

Asking parents about children's internet use: comparing findings about parental mediation in Portugal and other European countries

Cristina Ponte

New University of Lisbon (FCSH-UNL), Portugal

José Alberto Simões

New University of Lisbon (FCSH-UNL), Portugal

1. Introduction

Recent data from Eurobarometer on parents' awareness of risk issues regarding their children online activities confirms most findings from the EU Kids Online project but also raises new issues for some European countries. This is the specific case of Portugal (alongside with other southern Europe countries) where parents concern regarding their children online activities is now apparently one of the highest in Europe. These data, however, show some contradictions, which need to be discussed further.

In order to answer some of the issues raised by the Eurobarometer (2008), which was conducted by telephone interviews using closed-response questions, 75 face to face interviews were carried out among Portuguese parents from different regions and educational backgrounds, these last selected according to known national patterns. The structure of the interviews adapted the Eurobarometer questionnaire into open questions, allowing parents to answer all topics in their own words.

This methodology was useful not only because it allowed us to confirm some trends found in the survey, but also because it helped us elucidating several questions on the associated meanings and cultural perceptions of parents.

2. What parents say: comparing findings about parental mediation in Europe

In this section we will present an overview about parental mediation, namely by briefly examining recent data from Eurobarometer about parents awareness and mediation regarding children's online activities related to risk and comparing them, whenever relevant, with findings from EU Kids Online project. We will rely mainly on the Eurobarometer survey in this analysis, not only because it provided us with more recent data, but also because some of its conclusions raised further questions for which we didn't have a clear answer and that ultimately led us to our own study on Portuguese parents.

The relationship between parents' perception of online risks and their actual mediation strategies is far more complex than it seems at first hand. What people think is best (or worst) for their children and what they actually do to promote (or prevent) potential benefits (or consequences) is not necessarily the same. In fact, we don't really know what people do, but we do know what people *say they worry about* and what they *say they do*. It is precisely when

we start examining this relation that we find results indicating some inconsistencies that need to be looked at.

What parents say they worry about the most when their children are online

Parents concerns about their children's online activities may be shaped by many factors. One of which is their own online experience. This relation is quite clear in the new Eurobarometer (2008). In fact, for all the categories considered on this survey, there is a significant correlation between parent's perceptions of online risks and their own internet use. But let us start by examining what type of concerns parents have about their children online activities.

This analysis is somehow limited by evidence available and by the way this issue was addressed. We may interpret the items considered in the survey by using the classification of online risks proposed in the EU Kids Online project (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2008), even though this doesn't fully apply. Three of the items could be defined as "content" risks, meaning that the child's role may be considered (at least analytically) as "recipient" in the communication process. The motivational factors (or themes) considered in this survey were explicit images showing sexual or violent contents (both on the internet and on mobile phone) and information about self-harm, suicide or anorexia. Other three items are related to "contact" risks, meaning that the child may be involved on a communication exchange where s/he plays a "passive" role: being victim of online grooming or being bullied by other children (both on the internet and via the mobile phone). The last two items may be related to "conduct"¹ risks, meaning that the child has the initiative in the communication process; namely by giving out personal/private information online or by becoming isolated from other people if spending too much time online.

On the overall, content and contact risks prevail over conduct ones. Most parents apparently fear the possibility that their children might see sexually/violently explicit images on the internet (65% say they are very much or rather worried about it); even though they seem to fear a little less the fact that this images might come via their children's mobile phone (51%). This concern is followed by the probability of being victim of online grooming (60% of the parents claim they are very much or rather worried about it). Obtaining information about self-harm, suicide or anorexia is also a main concern for a large proportion of parents (55% declare they are very much or rather worried about this possibility), followed by parents who say they are very much or rather worried by the fact that their child might be bullied online by other children (54%); which is a little less if we consider the possibility of this happening via the mobile phone (49%). The risk that intense internet use might lead to social isolation is also mentioned by half the parents as being a major concern (51% say they are very much or rather worried). Finally, the least likely fear seems to be the one that concerns giving out

¹ There is a slight difference between the meaning intended in the classification proposed in Hasebrink *et al.* (2008) and the adaptation being made here. In the first case, conduct risks are the result of children initiative and their action may have a negative impact upon others; whereas in the second case while we are still considering "child as actor" the negative impact of its actions may fall upon him/herself.

personal/private information online (47% of parents declare they are very much or rather worried about it).

Table 1. Risk perception by country (%)

Type of risks	When your child uses the Internet or a mobile phone, how worried are you that he/she...							
	may give out personal information online	might see sexually/violently explicit images on the Internet	could be bullied online by other children	might see sexually/violently explicit images via the mobile phone	could be bullied by other children via the mobile phone	might get information about self-harm, suicide, anorexia	might become isolated from other people if spending too much time online	be victim of online grooming
Country								
EU27	47	65	54	50	49	54	35	59
Belgium	53	67	62	45	48	57	38	67
Bulgaria	37	53	44	40	38	46	46	46
Czech Republic	42	50	28	31	29	38	50	36
Denmark	12	26	21	17	23	17	37	31
Germany	39	60	44	49	44	49	35	52
Estonia	34	48	33	25	28	34	33	39
Greece	69	81	83	75	78	76	17	78
France	75	87	83	79	80	83	22	90
Ireland	42	64	56	54	57	55	31	52
Italy	50	65	52	45	43	45	45	60
Cyprus	69	76	79	71	73	66	29	78
Latvia	58	75	70	64	65	69	34	70
Lithuania	25	47	43	42	39	43	25	38
Luxembourg	46	64	42	50	42	47	42	54
Hungary	35	58	46	40	42	48	44	59
Malta	46	64	50	36	34	50	54	54
Netherlands	38	54	47	40	35	46	39	53
Austria	33	45	29	36	30	33	28	33
Poland	38	67	56	55	52	60	40	56
Portugal	76	84	81	74	75	81	33	89
Romania	36	53	50	42	45	47	21	50
Slovenia	36	55	52	38	40	47	33	50
Slovakia	34	39	23	28	21	28	44	24
Spain	72	79	78	65	65	76	36	78
Finland	34	58	30	18	29	33	41	36
Sweden	8	31	22	11	17	20	40	25
United Kingdom	33	59	39	36	37	42	30	46

