The young and digital technologies: defining spaces for leisure, participation and learning

Daniel Aranda and Jordi Sánchez-Navarro
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
Rambla del Poblenou, 156
08018 Barcelona – Spain
darandaj@uoc.edu

ABSTRACT
The present article is a descriptive summary of the data obtained through a survey addressed to the Spanish population between 12 and 18 years old about the effective use of Internet, social networks, mobile telephones and videogames. Specifically, the first data collected show that young people have learnt to use the Internet and connect mainly in informal spaces (private and/or related to family and friends), but not in formal educational spaces (such as classrooms or academies). For them, Internet is mainly a leisure space. Besides, the survey shows that a third does not use tools such as social networks, blogs or photologs, and that the majority does not play videogames on a regular basis, mainly because they are not interested. On the other hand, how they perceive the use of digital technologies illustrates characteristic ways of identity formation and privacy management by young people.

Key words: youth, leisure, digital technologies, communicative practices, cultural consumption

1. Introduction and methodology
The present paper is a descriptive summary of the data collected through a survey addressed to the Spanish population between 12 and 18 years old about the effective use of Internet, social networks, videogames and mobile telephones conducted between March the 16th and the 1st of April in 2009. This quantitative study is the first phase of a research funded by the Spanish Ministry Industry, Tourism and Commerce Ministry within the frame of Plan Avanza (grant reference: TSI-040400-2008-42), entitled “Transformemos el ocio digital: un proyecto de socialización del tiempo libre” [Let's transform digital leisure: a sociability project of leisure time].

The account of these results has been divided into four sections corresponding to the main sections of the survey: Internet use in general, use of online social networks, use of mobile telephones, and use of videogames.

The sample study is formed by the totality of Spanish teenagers between 12 and 18 years old (that is 3,044 inhabitants, without taking into account the population in the Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla). All in all, the final theoretical sample adds up to 2,054 consultations with a margin of error of ±2,16% for P=Q=50.0% and on the supposition of maximum uncertainty. This is how a strongest sample in terms of statistical significance was obtained. The amount of consultations made follows a distribution proportional to the Spanish population in terms of both sex and age between 12 and 18 years of age (with the exception of the Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla). From this premise, 51.7 % of the consultations have been conducted to men and 48.3 % to women. A percentage of 53.9% has been conducted to people between 12 and 15 years old and of 46.1% to people between 16 and 18 years old. Additionally, these segmentations have been applied to be proportional to the size of each town (less than 2,000 people, between 2,001 y 5,000 people, between 5,001 and 10,000 people, between 10,001 and 50,000, between 50,001 and 100,000 people, between 100,001 and 500,000 people and more than 500,000 people) and by regions or comunidades autónomas.

2. The Internet
The first significant information this study reveals is the fact that almost all Spanish teenagers claim to have connected to the Internet some time in their lives (96.7%). Besides, the majority connects on a regular basis (53% connect at least an hour a day on average; it is also revealing that 13.6% of the total claim to be almost always connected).

In this context, and in relation to the place, frequency and intensity of Internet use by teenagers, as well as to the effective parental control over this use, it is important to highlight, in the first place, that the majority (94.5%) connect to the Internet mainly at home, with 59.2% claiming to have a connection in their own bedroom. Internet availability in private or personal spaces increases with age (it is more frequent among those between 16 and 18 years old than among those between 12 and 15 years old). In parallel, the same occurs with the time they devote to it, which is slightly superior between the older stretch of teenagers interviewed, despite diversity is commonly observed in this respect, and with the gradual migration of the main hours of use, from afternoons (majority option, but more common among those between 12 and 15 years) to nights or to connect at any time. All these data together suggest an established pattern of Internet use for teenagers in their households, which becomes more flexible and diverse as they grow up, at first as a natural development of the habitual generational
dynamics that, precisely in domestic environments, often translate into discussions and negotiations regarding the use and consumption of technology and media [1].

On the other hand, the data corresponding to the channel of introduction to Internet use are particularly interesting. From the totality of users, 53.6% claim to have learnt to use it by themselves, whereas 21.8% have learnt with the help of some relative (parents, uncles or aunts, brothers or sisters, cousins). It is noteworthy, on the lines of the previously highlighted age-related observations, that the weight of the family as a way of learning the use of Internet is specially significant among the youngest interviewees (from 12 to 15 years old). Nevertheless, all in all, these data reveal that most teenagers (79.35%) learn to use Internet in informal contexts, either on their own, with the family or with friends 83.9%), and therefore unrelated to formal education (barely 19.9% of the interviewees claim to have learnt at school or in academies).

