

Social Networking in the News

(Romanian News Media Representations of Online Social Networking)

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Abstract: *Online social networking has recently become a major mass media topic, a source of an optimistic buzz, but also the focus point of various social anxieties. In parallel with the unprecedented rise of social media use among Romanian internet users, Romanian mass media has also been devoting increasing space to the risks and opportunities presented by social networking sites. This paper investigates Romanian news media representations of online social networking, focusing on the coverage offered by two of the largest news outlets. It charts the main risks and opportunities associated with the use of these sites, with special attention to the way concerns about children's social media use are framed, the moral language the latter are cast in, and the voices framing the representation of children's online experience.*

Keywords: *Online social networking, opportunities and risks, privacy, idling, moral panic, media violence.*

News and reports on the phenomenal increase of social media use is currently a daily feature in the papers or the blogosphere. Reports that the time the average US user spends on Facebook has outgrown the amount spent on any other site, or even the time spent on Google, Yahoo or YouTube combined¹ or that the social

1 Facebook Users Average 7 hrs a Month in January as Digital Universe Expands. *Nielsen Wire*. Retrieved July 30, 2010, from http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/facebook-users-average-7-hrs-a-month-in-january-as-digital-universe-expands/

networking site Hi5 now has more Romanian unique visitors than any other site measured² have been widely covered by Romanian media as well.

Social networking sites are also increasingly becoming sites of social anxiety, manifested in the prominence of news related to issues of online privacy, violence, personal and financial risks, but also fears connected to company and government intervention and interference in the world of social networking (on the debates concerning different legislative and surveillance initiatives concerning the protection of online privacy see Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, and Palfrey 2010).

Online social networking raises generational issues as well. According to the data provided on facebook.com, in June 2010 only 14 percent of Romanian users were over 35, suggesting that Romanian parents are unlikely to have a first-hand knowledge of the activity of children and teenagers on such sites. At the same time, the Eurobarometer *Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective* (Flash EB 248 2008) found that the internet activities most strongly regulated by parents pertain to the use of social media. When asked which online activities were not allowed, the most frequent answer was “creating a profile in an online community”; the majority of Romanian parents (54 percent) gave the same answer.

This survey showed that children’s internet use is being mediated by parents by imposing restrictions and trying to contribute to interpreting the online experience. It also showed that mass media (TV, radio, newspapers and magazines) were among the primary source of information for parents concerning online risks, closely following family and friends – and we can safely presume that the close friends or relatives acting as opinion leaders in these circles also derive their information primarily from the media.

Since mass media was designated by parents as one of the main sources of information concerning online risks, the media representation of online social networking will be central to parent’s awareness and perception of the opportunities and risks involved. Simply put, what parents worry about will influence the rules they will set. Furthermore, media representation is not only important for the rules we privately set, but also for the rules set by governments. Technopanics – media panics about the use of new, especially computerized technologies – are important factors in public debates on rules and regulations, or indeed sources of public pressure to institute such regulations (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1997:285-287; Ponte, Bauwens, and Mascheroni 2009:159), and are often also quite useful tools for politicians in demonstrating moral fibre. In Romania, a clear case of the phenomenon are the recurring media violence debates, and the concurring calls on the National Audiovisual Council to curtail on-screen violence by stricter regulations.

2 For detailed figures see SATI – Studiul de Audiență și Trafic Internet (Internet Audience and Traffic Survey), http://www.sati.ro/index.php?page=rezultate_site (Last accessed 2010-07-3.)

Research into the press coverage of children and the internet also showed significant variations in the way different national media covered online opportunities and risks. A research report on *A cross-national European analysis of press coverage of children and the internet*, completed as part of the Eu Kids Online project, concluded that the variations in these representations

may have consequences for perceptions. The overall message is that media coverage in different countries may be contributing (among other factors) to sensitising people to different kinds of risk, which may have a bearing on the degree to which people in different countries think the various risks are prevalent. (Haddon and Stald 2009:25-26)