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008. Base: all respondents; "rather worried" or "very much worried" shown.

■ 1 st most mentioned	■ 2 nd most mentioned	■ 3 rd most mentioned
■ 1 st least mentioned	■ 2 nd least mentioned	■ 3 rd least mentioned

If we look at country variation (table 1) we may identify some patterns regarding risk awareness: except for France, all other countries that show considerably higher concern about particular aspects of their child's online safety are from southern Europe, namely Portugal, Spain and Cyprus. Conversely, parents from Northern and Eastern Europe countries (especially Sweden, Denmark and Slovakia) are the ones that seem less worried about those same risks.

The question now is how can we explain these country differences? We don't have enough information to completely answer this question. However, based on the variables available from the Eurobarometer, we have proposed the hypothesis that parents' online activity (or absence of it) might explain in part their own concerns. If we look at table 2, we may notice that risk perception is negatively correlated with frequency of internet use for parents. For all categories of risks, parents who are "occasional users" or "non users" are the ones that fear the most all types of risks shown to them (on average, "non users" worry 12% more than "frequent users"). The less parents' use the internet the more they worry. It seems that we tend to fear what we don't know. This confirms our earlier assumption about considering parents own experience as a possible explanation for their concern.

Table 2. Risk perception by parents' internet use (%)

Type of risks	When your child uses the Internet or a mobile phone, how worried are you that he/she...							
	may give out personal information online	might see sexually/violently explicit images on the Internet	could be bullied online by other children	might see sexually/violently explicit images via the mobile phone	could be bullied by other children via the mobile phone	might get information about self-harm, suicide, anorexia	might become isolated from other people if spending too much time online	be victim of online grooming
<i>Parents' internet use</i>								
Frequent users	44	63	50	48	47	51	50	56
Occasional users	49	68	57	53	52	57	54	63
Non users	57	69	66	62	61	64	60	67

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008. Base: all respondents; "rather worried" or "very much worried" shown.

Therefore we could say, in general, that people from each country who use the internet less frequently or even at all are the ones that might be most worried. Which means that differences found between countries may be explained (at least partially²) by different internet penetration rates and technological diffusion³. This is true for what we have said for Portugal, Greece, Spain and Cyprus. However, in the case of France, where parents' internet use is a little above EU 27 average, risk awareness is still one of the highest in Europe, which might point out to the fact that we are either dealing with an exception to the rule⁴ or with differences within countries that need to be taken into consideration.

Parents' concerns about their children online activities also seem to vary significantly according to the child's age. This is probably so because risk awareness depends on parental representations about children behaviour at different ages and also because parental control may vary according to age. The relation examined in Eurobarometer, even if significant, is not entirely linear. In general, parents of 6 to 10 year olds worry 3% less about their children online activities than parents of 11 to 14 and 6% more than 15 to 17 year olds. This means that, as a general rule, parents concerns increase with age up until a certain point (11 to 14

² Of course, this doesn't explain the fact that there are differences within countries and also that the above relation (or rule) is not perfect.

³ This fact was already noticed by the EU Kids Online project (see Hasebrink *et al.*, 2008).

⁴ Actually, France is close to average with 85% of parents declaring they are internet users (62% if we consider parents who use the internet at least once a day), hence in a somehow ambiguous position.

age group seems to be the turning point) and then decrease again considerably as their children enter late adolescence. There are, however, two exceptions to this rule. The first comes from parents who say they worry about the fact that their children may give out personal information online. In this case, concern seems to grow with age: 50% of 6-10 year olds against slightly less for 11-14 (49%) and considerably more for those 15-17 year olds (41%). The other exception is being victim of online grooming, which apparently is a bigger concern for parents of younger children: 55% for 6-10 year olds, 53% for 11-14 year olds and 47% for 15-17 year olds. Gender differences are practically unnoticeable, but apparently parents seem to worry a bit more about girls than boys for all items considered.

As for parents' education attainment, the classification adopted by the Eurobarometer is somehow ambiguous, not allowing for a clear interpretation. Nonetheless, there seems to be a tendency for parents with lower levels of education to be more worried with their child's safety than parents with higher ones. Occupation is even more ambiguously measured by this survey, not allowing for detection of any clear tendency.

What parents say their children aren't allowed to do online

The way parents claim they establish rules for their children when they are online must also be looked at. In the 2008 Eurobarometer, when answering an opened question, exactly one fourth of the parents said they didn't set up any rules for their children's online activities⁵. This percentage was twice as much (or close to that figure) in countries such as Lithuania (60%), Czech Republic (52%), Slovakia (50%), Estonia (48%) and Slovenia (47%). Portugal was also above the average with 35%.

