

PARENTS CONFRONTING INTERNET : A REAL EDUCATIVE CHALLENGE!

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Internet, comme bien d'autres moyens d'information et de communication, pose aujourd'hui de nouveaux problèmes au niveau de l'éducation parentale. La difficulté de définir ce nouveau média dans son essence, et le manque de connaissance que peuvent en avoir certains parents en comparaison à leurs enfants, fait de cette difficulté un véritable challenge.

Franco Favilli se propose ici d'y présenter le nouveau média dans un rapport à ses usagers, tentant ainsi de resituer Internet afin que parents et éducateurs puissent mieux en cerner les enjeux.

C'est sous le point de vue particulier d'un membre de l'EPA (European Parents Association) actif en Italie qu'il tente de répondre à trois questions fondamentales dans le processus éducatif lié à Internet. C'est également au public précis des parents qu'il s'adresse au cœur de ses réponses.

La réflexion prend cours en se centrant sur le média lui-même (Qu'est-ce qu'Internet, quels sont ses potentialités et risques ?) avant de se pencher sur le rapport étroit qu'entretiennent avec lui les jeunes. Confrontant enfin l'adulte – parent au phénomène Internet dans une perspective éducative, elle lui dresse une esquisse de ce que pourrait être son rôle au sein même de la relation étroite entre l'enfant et la Toile – relation à comprendre avec ses risques et intérêts.

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Introduction

At first sight, the advent of Internet seems to represent something analogous in today's society to that represented by television fifty years ago. Just as then, we are dealing with a means of communication and information ; in the same way, its use has gradually moved from public places - bars and social clubs (TV), the workplace and cyber cafes (Internet) - to the home. As was the case fifty years ago for television, Internet, like any other means of communication and information now poses educational problems. It is not by chance that moments for reflection and discussion on the theme of Internet have been proposed by groups originating from various directions.

In fact, it is not just a problem that is purely technical, based on the knowledge, capacity and ability to use a technological instrument ; instead, the problem is to try and define its characteristics and potential through 360°...and this is in no way simple! It is not even easy to orientate oneself at an educative level with regards to something that is so difficult to define in its essence.

All of this leads us to say that Internet represents a real educative challenge for educators in general, and most of all for parents.

As parents, we must therefore try to put the phenomenon of Internet into perspective as well as possible, trying to give simple (not expert!) responses to some questions that many parents pose. These questions can be subdivided into three categories :

- **Internet and me** : What is Internet ? What are its characteristics ? What potential does it offer ? What risks does it bring with it ?
- **My children and Internet** : How is it seen by our children ? How do they use it ? Do they understand its potential and the risks it brings ?
- **Me “the parent” and Internet** : How can I insert myself effectively in this ever closer relationship our children have with Internet ? How can I manage to perform my role as an educator in this environment ?

Internet and me

Notwithstanding appearances, the first question, *What is Internet ?* is probably the most difficult ; one thing is sure, that the content of the response conditions many of the answers to the subsequent questions. Therefore we should dedicate particular attention to this question.

Let's start first of all by reconsidering the analogy of Internet with the television of fifty years ago, as we have already mentioned above. Well, this analogy is not altogether obvious! Or, at least, if we want to talk of an analogy, it could refer more to the impact that the creation of Internet has had on society and the population in general, above all at an emotive level : curiosity and interest, but also diffidence and unease. These are behaviors that, while varying qualitatively and quantitatively, are often conditioned by and reflect the degree of familiarity that the various subjects have had and continue to have with the technological instrument.

Every new phenomena requires a minimum of adaptation and this also applies to Internet. When confronting a totally new phenomenon, there may even be a certain reticence in using it and interacting with it, even once it becomes readily available ; this can be seen now with Internet, in the same way as was seen in the past with the advent of television.

Maybe the analogies end here or, at least, the differences seem both clearer and of greater impact at a personal and social level. One thing at least is evident : we can touch the television, but the Internet remains intangible! The content of Internet is transmitted by a screen, but it isn't simply a screen, it isn't a physical entity. Well then, maybe the analogy is between Internet and television programs ? We would say this is not the case, because while television programs are products that are selected, organized into timetables and transmitted by a broadcaster, and under the responsibility of a certain number of easily identifiable people, the situation is completely different for Internet.