The present study, starting from the above preliminary considerations, proposes to look at the way two of major Romanian news outlets, an online news portal and the online edition of a quality paper cover the topic of online social networking. According to June 2010 data, *Adevărul* is currently the Romanian quality paper with the largest readership, with its online edition (www.adevarul.ro) also having the largest online readership in the news media category. *Hotnews* in its turn (www.hotnews.ro) is the news portal with the largest online readership. According to sati.ro, a site publishing Romanian internet audience and traffic data, in June 2010 both hotnews.ro and adevarul.ro had over 1.3 million unique clients per month; both sites average over 100,000 unique clients daily.³ In the first three months of the year, *Adevărul* also sold between 123,000-131,000 copies daily.⁴ As concerns the number of unique visitors, both are surpassed by two sites of commercial televisions – however, for the purposes of this study, the focus was on news outlets that would fit into the traditional category of the press. The reasons for the choice are primarily comparability with similar researches into European media representations (Haddon and Stald 2009; Ponte et al. 2009), but also a point made by the latter study:

As the issue of young people and the internet is of prime importance to policymakers, education, industry and research – i.e. to powerful social institutions – it can be assumed that quality newspapers are particularly significant shapers of the agendas on this issue. Because of their serious and sober tone and their attention to issues traditionally deemed important to the public sphere (for example political processes, economic developments, social changes), some assert that the coverage of events and issues in the quality press is not normally framed in sensationalist and populist terms. (Ponte et al. 2009:160)

3 For detailed figures see BRAT – Biroul Român de Audit al Tirajelor (Romanian Circulation Audit Bureau), http://www.sati.ro/index.php?page=rezultate_site (Last accessed 2010-07-3.)

4 For detailed figures see <http://www.brat.ro/index.php?page=cifre> (Last accessed 2010-07-3.)

The study of course does note that quality journalism is being affected by market-driven considerations, and a sensationalist tone will not be missing from our chosen media products either – in fact, the way they frame their stories by making reference to popular fears and anxieties will be an important element of our analysis. Tabloid papers will also be indirectly represented in our sample, as both *Adevărul* and *Hotnews* review or publish articles sourced on the tabloid press.

The time-frame of the data collection was March-May 2010. We shall be looking at articles on online social networking published online in this period by *adevarul.ro* and *hotnews.ro*, and identify the main issues raised with reference to online social networking in general, and discuss separately the issues presented as pertaining to children's use of online social networking sites. Then we shall analyse the moral language used in framing the main risk associated with these activities.

Searching the online archives of *Adevărul* and *Hotnews* for articles touching on online social networking sites in the above-mentioned period (March 1–May 31 2010) yielded a total number of 220 items: 134 for *Adevărul* and 86 for *Hotnews*. Although altering the formulation of searches admittedly yields different results, this number of articles was deemed as large enough to draw some conclusions concerning the portrayal of online social networking in these two media.

The articles were coded with reference to the main topic touched upon by the article. The codes themselves were developed based on reading the articles, and also drawing on the quantitative analysis undertaken in Haddon and Stald 2009 and Ponte et al. 2009. The coding used in these media analyses followed the framework developed by the Eu Kids Online project, categorizing the online experience of internet users (children in that case) as risks or opportunities. In the latter framework, these large categories were subdivided into content, contact and conduct risks, respectively opportunities, based on the „forms of communicative roles” users assume online: recipient – *content*, participant in an interaction – *contact*, and actor, „offering content or acting in personal contacts” – *conduct*. (Hasebrink, Livingstone, and Haddon 2008:8-9)

The articles were first coded using single-coding, meaning that the number of articles corresponded to the number of codes used. Although multi-coding was considered, the vast majority of articles could easily be described with reference to a main focus, therefore, in a first step, the prominence of the main topics raised by online social networking was established using single-coding. The articles also easily fell into the larger categories of opportunities or risks. As concerns the further subdivision however, the content-contact-conduct categories could be more easily applied to risks than to opportunities. This primarily had to do with the nature of the topic for which the articles were selected: social networking is by its nature interactive, where content is exchanged in contacts, and interactions involve both contact between agents and their conduct towards each other. But whereas opportunities generally referred to all participants and in different respects, risks could be associated with separate communicative roles.