In this context, the comparison of the effective uses of the Internet with the perception young people have on the Internet reveals some fundamental characteristics related to how they introduce digital technologies into their daily lives. Although entertainment (with the Internet I while away the time and entertain myself) and information (The Internet allows me to know what is going on around me, in the Internet I always find the information I need) are still two of the main functions attributed to Internet, so is participation (The Internet allows me to share the pictures I take, the videos I record).

It is worth mentioning that 94.5% of teenagers that use the Internet have one or more email accounts, whereas 89.9% have one or more instant messaging accounts (Messenger, Skype, Jabber), which implies that only 4.6% use email as their main tool of online communication. In any case, it is worth noting that the use of email is more related, in principle, with entertainment (activities related to entertainment and leisure) than with merely practical issues (activities related to studies or work).

The principal uses (a lot) of these accounts are to talk to friends (89.3%) and about what interests them or they like (71.3%), high above the uses involving relationships with people not pertaining to their daily social circle, family or teachers (talk to people they do not often see, 48.5%; talk to relatives, 36.7%; talk to teachers or monitors, 3.1%), or, once again, of a more practical nature, such as solving doubts regarding studies (44.2%). Together, the contacts lists prioritize friends and schoolmates, whereas they relegate parents and teachers to the last places, or consider them their first choices not to add to those lists.

The correlations between the main socio-demographic variables (genre and age) and the answers obtained by a simple preliminary regression analysis (Chi-square; \( p < 0.05 \)) have been explored more thoroughly. This first approach precisely reveals some of the characteristics of that negotiation dynamics regarding media and technology within the households between fathers and mothers and their sons and daughters, wherein as teenagers grow up, the use of the available tools becomes more independent, personalized and versatile.

In fact, first of all, it is observed a quite clear relation between the increase in age and a higher level of integration and personalization of the use of the Internet. Thus, in general, and without forgetting that a wide distribution of answers among the different groups is usually observed, those between 16 and 18 years old are more significantly related to:

- more flexible hours of use (at any hour, compared to hours such as the afternoon and weekend for those between 12 and 15 years old);
- more time investment (more than 10 hours per week, compared to 8 or less hours for those between 12 and 15 years old);
- the connection in private spaces within the family environment (in the bedroom, compared to living room – communal space- for those between 12 and 15 years old);
- a tendency to learn by oneself (compared to with the help of relatives in the case of those between 12 and 15 years old);
- a tendency towards a more frequent, intense, personalized and versatile use of online tools and applications as main initial vehicle of communication.

In this respect, it is also necessary to note that girls are precisely those who perceive that the idea that their parents do not like that they spend so much time surfing the Internet, has a much more powerful effect on them, which at first might be indicative of a higher level of control of girls by their fathers and mothers. In fact, this information is confirmed by the significant relation of boys (specially in the higher age stretch, between 16 and 18 years old) with the absence of rules in the household about what can be done with the Internet. These norms, when applied, refer much more to the kind of pages they can visit and the people they can get in touch with in the case of the youngest ones (between 12 and 15 years old) and of girls in general, and to the time of connection with regard to the boys.

Nevertheless, girls are also the ones who relate in a more significant way as against boys to the distribution of pictures, videos or personal opinions (in the same way as in the specific case of Messenger). In a context wherein boys are more intense, frequent and independent users, besides perceiving higher versatility in the usefulness of the Internet, these results suggest that girls are more proactive when it comes to exploring exploiting the technical characteristics, tools and applications of the Internet. Theses data might be interpreted as an indication of the tendency towards gradual decrease and eventual disappearance of inequalities in the use of the Internet among boys and girls of these ages.

In any case, all these preliminary conclusions with regard to the relations of teenagers to digital technologies according to their genre and age must be necessarily contrasted with the corresponding data and analysis regarding the use and
perception of online social networks, mobile telephones and videogames, which are described in the following sections.