This lack of rules is apparently independent from parents concerns about their children's online safety. It seems that risk awareness and representations about what might be bad for one's children does not necessarily lead to adopting any practical measures. In fact, a significant proportion of parents who said they didn't set any restrictions regarding their children online activities also claim they are "very worried" or "worried" about the items examined before: might see sexually/ violently explicit images on the Internet (56%); be victim of online grooming (52%); might get information about self-harm, suicide, anorexia (47%); might become isolated from other people if spending too much time online (46%); could be bullied online by other children (46%); could be bullied by other children via the mobile phone (45%); might see sexually/ violently explicit images via the mobile phone (44%); and may give out personal information online (38%).

Nevertheless, if we look at the rest of the answers to that same question, we may see that some parents spontaneously claim they adopt certain rules. However, the only rule that seems to stand out is not being allowed to create a profile in an online community (43%), followed

⁵ The Eurobarometer 250 (2006) reported that 60% of parents didn't set any rules for their children's internet use. For those who set any rules, 55% declared their children aren't allowed to visit certain websites, 53% claimed that they have set rules regarding time spent online and 45% mentioned that their children are not allowed to give out personal information. These were the three most mentioned rules.

far behind by not being allowed to download or play games and buy online (both with 17%). The remaining rules were chosen by less than 15% of parents. On the contrary, when asked about adopting specific rules (as closed question) parents' answers were quite different. Not being able to give out personal information is mentioned by 92% of the parents, although this practically wasn't mentioned before (only by 10%). The same may be said about the other rules presented to parents. Approximately 8 out of 10 parents claim they don't allow their children to buy online (84%), talk to people they don't know in real life (83%) or spend a lot of time online (79%). Creating a profile in an online community, which was the rule most mentioned spontaneously, is now in fifth place with 63% of parents claiming they don't allow their children to do it.

These discrepancies may have at least two plausible explanations. One has to do with the measurement method itself: when asked to say spontaneously what they do, some parents - we have to admit this possibility - probably didn't recall the rules they had initially set for their children. Of course we may dispute this explanation, since the difference between open and closed answers is considerably high. Another explanation has to do with what we might call a "social desirability" bias. Parents have probably exaggerated their actual rules in order to correspond to social expectations regarding appropriate behaviour. This last explanation is consistent with parents' answers to other questions from this survey that also points out, even more clearly, to this bias.

As for the rules mentioned, there is a parallel between the list of restrictions shown to parents and the type of worries considered on the previous question. These restrictions try to address specific problems, thus anticipating some sort of solution to potential risks. In general, these items fall into two main categories. On the one hand, they address problems that might result from social interaction or communication, which may ultimately lead either to "contact" or "conduct" risks (giving out personal information, creating a profile in an online community, talking to people they don't know in real life, using chat rooms, using email/instant messaging tools, buying online). On the other hand, some of the rules proposed are related to problems that might come from accessing or using "content" itself, to which certain risks may be connected (accessing certain websites, downloading/ paying music, films and games or, even more generally, the simple fact of spending too much time online).

If we look at the distribution of countries, we find that some countries tend to favour some restrictions while different countries mainly adopt others (table 4).







In countries such as Ireland, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and Greece, parents seem to set more rules regarding risks that might come from social interaction and communication. This is particular evident in the case of Irish parents, apparently the ones that mostly establish rules regarding giving out personal information (98%), talking to people s/he doesn't know in real life (96%), using chat rooms (92%) or using email/ instant messaging tools (59%). On the other hand, Spain is the country where parents worry the most about creating a profile in an online community (77%), while Portuguese parents seem to worry most about the possibility their children might buy online (93%), followed by Greece and Spain (both with 92%).

Conversely, Estonia, Sweden, Czech Republic and Latvia, are the countries where parents seem to set less rules about these same online activities.

Table 4. Parents' restrictions by country (%)

Restrictions	What things s/he is not allowed to do?								
	Spending a lot of time online	Talking to people s/he doesn't know in real life	Using email/instant messaging tools	Using chat rooms	Creating a profile in an online community	Accessing certain websites	Downloading/playing music, films, games	Buying online	Giving out personal information
EU27	79	83	37	61	63	49	38	84	92
Belgium	73	84	27	53	59	40	32	89	78
Bulgaria	72	75	37	38	57	37	7	82	80
Czech Republic	56	62	17	37	39	48	25	65	75
Denmark	45	75	23	49	48	49	33	74	86
Germany	82	74	41	54	62	34	61	88	95
Estonia	69	61	19	33	30	29	19	81	77
Greece	84	86	51	73	66	43	11	92	93
Spain	88	89	38	73	77	70	26	92	91
France	77	91	31	54	73	33	40	85	93
Ireland	87	96	59	92	72	51	31	84	98
Italy	92	86	43	73	75	77	39	85	95
Cyprus	80	92	40	57	58	51	14	84	93
Latvia	76	76	23	30	22	37	11	84	77
Lithuania	80	66	26	40	59	73	8	88	81
Luxembourg	80	79	28	56	73	31	35	82	91
Hungary	84	74	22	35	49	45	20	86	90
Malta	71	86	27	64	55	49	17	75	85
Netherlands	72	88	31	73	53	42	29	85	90
Austria	77	71	40	45	63	49	42	86	90
Poland	82	87	38	59	52	69	39	74	90
Portugal	84	88	50	73	64	77	45	93	92
Romania	77	79	44	62	54	46	26	81	86
Slovenia	87	80	29	42	67	44	15	88	93
Slovakia	61	63	20	38	45	46	26	74	80
Finland	81	76	26	58	62	41	37	84	98
Sweden	59	67	18	23	39	38	40	82	91
United Kingdom	75	92	46	85	68	46	38	83	97

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008, Q7A. Base: parents whose child uses the internet. "Not allowed" shown.

