

National report for Belgium

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Contribution to the European report:

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1. The Internet

1.1 Children's Internet access

- In Belgium, the State Secretary of Computerisation and the State Secretary of Administrative Simplification are responsible for e-government issues. The Federal Public Service of Information and Communication Technology (Fedict) and the Service for Administrative Simplification are responsible for outlining and executing e-government policies. Among other goals, it aims to provide public places throughout the nation with Internet access (see website: Federal Public Service Social Integration, 2007).
- The Federal Public Service 'Social Integration' is responsible for closing the digital divide between citizens who have access to the Internet and those who do not. In 2007 the Social Integration Service drew a map showing all of Belgium's so-called 'Public Computer Spaces', including libraries, educational organisations, municipal organisations and cybercafés. This allows citizens to look up the nearest Public Computer Space.
- "Easy-e-Space" is another programme launched by the federal government to introduce Digital Public Places into Social Welfare Organisations.
- In addition, Flemish libraries have offered free Internet access since 1997 (see website: Federal Public Service 'Social Integration', 2007).
- The 2007 Eurobarometer Belgium survey showed that 53% of citizens have at least one Internet access point at home. Of this group, 89% have broadband access and 10% use narrowband.
- A 2004 DIMARSO investigation confirms that there is a digital gap in Flanders related to age (i.e. the greater a person's age, the less digitally equipped he or she is), social group and education level (i.e. the lower the education level, the less digitally equipped a person is). In this investigation, 82% of the respondents in the highest social group owned a computer, and 80% of them had Internet access. In the lowest social group this percentage dropped to 37% and 36%, respectively. Among the individuals with a higher level of education, 82% owned a home computer, and 83% of this group had Internet access. In the group with a lower level of education this percentage dropped to 34% and 70%, respectively. Fifty years of age is an important benchmark; below this age, almost 60% of the respondents use a PC. Above it, the number drops to less than a third of the population. In total, 68% of the Flemish population has a computer at home and 67% has Internet access. In Wallonia, 55% of households have a computer at home and 40% have Internet access (*Agence Wallonne des Télécommunications* (2004)). There is a computer in 77% of the households where the head has a higher educational background. This number drops to 30% when the head of the household has a lower education level. Income is also a factor, with 83% of high income households owning a home computer compared to 30% in the lowest income group.
- The research project *Cyberkids' e-privacy* investigated 294 websites of Belgian organisations or those with a department in Belgium focusing on children and adolescents (15% of which are children under age 12) (Michel Walrave, 2005).

The Belgian Privacy Commission (see below) suggests that information leading to direct identification of a minor, such as a family name, address, telephone number, photograph, etc., may not be collected via the Internet. In addition, the Privacy Law states that gathering information about minors for marketing purposes is illegal

Out of the websites aimed at children below 12 years of age, many have a place to enter an email address (80%), a name (67%), an address (44%), a telephone number (22%) or a mobile phone number (10%).

The privacy statement created in the Privacy Law of 1992 is mentioned on four out of these websites, and sometimes in an incomplete way.

Of the websites aimed at children below 12 years of age, 55% offer information about their privacy policy, 12% give information for parents, 10% ask for the parents' opinion and 3.5% ask for parental permission; 54.5 % of the websites use cookies (i.e. generally used for marketing purposes) and in 76% of the cases no information is provided.

- The government has teamed up with private partners (the Association of Internet Providers, ISPA) for 'Safer Chat', an initiative to create a safer environment for minors to chat on the Internet. To accomplish this, a Belgian electronic identity card will be launched and certain chat-rooms will be initiated.

1.2 Findings on children's access to the Internet and online technologies

In Belgium the Internet is mainly accessed at home, less frequently at school and rarely in cybercafés (Vandercammen, 2006). In 2006, more than 80% of households with children owned a computer. In 2007, Eurostat research found that 60% of Belgian households have Internet access. Moreover, 56% of these households use broadband to access the Internet. In terms of school/home access in the French speaking part of Belgium, the Internet is used far more at home than at school. According to the Mediappro project "it is within the home that the young people seem to have most freedom to do what they want on the Internet" (Mediappro, 2006). More specifically, among the children and adolescents who use the Internet several times a week or daily, 69% use the Internet at home while only 9% use it at school. As for the Flemish speaking part of the survey, 91.2% of 9-12 year olds access the Internet at home, while 31.7% access it when visiting friends (Valcke, et al., 2005). Only 11.2% use the Internet in libraries.