In the Internet case, we find ourselves in a situation of complete freedom and de-responsibility : there is certainly someone who produces the web pages and organizes them on a site, but there is absolutely no selection activity of the products, and often it is not easy to identify the person responsible for them. The aspect of Internet that hits newcomers the most strongly is the absolute impossibility of knowing its content,

given that anyone can open a web site at a modest cost and insert free of charge anything they want.

For this reason, there can't be a guide (as used for the TV), there can't be a catalog (as found in a library) : the only instruments for identifying specific content are search engines, with their inherent limitations. In fact, even though the reference databases are enormous, there are many sites that do not belong to these databases, the contents of which cannot be brought to the attention of the person performing the search. On the other hand, it is practically impossible to identify all the sites existing on the web, it would definitely be simpler, for example, to collect the catalogs of all existing libraries or all publishers in a single database ...

It is also important to consider that use of a search engine can't be seen as something culturally neutral ; we must be aware of the fact that apart from making use of it to a greater or lesser extent, choices are made when a database is being constructed and priorities are established when listing the results of a search.

These choices are obviously made having some indications and variables as reference, supplied by those who promote the production of a specific search engine : choices that therefore reflect not only cultural, social, moral and ideological evaluations, but also, and maybe most importantly, economic evaluations of a single person or group of people.

For example, if a specific search produces three hundred responses, it is one thing if a certain site appears on the first page (that practically all people read completely) and quite another if it appears on the last page (that practically nobody gets round to opening!). Therefore the position of a site within the results of a search, and even more so, its absence, are all consequences of univocal choices, which cannot possibly always coincide with the needs, expectations, cultural and social background of the person performing the search, a person who is unknown to the search engine : whoever performs a specific search, irregardless of his or her age and where it is performed, obtains the same group of information, ordered in the same way.

To overcome this single source of information, we can use various search engines, and compare the results obtained : but this lengthens the time required to identify the best responses and the information required, while still leaving the doubt that maybe what we were really looking for hasn't been found.

This is another interesting aspect of Internet : the duality of sensations it transmits. *Doubt*, as we have already seen, but also *security* ; *mystery* and *rationality*, *repulsion* and *attraction*, *alienation* and *affinity*, etc.

We have already touched on doubt : the awareness of everything that must exist on Internet, but, for some reason, we don't have access to ; on the other hand, with a list of responses to our search before us, presented almost instantaneously, we feel comforted and reassured : we only have to choose the response we like the best!

In this way, often our not being able to understand who has put certain information on the Internet together with how to find where they put it and why they put it there in the first place renders more mysterious the structure which can't be seen or touched, but which exists nonetheless ; a structure in which efficiency, instructions it responds to, and the logic it acts with all seem an ode to rationality : if something doesn't work, it must be us, the users, that have made the mistake!

This can be fastidious, create repulsion, provoke a refusal by many people, adults above all, who don't feel capable of interacting with an instrument which appears perfect and requires exact instructions to supply the information and services requested : some people even seem to be scared of exposing themselves and, almost through pride, refuse any type of approach a priori.

But for those who overcome this initial diffidence, there is a rapid transformation to an opposite sensation of attraction and almost dependence on the most recent discovery of information and communication technology! Once the high of Internet navigation in its various forms has been experienced, it is difficult to stop ...the relationship with the PC and Internet becomes ever stronger, we have the sensation, often coinciding with reality, that many things can be done while remaining comfortably seated in front of a screen, isolating ourselves, even physically, from everything that surrounds us. Often, even, if we have to communicate something to a friend or colleague on the floor above, we send an e-mail instead of telephoning, thus losing a great deal of the significance and appeal of a communication activity. The relationship between people is sacrificed in the cause of the indubitable savings in time.

It can be said that for some aspects, Internet can contribute in pushing some people towards a sort of isolation, if not alienation, in a society that already tends towards individualism. Internet's other aspects, however, offer new an enormous opportunity to put people

in contact across great distances, to discover and develop knowledge ...sometimes, unfortunately, with negative consequences.

My children and Internet

This great opportunity offered by Internet to put and keep people in contact with new or distant people, to make new discoveries is one of the most attractive and interesting aspects for young people, in their continuous search for the new world that surrounds them and that they want to explore, as also shown [see table 1] in a study² performed in Italy on a sample of 400 young people aged between 11 and 15, a group which we will continue to refer to in the following.