4. Online social networks and photologs

The contrast of data related to the use and perception of the Internet in general on the one hand, and of social networks specifically (and mobile telephones, see below) on the other, offers the possibility to elaborate a first general approach to the patterns of appropriation of digital technologies by the Spanish youth. This appropriation means the application of different services, tools and platforms related to obtaining and developing social, cultural and educational competences. In this respect, regarding the level and type of contribution of the youth to the construction of ways of participatory culture [2], and the previously mentioned data about the relatively low level of activity related to content creation and distribution, it is specially remarkable the fact that 31.6% of Spanish teenagers do not use online social networks, blogs or photologs. This information is particularly significant insofar as this kind of tools and services on the Internet are applications precisely built around relations of friendship and/or interest, and whose technical characteristics have a direct relation to the social and or cultural competences on which new models of participatory and collaborative culture are founded [3]. In this respect, the most commonly used social networks are Tuenti (68.5% of the social networks users) and Fotolog (18.4%), in both cases above Facebook (10.1%), which, at first, offers more technical versatility in relation to participation. On the other hand, the use of blogs among teenagers in Spain is insignificant (only 0.4% of the totality of Internet users within this population group).

In this context, the reasons to use these tools and services among young people reveal the importance of these tools and services with respect to their social life. Thus, the main uses (a lot) of social networks in general are to talk to friends (79.5% of the users) and to look at what the contacts in their friends list do or say (66.6%), which suggests a main pattern of appropriation regarding friendship relations. Besides, these data corroborate the fact that teenagers integrate the Internet into their daily life, at least at the beginning, as an online extension of their offline environment. In fact, the friends and schoolmates are by far the people more frequently included in the “contacts” lists of the social networks (94.6% and 65.3%, respectively). In this respect, it is important to mention that the online extension of the teenagers offline life through the Internet does not include family, mainly fathers and mothers: on the one hand, to talk/communicate with relatives is not one of the main uses of social networks (or Fotolog); on the other hand, fathers and mothers are a minority group in contacts lists at the same time as they are one the main groups they would not include in such lists.

Beyond the importance of social networks, relations of interest and participation (although not necessarily separated from friendship relations) are also fundamental: other main reasons why the Spanish youth uses social networks on the Internet are to talk about what interests me/I like (63.8%), to give an opinion (61.2%), to send pictures, videos or texts made by oneself (59.8%), and to send/receive pictures, videos or funny stuff found on the Internet (59.5%). In the case of Fotolog (figure 9), participation, which is clearly linked to friendship relationships, is revealed as the most significant function: thus, the personal reasons to use Fotolog are, by order of importance, to write or comment on Fotologs of friends (67.7%), to publish pictures, videos or texts made by oneself (59.8%), to communicate with friends (53.8%), to write about what interests me/I like (51.4%). Regarding “contacts” lists, the pattern is similar to that of the social networks in general, so that friends (85.7%) and schoolmates (63.3%) are also the most present groups. All in all, these data strongly suggest that the appropriation by young people of these tools and services becomes a development vector of a participatory culture, mediated by technology, and supported by friendship relationships in the first place and interest relations in the second place.

The analysis of preliminary regression undertaken reveals some significant differences regarding the use of online social networks and photologs, specially regarding genre. Thus, it is important to stress that girls are particularly more active in the use of these tools and services as a means of interpersonal communication (with friends, relatives, people they know but they do not see often) of participation (to comment on what others do, for the distribution of pictures, videos or texts made by themselves) and for solving practical problems (to solve doubts related to the studies). These data coincide with the fact that girls relate in a more significant way as against boys to the distribution of pictures, videos or personal opinions in the general use of the Internet (and in the same way in the specific case of Messenger). Thus, in a context wherein boys are more intense, frequent and independent users, besides perceiving more versatility in the usefulness of the Internet, these results suggest that girls are more proactive when it comes to exploring/exploiting the technical characteristics, tools and applications on the Internet. These data become an additional indication, insofar as speaking about teenagers, of the tendency towards a gradual decrease and eventual disappearance of gender inequalities in the use of Internet.