According to the OIVO report, in 2006 82% of 9-18 year old Belgian children owned a mobile phone (Vandercammen, 2006). The percentage of children with a mobile increases with age (29% of 9-10 year olds have a mobile phone, compared to 65% of 11-12 year olds, 95% of 15-17 year olds and 98% of 18 year olds). On average, the percentage of children who own a mobile phone is slightly higher in the southern part of Belgium (i.e. in the Walloon provinces).

In Belgium, there is a relationship between SES and the percentage of 9-18 year olds who own a mobile phone. 88% of children from families with a lower SES own a mobile phone (this is higher than the average 82% of children in this age group who possess a mobile phone) (Vandercammen, 2006).

In Belgium, there is a correlation between owning a mobile phone and the type of family the child belongs to. The greatest percentage of mobile phones is found among children of single-parent families, where 93% of 9-18 year olds own a mobile phone. This breaks down into 97% of children living with their father and 90% of those who live with their mother. This is greater than the 77% of children from large families, 75% of children from two-parent families and 70% of children from joint-custody families who have their own mobile (Vandercammen, 2006).

1.3 Findings on children's use of the Internet and online technologies

In general, Belgian children have access to the Internet and use it on a regular basis. Different reports state that more than 85% of boys and girls have access to the Internet. For example, Eurostat figures for 2007 show that among Belgian 16-24 year olds, 89% of males and 87% of females use the Internet at least once a week. The Eurobarometer 2007 study also reports that Belgian boys between age 12 and 14 spend an average of 1-2 hours a day on the Internet. The frequency of Internet use among girls from 12-14 years old varies from a few times a week to daily Internet access. According to the Oivo report, an average 84% of 9-10 year old Belgians, 87% of 11-12 year olds, 95% of 13-14 year olds, 96% of 15-17 year olds and 97% of 18 year olds use the Internet (Vandercammen, 2006). A study by Valcke et al. found that of the Flemish 9-12 year olds who frequently use the Internet at home, 62.9% do so at least three times a week (Valcke, et al., 2005).

In 2005, research on the Flemish speaking provinces found that more than 90% of young people between 12 and 20 years old use MSN (Depandelaere, et al., 2006). The most frequent MSN users are 16 and 17 year olds. Evidence suggests that younger children use instant messaging less frequently than older ones. Valcke et al. found that only 59.3% of 9-12 year olds use this technology (Valcke, et al., 2005). In the French speaking provinces, 81% of 12-18 year olds use instant messaging sometimes, often or very often (Mediappro, 2006).

Flemish children also commonly use the Internet for school-related purposes. Valcke et al. claim that 54.9% of 9-12 year olds use the Internet for schoolwork at home (Valcke et al., 2005). Research in the Flemish region of Belgium shows that 20% of 12-20 year olds use blogs (without necessarily being the blog's creator) (Depandelaere, 2006). Blogs are most commonly used by 15 and 16 year olds. In Wallonia approximately 35% of 12-18 year olds have their own blog (Mediappro, 2006). Interviews from Mediappro show that the lifespan of a blog varies from between six months and one year, and that young people who have a blog are mostly those who have an Internet connection at home (Mediappro, 2006).

In 2005 9% of the Flemish youth between 12 and 20 years old had used podcasting at some point (Depandelaere, M., 2006). In the same year 23% of Flemish children in this age group had ever used VOIP such as Skype (Depandelaere, M., 2006). VOIP was most often used by older and/or male children. In Wallonia, searching for information is the most common Internet activity among adolescents, with 95% of 12-18 year olds using search engines online (Mediappro, 2006).

According to the Mediappro report, 74% of children from the French speaking Belgian community use email sometimes, often or very often (Mediappro, 2006). A study carried out among younger Flemish children, however, reveals much lower rates of email usage (Valcke, et al., 2005). This difference may be due to age differences in the samples; the Flemish children were under age 12, while those in the Walloon sample were aged 12 to 18.

According to the Mediappro report, 28% of the children from the French speaking Belgian community use chat rooms sometimes, often or very often (Mediappro, 2006). The Mediappro report also found that 58% of 12-18 year old children from French speaking Belgium download content, especially music, sometimes, often or very often. Older adolescents download more than younger children, despite being fully aware that this practice is often illegal. 61.80% of Flemish children aged 9-12 play online games (Valcke, et al., 2005).