Table 1

Why do you use Internet ?	
To communicate	33,1%
To study	30,5%
To play	30,3%
To work	6,1%

For our children, who are growing and developing in a society in which technology has assumed an ever increasing and significant role, there are no longer doubts, only certainties, there is no room for uneasiness or repulsion towards Internet, only attraction, any form of alienation is unimaginable! The sensations they feel are often opposite to those felt by their parents, many of whom have no experience of the world wide web, or even a PC.

Children find in Internet a world to discover, full of information and people. A source of information to consult to find the answer to any question, or people that, although invisible, can be imagined with their features, age and character. Some of these people are given an almost mythical representation, between reality and fantasy : the emotional drive to find out in some way whether they exist can be strong enough to lead to attempts to meet them, sometimes with success.

All of this is fascinating! But how could it fail to be so for a generation of young people for whom many experiences and much knowledge have been acquired, maybe only superficially, at a much younger age than was possible for their parents in their time ? Internet offers some the possibility of overcoming that sense of boredom, of dangerous satisfaction or lack of any type of interest that can lead those weaker in the face of unsatisfaction and the search for something, anything, new, maybe even drugs.

The use young people make of Internet is always very direct, and above the skills learnt are either self instructed or learned from other young people [see table 2] and often guided by a word of mouth, allowing them to always be up to date on where to find the best sites for downloading music, chat rooms where they can find really friendly virtual friends, the most sophisticated web-cams, the most up to date search engines,...the best way to crack expensive software, etc. Certainly, they also use e-mails, but, for them, this opportunity for communication most closely corresponds to traditional means (I write and you reply) and is therefore more appropriate to the habits and requirements of their parents and adults in general, than to theirs : the immediacy of a chat line is missing!

Table 2

Who taught you to use the Internet ?	
I taught myself	29%
Friends	31%
My family (including older brothers and sisters)	33%
Teachers	7%

As is natural for their age group, young people have an extremely spontaneous and positive attitude towards the Internet ; they see its potential and make use of that which is of most interest to them : they certainly appreciate the opportunity to find information, but the communication aspect is much more important.

The very nature of the risks make them difficult for young people, and especially children, to appreciate. An evident risk is no longer a

risk, in that it is easily identifiable, thus losing its potential danger. The real risks are linked to activities and uses of the Internet by people who, taking advantage of the difficulty in their being traced, subtly move at the limits of the law and/or moral behavior. The degree of danger of this activity for potential Internet users is determined by the degree of maturity and cultural, psychological and social development of the person sitting in front of the screen. The concept of risk is therefore relative, not absolute [see tables 3 and 4].

Table 3

Do you consider the following as possible risks while using Internet ?	1-->5
Make bad acquaintances	3.75
Be tracked down by hackers	3.60
Download files with viruses	3.60
Use credit cards for on-line purchases	2.80
Isolate yourself from reality	2.50

Table 4

Do you consider the following to be possible dangerous content on Internet ?	1-->5
Pornography/Pedophilia	4.20
Violence/Intolerance	3.50
Push towards using tobacco/alcohol/drugs	3.50
Gambling/betting	2.50
Vulgar/blasphemous language	1.80

Me “The parent” and Internet

In a context as complex as Internet, together with its vaguely defined limits, the opportunities for adult-youth and parent-child confrontation appear numerous, especially as regards educational aspects, but not necessarily easy. The most obvious obstacle is represented by the different levels of familiarity with new technologies and with Internet in particular : often the young, our children, have a wider knowledge than adults, their parents. Another obstacle for a proper confrontation is, however, the frequent lack of a PC connected to the Internet in the house. These two objective obstacles add, however, to those characteristic of an educational activity correlated to a totally new theme. We will now try to describe these obstacles.

It is obvious that, to be able to have a confrontation on a subject, a minimal amount of knowledge on the subject is essential, even better if the knowledge is accompanied by sufficient practice. On this point, it is clear that there is a gap, sometimes significant, between adults and young people and, in particular, between parents and children, as was found [see table 5] in the same study we referred to before, which also considered 160 educators, divided between parents and teachers. In fact, even spending the same time in front of a PC connected to Internet, the ability acquired by the young and by our children is distinctly superior to that of adults and parents, bearing in mind the higher level of attraction and closer cultural affinity towards the new technologies that young people have with respect to adults.

