YOUNGSTERS, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND UNPLUGGING

Charo S.
Professor, School of Communication,
University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain
csadaba@unav.es

Abstract:

The presence of the internet is clear in developed countries, especially among youngsters. However, technology access and usage is also increasing in developing societies, where minors are in most cases at the forefront of the adoption and usage of these new services.

The incidence of ICT is higher among young people whom, according to Prensky (2001), have been considered digital natives. In this particular case, the future, which has already transitioned into the present, is shaped by millions of minors with a screen in their pockets, which gives them global and interactive access to various forms of content. Research confirms that, despite socioeconomic and cultural differences, in most countries it is possible to find high levels of ICT penetration among young people who seem to be at the forefront of the adoption of any technological development.
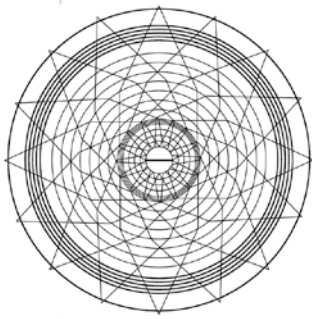
Keywords: unplugging, youngsters, digital technology, addiction to media, information overload

1. Youngsters and technology

The presence of the internet and is clear in developed countries, especially among youngsters. But technology access and usage is also growing in developing societies, where minors are in most cases at the forefront of the adoption and usage of these new services.

The incidence of ICT is higher among young people that, following Prensky (2001) have been considered *digital natives.* In this particular case, the future, which has turned already into present, is drawn by millions of minors with a screen in their pockets which gives them global and interactive access to all kind of content. Research confirms that, despite socioeconomic and cultural differences, in most countries it is possible to find high levels of ICTs penetration among young people who seem to be at the forefront of the adoption of any technological development.

The adoption of a new technology always raises issues that attract the interest of researchers. Some of the recurring themes arising from the emergence of an innovation are the motivations to adopt innovations sooner or later (Rogers, 1971), the changes that the arrival of a new device has on habits, behaviors and conducts (displacement effect) of existing devices users, possible psychological or perceptual changes, and positive or negative effects that the

new technology will have on the scenarios it affects. Of course, many of these issues begin and are supported in quantification exercises and in the description of profiles of new technology users. This is done to predict or establish consumption and adoption patterns as well as different uses of the new technology. The impact that an innovation can have on certain groups is another issue that has traditionally attracted the attention of researchers.

In this context, ascertaining the extent to which information and communication technologies affect children attracted significant interest for several reasons. One was the ease of access that this age group has to these new devices. In this sense, and despite its non academic perspective, Tapscott (1998) had a strong impact bringing the public attention to this issue. Besides Tapscott over-optimistic approach a strong defensive position was taken upon the arrival of these new devices and technologies into the lives of children. However, their educational, transformative and participatory potential led to public and private initiatives becoming common in the late nineties to promote an increasingly intensive use of ICT by this segment.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, the National Institute on Media and the Familiy or The Markle Foundation were some of the first institutions setting up research efforts to understand in which extent US children were using the new technologies (Wartella et als., 2000). In this country the most important source for information is now the "Pew Internet&American Life Project"[1] who covers, among other issues, the role of ICTs adolescents everyday life.

In Europe, Livingstone and Bovill published "Young People, New Media" in 1999 which dealt with "children, young people and their changing media environment, focussing on the diffusion, uses, experiences and significance of media and information technologies among 6-17 year olds. The subject of children, young people and the new media attracts considerable public and academic interest" (Livingstone&Bovill, 1999:1). This was followed by a relevant research project coordinated by Sonia Livinsgtone under the European Commision's Safer Internet and Safer Internet Plus Programs, EUKids Online (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). The project helped to establish the agenda both in the academic and the political scene regarding this field[2]. Other relevant contribution in this field is Livingstone's (2003) proposal of research agenda in this field. As another follow-up the Net Children Go Mobile[3] project has recently focused on five European countries and on the use of mobile devices amongst this age group (Mascheroni and Òlafsson, 2014).