Table 1 presents the results of single-coding of the articles retrieved:

Table 1. Opportunities and risks associated with online social networking (single-coded)

| Opportunities | | Risks | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------|---------------------------|----|------------------------|-----------|-------------------|----|
| | | Content | | Contact | | Conduct | |
| entertainment | 28 | embarrassment | 6 | breech of privacy | 9 | idling | 13 |
| activism | 27 | violent / hateful content | 5 | sexual abuse | 9 | self-harm | 4 |
| socialization | 24 | distortion | 3 | tracking personal data | 7 | identity theft | 3 |
| information | 21 | pornography | 2 | verbal abuse | 4 | verbal aggression | 3 |
| business | 17 | | | | | blackmail | 2 |
| public interest | 14 | | | | | prostitution | 2 |
| technological convergence | 14 | | | | | | |
| penetration | 3 | | | | | | |
| <i>Subtotals</i> | | | 16 | | 29 | | 27 |
| Total | 148 | | | | 72 | | |

Opportunities associated with online social networking accounted for 67 percent of all codes, as opposed to 33 percent represented by risks. These ratios suggests an overall optimism and positive attitude concerning the phenomenon. Part of the reason may be that media attention to online social networking increased with the recent penetration of Facebook use: the number of Romanian users of Facebook increased between January and March 2010 from 500,000 to over 1,000,000. From September 2009 to June 2010, the number of users increased by a million.⁵ These figures do not make Facebook the social media site with the largest number of Romanian users, as traffic data for hi5.com show that the social networking sites constantly has over 4 million unique clients from Romania monthly, and local sites like neogen.ro or tpu.ro also register about one million unique clients monthly.⁶ However, these sites receive far less media attention. Therefore the optimism may be due to the recent penetration of an online phenomenon perceived as something of a modernizing factor. In fact, technological news, e.g. news on more and more mobile phones and various gadgets having social media functions (coded under *technological convergence*), as well as news on the penetration of online social networking were included under opportunities because of the generally optimistic tone of these articles.

5 For user growth statistics see <http://www.facebakers.com/countries-with-facebook/RO/> (Last accessed 2010-07-3).

6 For detailed figures see SATI – Studiul de Audiență și Trafic Internet (Internet Audience and Traffic Survey), http://www.sati.ro/index.php?page=rezultate_site&o=name&sort=ASC&siteid=nespecificat&letter=toate&filter_type_period=1&filter_category=27#nespecificat (Last accessed 2010-07-3).

From analyzing the articles retrieved, the main topics that emerged as pertaining to opportunities were *entertainment, activism, socialization, information, business, public interest, technological convergence* and, to a significantly lesser degree, *penetration*.

The prominence of Facebook in the press coverage of online social networking (on August 1, 2010 a search in the whole online archive of *Adevărul* yielded 863 results for Facebook, 517 for Hi5, 59 for Neogen and 6 for Tpu) is also related to the fact that Facebook has become a major source for entertainment industry and celebrity news. This also explains the prominence of the codes for *entertainment* and *information*. Articles coded under *information* included several pieces the central focus of which was not social networking, but referred the reader to Facebook profiles along with, or even in lieu of, websites of various events or celebrities. References to Facebook profiles and Twitter feeds appeared as an established journalistic practice, although one using these sites as information outlets much in the vein a website or indeed a press release would be used.

In the articles coded under *entertainment*, social networking also appeared as a topic of movies, a source of entertainment (e.g. by setting up fun groups), and platforms for organizing fandom. The latter feature of the site's use is of course also part of the reason why entertainment industry news figured so high in the results. The code *information* was closely related to entertainment, but included pieces referring to communication as a means of sharing information, to social networking sites as sources of studies and research, or as sources of information used in fighting crime.

The *business* component of online social networking also received varied coverage: social networking sites appeared as models for launching similar ventures, or creating new business opportunities via social applications, by making possible new forms of online advertising and public relations campaigns, and were also described as platforms for online business communication.