5. Mobile telephones

The data regarding the use and perception of mobile telephones by teenagers is essential to elaborate a general picture about the relation of the youth with digital technologies. Specifically, they complement the results obtained in relation to the use of the Internet in general and online social networks in particular, specially regarding sociability, but also participation, although, as previously seen, in clear conjunction with their friendships relationships. Thus, with respect to the context of use, 93.2% of teenagers in Spain have their own mobile telephone, a percentage which rises to 98.0% among those between 16 and 18 years old. It is also noteworthy that the majority (53.0%) have had their mobile telephone for 4 years or more, including a 30.7% percentage of the younger ones (between 12 and 15 years old), which indicates that mothers and fathers are willing to facilitate this technology to their children at an early age. In this context, it is interesting
mentioning that 17.1% of the users in this population group mention the possibility of their fathers and mothers controlling them as one of the main functions of their mobile telephone, and that 77.9% think that to have their mobile telephone on facilitates their [parents] controlling them. On the other hand, and in relation to parental control of the use of the mobile telephone by teenagers, 58.3% of the users claim to have a limited monthly budget, which is 14.81€ on average, whereas only 11.7% claim to have other kind of restrictions, mainly related to the moment and place where they can use it.

With regard to the specific uses teenagers make related to interpersonal communication, 55.5% of them use the mobile telephone mainly to make calls, whereas, considering that almost two thirds of the users have a budget limitation, it is not surprising that, in principle, 45.5% use it mainly to send text messages (SMS).

Besides these uses, the most important activities the mobile telephone allows to do, are, according the young people by order of importance, to take pictures (64.7%) and to listen to music (60.3%). The functions of the mobile telephone with digital camera and sound equipment are complemented by a 26.7% percentage that also mentions the possibility to make videos as an essential activity, and 6.7% of them that also use it to listen to the radio. In this respect, it seems evident that for teenagers the mobile telephone is, among other aspects and as with the Internet, a leisure space (in fact, 59.8% of them claim to have fun with their mobile telephone).

Another significant activity for teenagers in relation to the mobile telephone and which is clearly related to sociability is the possibility to know what friends are doing (45.9%). In this respect, the perceptions of teenagers regarding the use of mobile telephones (figure 12) reveal characteristic ways of identity and privacy management. On the one hand, there is no doubt about the fact that, as with online social networks, the mobile telephone is a tool of immediate contribution and which is clearly related to sociability of teenagers, and at the same time it is a field test with regard to the identity and privacy management typical of their age, specially regarding the participatory functions that the technical characteristics of these devices offer.

6. Videogames

The use of videogames by teenagers is often one of the key points of debate regarding the relation of the youth with media and technology. Aspects such as access to adequate contents regarding the age of the players, as well as the frequent and intense use that might generate addiction in teenagers, besides the consequent alienation of their social life, are habitual arguments being discussed at all levels (academic, administrative, public). In general terms, and according to the data obtained in this survey, only 42.4% of Spanish teenagers play videogames usually (figure 13). In this respect, significant differences have been observed in relation to gender and age (differences which have been corroborated by the preliminary regression analysis): thus, boys (62.3% of the total) play more than girls (21.0%); on the other hand, the youngest ones, between 12 and 15 years old (47.9%) are also more frequent players than those between 16 and 18 years old (35.9%). In this respect, the survey establishes the average age at which they start playing at 9.3 years.

Regarding the majority of those not playing videogames (57.6%), the main argument they put forward when asked why is by far their lack of interest (I am not interested, 79.2%; the next argument being the lack of time, mentioned by only 12.2%).

Regarding the hours and place of the game (figures 14 and 15), the results are similar to the ones obtained with respect to the use of the Internet: the most habitual hours are the afternoons (44.1%) and nights (between 8 and 12 in the evening; 15.9%), although the weekend becomes particularly important (26.2%); and the more habitual place is their bedroom (49.0%) before the living room (40.8%). In both cases, it is observed a migration of age habits, which means that the youngest ones tend to play more in the afternoons and weekends, as well in common spaces at their households, whereas the oldest ones play more by night and in the private environment of their bedrooms.

Similar results are drawn by the intensity of the game (figure 16): the average time devoted to videogames is 5.2 hours per week. Despite the percentage of players among the youngest ones is superior compared to the oldest ones, these are the ones who devote more time to playing (6.3 hours on average per week for those between 16 and 18 years old, as against 4.4 hours for those between 12 and 15 years old). In this respect, genre differences have been also observed (5.9 hours for the boys as against 2.8 hours for the girls).