	1 st most mentioned		2 nd most mentioned		3 rd most mentioned
	1 st least mentioned		2 nd least mentioned		3 rd least mentioned

Rules concerning internet content in general are favoured by parents from Portugal, Italy (in both cases for rules about accessing certain websites) and Germany (for downloading/playing music, films or games). Rules about not spending too much time online are favoured by countries such as Italy (92%), Spain (88%), Ireland (87%) and Slovenia (87%). Although Portugal, Greece, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Cyprus, all show values around 80%.

Contrary to risk perception, we couldn't detect an obvious pattern in what concerns the relation between rules and parents' internet use. "Occasional users" seem to be a bit more restrictive than "frequent users" and "non users" in all categories considered. Nonetheless,

these differences are quite small (in most cases they are of no more than 5%). On the other hand, parents who mentioned they set no restrictions for their children's online activities don't seem to vary significantly according to their own internet use (25% frequent users, 24% occasional users and 26% non users).

The key explanation, in this case, seems to be the child's age, which is something that already could be noticed in the 2006 Eurobarometer and was reported by the EU Kids Online project (see Hasebrink *et al.*, 2008). However, contrary to what has been identified in previous survey, which pointed out to a pattern similar to what we have identified before for risk awareness, variation according to children's age seems to be linear. The younger the child is the more restrictive parents tend to be. These differences are more evident in some cases than others, but generally they follow the same direction.

Table 5. Parents' restrictions by age of child (%)

Restrictions	What things s/he is not allowed to do?								
	Spending a lot of time online	Talking to people s/he doesn't know in real life	Using email/ instant messaging tools	Using chat rooms	Creating a profile in an online community	Accessing certain websites	Downloading /playing music, films, games	Buying online	Giving out personal information
<i>Child's age</i>									
6-10	90	92	65	84	83	53	51	92	95
11-14	80	86	32	61	62	51	36	88	94
15-17	66	70	17	40	44	42	28	71	85

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008. Base: parents whose child uses the internet. "Not allowed" shown.

On average, parents of 6 to 10 year olds are 25% more restrictive than parents of 15 to 17 year olds. These differences may rise to more than 40% in cases such as using email/ instant messaging tools or using chat rooms. So apparently parents establish their restrictions for younger children mostly for social interaction or communication rules. This is also the case of creating a profile in an online community. Talking to people one doesn't know in real life or giving out personal information, are rules that don't seem to decrease as much as children turn into adolescents. Not being allowed to download/play music, films, and games is one restriction that presents less age differences.

Contrary to risk awareness, parents' restrictiveness starts earlier than before. This is probably related to internet generalisation in younger ages, which might explain the need for setting boundaries in this particular case. Nonetheless, the decrease of regulation in late adolescence seems to confirm the pattern already identified, which might be explained by the growing autonomy of children as they move to adolescents.

Differences according to gender are practically unnoticeable (around 2%), pointing to a slightly higher restriction for boys⁶ when it comes to using email/ instant messaging tools, using chat rooms and creating a profile in an online community, and to a slightly higher

⁶ This is not consistent, however, with the fact that parents seem to worry a little more about girls online risks.

restriction for girls in the case of accessing certain websites, downloading/playing music, films, games and giving out personal information.

What parents say they do when their children are online

Besides establishing explicit rules, which specifically deal with certain problems in a restrictive way, parents attempt other strategies of mediation. In the 2008 Eurobarometer, a set of questions addressed this issue. Looking at the categories proposed we may distinguish two main forms of mediation. First, one form that works as social mediation, by developing a particular type of interaction or social relation with the child (“sitting with”, “asking/talking to”, “being nearby”); second, one form that doesn’t involve any kind of interaction, only technological expertise and software monitoring (“check computer”, “check profile”, “check messages”). If the former may allow for some negotiation between parents and children, the latter are undoubtedly one-way strategies.


On the overall, the first form of mediation strategies is dominant: 74% of the parents claim that, while their children access the internet at home, they “always” or “very frequently” ask/talk to them about what they are doing (or did) online; 61% said that they “always” or “very frequently” stay nearby when the child is online; and 36% declared the same about sitting with the child when s/he goes online. The most frequently referred monitoring strategy is checking the computer later to see which sites the child visited (43% mentioned they do it “always” or “very frequently”). The fact that parents seem to prefer social mediation over technological monitoring needs to be considered carefully. As we shall discuss in the next section with new data on Portuguese parents (and was also pointed out by the Eurobarometer report), some of the parents may have overemphasized their supervising role by giving “socially acceptable” answers.

Looking at the distribution of countries, we may notice that Portuguese parents, alongside with parents from Cyprus, are amongst the ones that seem to favour more technological or monitoring strategies, while parents from the UK, Germany, Spain, Ireland and Poland, seem to prefer more social mediation strategies. On the contrary, in Estonia parents seem to adopt less any of the mentioned measures. Check Republic, Denmark, Sweden and Lithuania are also amongst the countries where parents adopt less both forms of mediation.