Social networking was also quite frequently represented as the locus of online *activism*, a platform for organizing social and political protests, promoting various projects from environmental causes to making people smile more or raising funds and announcing donations. Apart from offering a communication and representation platform for such bottom-up or grassroots initiatives, online social networking sites also appeared as means for public authorities to establish or maintain contact with citizens. Such stories were coded under *public interest*.

As concerns the main types of risks associated with internet use in general, content, contact and conduct, online social networking was associated with contact and conduct rather than content risks. The content risk with the highest ranking, *embarrassment*, referred to embarrassing information emerging about a person online, including information impacting on employability. Other codes in this category included *violent or hateful content, distortion*, referring to false or misleading content, including stories on the difficulties in controlling the message in business communication, and *pornography*.

Most prominent among contact risks was *breach of privacy*, referring to stories on figures in one's network publicizing things meant to be private, or misusing private information for unwanted commercial and advertising commercial purposes. *Sexual abuse* received similar, relatively high coverage. Articles thus coded generally relayed stories of contacting risky sexual partners, or participants, especially falling children victim to sexual crime like online grooming. *Tracking personal data* primarily referred to phishing attacks, while *verbal abuse* referred to being labelled, harassed, aggressed, bullied by others.

The most prominent risk associated with online social networking was *idling*. The code name was intended to be a value-laden one, as articles representing online social networking activities as idle pastimes generally employed a strong moralizing and judgmental tone, or cited such voices, for example of employers feeling financially deprived by such activities of employees, and also often lamented the perceived impact of online social networking on various spheres of life from handwriting to family time or reality itself. *Idling* also appeared as pertaining primarily to the experience of the Romanian user. Not only were 10 of the 13 articles thus coded local stories, but one article even drew attention upon the contradiction between international research results highlighting the benefits of social media use in terms of workplace efficiency, and the Romanian perception of online networking sites as sites of idle pastimes.⁷

Self-harm referred to users joining groups promoting self-harm, taking up potentially injurious activities, or accessing dangerous information like information on accessing drugs. *Identity theft* stories referred to fake accounts being set up for celebrities. *Verbal aggression* referred to family quarrels, or actions of labelling aggressing, harassing others. These, along with *blackmail* and *prostitution* were coded among conduct risks if the articles focused on the person committing these actions rather than on the victims. These latter codes also illustrate the difficulties inherent in classifying internet risks under either contact or conduct when it comes to social networking.

In a comparative perspective, in the period from which data for this research was collected, the main topic in English-language media concerning online social networking was the issue of online privacy, and the angry response triggered by Facebook's changing of privacy settings towards making more settings public by default (on the debate in general see Vleugels, Verhenneman, and Bannier 2010). In March, plans were announced to automatically share personal information with external sites, while earlier changes made status updates and other personal

7 Vlad Barza, Studiu Cisco: Peste jumatate din companii interzic folosirea retelelor sociale, insa un sfert dintre angajati schimba setarile pentru a avea acces la ele. HotNews.ro, May 19, 2010. Retrieved August 3, 2010, from <http://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-it-7291861-studiu-cisco-pestre-jumatate-din-companii-interzic-folosirea-retelelor-sociale-insa-sfert-dintre-angajati-schimba-setarile-pentru-avea-acces-ele.htm>

information public by default. These lead to increased criticism and even a movement to delete one's account on May 31, designated *Leave Facebook Day*. Although the movement did not have a large impact in terms of numbers, the build-up received significant media attention. In response, on May 24 Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg acknowledged the need to simplify privacy settings and thus give users more control over their personal information in the *Washington Post*.⁸

Another news item that received wide coverage in the same period was the meeting between Facebook security officials and the UK child protection officials, in the context of mounting pressure on Facebook to improve child protection. The issue of safety and privacy on Facebook was perceived by the British press itself as developing into a moral panic played out in the media: "In recent weeks, moral panic over the safety of social networks has been everywhere in the media" wrote *The Observer* on March 21⁹, while the online edition of *The Herald* recently ran a piece entitled *Moral panic over Facebook will not cure our ills*¹⁰ (on the transition of the term from sociology to the media patois see Hunt 1997).