In Belgium, 80% of 9 year old children go online about 4 to 5 times a week. Evidence shows that from age 13 the amount of children who go online increases to 95%. The frequency of Internet use increases considerably from age 11, when children start using the Internet on a daily basis (Vandercammen, 2006).

Boys aged 9 to 18 use the Internet more often than girls. On average, boys use the Internet 8.8 times a week whereas girls use it 6.1 times weekly (Vandercammen, 2006).

1.4 Internet and media content for children

- **Ketnetonline.be** is the website of the public broadcaster's youth channel, KETNET. It provides online radio, games, discussion platforms, and guidelines for safe Internet use.
- **Studio100.be** is the website of the major commercial children's media content provider. It contains heavy advertisement and product-selling.

1.5 Opportunities experienced by children online

Belgian children and adolescents use various Internet applications to communicate with their peers online. For example, the 2007 Eurobarometer study shows that Flemish boys aged 12-14 explicitly mention that they favour the Internet because they like to chat or talk with friends. Another study carried out in the Flemish provinces in 2005 showed that one of the main reasons for using MSN was to communicate (especially among girls) and make appointments (especially for boys) (Depandelaere, M., 2006). The popularity of online communication is also evident in Wallonia, where 73% of 12-18 year olds (male and female) use the Internet to communicate with their friends on MSN. These adolescents often use MSN to contact friends they see everyday, where they continue the day's conversations or swap schoolwork and photographs. These children tend to have large numbers of people on their online contact lists, but in interviews they say that they only regularly use a dozen or so of these (Mediappro, 2006).

The Mediappro study claims that the creation of blogs allows young people to present themselves to the world (Mediappro, 2006). This tool allows adolescents to test the reactions of other members of their community and try out the image or identity they project for themselves (Mediappro, 2006). Flemish youths from 12-20 years old said that their main reasons for using MSN are communication (especially among girls), sharing pictures, schoolwork, making appointments (especially among boys) and sharing music (Depandelaere, M., 2006).

Instant messaging, email and blogs present children with other ways of expressing and presenting themselves, as reflected in the use of pseudonyms, images and text. These online tools also provide new opportunities for adolescents to develop socially. In particular, they can be useful for community-building among peers. In this sense online communication can be considered 'tribal', meaning that young people mostly communicate with people they already know and who form a pre-existing network of friends. Finally, online communication tools also provide opportunities to help shy adolescents overcome their social fears (Mediappro, 2006).

Belgian children and adolescents often use the Internet to look for information, both for schoolwork and for information they find interesting and fun (Eurobarometer, 2007). In addition, young Walloon children state that, thanks to the Internet, they learn things more quickly and easily about the world around them, mainly by using search engines (Mediappro, 2006).

In Belgium, children between age 9 and 18 favour mobile phones for the following three reasons (in order of importance): text messages, phone calls and games (Vandercammen, 2006). According to these youths, text messages are a cheaper and more discreet means of communication than voice calls. Young people justify owning a mobile phone on the grounds of being able to contact their parents, but mobile phones are used above all among peers (Mediappro, 2006). From the parents' point of view, mobile telephony provides children with important opportunities like being able to contact them at any time (46%), reassurance (27%) and for their child's leisure and comfort (16%) (Mediappro, 2006).

It seems that the percentage of youths using the Internet in Belgium is higher for children belonging to a higher social class (96%) than for those with a lower social status (89%). However, this difference has not been tested for statistical significance (Vandercammen, 2006).

1.6 Risks experienced by children online

EB 2007 qualitative research shows that while boys aged 9-14 mentioned viruses as a predominant risk, girls in this age group saw chatting with a stranger as the foremost online danger. All four groups perceived the most risks and problems when engaging in open chat-rooms, putting personal information on the Internet, or having contact with a stranger.

The following percentages only apply to children who use the Internet: According to Eurobarometer 2007, boys aged 9-14 and girls aged 12-14 consider viruses to be a problem related to Internet use. Interestingly, the Mediappro report on children aged 10-18 highlights that in spite of the fact that many young people do not have a clear idea of what viruses are, nor have they had any experience with them, they still fear them.

