Chapter 3
Online Violence:
Listening to Children's Online Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The Internet imprints a great complexity to new and old risks as threats become more available in children's lives. Criminals have greater access to the victims and Internet crimes are favoured by ambiguities in the law. This chapter presents preliminary data from an on-going doctoral investigation about the upsetting phenomenon of violence perpetrated by, with, and among school-aged children using online services and devices. To better understand the subjectivity, delicacy, and complexity of matters and meanings that participants bring to their online experiences, the authors follow a qualitative approach, based on a structured and interpretive analysis. They work with a group of children aged between 6 and 15 years old. With this chapter, the authors intend to contribute to a greater understanding and reflection about this complex problem and its impact in order to increase awareness about how children behave online and in what way it may influence their well-being.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents preliminary data from an on-going doctoral investigation about the worrying and emergent phenomenon of violence perpetrated by, with and among school-aged children, using online services and devices. For this text we selected and will briefly describe some online experiences from children's point of view.

In Portuguese context, the General Attorney (http://cibercrime.pgr.pt/) advocates the need to broaden the knowledge and raise awareness of the phenomenon once it exploits the vulnerabilities of young people and expose them to new forms of practicing old criminal activities (such as grooming, harmful content, pornography, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse) and also new kinds of criminal activity. Therefore, the General Attorney launched an Action Plan on Crimes against Children on the Internet to deal more effectively with the criminal phenomena, which involves using the information and communication technologies to

victimize children. Reiterating the previous UNI-CEF's global agenda for children's rights in the digital age pinpoints that "[r]esearch is needed to discover which risk factors operate in particular cultural or national contexts and what protective factors exist in children's environments that can be strengthened" (Livingstone & Bulger, 2013, p. 23).

By 'online violence' we mean the use of online digital services and devices to participate in activities that may result in child's own physical, psychological, emotional harm or in causing harm to other people. In the end, with this doctoral research we aim to understand: i) the current online threats that are perceived by children as risks; ii) which typified risky behaviours online are not recognised as risks (and why) by children; iii) how children engage and deal with online negative and risky online experiences.

This text is organized in six sections including this "Introduction". The second section presents a short review of the state of the art on the discussion surrounding how risk is present in children's online lives; the difference between risk and harm; and online violence as an emergent and worrying health problem. The third section describes our methodological approach. The fourth section presents a preliminary, descriptive and interpretive analysis of data collected. In the fifth section we make some brief and final remarks about the provisional findings. Finally, in the sixth section we pinpoint some future research directions.

WHEN RISK LIVES IN THE CHILD'S POCKET

In a world saturated with attractive possibilities enabled by the online digital technologies, and where time is money, we don't get all that surprised when we find parents using digital devices to entertain their children, while they keep on distracted or worried with their busy lives. We often observe this picture, in gatherings with couples, in restaurants or malls. Though imagined, designed and built by adults, technologies, that favour the interaction and communication between people, won the attention of children and young people through the last decades, taking a central role in their daily life (Huesmann, 2007).

Interesting is that society seems to accept that these digital devices babysit children but then get all surprised and suspicious when young people choose the computer instead of having fun outdoors, or when they use the online devices to: i) talk with strangers; ii) learn about sex; iii) involve in sexual experiments; iv) engage in self-harm practices or unhealthy eating behaviours[1]; or v) harass others. The so-called 'digital natives' or 'net generation' are growing in a wired rapidly changing, complex and ambiguous world and their digital trends reinforce the generation gap between adults and children. Therefore, despite entitling themselves experts in digital matters (Ponte & Cardoso, 2008), we are not all that sure they are using the online digital opportunities wisely. But, certainly they are using them differently.

Quite often we hear or read about national and international tragic news that urge us to reflect on how adults and children behave online. There are cases where parents themselves contribute for an unwanted precocious and unauthorized digital footprint that may endanger children, when they innocently publish online pictures of their sons and daughters, contributing for the possibility of an unauthorized distribution and misuse. And, sometimes, children may get themselves or others in real trouble because they i) lack maturity; ii) lack life experience; iii) lack internet literacy; iv) like to push boundaries; v) challenge their limits; vi) don't think about the consequences; vii) need to fit in and be accepted and respected by their peers.

Thereby, as online digital technologies evolve and become more sophisticated, interactive and mobile, a greater amount of exposure to risk in the network is favoured: i) the Internet is faster and cheaper enabling people to share and distribute larger files (pictures, video and audio); ii) children

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