The increased attention of English-language and indeed global media to these issues in the period of data collection was expected to distort the findings of the analysis towards the emphatic presence of privacy fears. Especially as English language media, and the British press in particular are major sources of news for Romanian media as well. The latter point can be illustrated by looking at the sources of articles covering foreign news stories touching on children's use of online social networking sites:

Table 2. Source of foreign news stories covered, concerning children's use of online social networking sites

| Source of news | Nr. of items |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| UK media | 7 |
| US media | 3 |
| AFP | 3 |
| Local journalists | 2 |
| Agerpress | 1 |
| no source given | 4 |
| <i>Total articles</i> | <i>20</i> |

8 Mark Zuckerberg, From Facebook, answering privacy concerns with new settings. *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2010. Retrieved July 30, 2010, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/23/AR2010052303828.html>

9 Tom Chatfield, Smokescreen game guides teenagers through dangers of social networking *The Observer*, 2010, March 21. Retrieved July 31, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/mar/21/smokescreen-privacy-social-networking>

10 Moral panic over Facebook will not cure our ills, *Herald Scotland*, June 18, 2010. Retrieved July 31, 2010, from <http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/herald-view/moral-panic-over-facebook-will-not-cure-our-ills-1.1041916>

The prominence of the news relating to the English-speaking world is higher than the above table would suggest, as two of the AFP stories, as well as two of the items with no source given also reported on British and US news. The others were pieces on security settings with no geographical focus. There were only two stories with a geographical focus other than the English-speaking world, both on neighbouring countries: one on the Republic of Moldova, the other on Bulgaria.

The expectation concerning the prominence of privacy-related fears remained however unfulfilled. Privacy-related articles (articles coded under *breach of privacy*, *tracking personal data* and *identity-theft*), 19 in total, were but a small part of the total number of 220 articles retrieved for our study. Furthermore, these articles were mostly on phishing attacks – on risks of hackers gaining access to banking data and other types of user accounts. Stories about other users publicizing things meant to be private – or public in a much smaller circle – were mostly stories relating to celebrities, not to the experience of the everyday user.

There were only two articles concerning the issue of confidentiality, and the possible misuse of our personal data by the operators themselves, both on the same story. *Adevărul* and *Hotnews* both reported on Zuckerberg admitting errors in handling confidentiality issues. The tone of those articles was quite conciliatory, basically taking over the official statement that the company was doing everything in its power to protect private data. But these articles also focused on possible criminal use of our profiles, and did not make reference to Zuckerberg's more controversial claim that our lives were becoming public by default, and hence the changes to privacy settings, which was at the heart of debates in English-language media in the same period.

Another way to look at the weight of the privacy issue is to ask whether the privacy-related articles were about the experience of the Romanian user, or took over stories that made the news elsewhere: and of the 19, only four were framed as Romanian news. The latter mostly appeared in the press review or life and entertainment sections and were about the online plights of celebrities.

The relatively low significance assigned to privacy issues is not characteristic of the Romanian media analyzed here only. The coverage of privacy risks is also low in Southern Latin countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal, with which Romania may share not only cultural ties, but also similarities in internet use. If "in the Southern Latin countries the lower rate and slower pace of internet penetration and usage seem to help explain why their quality press has yet to focus on consumer rights and privacy" (Ponte et al. 2009:163), similar factors may be at work in Romania as well.

Many of the articles retrieved, 40 out of the total of 220 dealt with children and the young in general using online social networking. 32 of these specifically dealt with children, while references to "the young" could include students or young adults as well. Since, as we have seen, the media are a main source of information for parents concerning online risks, the way these risks are framed by the media can be regarded as a significant factor in the parent's attempts to mediate the children's online

experience. Therefore the 32 articles discussing children were coded separately, using multiple coding, in order to identify the opportunities and risks associated with children using online social networking. Apart from opportunities and risks, the countries of reference (home, foreign or both), the areas of life discussed in the articles, as well as the voices cited, i.e. the figures whose views and opinions were depicted were also coded, again using multiple coding.