The Eurobarometer study also found that 9-10 year old Belgian girls perceive risks including being contacted by strangers on their mobile phones or online. According to this report, girls are generally more aware of the risks of communicating with strangers on the Internet than boys. In the Flemish speaking region, a qualitative study carried out in 2006 revealed that youngsters consider chatting to be risky only if it involves communicating with unknown adults, but not if an unknown child is involved. Walloon girls, on the other hand, claim that when using MSN they always know who their interlocutor is, and that they can protect themselves if the conversation takes an undesirable turn (Mediappro, 2006). More specifically, Valcke et al. report that nearly 26% of Flemish children aged 9-12 do not always know who they meet via the Internet Valcke, et al. ,2005). Moreover, they found out that 7.5% of Flemish children have met a stranger in person after making an appointment via the Internet. Of this group, 20.9% went to these meetings alone.

Giving out personal information to strangers constitutes another kind of online risk. In a qualitative study (Eurobarometer, 2007), children aged 9-14 mentioned the fact that online information is not always to be trusted. In relation to sharing personal information, Valcke et al. found that approximately 13% of 9-12 year olds have passed personal details on to people they chat with, and 12.7% have sent pictures to people (Valcke, et al., 2005). As for illegal downloading, most children do not seem to understand the difference between legal and illegal activities. Young people are not generally acquainted with the rules which govern downloading or the publication of certain kinds of content on the Internet. Their grasp of relevant laws is practically non-existent, and sometimes even mistaken (Mediappro, 2006).

Qualitative research carried out in 2005 on more than 2,000 Flemish 11-18 year olds showed that one out of ten youths had been a victim of bullying via the Internet or a mobile phone. In addition, almost two out of ten youths had committed bullying themselves, while three out of ten had witnessed bullying. According to this report the most common types of bullying were insults, threats or deception via the Internet or mobile phone, gossip and breaking into someone else's inbox or MSN and changing someone else's password (Vandebosch, et al 2006). According to Valcke et al., Flemish girls have felt significantly more threatened online than boys (Valcke, et al., 2005). In the French speaking part of the country, having an anti-social attitude that involves saying nasty things in a blog, damaging another's reputation, or making inappropriate statements in a discussion forum is considered to be one of the worst types of behaviour anyone can exhibit on the Internet (Mediappro, 2006).

Walloon children rarely claim to have been encountered inappropriate websites. When faced with the hypothetical situation that this would happen, most replied that they would simply close the offending web pages (Mediappro, 2006). On the other hand, four out of ten Flemish children aged 9-12 report having been shocked by inappropriate content of a violent, sexual or racist nature. Moreover, 16.7% have felt threatened while online Valcke, et al. ,2005). According to Valcke et al., 10-12 year olds have witnessed more inappropriate content online than their 9 year-olds counterparts (Valcke, et al., 2005).

A 2005-2006 Eurobarometer survey found that 25% of parents/guardians think that their child has encountered some type of harmful or illegal content on the Internet. Some children are afraid that the Internet might have a negative impact on their schoolwork or might make them waste their time (Mediappro, 2006).

1.7 Internet regulation and promotion

Legislation has been passed regarding illegal and damaging content on the Internet. On 30 July 1981 a law was passed for the punishment of certain acts of racism and xenophobia. It also imposed criminal sanctions for these acts. A law passed on 11 March 2003 deals with the legal aspects of services in the information society. This includes all economic online activities, and applies to Internet providers, email services and customers. It aims to provide a protection frame for customers. Privacy protection and gambling activities, however, are not included under this law. With regards to advertising, this law entails the advertisers' duty to inform the public of its services and to identify itself clearly. There is also legislation to combat spam.

Privacy and other fundamental rights are also ensured by law. A privacy protection law from 8 December 1992 prohibits the processing of personal information. The Belgian Privacy Commission, an independent institution, was founded in the same year by the Chamber of Representatives in an effort to help prevent computer crime. A law was passed on 28 November 2000 aims to cut down on informatics crimes like hacking.

There are two articles (383 bis and 380 ter) enforcing the ban on child pornography on the Internet.