The main ways to acquire videogames are shopping (36.8% of players buy videogames and 12.8% are bought videogames) and Internet downloads (24.6% download them, mainly to have more, because it is an easy method, or to get something that others do not have or has not been released in Spain). On the other hand, a wide majority of players (72.6%) decide personally the kind of games they
patterns of adoption that oscillate between two extremes: on one hand, that is to say, again the closest social circle beyond immediate family, are the ones they mostly talk about videogames with (in 85.5% and 77.9% of the cases, respectively) whereas fathers and mothers are much less habitual interlocutors (in 36.2% of the cases). In this respect, it is also worth mentioning that the preliminary regression analysis confirms that girls in general, but mostly those between 12 and 15 years, keep a significantly closer relationship to their fathers and mothers when it comes to playing or talking about videogames.

In this respect, the majority of Spanish teenagers play usually on their own. For their part, the minority that play fundamentally with other people are particularly prone to mention friends (52.2%) and brothers and sisters (43.3%). However, fathers and mothers barely appear as play mates (7.8%). Finally, taking into account that 66.3% of the players use the Internet to play, and regarding the risk of unwanted contact through the Internet, it is also noteworthy that the people one has met online but not in person are mentioned as play mates in 27.1% of the cases (which represents 11.5% of the total of Spanish teenagers), which decreases to 23.6% among players that specifically use the Internet to play (6.6% of the total).

Within this general context of teenage practices related to the use of videogames, we start from the premise that 66.3% of Spanish teenagers play usually on their own. For their part, the minority that play fundamentally with other people are particularly prone to mention friends (52.2%) and brothers and sisters (43.3%). However, fathers and mothers barely appear as play mates (7.8%). Finally, taking into account that 66.3% of the players use the Internet to play, and regarding the risk of unwanted contact through the Internet, it is also noteworthy that the people one has met online but not in person are mentioned as play mates in 27.1% of the cases (which represents 11.5% of the total of Spanish teenagers), which decreases to 23.6% among players that specifically use the Internet to play (6.6% of the total).

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Within this general context of teenage practices related to the use of videogames, their perceptions on that matter reveal patterns of adoption that oscillate between two extremes: on one hand, the assimilation of preventive discourses that are public knowledge. Thus, a high percentage of players claim that videogames can create addiction (84.9%) or that the majority of videogames are violent (59.5%). On the other hand, the appropriation of these technologies, together with other technologies and available media (such as television) according, as expected, to the needs and interests of their daily lives. In this respect, a majority acknowledges, on the one hand, that they prefer to go out with friends than to play videogames (89.2%) which is indicative that videogames are not used or do not necessarily become substitutes for the daily social life of teenagers; on the other hand, they prefer to play videogames than to watch television (49.9%), an information that illustrates a strong competition between the different media and technologies available in the households.

These patterns of appropriation also involve a certain degree of transgression, which is otherwise perfectly attributable to the interests concerning their age and the generational negotiation, specially in the households. Thus, taking into account that the absence of rules regarding the use of videogames is habitual, and that a majority of players claim to know very well, as previously mentioned, what can and cannot be done with them, a significant amount of them also recognise that they play videogames not recommended for their age (72.1%).

On the other hand, a significant amount of players attribute openly positive characteristics to videogames related to sociability, personal well-being and, notably, learning. On the one hand, 31.6% of players claim that after playing they feel more relaxed; and on the other hand, 45.3% claim that things can be learnt with videogames. The attribution of learning functions is much superior in this case to what was detected on the Internet, the online social networks and mobile telephones, and probably has a directed relation with interactivity and the level of involvement that is demanded to the player concerning videogames. In this respect, it also should not be overlooked that, as with the rest of technologies analysed, teachers, as well as fathers and mothers (that is to say, adults in general), become interlocutors to talk about videogames or play mates in very few cases. Thus, all in all, these data reassert the priority that, through the use of digital technologies among other aspects, teenagers attribute to more intertwined and horizontal types of sociability and learning, compared to traditional educational schemes. Lastly, it is worth pointing out that the regression analysis reveals that boys, that is to say, those who play the most, and mostly older and therefore more experienced ones, significantly attribute to videogames the abilities to make [them make] friends, relax and learn. This information establishes a relation between the intensity of use and the experience of a wider, more versatile and personalized attribution of functions, abilities and possibilities related to digital technologies.