Table 6. Supervising strategies by country (%)

Supervising strategies	When your child uses the internet at home, what you usually do?					
	Make sure you stay nearby when your child is online	Sit with your child when s/he goes online	Ask/talk to your child about what s/he is doing or did online	Check the computer later, to see which sites your child visited	Check the messages in your child's e-mail account/Instant messaging service	Check whether your child has a profile on a social networking site/online community
Country						
EU27	61	37	74	43	24	30
Belgium	59	25	66	33	25	30
Bulgaria	40	31	59	36	29	29
Czech Rep.	34	23	47	28	14	17
Denmark	35	17	61	20	9	17
Germany	65	41	85	55	29	38
Estonia	26	14	50	22	11	16
Greece	60	48	80	45	34	32
France	47	22	62	36	22	23
Ireland	80	47	84	47	24	37
Italy	74	48	77	50	33	32
Cyprus	50	34	79	40	43	43
Latvia	38	16	61	35	16	26
Lithuania	22	22	57	28	11	9
Luxembourg	54	27	78	42	16	20
Hungary	40	22	69	22	12	22
Malta	63	36	77	45	28	29
Netherlands	54	17	63	29	25	30
Austria	48	22	73	43	26	21
Poland	74	35	72	38	15	25
Portugal	68	60	80	60	49	50
Romania	52	34	62	36	25	23
Slovenia	59	23	74	31	17	20
Slovakia	45	33	52	37	21	20
Spain	74	56	85	54	33	33
Finland	59	27	73	29	8	21
Sweden	48	17	62	20	6	13
United Kingdom	70	49	86	46	23	34

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008. Base: respondents whose children use the internet from any computer at home; "always" or "very frequently" shown.

 1 st most mentioned	 2 nd most mentioned	 3 rd most mentioned
 1 st least mentioned	 2 nd least mentioned	 3 rd least mentioned

As in the case of parents' direct restrictions, supervising rules are also significantly correlated with age (table 7). In general, we may confirm the same pattern noticed for parents' restrictions: parents attempt more mediating strategies for younger children than for older ones. This is particularly evident in the cases where parents claim to be nearby or with their children while they are online. 4 out of 10 parents from 6 to 10 year olds do this more frequently than parents of 15 to 17 year olds. These differences are lower in what concerns monitoring the computer or particular communication software. In fact, it is in this last case that we notice a slightly different pattern: technological mediation increases from 6-10 to 11-13 and then decreases again in late adolescence, which could be explained by the same reasons presented earlier. As before, gender differences are quite small, even though they all point out in the same direction: parents seem to adopt more frequently mediation strategies

for boys (especially in what concerns checking computer later to see which sites they have visited) than girls (with the exception of checking if they have a profile in an online community, which is higher for girls).

Table 7. Supervising strategies by age of child (%)

<i>Supervising strategies</i>	When your child uses the internet at home, what you usually do?					
	Make sure you stay nearby when your child is online	Sit with your child when s/he goes online	Ask/talk to your child about what s/he is doing or did online	Check the computer later, to see which sites your child visited	Check the messages in your child's e-mail account/Instant messaging service	Check whether your child has a profile on a social networking site/ online community
<i>Child's age</i>						
6-10	82	60	85	49	26	27
11-14	64	36	79	48	29	35
15-17	34	16	59	30	17	26

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008. Base: respondents whose children use the internet from any computer at home; "always" or "very frequently" shown.

It is in the case of parents' supervision that some of the inconsistencies mentioned before become more evident. Differences between "frequent users" and "occasional users" don't seem to matter much, and even when they can be noticed, there is no clear pattern. What caught up our attention, however, was the significant percentage of parents that claim they carry certain supervising strategies although they are non users. These answers puzzled us, since some of the questions are quite specific and clearly imply that the person who answers them is familiar with the internet and several of its most common uses. How can one "check the messages in your child's e-mail account/Instant messaging service" without being an internet user?

Table 8. Supervising strategies by parents' internet use (%)

<i>Supervising strategies</i>	When your child uses the internet at home, what you usually do?					
	Make sure you stay nearby when your child is online	Sit with your child when s/he goes online	Ask/talk to your child about what s/he is doing or did online	Check the computer later, to see which sites your child visited	Check the messages in your child's e-mail account/Instant messaging service	Check whether your child has a profile on a social networking site/ online community
<i>Parents' internet use</i>						
Frequent users	60	36	76	44	24	31
Occasional users	65	40	75	44	26	29
Non users	44	28	60	24	18	17

Source: Eurobarometer, 2008. Base: respondents whose children use the internet from any computer at home; "always" or "very frequently" shown.

Almost 2 in 10 parents claim they check whether their child has a profile on a social networking site/ online community and check the messages in their child's e-mail account/Instant messaging service, although they declare to be non-users. This figure rises to almost 24% in the case of parents who mention that they check the computer later, to see which sites their child visited. It was partially because of these intriguing data that we have

decided to pursue our own study on Portuguese parents, by adopting a different methodology that we hope will answer some of the questions raised. It is precisely these results that we are going to examine in next section.