When looking separately at the articles on children using online social networking, the balance between opportunities and risks significantly shifted from the general tendency. As we have seen in the previous analysis of the results pertaining to all articles, in the overall coverage, opportunities far outweighed risks, with risks accounting for 33 percent, while opportunities accounting for 67 percent of the total number of codes assigned. When it came to discussing children’s use of these sites however, 73 percent of the codes referred to risks. The tendency towards significantly higher coverage of risks rather than opportunities for children was maintained and even amplified when looking separately at articles covering local stories, or topics framed as having both foreign and local relevance. In this latter case, risks accounted for 76 percent of the total codes.

Table 3. Opportunities and risks associated with children using online social networking in local or both foreign and local stories (multi-coded)

| Opportunities | | Risks | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------|---------------------------|---|------------------------|----|-------------------|----|
| | | Content | | Contact | | Conduct | |
| activism | 3 | distortion | 3 | breach of privacy | 5 | idling | 6 |
| socialization | 3 | pornography | 2 | sexual abuse | 4 | identity theft | 2 |
| business | 1 | embarrassment | 1 | tracking personal data | 3 | verbal aggression | 2 |
| information | 1 | violent / hateful content | 0 | verbal abuse | 0 | self-harm | 1 |
| penetration | 1 | | | | | | |
| entertainment | 0 | | | | | | |
| technological convergence | 0 | | | | | | |
| <i>Subtotals</i> | | | 6 | | 12 | | 11 |
| Total | 9 | 29 | | | | | |

Coding news as foreign or local proved relatively straightforward. It was but rarely that foreign news was represented as relevant to the experience of the local user. The items that fit into both categories contained advice taken over from foreign specialist press and presented as general rules, e.g. concerning security settings to be observed by local users as well. But there were no stories asking for example whether something that had happened elsewhere might happen in our society, as well, or what the local voices would have to say about the foreign news.

In line with the tendency characteristic of the overall coverage, contact and conduct risks were more prominent than content risks. Among all codes referring to risks associated with children’s use of online social networking, contact risks were the most numerous: 20 codes referred to contact risks, as opposed to 12 associated

with conduct and 9 associated with content risks. However, as apparent from Table 3, the coverage of contact and conduct risks appeared as more balanced when looking separately at articles with local or both foreign and local reference. The reason in the drop of number of contact codes is that sexual abuse – a contact risk – was largely reported as foreign. The number of conduct risks remained almost the same because idling, the main conduct risk that appeared as prominent in the overall coverage as well, was largely reported as local. This finding might be a distortion caused by the fact that in this period, western media covered many paedophilia-related stories, which were then reported by the local media. But it also means that online sexual crime is not yet a major issue in the local news, which appears as more concerned with the impact of online social networking on the morals and behaviour of children.

The high percentage of risk codes should come as no surprise, if we keep in mind the results of the analysis of European press coverage of children and the internet, which showed that there was a Europe-wide tendency of stressing risks rather than opportunities:

Probably, if one believes the common saying that within the world of journalism “good news is no news”, this could explain why ... the percentage of news related to the risks children encounter on the internet is very high in almost every country, appearing on average in almost two out of every three articles (64%). In contrast, in almost all countries (with the exception of Bulgaria, which has low numbers of articles overall) the coverage of opportunities is much less, usually dramatically so (especially in Greece, Portugal and the UK). (Haddon and Stald 2009:24)

However, an “if it bleeds, it leads” approach on part of the media cannot account for the representation of the internet sphere analysed here. On the contrary, the overall tendency clearly pointed towards an emphasis on opportunities rather than risks, and towards positive expectations is general. The remarkable difference between the coverage of online social networking in general, and children engaged in such activities in particular must rather be explained with specificities of the coverage of children.