In LatinAmerica between September 2007 and June 2008 a research team leaded by the University of Navarra and funded by Telefonica, the Spanish telecommunications company, reached more than 80,000 young people between 6 and 18 years old in seven countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. By December 2011, the total number of children participating in the investigation stood at 200,000, and it was expanded to Spain, Ecuador and Guatemala. Three progress reports were published with the data that had been collected: "The Interactive Generation in Latin America 2008" (Bringué & Sádaba, 2008), "The Interactive Generation in Spain 2010" (Bringué & Sádaba, 2010a) and "The Interactive Generation in Latin America 2010" (Bringué & Sádaba & Tolsá 2010b). Furthermore, in 2011 a special report on the relationship between Spanish minors and social networks was published (Bringué & Sádaba, 2011a). Reports with data from Argentina (Bringué, Sádaba, Zemboráin, Cantu & Bunge, 2009), Brazil (Passarelli, B., Junqueira, A.H., Angelucci, A. Kutscka, S. Boaro,
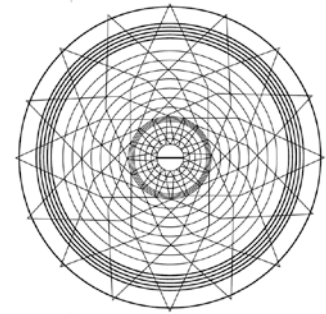
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[1] http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/teens-and-youth/
[2] Database is avaible at: http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/DB/home.aspx
[3] http://netchildrengomobile.eu/

J., Bringué, X., Sádaba, Ch., 2012) and Ecuador (Bringué & Sádaba, 2011b) were also published. Articles covering the particular cases of Colombia (Arango, Bringué, Sádaba, 2010), Mexico (Bringué and Sádaba, 2009) and Venezuela (Sádaba, Bringué and Calderín, 2011; Bringué, Sadaba and Calderín, 2011) were also published. Beyond the relative academic value of this work, which provided original information on the relationship between children and adolescents in these countries with technology (Sádaba, 2013), its impact on public opinion was remarkable precisely because of its novelty (Sádaba, 2014).

Buckingham (2006, 2007) and Turkle (1995, 2011) among others have approached the subject from a more theoretical perspective offering interesting questions about the kind of relationships the technological scenarios are creating and how it affects to children and young people.
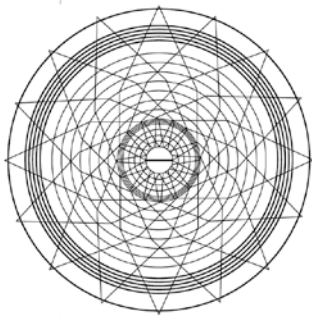
The research work developed by EUKids Online established and confirmed in the last years how European minors are leading the way. But this also happens in other regions and countries: one of the last Global System for Mobile communications Association's (GSMA, 2011) reports focused on Egypt, Japan, India and Paraguay, found out that 69% of children in these countries were using a mobile phone, and the usage was more sophisticated everyday: not only because of the device itself (many kids are familiarized with smartphones), but also because of what they use the mobile phone for. While only 43% of parents in those countries reported using their mobile phones to access social networking sites, 73% of minors declared doing so.

Thinking about the main reasons to explain and understand this close relation, it is possible to identify at least four issues (Sádaba, 2008; Sádaba and Naval, 2008):

- In first place technology solves two of the most important and prevalent needs of teens: it helps them to socialise with others in quicker and costless ways, and it constitutes an easy way to entertain themselves. Socialization and leisure needs, both very relevant for this age group, are well covered with this technology.

- Technology allows them to reinforce the generational gap in a positive way: they are aware of their superior technological skills. Adults should not despise the opportunity that technology use gives them to show off that there are things or situations where they are better.

- In third place, technology is an interactive medium and teens prefer a two-way communication process instead of linear and one-way communication: they want to be able to participate (even if they do not do it afterwards).

- Finally, there is a clear generational link between them and the technology and it is easy to understand that this creates a particular relation that cannot be fighted.

2. Emerging risks

Youngsters are eager consumers of technology, but sometimes they are also suffering from the risks associated to its use. Experts identify **three C** to be aware of: **Content** (age-inappropriate or harmful), **Contacts** (being able to contact or being contacted by strangers) and **Conducts** (bad habits or behaviors they can adopt or suffer from). These risks must be addressed from a multistakeholder point of view: governments and public administration should assure that the online space is as safe as possible for them; telecommunication companies and content providers have to take into account the specific needs associated to this age group (Recalde, Sádaba and Gutiérrez, 2015); parents need to be aware of the risks; educators in a broader sense, could implement throuhg media literacy programs, ways of coping with this harmful contents, contacts o misconducts.

Besides that, it is true that in the last years we have witnessed how new illnesses are appearing: addiction, technology-related anxiety (Fear of Missing Out or nomophobia), but also a kind of *gluttony* on how we consume and produce information as well as food. The information overload is a problem as it is the amount of food wasted in the more developed cities of the world where homeless people and families with low incomes struggle to eat every day. And as obesity is one of the main problems in developed societies affecting mainly children and young people, the *digital gluttony* can also create a *digital obesity*.

3. Unplugging: a growing necessity?

Internet access offers to every single user a first-row seat to what is happening all over the world as well as the possibility to take part and participate in the reshaping of the societies. But this participatory dream that some envisioned several years ago is sometimes far from users everyday routines: people are eager to be connected but this connectivity does not imply a wider awareness about the inequalities that afflict the world.