- **Sensibilisation:** The Federal Action Plan of 2005 endeavours to close the digital divide. Its actions are centred around three themes: sensibilisation, training and providing access. Recent projects include *Internet for Everyone*, *Peeceefobie*, *Safer Internet*, a *Suske and Wiske* comic strip, recycling old PCs and project Public Computer Spaces. In October 2007 the Minister of Education Frank Vandenbroucke, in cooperation with Child Focus and Oivo, created information brochures and CD-roms to promote safer ICT use, as well as course packages for schools and final attainment levels for ICT use in primary and secondary schools.
- **Clicksafe.be** is carried out through the cooperation of the Ministry of Justice, Child Focus, the Federal Police and VT4 (a commercial broadcaster). Its goal is to protect minors from abuse in new media and to provide information to prevent such abuse.
- **E-cops.be** is the Belgian government complaints office for Internet abuse and misuse.
- **The Privacy Commission** for the protection of privacy was founded by the Chamber of Representatives.
- **Internet-observatory.be** is the Federal Government Service of Economy website. It formulates recommendations concerning economic problems caused by the use of information and communication technology.
- **Stopchildporno.be** is the Belgian public complaints office to report images of sexual abuse of children found on the Internet.
- **Saferchat.be** is a joint initiative of the government and private partners (an organisation of Internet providers, ISPA) to create a safer environment for chatting on the Internet. To accomplish this it enforces use of a Belgian electronic identity card in certain chat-rooms.
- **Agence Wallone de Télécommunications** was founded by the Walloon District to promote universal access to information and communication technology.
- **Coordination Point 'Information Society'** was founded by the Flemish District to coordinate the battle against the digital divide.

Some examples:

- **Centre for equal opportunities and opposition to racism:** The centre targets cyber hate by providing a website to report racism on the Internet.
- **ACG-Médialogue, CTV Horizon Médias, Inform'action:** These are youth centres in the French Community which actively take part in the battle against the digital divide.

1.8 Parental mediation

Studies show that from a child's point of view, parents do not spy and are not inquisitive about their Internet use. Nevertheless, this does not mean that parents are completely unconcerned. A few young people do complain that their parents are too inquisitive

(Mediapro, 2006). When parents mediate their children's online use, it is usually to limit the time spent on the Internet, to supervise the content children access online, to manage the order in which brothers and sisters make use of the Internet (which is often problematic) and to make sure their Internet use does not interfere with school responsibilities. 37% of Walloon parents systematically supervise the sites visited by their children, 22% do it on an ad-hoc basis and 42% don't supervise computer use at all (AWT, 2003).

Girls aged 12 to 14 are often prohibited from visiting websites or downloading things that may contain viruses. In contrast, younger boys (aged 9-10) are often not allowed to visit websites containing 'sex', or 'dirty websites' (Eurobarometer, 2007; (Bauwens et al 2006). Results from a qualitative study of Belgian children show that the parents of 9-14 year olds set time limits for Internet use at home (Eurobarometer, 2007).

There is a statistically significant difference between the level of control reported by children in different age groups. 9 years old claim to be controlled significantly less than 10-12 year olds (Valcke, et al., 2005). According to Valcke et al. there is no significant difference in the way boys and girls are supervised when using the Internet at home (Valcke, et al., 2005). They report that higher levels of parental control lead to 9-12 year old children communicating only with those they know online. Parental control also prevents children from sending personal details or pictures to unknown contacts (Valcke, et al., 2005). Nevertheless, there seems to be no relationship between parental control and actually meeting online contacts in real life, going alone to these meetings, feeling shocked by Internet content, or feeling threatened on the Internet. Parental control seems to be significantly related to lower degrees of unsafe behaviour.

1.9 Media literacy

EB 2007 qualitative research showed that within the youngest group of girls, some were not fully aware of the risks involved in giving personal information to a stranger. In all four groups, the children believed that having contact with a stranger can be dangerous and that you must never give personal information to unknown persons.

In all four groups, children were aware that not all the information on the Internet is correct. To find the truth they said they would read books. The youngest children would ask their parents for the truth, while older ones said they would rather believe the Internet.

Most children had already received sexual images via email, or seen them while surfing the Internet. Although for the youngest those pictures can be shocking, they tend to just click them away and not speak about the experience to anyone.

With regards to bullying, the children were divided between those who would tell their parents when it happened to them and those who would do nothing at all

Only a few children in the four groups realised what illegal downloading is. The youngest boys and the older girls believed that there is nothing illegal about downloading music. These children do not seem to differentiate between legal and illegal.