3. Different questions, different perceptions?

Parental experiences and attitudes regarding the mediation of their children's online activities are, as we have been noticing, far too complex to be approached only in one way. Our aim in this section is to contrast two ways of considering this problem methodologically. On one hand, the Eurobarometer survey, built as a code based questionnaire, using distant telephone contact and its disembodied voice as only method of data collecting. On the other hand, the face to face interview based on opened questions, more similar to a conversation, inviting the interviewees to answer in their own words and body language (laughs, smiles, pauses, silences).

For analytical purposes, this paper will consider both methods of information gathering as *texts*, by drawing on the concept of "interpretative repertoires" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, in Jensen, 2002) to understand "different settings, including everyday conversations" and "its relations to dilemmas of stake" (Potter, 1996: 116). The concept of interpretative repertoire suggests that "individuals rely on a range of repertoires, depending on their own background, the text at hand, as well as the particular context of media use. Accordingly, data analysis can trace the semantic relations, metaphors and other interpretative procedures that different respondents employ" (Jensen, 2002: 167). We intend to explore the activated interpretative repertoires by comparing how interviewees answered to questions focused on behaviour and attitudes.

Questions on behaviour and attitudes are affected by broader social dynamics and respondents may feel reluctant, consciously or subconsciously, to admit how far they may fall from perceived social expectations. Other problems are the difficulty of recalling *accurately* routines or trivial forms of behaviour, and the association with threatening situations. Precisely due to this association, Deacon et al. pointed out that behavioural questions that are most likely to produce accurate and 'honest' answers are those that "deal with non-threatening, non trivial-matters and which offers no obvious incentive for the respondents to exaggerate or underplay their response" (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 72). Questions on attitudes are also affected by the same social factors, and are the most sensitive to influences by question phrasing or interviewer prompting. If asked about issues in which they have little interest or knowledge of, respondents may feel obliged to improvise points of view, whether because they feel they are expected to or because they do not wish to appear as ignorant (Deacon *et al.*, *idem*). In the Eurobarometer survey, mediation on safer internet use for children certainly was not considered trivial by parents that were not comfortable with the child's online

experience, taking into account that some of them even considered the internet as a threatening media.

For the face to face interviews respondents were selected by a purposive sampling method which considered two main factors: a) be a parent of a child (6-17 years old) that uses the internet⁷; b) the distribution of parents' educational background should also reproduce national patterns: roughly 60% with Basic (Bas.) education (9 years) or less; 30% with Secondary education (Sec.) (12 years), 10% with University (Univ.). Parents' gender and age were also taken into consideration in the sampling procedure, to assure a more balanced distribution. The child considered in the study (in the case of more than one) was the one whose birthday was closest to the date of the interview. The interviews were conducted by 6 PhD students⁸, in two main metropolitan areas (Lisbon and Oporto) and in smaller urban areas across the country.

Interviews analysis

Before proceeding with the comparison on behavioral and attitudinal questions, let us briefly characterize parents' profile as internet users. Parents that answered our face to face interviews presented a higher level of internet use: 57% defined themselves as frequent users, 19% as occasional and 24% as non-users, far above the Eurobarometer data (respectively 32%, 33% and 35%). The weight of the metropolitan and urban areas in the sampling and the selection of parents might have contributed to explain this difference.

The interviews showed that the frequency of use among parents apparently was affected by age, gender, and educational background: older parents used less the internet than younger ones; mothers were more occasional users than fathers, less educated parents used less the internet, while all the parents that attended University were frequent users.

Table 9. Interviewees characterization according to age, gender and education by internet use (%)

Internet use	Age		Gender		Education		
	<40	>40	M	F	Bas.	Sec.	Univ.
Freq. user	53	47	49	51	31	82	100
Occ. user	43	67	36	64	29	9	0
Non user	50	50	45	55	39	9	0

In this paper we will analyze the Eurobarometer questions that focused on behaviour and attitudes: *Q6 - What do you usually do when the child uses the internet at home? and Q7 - When your child is online, are there things that s/he is not allowed to do?*

⁷ In the Eurobarometer this condition was not contemplated, parents were randomly selected among those with children 6-17. Answers on parental monitoring only included parents whose children used internet at home.

⁸ We are thankful to Ana Cristina Gomes, Ana Margarida Jorge, Karita Francisco, Lília Carvalho, Maria José Brites, Sónia Carrilho and Sónia Lamy.

Q6 - What do you usually do when the child uses the internet at home?

With the purpose of evaluating parental attitudes when the child uses the internet at home, in the Eurobarometer survey parents were asked to place themselves within a frequency level scale of their attitudes in six supervision acts which included, as discussed earlier, social approaches and technical controls.

As said before, Portuguese parents were among the European parents who selected the highest end of the scale (*always, very frequently*) in the six situations considered, above the EU average. In particular, they were the ones that most frequently mentioned the following items: *sitting with the child, checking the computer, the child's profile on a social networking site and his/her messages*, all reflecting high supervision and control. Although mainly not frequent users, when invited to grade the frequency of their acts in all proposed situations, they clearly presented themselves as vigilant parents, even when technical skills were needed. The question seemed to have activated a shared interpretative repertoire that associated good parenthood on safer internet use with an active attitude in all the different surveillance strategies adopted.