Every minute of the day Youtube users upload 72 hours of new video content, email users send 204,000,000 messages, Google receives over 4,000,000 search queries, Facebook users share 2,460,000 pieces of content, Whatsapp users share 347,222 photos and Apple users download 48,000 new apps[4].

Paradoxically, in the developed world, the possibility of unplugging is a luxury that only rich people can afford: some five stars hotels and resorts are offering their guests the "experience" of being unplugged from the digital world as a cure and an exciting opportunity. And at the same time, in the last five years the developing countries have had the highest growing rates of internet connection and mobile phone access.

Some western governments are discussing and approving laws to forbid companies to contact with their employees during their free time[5] trying to preserve the personal lives of their citizens. They are aware that while a personal attitude towards it is necessary, it is also helpful to have an organizational culture or a law that protects the weakest.

In the last decade the *slow movement* leaded by Honoré (2004) has promoted the need of taking a more paused look at our reality, far away from a technological determinism where humans are, or should be, as technology, every day quicker and more instantaneous. Time is require to acquire knowledge, to get a friend, to be involved in an interpersonal relationship and is an essential dimension of human live that need to be taken care of in an appropriate manner.

In the context of this movement, unplugging from the permanent connection, from the always online, is, for some thinkers, a real need. In part also because of the harmful consequences of the always on culture, creating weak links, generating people that, following Shirley Turkle's book (2011), are "alone together". While technology sometimes is a convenient way to fight loneliness or boredom it also could promotes a way of life somehow disconnected from real life.

4. Media literacy: an example

Governments, schools and families have developed resolute campaigns addressing the problem of obesity teaching the children how to eat properly. Also in the last years media literacy campaigns have been implemented in some countries to teach children how to use
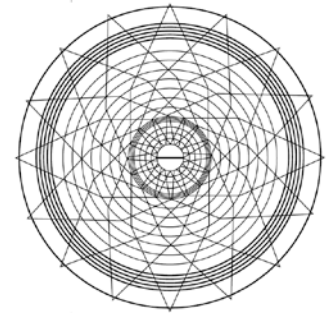
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[4] https://www.domo.com/blog/2012/06/how-much-data-is-created-every-minute/
[5] http://www.ubergizmo.com/2016/05/illegal-email-employees-after-work-hours-france/

and consume media content. Could media literacy help to bring up more responsible citizens, well aware of the world inequalities?

In the last years a very interesting activity has taken place under the "media literacy" umbrella. The "24 hours without media", also name the world unplugged, or experiment proposes educational communities an activity where all the participants agree to stay away of media contents, outlets and screens for 24 hours (Moeller, Powers and Roberts, 2012).

Some of the conclusions of the participants in the project leaded by several universities confirmed that while "addiction" to media may not be clinically diagnosed, the anxiety and depression following its absence seem real. For most of the students was really difficult, and almost impossible, to go unplugged as they reported how their mobile phones were an extension of themselves. The role of digital technology is essential to their social lives[6].

The experiment is just an occasion to reflect on their own use of media, and the role of technology in the daily lives. Ideally, after a experiment like this, a more rational use of technology should follow. But there is the permanent need to remind young people about this need and media literacy programs could be a perfect opportunity to deliver this message.

5. Discussion

In the midst of the technological invasion we are facing and particularly young people, we all feel the need to be permanently connected. These and other traits are what give shape to the era of hyperconnectivity. Regarding this reality, there are those who see a certain technological fatigue amongst users, and so, from certain perspectives, there is a feeling that we need to rethink the technological approach, to reconsider the effects that technology has on our lives.

It is not possible to eliminate online life completely, but rather establishing regular periods of digital time-out in order to develop face-to-face communication; they suggest cultivating leisure periods which, to a certain extent, would dispense with digital technology and would re-construct the borders between the time for work and the time for rest. Digital unplugging could be a useful media literacy tool. Mainly because, as Buckingham (2008) reminds us, we cannot expect from technology to teach an ethical approach in its users

From an education perspective it is make clear that at present, media education and the promotion of digital competence is a priority in the systems of education and of the main international bodies. It is absolutely fundamental that people learn these new languages, acquire the capacity to critically differentiate and evaluate the enormous amount of media and sources of information available, and use this safely. But perhaps one important component of digital competence should be learning how to disconnect, in order to make connections in another way.