7. Conclusion

The generalized access to these technologies from a very early age has prompted a debate at very different levels (academic, administrative, public) about the use and the ways of appropriation of these technologies by young people. There is no doubt about that the life of teenagers is developing in contexts characterized by the growing presence of media and technology, wherein digital technologies play a fundamental role in relation to multiple aspects of their daily lives, such as sociability, consumption or learning. In this respect, the current youth is often referred to as the “digital generation”, although this denomination tends to involve a double meaning according to the terms of the public knowledge socio-cultural debate: on the one hand, they are the vanguard that represents a better future supported by the experienced use of these technologies; on the other hand, due to their age, and therefore lack of experience, they are vulnerable to the risks attributed to these technologies, mainly in relation to the access to unwanted contents or contacts [4].

Considering these premises and the growing need to better know the dynamics of appropriation of digital technologies by the teenage population, this survey reveals some essential
aspects. In the first place, the study corroborates that the main way of introduction to the use of digital technologies is the family-domestic environment, so that learning is made in informal contexts (mainly self-taught or with the help of relatives). From this situation, teenagers use the technologies and media available according to their needs and daily interests, that is to say, mainly related to sociability, consumption and learning, but within a generational debate with fathers and mothers which develops in a perfectly logical and natural way according to age, and which, precisely, often revolves around the characteristics (frequency, intensity, use) of use of available technologies and media [5].

This debate is very much related to value judgements that counter the practical need for teenagers to learn to use these technologies, according to traditional professional and educational schemes, and the patterns of appropriation of these technologies by the fathers and mothers, to the “waste of time” represented by the idle consumption of media, which is an extension of the perception of fathers and mothers about the way teenagers (and themselves) use of television. There is no doubt, as the study reveals, that teenagers appropriate these technologies fundamentally as leisure spaces. Nevertheless, in this respect, the survey also reveals that it is very common that fathers and mothers do not impose any kind of restrictions whatsoever to their children regarding the use of technologies, with the precise exception of time [6], that is to say, to the hours teenagers devote to the Internet, the online social networks and videogames, and even to the mobile telephones, which translates into budget limits.

In the second place, the survey illustrates the characteristics of appropriation of these technologies around the needs and interests of teenagers. Thus, their use of the Internet, the social networks, mobile telephones and videogames revolves around their daily and closest social circles outside their families (their friends and schoolmates), which means that their high level of integration of these technologies into their daily life translates essentially into an online extension of their offline life. This is how the technical characteristics of these technologies turn them into essential tools in relation to the sociability of technologies, and at the same time become a test field regarding the identity and privacy management (within and beyond the family environment) typical of their age. In this respect, and considering the above mentioned absence of restrictions, teenagers show a certain level of assumption of the previous parental preventive discourses regarding the risks they are taking, as well as a high level of certainty regarding what they can and cannot do with technologies. In this respect, the study makes it clear that the contacts made strictly online are reduced to minimal percentages.

And lastly, in the third place, the study corroborates that the appropriation of technologies by the youth constitutes a development vector of a participatory culture mediated by technology, and, as mentioned before, firstly supported by friendship relationships as an extension of their life offline, as well as interest relations [7]. The results obtained show that teenagers articulate their activities with digital technologies around a participation and contribution dynamics which is egalitarian in the community. At its turn, this circumstance brings about a generation of characteristic forms of obtaining and managing social, cultural and educational competences, that is to say, those related to the way they communicate, consume, study, collaborate and solve problems. Without forgetting the fact that teenagers mainly relate these technologies to leisure and not to learning, actually the study reveals that, through the use of these technologies, young people generate support, sociability and recognition spaces which are also collaborative learning spaces, undoubtedly informal and supported by their close social circle, wherein there are ample opportunities to develop very diverse abilities at a social, cultural, professional or technical level. As previously mentioned, this is how young people acquire an important network capital [8]. To share their experiences, worries and opinions through alternative leisure and participation spaces constitutes an important vector of learning, no matter how the people concerned do not perceive it as such. In any case, this perception probably stems from the informal nature of this learning, which is openly collaborative (horizontal and egalitarian, as opposed to a traditional transmission flow of vertical information, from expert adults to profane minors), and which is mainly supported by social relationships beyond their family, that is to say, those that are less focused in the practical function of the use of digital technologies.

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