Characteristics of this coverage can be grasped if we look at the main areas of life where children’s online social networking activities were located, and the voices framing the media representation of their experience:

Table 4. Children using online social networking, both foreign and local news: area of life and voices (multi-coded)

| Area of life | | Voices | |
|-------------------------|----|----------------|---|
| legal / criminal | 16 | experts | 8 |
| education | 8 | legal / police | 8 |
| family | 6 | children | 6 |
| entertainment / leisure | 5 | industry | 6 |

| Area of life | | Voices | |
|-----------------|---|--------------------------|---|
| social life | 5 | journalists | 6 |
| work | 1 | NGO | 5 |
| politics | 1 | parents | 4 |
| social problems | 1 | none | 3 |
| | | politicians / government | 3 |
| | | academics / researchers | 2 |
| | | teachers | 2 |

The dominant voice framing the coverage children's online social networking was that of the experts, closely followed by legal and police voices. When children were given a voice, it was mostly their words posted online that were quoted, i.e. their actual online activities, rather than their views on those activities. Teachers or parents were rarely given a voice. In articles with local or both foreign and local reference, a strong, identifiable voice could always be identified (the three *none* codes in the above table all referred to foreign news.) The prominence of strong normative voices contributes to the subjective impression that the coverage of children's online experience is framed in negative and disciplining terms. This latter impression is reinforced by the fact that the main area of life covered is the legal and criminal one, with codes for the latter accounting for 37 percent of codes referring to the areas of life.

To articulate this insight, let us look in more detail at the risk that emerged as prominent in both the overall coverage of online social networking, and the local articles referring to children using such sites, that is *idling*.

On May 8, 2010 *Adevărul* ran a piece on the risks of online social networking starting from the finding that hundreds of under-18s from a local town were present on hi5. The tone of the article was set by a title including a capitalized admonition calling attention upon the social and psychological dangers of online social networking: „WARNING! Hundreds of Children and Young from Târgoviște May Become Ill-Adapted.”¹¹ Children, the author argued, preferred to spend time online because there they could effortlessly access a life that they would have to work hard in reality, involving well-being, popularity and self-esteem. However, the risk of spending too much time online created a risk of dependence causing them to become unable to cope with real-life relationship, to communicate and manifest empathy, which could lead to develop depression, panic attacks and finally autism. They may also become involved in criminal activities, being encouraged to

11 George Enache, AVERTIZARE! Sute de copii și tineri târgovișteni pot ajunge inadaptați. *Adevărul*, May 8, 2010. Retrieved August 10, 2010, from http://www.adevarul.ro/locale/targoviste/AVERTIZARE-_Sute_de_copii_si_tineri_targovisteni_pot_ajunge_inadaptati_0_257974238.html

steal from their parents using their cards online, or be stolen from, by giving out personal information. Administrators of such sites possessed but a “false control”, being unable to verify the age of the users.

Another piece, this time on the young, bore the title “The generation that does not want to work too much.”¹² The article presented the results of studies on the job search strategies and expectations of the young, as well as their attitudes towards work. In one of these studies, part of the respondents (7,6 percent) declared that they were not interested in finding a job, a response typically given by young people in rural areas. The author of another study was cited saying that the young may be choosing not to work because of the models of success promoted by the media, focusing on financial speculators and media stars. The studies recounted also showed that the young spent several hours a day watching television or using online social networking sites. They were doing so instead of actively searching for jobs, the journalist commented. The article was illustrated by a picture of a young girl sitting on a couch, with popcorn in one hand, the television remote control in the other, phone at one ear and headphone on the other.

While in the second article the young were given a voice, with students being cited explaining their job search experiences and expectations, this was not the case in the article on children. Their portrayal allowed for little agency. Viewed either as victims of a technology more powerful than they, or as potential offenders falling victim to online deception or temptation, their representation made strong use of the myth of the wide-eyed, innocent child subject to corruption (Jenkins 1998) and in need of supervision and control – a function assigned by the article to the industry. Parents or teachers were not turned to for their attention, in line with the general tendency of assigning but a low weight to such voices (see Table 4.)

Conceptions of childhood and their cultural and political stakes proved central in previous debates surrounding the causes of violence in children, with emerging rising moral panics focusing on television and computer games (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1997:287). The debate moved towards calls for recognizing children’s political and social agency, cultural creativity, as well as communication rights: the right to participate the shaping of the discourse on their own cultural and communication practices (Ponte et al. 2009:160).