Table 5

Regular use of Internet	
Children	63.6%
Parents	22.5%
Teachers	77.0%

In addition, adults often only connect to Internet for work requirements, while children use it occasionally at school, and much more often as a hobby in their free time, with no outside conditioning or restrictions [see tables 6 and 7]. Children therefore rarely have much to learn from adults about the Internet!

Table 6

Who is with you when you when you are connected to Internet ?	
I'm by myself	47.5%
With friends	35.1%
With teachers	3.5%
With my parents	13.9%

Table 7

Where do you use Internet ?	
At home	63.0%
At friends' homes	26.9%
At school	5.4%
At Internet points	4.7%

If we move our attention towards the educational aspect, well, here we really find parents in a completely new situation : to educate their children in an environment in which the children have a greater understanding. Educational activity up till now has always seen the parents in a privileged position, both in terms of knowledge and experience. This position has always permitted them to have that degree of authority that makes instruction acceptable in the eyes of their children and , as a consequence, any consideration or evaluation which has the scope educating them is even more effective : exactly the opposite occurs for Internet and this reversal of roles in terms of knowledge and experience makes any educative activity by the parent extremely difficult. How can we be incisive when talking about something we have less knowledge of than the person we are talking to ? ... above all if this person is our child, not always enthusiastic, just as many young people,

to listen to their parents' points of view and suggestions and discuss experiences they have already had with them or give up the chance of trying others ?

A consequence of all of this can be for parents to resign themselves a priori to not performing any educational activity related to Internet, accompanied by a sense of frustration due to their incapacity and the impossibility of performing an educational role they feel they should perform.

Even when this doesn't occur, a new obstacle can be created by the non availability of the technical instruments necessary to construct an educational path. In fact, if there is no Internet access in the house, everything becomes more difficult ; if the parents only use Internet at work and the children in a cyber cafe or at a friend's house, how is it possible to begin any sort of dialog apart from in an abstract way, based only on the enunciation of principles and therefore with very limited effectiveness ?

It would be very different to be able to discuss Internet in front of a PC connected to the net! Any comments made and orientation suggested by parents to their children while sitting in front of the screen would surely be much more effective, maybe while the children navigate freely, as usual, in the presence of their parents. The children should feel this presence as a discreet figure who gives a sense of security, not one of control ; a figure who they can turn to when their navigation leads them to sites with content that might disturb them or to chat rooms where the people they meet may not be the type they were expecting.

Apart from these possible obstacles, a basic problem remains : the lack of a clear point of reference for those parents that feel the need to perform their role of educators in the sphere of Internet. The novelty of this information and communication instrument is so great that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to find an analogy with other instruments of the same type to be referred to as possible sources of educational experiences and approaches to be used in part by parents in this new context. There are not even any sufficiently valid pedagogical guidelines to be used as a reference for Internet and, even if we are to consider the few that are now starting to appear, these are relatively inaccessible to the majority of parents in that they are mainly reserved to people working in the field.

In this situation, parents wanting to educate their children with Internet can only navigate by sight! There are two main points of refer-

ence, two aims for their educational rather than virtual navigation and these are :

- Improve their own knowledge of Internet, not limiting themselves just to a technical background ;
- Acquire the knowledge of Internet's positive and negative potential.

Once these two aims have been reached, it is possible to start a real educative path with their children, a path that each parent will model according to his or her own beliefs and choices that he or she will have defined as being the best for the development and cultural, social and moral growth for their child. There neither can nor should be a single model : each parent-child unit is unique, rendering any educative stereotype impossible. The variables in play are people, with their own individual experiences, family and socio-cultural background, degree of sensitivity and ideals, all to be respected and accepted as long as their behavior do not provoke dangers to the surrounding society : there neither can nor should be homogeneity or homologation in the field of education.

The above reference to society wasn't casual! If today's society has decided that Internet is indispensable, at least in the western world, this means that Internet education cannot just be a question of parents-children, it can't just be relevant to some family environments : it has to be a problem to be dealt with at a global level and include as many families as possible. From a certain point of view, the numerous initiatives and projects supported at national and European level are certainly a step in the right direction : initiatives and projects that aim, amongst other things, to supply young people with the tools of knowledge and reflection that will help them to use Internet with an even wider awareness, with the support of their parents and teachers.