The 2005-2006 Eurobarometer study showed that 64% of parents/guardians think their child knows what to do if they feel uncomfortable online, while 35% think they do not.

2 The Educational system

2.1 General education

Depending on the source and the criteria used, it is estimated that 10-25% of adults in Belgium cannot read, write and count sufficiently (functional illiteracy, as defined by UNESCO). More than one in seven Flemish adults (15-18% of the population, or 700,000-

850,000 adults) cannot read or write at a functional level. In Wallonia and Brussels, one in ten adults is illiterate (Lire et Ecrire, 2005; www.armoedebestrijding.be).

In 2005 12.6% of the Flemish population between 25 and 64 years of age had a university degree, 17.9% had a higher non-university degree, 36.8% had obtained a secondary school degree and 32.7% had only completed primary school. A gender comparison shows that 15.4% of men and 9.8% of women have a university degree (Flemish Community, 2005). No information was found on the French speaking community.

Belgium ranks in the PISA figures, with the Flemish ranking much higher than the French. See also: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/16/7/39722098.pdf>

2.2 Education and the Internet

The 2005 Federal Action Plan to battle the digital divide aims to create an ICT infrastructure in every school, providing at least one computer per fifteen students. In some schools this goal has already been achieved. Under the plan, communities see to it that every adolescent has the necessary skills to use information technologies upon leaving school. Since 1 September 2007, new final attainment levels for ICT use have been implemented in primary and secondary schools. One of these final attainment levels entails the safe, responsible and pragmatic use of ICT. To achieve this, as mentioned earlier, the Minister of Education distributed information brochures, CD-roms, and five course packages to the schools.

Teachers can also take a course to learn about safe ICT use. In the French Community the Centre Audiovisuel Liège has organised courses to certify participants as 'animateur médias' since 2004. In the French speaking community, four ICT knowledge centres were set up for teachers, students and the unemployed. These centres provide a wide range of training and sensibilisation instruments.

3 Wider society

3.1 Social change

Social change happens at different speeds in the two regions of Belgium. Whereas the South (Wallonia) was a strong economic region until the beginning of the 20th century, today economic growth and power is mainly located in the North of the country in Flanders (Biatour et al. 2007, 'Growth and Productivity in Belgium', Working paper 5-07 Federal Planning Bureau, <http://www.plan.be/publications>). The inequality of economic development is the result of other inequalities, which are explained in section 6.2.

Due to Belgium's specific federal structure, Information Society policy is a matter of concern for different policy bodies. The Belgian federal government strives to be ahead of the curve when it comes to the diffusion and adoption of ICTs among its citizens, government bodies and services, and in economic life. Its central strategy, which is shared by the Flemish government, is the diffusion of broadband. Because PC and Internet access in Flanders is not widespread, the Flemish government is convinced that digital interactive television offers the ideal entrance to accessing the information highway. The government hopes this option will make Flemish people participate in the information society, thus bridging the digital divide. Interactive television is a platform to get everybody online while also offering specific governmental services (Van den Broeck et al., 2007, 'Does interactive television imply new uses? A Flemish case study', In: Conference Proceedings of 2nd European Conference on Interactive Television: Enhancing the Experience, Brighton, UK, 31 March - 2 April.). As for the southern part of the country, no research into discourse and strategies is available, apart from the figures on the adoption and diffusion of ICTs produced by the AWT (Agence Wallonne des Télécommunications: <http://www.awt.be/web>).

The federal and regional government's goal is to be on the cutting-edge when it comes to the diffusion and adoption of ICTs, but this has not yet been realised. Belgium only occupies the

11th position worldwide, based on its citizens' Internet use (ITU 2008). About 40% of Flemish households have no interest in acquiring an Internet connection. Van Audenhove et al. report that the cost of material and connection is an important barrier, so different action programmes have been undertaken. These are mainly aimed at stimulating the acquisition of computers, as for example the Flemish government's initiative 'PC voor iedereen' ('PC for everyone') (listed in 2.2.).

The most fundamental divide exists between the south and north of the country. Flanders and Wallonia differ in levels of education, work status, income level and poverty, as well as the diffusion and adoption of ICTs. These differences coincide with the economic inequality of both regions. Flanders is more prosperous, its population is more highly educated, its poverty and unemployment rates are lower, and its income and Internet use is higher (67% of Flemish households had Internet access in 2007, compared to only 50% of Walloon households; <http://www.statbel.fgov.be>).