The same question was translated for the face to face interviews as: *When your child uses the Internet at home, what do you usually do? As there were no orientations/suggestions, in order to facilitate parents' recall on routine attitudes, it was added after their pause: Anything else?*

The translated question was ambiguous in its meaning because the context of monitoring was not explicit. However, most of the parents understood the implicit meaning and answered in their own terms how they managed or not the internet use at home. Perhaps because of this mitigation of oriented meaning, quantitative results diverged from the Eurobarometer as far as technical control was concerned. Only four respondents, all frequent users, reported spontaneously that they used technical tools or checked the computer, while more than the half of parents reported that they tried following what children did and talked with them, this last answer supporting and confirming the Eurobarometer results that showed Portuguese parents as concerned about the issue. In households with older siblings, these acted as advisers and parents delegated them the responsibility of monitoring. Finally, gender differences were evident: mothers were more active in the social supervision, also in coincidence with Eurobarometer results:

"God knows, it depends on the time, I can't say that I'm making dinner because I'd be lying... but normally I'm not with her." (M, 40, Univ., frequent user; Child: F, 9)

"Every once in a while, I check on her [laughs], if she is searching things that she shouldn't do." (F, 35, Bas., non-user; Child: F, 9)

"Every once in a while we check the historical but he already knows how to delete it, but we can trace back and check what he had been doing. We do this to keep an eye on what he has been up to" (laughs). (M, 41, Sec., frequent user; Child: M, 12)

"Usually I'm tidying up, but every so often I check on her to see what she is up to, because I do worry, with all that is going around... I try to know where she is. I ask her if everything is ok..." (F, 44, Bas., occasional user; Child: F, 13)

"We've got the internet in the living room where we eat and where they [father and son] use it and where I watch TV. I'm normally walked past because I'm always doing something. I get on with my work but he is rarely ever alone" (F, 40, Bas., frequent user; Child: M, 16)

"I'm not always there, but I've checked the screen sometimes, to see what he is up to... And as his brother is there with him, he is older..." (F, 46, Bas., non-user; Child: M, 16)

However, the ambiguity of the question might have contributed to the silence expressed by 9% of the parents, all non-users and less educated. Other parents with lower educational resources interpreted the question according to their own time routines and constraints, some projecting their desire of learning about the internet from the children. A few parents of younger children also gave this interpretation immediately, and their answers in the next question made clear that they were not worried because they considered that there was no danger in the kind of uses at those ages⁹.

"I'm working... or watching TV, or looking after the animals... I don't know..." (M, 27, Bas., occasional user; Child: F, 7)

"I'm cleaning up, or cooking or something like that..." (F, 29, Bas., frequent user; Child: M, 7)

"I'm working... that's life... I'd like to be with them to learn a bit more, but life is hard..." (M, 56, Bas., occasional user; Child: F, 12)

The comparison clearly shows that the format of the question may influence the interpretative repertoires. While the *code-based* question both decontextualize and disambiguates the meaning, the *case-based questions* allow an analysis to be informed and modified by the context. The first may induce the respondents to answer according to what they were expected to do, the second remains "open to ambiguities in the delimitation and interrelations of the units of meaning" (Jensen, 2002: 257).

If the qualitative results confirmed that parents didn't distinguish between girls or boys regarding their strategies for supervising the child's internet behaviour, the number of children in the household may be relevant, in contrast with the Eurobarometer conclusion that there was almost no difference when looking at this indicator (p.40). Instead, it seems

⁹ This is apparently true, as we have seen before, for different forms of mediation and restrictions adopted but not for parents' worries about online safety.

that the presence of *older siblings* activated peer monitoring and advising and had influenced a broader parental perception of security issues.

Q7 - Allowing/forbidding things

The subsequent Eurobarometer question (Q7) was divided in two parts. Parents were firstly asked whether there were any rules or restrictions about their child's use of the internet through an open-ended question, simply listing all the activities that were "not allowed". In a second step, through a closed question, parents had the option to answer if each one of the nine specific online activities was allowed or not.

For the open formulation, that involved measuring the real situation lived at precisely that moment (what the child was not allowed to do "*now*"), parents, in general, indicated one or two activities, as most of the parents would also do in the face to face interviews. However, as noticed before, more than one in three Portuguese parents (35%) said that no rules were set, above the EU average (25%), this being the highest value among the EU15 countries.

The closed formulation might have been understood as including a projection, according to the child's age (what *is not* and/or *will not* be allowed). Again, as noticed, Portuguese parents were above the EU average in all the nine items, leading on not allowing *visit certain websites*, and *buy online*. Other main differences (>5%) with the EU average were on *visiting chats*, *download music* and *use email/IM*.

The question was translated to the interview just as: *Is there anything you forbid children to do online? What are they? (...) Anything else?* Less ambiguous than the previous one, it provided more focused answers and revealed the influence of the child's age on parental mediation.

Parents of younger children's were roughly divided in two kinds of mediation: one group being up to 6 out of 10 parents, mostly frequent users, considered that at this age the child didn't justify interdictions and advice on online risks. Independently of parents' education, their age, gender and internet use, they shared a view that *there was no danger yet*, since the child was not a real expert about the internet, and considered it counterproductive to alert them about the risks.

This non-intervent position contradicts what Eurobarometer noticed. According to the results, parents of younger children were the most likely to say that they had imposed restrictions on their child's internet use (see previous section). This kind of mediation was found also in the interviews but involving a narrower group of parents. Within this second group, filtering and monitoring software were used by higher educated parents.

