

National report for France

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Contribution to the European report:

Stald, G. and Haddon, L. (2008) *Cross-Cultural Contexts of Research: Factors Influencing the Study of Children and the Internet in Europe*. A report for the EC Safer Internet Plus Programme, 2008.

Universities and Disciplines

In France, there are 98 universities in 26 different cities, more than 88 "Grandes Ecoles" (Grand Schools: Ecole Polytechnique, Ecole des mines), 23 "grands Etablissements" (public institutions under ministerial charter: Collège de France, Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers), 9 "Etablissements Publics à caractère scientifique et technique" (including the CNRS [which is employing 30 000 people in 2007], INED). Some other public bodies may conduct research, such as the Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique (15 000 employees, 10 research centres). Media studies and communication studies are mainly conducted within the discipline "Science de l'Information et de la Communication", 71st section of the french university national council (CNU). Neither "IT and Society" nor "New Media and informatics" exists as a discipline in French universities. The "IT and Society" research field is rather structured by research networks, such as the GDR Tic et sociétés ("groupement de recherches Tics et Société), and the scientific revue Réseaux.

National Data Collected

One of the major studies on IT, conducted by the CREDOC each year, is co-funded by the state agency ARCEP. As far as know, no data on the internet and children are collected, apart from the Mediapro study, conducted by the CLEMI. In terms of non-Government bodies collecting national statistics the MEDIAMETRIE study is the most used. No regular and public data are provided, although there are many commercial studies (e.g. Z'adobus, conducted by CSA). There are no regular and repeated studies of children and the internet.

Institutional processes in applying to conduct research

Research topics are usually not regulated, nor do we have an ethics committee. As we work in a private company, all research has to be included into programmes that are supposed to be useful for France Telecom.

Pressures to conduct research

Because we work in a R&D centre i.e. in a laboratory that primarily does research, there is no teaching involved for us. And while we operate within the industry, we are supposed to work along with academics.

Factors influencing the orientation of research

Links between academic research and industries are strongly encouraged. For instance, the "poles de compétitivités" that have been set up for 2 years encourage projects, and having a joint academic/industry project is clearly desirable.

National Research Traditions

There is a well established tradition of quantitative research in France, both in academia (especially in the French sociological tradition) and in commercial studies (Mediametrie). There is also a national institution to produce statistics (INSEE). Qualitative research is also well established in France, in most of the social sciences (for instance sociology, psychology, science education). Interpersonal communication has been studied by the French speaking tradition of "sociologie des usages" since the late eighties.

Some studies were conducted earlier, but at that time, a department of sociology was set up at the CNET (national centre for telecommunication studies), that became France Telecom R&D and Orange Labs with the privatisation process of France Telecom. This laboratory used to be the biggest laboratory in “sociologie des usages” and started a strong tradition of research in that field, including the academic review “Réseaux”. During the eighties and the early nineties, studies in “sociologie des usages” mainly focused on the telephone and telematics (the French “minitel”). The first studies on the internet occurred with the diffusion of the internet, around 1994.

Case study of how a particular study emerged

I started my PhD on the use of computers by teenagers because France Telecom was at that time involved in a research project about an operation that consisted of lending laptops to schoolchildren in Marseille. As I was already working in France Telecom (as a computer scientist) and as I was finishing my masters in science education on the educational uses of ICTs, I applied for that PhD. The project was abandoned a few weeks later. My main interest was in the appropriation of ICTs by teenagers. I wanted to understand what they were actually doing, what they understood in the use of computers. This implied going further than their declarations, and implied observations of actual uses. This is why I chose a qualitative “ethnographic” methodology. The age of children was originally due to the operation in Marseille, concerning 15 years olds. When the project was abandoned, I continued working on the same population. Since the original project was abandoned, I was completely free to set up my own research questions. My main interest was to do with the appropriation process: how do children know what they know about computers? How do they learn? This project was funded by France Telecom.