These inequalities are monitored by 'Statistics Belgium', a federal government agency. Whereas Statistics Belgium collects data on a federal level (the General Socio-economic Survey on household level is held every decade), several regional bodies gather regional figures. The official regional bodies are APS, the Administrative Planning en Statistiek Vlaanderen and IWEPS, and Institut wallon de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la statistique.

Although both parts of the country differ from one another, their inequalities coincide with patterns observed in other European countries. The main inequalities are situated at the level of:

-Work: Women, people over 50 and immigrants are strongly underrepresented in the labour market (<http://www.statbel.fgov.be>; <http://aps.vlaanderen.be/statistiek/nieuws/arbeidsmarkt>).

-Gender: In spite of the better school results and higher educational level girls reach, women are still underrepresented in the labour market, where they occupy lower positions and earn lower wages than men (<http://ecodata.mineco.fgov.be>).

-Educational level: As in the rest of continental Europe, the post-war expansion of educational participation has only resulted in marginal changes to the social inequality of educational opportunities. A person's social background still determines the level of education he or she will reach. Gender differences have largely vanished, but large inequalities still exist for immigrants, disabled persons and children with a weaker social background. They are underrepresented in the higher educational system. The most influential factor in determining a person's educational level appears to be the language spoken at home and the educational level of the person's mother (Groenez, S. et al., 2003, *Cijferboek sociale ongelijkheid in het Vlaamse onderwijs*; <http://www.hiva.be/docs/rapport/R850.pdf>).

Belgium is a small but highly dense country with ten million inhabitants (six million living in Flanders and four million in Wallonia). It also lacks a real distinction between its cities and rural regions, giving Belgium the appearance of one suburban region. Together with the Netherlands it is one of the most cable-heavy countries in the world, with 94% of households receiving cable. Diffusion of broadband and access to the Internet is therefore easier to realise for all parts of the country (Mérenne, B. et al., 1997, *La Belgique – Diversité territoriale*; <http://www.iph.fgov.be/EPIDEMIO>; Van den Broeck, W., Pierson, J. & C. Pauwels, 2007, 'Does interactive television imply new uses? A Flemish case study', In: Conference Proceedings of 2nd European Conference on Interactive Television: Enhancing the Experience, Brighton, UK, 31 March - 2 April.).

The country's agricultural sector is also relatively small due its density and the lack of heavy industries, so the Belgian population is mostly involved in the tertiary sector. Data are collected by Statistics Belgium (<http://www.statbel.fgov.be>).

The social security system is well-developed in Belgium; unemployment and pension payments are guaranteed for every person working on a salaried basis. The government also provides a restricted pension scheme for self-employed workers. One inequality still exists, however, as Belgium is the only country that differentiates between two social security statutes for salaried employees; labourers are treated differently than 'white collar' workers,

thus discriminating against labourers when it comes to social security provisions (https://www.socialsecurity.be/site_nl/home_default.htm; <http://www.steunpuntwav.be>).

Belgium usually ranks high in cross-national surveys, such as Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey and the European Values Study, when it comes to intolerance shown towards immigrants. This attitude differs in Wallonia, where no extreme right-wing equivalent of the Flemish Blok/Vlaams Belang party has flourished so far. In the first half of 2006, the public and political leaders were shocked by serious ethnically-motivated events like an illegal immigrant who stabbed a Belgian teenager to death in a train station in order to steal his mp3 player. In Antwerp a Belgian teenager, expelled from school, hunted down and shot an African and a Turkish woman for racist motives, also killing a two year old Belgian girl and her Malinese nurse. A group of Moroccan youths beat a bus passenger to death when he protested the noise they were making. These incidents raised questions about the (im)possibility of different ethnic communities living together. The media gave voice to a discourse of incompatibility.