What still seems to be missing, at least in some countries, is a real promotional activity to make Internet widely available in peoples homes : while most places of employment, both public and private, together with all schools, now have an Internet point, many homes still remain without. As was said before, this leads to a lack of education in the use of Internet and this has a significant social aspect. It is not just a problem regarding the people living in that house, but also a problem for society at large, which must remain conscious that a significant portion of the population remains excluded from the possibility of having a minimum education in the use of an instrument of such great importance to daily life.

All of this leads to a very real problem of social equality : not all citizens have the same opportunity to learn about and be instructed in how to use Internet. There is a need for training for adults in the framework of permanent educational programs and to set up a system of financial interventions to assist the less financially able, to permit them to install and use Internet in the home. It is hoped that the State, Internet Service Providers and PC producers will work together in synergy, starting from the fact that it is in the general interest of society as a whole to overcome the problem and that this will permit a rapid reduction in the percentage of computer illiteracy, an illiteracy which is added to the surprising increase of *return* traditional illiteracy.

A point aside : the problem of collaboration with and attention given by possible interlocutors to the family and educators cannot be reduced to the simple production of lists of conditions for a safe use of Internet and its filters, the effectiveness of which are notoriously scarce for those who have a minimal capacity to use the net and which, according to some people, seem to be produced more for the opportunity to make money, rather than to be an effective support to the educative requirements of parents and teachers!

The fact that citizens are sufficiently educated about Internet and how to use it correctly and with a sense of awareness cannot be ignored by any society. Supplying information and permitting communication is extremely useful, even for its unquestionable rapidity, but its use also has important and sometimes delicate, social implications : because the transmission of information and the opportunity of connecting distant people is not a socially neutral activity, it depends on what is transmitted and what is communicated. The extreme liberty that Internet offers makes it possible to supply correct, but also erroneous information, communicate in a friendly , but also deceitful way. Commercial activities can be performed legally, but also illegally ; ideas considered acceptable, even though they may be subjective, or even ideas generally considered dangerous for society can be propagated ; navigation can favor both the development of good and bad habits.

Providing awareness of all of the phenomena listed above amongst others, with the help of explicit examples, must be at the center of any educational activity on Internet, whoever the subjects involved may be. A particular attention must obviously be paid to subjects that can be considered more at risk, above all children and young people. For example, they must be made to understand that not all information found on the Internet should be accepted passively and that the people we

meet on the net do not necessarily correspond to what we can imagine they are like from the messages they send us.

In an appropriate manner according to their age, children should become accustomed to a critical use of Internet ; they should be made to understand that the world of Internet is a lot more real than what they may imagine, in that in a certain sense, Internet is a virtual representation of the world that surrounds us : with its good sides and bad sides, with content not always suitable for anyone who wants to see it. Going back to the initial comparison with television and remaining in the theme of parents-children and Internet, we can say that another great difference is that while for television, parents can decide what programs are not considered suitable for their children, and therefore make a critical choice as to what channel to watch, this is not at all possible for the Internet : even by starting the navigation, or by directing the navigation in a certain direction considered safe for their children by the parent, all of a sudden, a simple and unimposing link can land us into a site that may be inappropriate or even dangerous for a child's social and psychological development. Moving around Internet cannot even be compared to entering into a newsagents ; here too, there are various types of newspapers and magazines, including the so called "adult" magazines : but they are divided by category and always have a clear and easily identifiable collocation. I can pick up any one of the available magazines, but never by chance, it is always my free choice : Internet is much more underhand, our initial choices are not always respected during navigation and this often happens totally independently of our intentions.

We should be aware that Internet is in fact a virtual representation of real life, but it is a multiform representation ; anybody can place their own personal view of a particular aspect of life on the web : in this way, this single aspect can be represented under various points of view, almost filtered, if not even deliberately deformed, by the eyes and the will of those who want to describe on the Internet what they see or what they think of that specific aspect of life.

It isn't easy to educate children in this, just as it isn't easy to educate them towards taking steps into the real world ; once again, adults, and in this case, parents, generally know the real world sufficiently well, whereas with Internet, often, they know very little. Therefore we can truly say that Internet represents a real educative challenge for parents!

Notes

- ¹ European Parents Association (Associazione italiana genitori – A.Ge., Italy)
- ² The study has been part of the activities in the Friendly Internet project – Safer Internet Action plan of the DG Information Society of the EC. Age, the Italian parents association, has been a partner in the project. The data in the tables refer to the analysis, done by A. Riggio (UCIIM), of the questionnaires submitted to teachers, parents and pupils within the project workplan.