The educational value of this work is clearer if children and teenagers are kept in mind: they are heavy users of the devices and social applications, and despite the risks and opportunities have been researched in the last years all over the western world, there is still our responsibility to ensure they benefit from the technology at the same time that risks and perils are minimized.
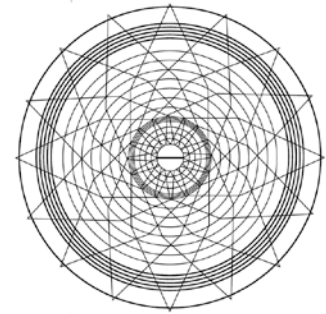
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[6] https://theworldunplugged.wordpress.com/
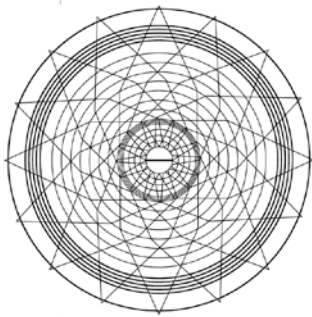
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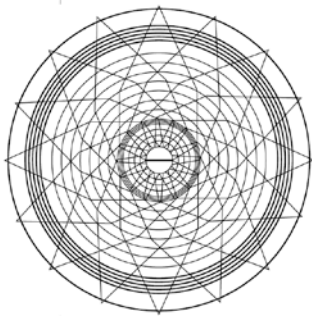
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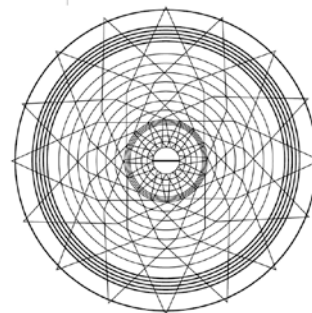
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ПОДРОСТКИ, ЦИФРОВЫЕ ТЕХНОЛОГИИ И «ОТКЛЮЧЕНИЕ»

Чаро С.
Профессор, департамент коммуникации,
Университет Наварры, Памплона, Испания
csadaba@unav.es

Аннотация:

В представленной статье анализируются взаимоотношения современных подростков с цифровой средой в эпоху информационного общества и сопутствующих ему информационных перегрузок. Автор рассматривает, как подростки адаптируют под себя те или иные сервисы, как новые технологии и устройства изменяют привычки и поведения современной молодежи.

Автор описывает, как осмыслялось это проникновение новых технологий в молодежную среду разными исследовательскими сообществами. Одним из таких исследований стал проект, включивший в себя 80 тысяч подростков участников из 7 стран: Аргентина, Бразилия, Чили, Колумбия, Мексика, Перу и Венесуэла.

В статье приведен список рисков, с которыми сталкиваются подростки в процессе адаптации к цифровой среде. В их числе зависимость от цифровых устройств, тревога, связанная с технологиями и боязнь остаться без мобильного телефона или оказаться вне зоны покрытия мобильной связи, а также информационная перегрузка.

Автор приходит к выводу, что в современном обществе растет необходимость «отключения» (unplugging) от цифровых устройств, так как, несмотря на огромные социальные и коммуникационные возможности современных технологий, все выше риск отрыва от реальности при их активном использовании.

Автор описывает одно из исследований, связанных с повышением медиаграмотности, в качестве показательного примера: эксперимент «24 часа без媒диа». Один из результатов эксперимента — переосмысление роли媒диа в повседневной жизни современной молодежи.

В заключительной части автор приходит к выводу, что потребность постоянно находиться на связи повсеместна в современном обществе, однако именно в молодежной среде она выражена наиболее ярко. Таким образом, отключение от цифровой среды может рассматриваться как один из основных и важных инструментов повышения медиаграмотности.

Ключевые слова: подростки, цифровая среда, медиасреда, отключение, зависимость от медиа, адаптация в цифровой среде
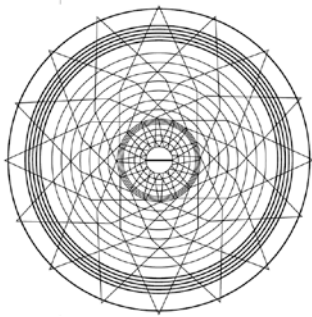
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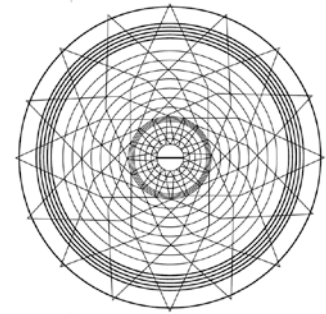
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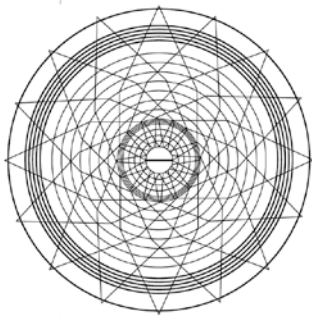
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