems to have reduced the supervision and mediation compared to 6 years ago. However, children start using internet at an earlier age, so they need more mediation in order to develop the necessary social and media skills that will allow them to benefit from the opportunities the internet provides. The education system also has an important role to play – digital and media literacy should be urgently included in the curricula in order to educate competent and active netizens.*

Further materials from this study

Online experiences of children in Bulgaria: risks and safety (authors: Marko Hajdinjak, Petar Kanchev, Emanuil Georgiev and Georgi Apostolov, Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre; 2017)

Parental support for development of children's digital skills (authors: Emanuil Georgiev, Marko Hajdinjak, Petar Kanchev and Georgi Apostolov, Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre; 2017)

Are Digital Natives Digitally Literate? Insights from a national representative survey (authors: Petar Kanchev, Marko Hajdinjak, Emanuil Georgiev and Georgi Apostolov, Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre; 2017)

More about the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre

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