In terms of Internet tolerance and awareness actions, the Brussels-based European centre for missing and sexually exploited children, Child Focus, launched a Click Safe campaign in 2002 to raise awareness about problematic blogs and intimate diaries on the Internet. Child Focus also took part in the 2005 Safer Internet Belgium platform, which was coordinated by the Centre for Research and Information of Consumer Organisations (CRIOC). In addition to Child Focus, the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (Centre pour l'Égalité des Chances et la Lutte contre le Racisme), the Information and Advice Centre on Sectarian Organisations (Centre d'Information et de Conseil en matière d'Organisations Sectaires) and the Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA Belgium) also formed part of this platform. Its objective is to teach children and adolescents how to use the Internet and mobile technologies in an intelligent manner, alerting them to possible risks. As part of International Missing Children's Day on 25 May 2004, all primary schools received mouse mats with tips for safe surfing. A total of 250,000 of these mats were distributed to 4,500 schools.

Research by social psychologists Vanbeselaere et al. (2006) observed that the Flemish identify with a negative attitude towards immigrants, as well as with a growing approval of discriminatory acts. The link, however, between national identification and attitude towards immigrants is not inherently negative. Whether this association is positive or negative depends upon the definition of citizenship. When an ethnic or cultural definition of citizenship is prominent (i.e. based upon cultural heritage), the Flemish resist accepting immigrants as full-fledged citizens out of a feeling that the Flemish culture needs to be protected and preserved, and support of more derogatory and discriminatory acts. In other words, 'newcomers' have to fulfil a set of cultural requirements like language and religion in order to be accepted as co-citizens. Cultural diversity is seen as a threat to the continuation of authentic Flemish culture. For Flemings with a predominantly civic or republican definition of citizenship, membership in the nation depends on a willingness to accept the basic rules underpinning the society. In this case stronger national identification is related to a more positive attitude and behaviour towards immigrants (Vanbeselaere, Boen, Meeus, 2006).

3.2 Role of the state

In line with the e-inclusion action plan "i-2010" initiated by the European Commission and the WSIS initiatives (Geneva, 2003 and Tunis, 2005), the Belgian federal government launched a national plan to combat the digital gap. The government worked closely with the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels Capital regions. A tangible result in this plan is the establishment of the so-called 'Public Computer Spaces'. The government commissioned a study mapping all public computer spaces available in the Belgian territory. Public computer spaces include every public space which makes ICTs like the Internet and office software available to the public. Private and public initiatives (public libraries, education centres, associations, cybercafés, phone shops, etc.) are also considered.

'Internet for Everybody' is another national action plan combating the digital divide. Its three main areas of action in all three regions are, as explained earlier, sensibilisation, education, and access. In each region there is specific emphasis on local needs. For example, in the Brussels capital region where many low-income newcomers live, employment and social economy, citizen culture, and sustainable technology are considered the main aims of ICT empowerment.

Freedom of speech is guaranteed by Belgian law, namely articles 19 and 25 of the Belgian Constitution. There is no record of notable or fundamental problems in their enforcement. The level of free speech allowed versus issues of censorship in Belgium is comparable to other European countries.

4. Other factors affecting children's online experiences

Belgians are known for having a high knowledge of foreign languages. They share this feature with other small countries where citizens are taught from kindergarten that their mother tongue is only a minority language on a world scale, and therefore learning foreign languages is necessary to attain professional success. Belgium is officially trilingual in Flemish/Dutch, French, and German. All three languages are compulsory at some point during the educational curriculum. French and Flemish as a first foreign language (i.e. the language of the neighbouring region) are compulsory after age 12. German comes in at a later stage (around age 16). At about age 14, English is taught as a second foreign language. English is also the de facto language spoken in the capital city, Brussels. The headquarters of foreign multinationals are located in Brussels, and numerous bureaucrats work there for European institutions. Knowledge of English is particularly high among the younger generations and the active working group up to age 50. The fact that foreign television products including popular British and American sitcoms are shown in the original versions with subtitles, rather than dubbed as in the bigger markets, contributes to the level of fluency acquired. This fluency is much higher in the North of the country (among those who speak Flemish, which shares Germanic roots with English) than in the French speaking region, where the media focuses much more heavily on products from France.

'Bedroom culture' is a term from the Himmelweit Revisited study which refers to the activities adolescents engage in in the privacy of their bedrooms (Johnsson-Smaragdi et al, 1997; Pasquier et al., 1998). Although no further research has been published with regards to this concept, it is clear that girls spend more time in their bedrooms, mostly with other girls talking about female issues. Boys, on the other hand, spend less time in their bedrooms which are generally much better equipped media-wise than those of the girls. For girls, bedroom decorations like curtains, bedspreads and plush bears tend to be more important than the computer equipment is for the boys.

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