Media representations and children’s discourses on online risks: Findings from qualitative research in nine European countries

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12 children aged 9-16

# Abstract

Prior research has pointed to cross-national variations in media attention for online risks, which are then mirrored in parental concerns regarding the internet. However, little is known so far about how the discursive environment around opportunities and risks of the internet for children shapes the very context in which children’s own perceptions are developed and their online experiences are situated. The aim of this contribution is threefold: (1) to understand how and to what extent children’s perceptions of online risks incorporate media representations, parental worries and discourses circulating among peers; (2) to identify any age- or gender-specific patterns in the appropriation and conversion of media, parents’ and peers’ discourses; and (3) to identify whether there are cross-cultural variations in risk perceptions.

# Outcome

"In this article we have examined how children make sense of online risks; more specifically, we were interested in assessing how the discursive environment produced by media representations and adult’s constructions of the dangers of the internet shapes the way these risks are perceived by children.

Findings show that media framings of online risks are particularly influential when children are less likely to experience those risks directly: in making sense of the “stranger danger” children adhere to stereotypes, vocabularies and frames that they draw from the media (both news media and entertainment or educational TV formats). Similarly, younger children are more vulnerable to media representations of the most serious consequences of being bullied online. By contrast, teenagers who boast stronger experience of the patterns and risks of online conflicts draw on first-hand or other peers’ experiences in making sense of cyberbullying. However, beyond exerting a direct influence on children’s perceptions, media narratives are also incorporated in lay discourses that circulate in peer exchanges as well as within the parent–child relationship. This re-embedding of media discourses in the context of everyday life often entails a personalization and localization of media coverage, which turns distant stories into personal and realistic experiences. Through a similar re-embedding, media representations are re-positioned as true experiences of peers, and thus reliable sources of knowledge, in compliance with the norms of “I-pistemology” (van Zoonen, 2012).

Against evidence of cross-national variations in how the media cover online risks (Haddon Stald, 2009; Ponte et al., 2009), cross-cultural comparison did not point to striking differences in the sensemaking of risks in the countries involved in this study – one exception being the highly gendered definition of both “stranger danger” and bullying that result from sexting, whereby girls in Southern European countries are particularly negatively sanctioned as responsible for being involved in such risky situations." (Mascheroni et al., 2014)