References to these debates should be appropriate when discussing media representations of children’s online activities, as the risks associated with traditional media, especially television, are casually being transferred to online activities. The transfer of popular fears concerning the culture and activities of the young was described by David Buckingham and Julian Sefton Green in 1997 in terms that

12 Daniela Șerb, *Generația care nu vrea să muncească prea mult*. *Adevărul*, April 15, 2010. Retrieved August 10, 2010, from http://www.adevarul.ro/actualitate/social/Generatia_care_nu_vrea_sa_munceasca_prea_mult_0_244176096.html

are applicable to the transfer of previous fears to children's use of online social networking as well:

In recent years computer games have begun to take the place of television, and comics took the place of the cinema in earlier decades. Yet, if the focus of attention has changed, the concerns and the rhetoric in which they are expressed remain very familiar. Like television and video before them, computer games are seen to be responsible, not merely for murder and delinquency, but also for undermining children's physical, moral and intellectual development. (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1997:286)

The association of risks associated with television to the newly penetrating online activities can be clearly observed in the article on the young allegedly refusing to work, where idling was described with reference to television, music industry and the internet. Just after the closing of our data collection period, *Adevărul* published another piece using the same rhetoric of transfer, entitled „Causes of violence: the internet, games and cartoons”. Violence in Romanian schools, the article found, „was caused by the products specifically aimed at the young: online social networking, computer games and cartoons”¹³.

The continuity of concerns is also illustrated by the presence of superthemes. Although developed in audience research to signify the constructs using which viewer interpret complex news stories, which mediate between a seemingly distant reality and their own life-world (Jensen 1998:19), the concept seems appropriate to grasp the processes by which the media itself mediates children's experience making reference to long-standing or currently prominent concerns, childhood autism falling clearly into this latter category. Another such supertheme is violence: the main concern associated with the perceived effects of televised violence, i.e. children allegedly becoming more aggressive, is also used in rendering their online experience.

Finally, the portrayal of children's use of social networking sites was strongly shaped by the rhetoric of moral panic, itself characteristic of framing the coverage of the effects of media violence. In a wide sense, the term moral panic is often used to describe the media's approach to moral issues in terms of panic, or raising stereotypical moral concerns about other issues which seem to threaten the founding values of society. A central function in such discourses is assigned to the expert, who gives weight to the concerns raised, and also puts forward, or, in the typical case of politicians, pushes for, solutions that would reinstate the moral order (Hunt 1997:3-4). The possibility to pose as the restorer of moral order makes the purposeful

13 Toma, C. (2010, June 7). Cauzele violenței: internetul, jocurile și desenele animate. *Adevărul*. Retrieved August 10, 2010, from http://www.adevarul.ro/scoala_educatie/clasele_cinci_opt/Cauzele_violentei-_internetul-jocurile_si_desenele_animate_0_275972822.html

generation of moral panics useful for the so-called „moral entrepreneurs“, be they specialists, journalists or politicians, not only for purposes of personal branding, but also because using this language they can effectively press for new or stronger regulations in their respective policy areas.

In the analysis of the representations of online social networking, the main risk identified, idling, appeared as a value-laden topic with strong moral overtones. By using such sites at the workplace, adults appeared as wasting employer's money. The youth in their turn were spending their time on social networking sites instead of finding proper jobs. Instead of reaching their goals with hard work, the children were hanging out in a virtual world where success came easily, under the influence of models of success promoted by the media. The primacy of the experts among the voices framing these articles give weight to the seriousness of these concerns. Solutions proposed pointed towards surveillance (by the industry, by school or parents), disciplining and imbuing the children with proper values. In the last article cited, the solutions listed even included inviting policemen to classes and visits to prison or institutes for juvenile delinquents.

Panics over media violence are generally used to call for stronger supervision and regulation. As risks associated with children's use of online social networking are framed with reference to similar topics and the same moral language, the topic of internet regulation can be expected to emerge in the near future. Media and digital literacy programmes thus become important not only because they represent an alternative approach to supervision and regulation, an approach allowing for agency, creativity and participation. Media and digital literacy should also be considered important – and considered together when designing literacy programmes – because understanding the media languages used in framing their children's online experience may help parents and decision makers involved better mediate between the risks and opportunities involved.

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