"No, but she only accesses where I allow her. I don't forbid it but I control the site that she's using." (F, 39, Univ., frequent user; Child: F, 10)

"Yeah, where she shouldn't be." (F, 36, Bas., non-user; Child: M, 8)

"Yes, sites that she shouldn't go to." (M, 39, Sec., frequent user; Child: F, 8)

"No, she is still very young, she only uses those sites for children... but when she gets older I'll also forbid certain things. Talking with strangers... yep... Buying online and give personal details." (M, 28, Bas., occasional user; Child: F, 7)

Parents of 11 to 14 year olds (most of them in their 30-40s and frequent users), were more intervenient, balanced their mediation between forbidding and advising, and recognized children's agency as active *recipients* of contents, as *participants* in communicative contacts and as *actors* deciding what to do. In contrast with digital excluded parents, these parents also shared the repertoire of online activities. These were clearly identified except on sites: in the context of the face to face interaction, parents tended to use indirect and ambiguous expressions (*certain sites, less convenient sites*), suggesting nonetheless a dominant association with sexual contents.

"Look, I keep quiet. As I said, they know what they shouldn't do and if they cause any mischief I'll take it away" (M, 56, Bas., non-user; Child: F, 12)

"Yes... the sites... Oh, use Messenger with strangers I don't let her to do that. Having access to certain sites also... buying on line... sharing personal information. That's basically it." (F, 38, Sec., frequent user; Child: F, 11)

Finally, among parents of older children (in general, older parents, less educated and more digitally excluded), some expressed difficulty in understanding what the internet is or what it allows. Visiting certain sites, downloads, buying online, talking with strangers appeared also as a matter of concern, higher when parents were less familiar with the internet. These parents balanced between the will to control or prevent activities and the recognition that they can't control anymore what their children's do at this age.

"Some things I forbid but he goes there any way. You know, some places that he shouldn't go. Dangerous places, right?" (F, 48, Bas., occasional user; Child: M, 17)

"No, the only thing we discussed was about the good and the bad and that they should know how to use it, because the internet is a world and they have to know how to use it, because not everything there is true. But only that... (F, 38, Sec., frequent user; Child: M, 16)

Concluding remarks

As we have seen, there is an intricate relation between perceptions, attitudes and actual practices when it comes to online activities and risks. This is the specific case of parents' awareness of their children online activities and the strategies they apparently adopt to prevent (or enhance) the risks (or opportunities) that their children might face online. As the

Eurobarometer points out, risk perception does not necessarily lead to the adoption of any specific measures, but that doesn't mean either that parents don't take any measures. Additionally, parents own internet experience seems to matter in their assessment of online risks (but not as clearly as one could imagine) on what they actually do. Children's age also seems to play an important role in explaining not only parents' perceptions but as well the way they seem to set rules or attempt different mediation strategies. These differences may also fit some kind of country pattern.

In the context of other European countries, Portuguese parents appear as very worried about their children's online activities, even though, like others, they don't seem to take all corresponding measures to reduce their anxiety. Rules concerning internet content in general are favoured by Portuguese parents, even though they seem to have rules about contact risks. Technological and software monitoring is also preferred, although in Portugal parents' internet use is below EU average.

As we have noticed, some of these results indicate inconsistencies that have puzzled us. Moreover, answers seemed to vary according to the way questions were formulated. Since there is no straightforward solution to this problem, we have decided to attempt a new methodological approach by conducting face to face interviews on a sample of Portuguese parents. This allowed us to consider different epistemological aspects involved in data collection and how they affect the way results may be interpreted.

While relevant, interview methodologies depend on the respondents' introspection, retrospection, and verbal recollection of their actions, which necessarily reproduce events from a current perspective (Jensen, 2002: 161). The translation of the Eurobarometer predefined categories into open questions interviews clearly shows the limits and the challenges of each approach.

The Eurobarometer format and the closed questions facilitate a stronger self-presentation of the Portuguese parents as worry and technologically competent as internet supervisors, while the face to face interviews stress even more the child's age as a relevant factor in parental mediation. Open questions make relevant the idea of younger children as innocent users; closed questions show a dominant self-representation as conducting strict control over children. Although different, both perspectives suggest traditional views of childhood and parenthood.

The comparison reveal also common trends between the Eurobarometer and the interviews, such as the mother as the dominant figure on monitoring at home, and the forbiddance of visiting *certain websites*, buying online, giving out personal details and contacting with strangers.

Results from the interviews suggest that there are less restrictions in the extremes of ages, and that Portuguese parents delay the moment of starting prevent risks and uncomfortable situations, as if they were aiming at extending the "age of innocence" as far as possible, until the adolescence. On the other hand, when there are older siblings, parents trust them to act as

advisors, delegating attention and control, and seeming to start earlier to be concerned about online risks experienced by the younger child.

Therefore, besides class and gender as social attributes of the respondents, the case study suggests the relevance of cultural trends that might affect parental mediation. Here the similar pattern of an absence of worry on the younger children (*I'm not yet worried*) or the reference to older siblings as internet advisors crosses those differences and suggests that the age and household composition also matters as social variables in the reception and audience studies.

As Jensen stresses, "such interpretative categories may be mapped onto sociodemographic ones, thus enabling research to explore both discursively and socially specific aspects of mediated communication" (2002: 167). The understanding of parental views and mediations based on these different interpretative repertoires might contribute for a more productive design of public campaigns and tools aimed at parents.

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