Maltese Parents' Awareness and Management of Risks their Children Face Online

Lorleen Farrugia & Mary Anne Lauri

Abstract

Parenting children in the digital age involves the challenge of achieving the delicate balance between supervising children's online behaviour and allowing them online independence. It can be even more pronounced in an insular culture based on Catholic values. This challenge is discussed in the view of the results of two studies, a qualitative study using focus groups with parents (n=26) and a survey questionnaire carried out to children aged 8 to 15 years and their parents (n=1,324). Results showed that there was a gap between what children do online and what their parents know about these practices. Parents have no clear-cut strategies to prevent risks. They use both enabling and restrictive mediation strategies, but the constant changes in technology mean that they have to adopt a "trial and error" approach to parenting.

Keywords: parents, awareness, children, online risks, challenges

Introduction

In a culture characterised by relatively stable rules and norms about upbringing but where developments in new media are being adopted rapidly, raising children can be a challenge for Maltese parents. They have to balance conflicting priorities (Ofcom, 2012) and adapt their parenting ways to each new wave of technology (Warren, 2016) while engaging in what Yardi and Bruckman term "trial and error approaches to parenting" (2011: 3238). The aim of this chapter is to identify Maltese parents' awareness of how children behave online and understand the challenges they face when parenting the digital generation.

National context

Some factors in the Maltese context might be relevant to understanding parenting experiences. Rutledge (2010: 8) argues that as much as we would like to blame the media for many of the things that happen, it is not separable from society. "Human experience does not happen independent of the current social, political, and technological environment". Malta is no exception. The characteristics of the Maltese media landscape are shaped by its oral culture, geographical proximity to Italy, and the importance given to its institutions and political developments (Borg, 2009).

In Malta, the nuclear family unit is still relatively strong and most parents follow their children closely. When reflecting on social media, Narayan (2013) argued that social media, rather than being merely a space, have now become a real, tangible place because of the lived experiences of those who inhabit it. Social media have influenced greatly the upbringing and the socialization of children. Parents feel this new responsibility and while some take it in their stride, others are at a loss about what they should and should not do.

Malta can be considered a media rich environment, and despite its small size it is rated among the best countries in the European Union (EU) for Information Technology. The drive by the state to make technology more accessible was reflected in the spread of new media and a significant increase in internet users over a short span of time. The online world became rapidly accessible (Borg, 2009).

Through the years, several measures were taken by the government to increase digital accessibility and media literacy. Two such initiatives are digital literacy becoming a cross-curricular theme and the One Tablet per Child project. The Malta Communications Authority (MCA) aims to help develop the country's information and communications technology (ICT) potential and to support the island's transition into a knowledge-based society and economy. One of its initiatives, BeSmartOnline!, supports children's safe and responsible use of the internet together with local stakeholders.

Data from MCA indicates that over 98 per cent of Maltese children have access to the internet (Lauri et al., 2015). This compares quite well to the 87 per cent of all children aged 9 to16 in the EU Kids Online survey that have internet access from home (Livingstone et al., 2011). With the high prevalence of internet use among Maltese children and young people, it becomes increasingly salient to help them navigate the online sphere. Parents have an important role to play. When children are young, they can help form positive attitudes towards new media and also discuss the good and the bad that these platforms can offer. It is also relatively easy to "control" their young children's use of the internet. However, when children grow older and spend more time online, new media, and in particular mobile devices become more of a challenge for parents to monitor (Hart Research Associates, 2011). It also becomes more and more difficult for parents to impose restrictions on media use, and it is sometimes difficult for parents to find the right strategy to negotiate the use of new media. They often have to learn by trial and error. This behaviouristic way of learning takes time and sometimes parents are

not fast enough to keep up with growing children and their relationship with the fast changes in media technology.

Mediation strategies

Parents take specific actions to deal with their anxieties about their child's personal, physical and psychological safety online. Livingstone et al. (2017) categorised mediation styles into two broad strategies. Enabling mediation responds to child agency and incorporates safety measures. Restrictive mediation is typically used more by parents who are less digitally skilled and tend to control their children's use of the internet. Another reason why parents restrict their children's internet use is because of their fears that their children are exposed to different values from the ones they are trying to impart (Hargittai, 2013). Shame based messages in reaction to adolescents' encounter with problematic online content, such as pornography, deter open communication between parents and child (Zurcher, 2017). The role of fear and shame could be especially relevant to understanding Maltese parenting in a context that has deep-rooted Catholic values.

The internet puts into question traditional values because of its different affordances. Malta is predominantly Catholic, and the influence of the Catholic church is still strong, despite the government recently introduced civil laws, which widened the separation between church and state. The Church's teachings about new media as "fully human forms of communication" that call us to "use wisely the means at our disposal" (Vatican, 2016) are often discussed during the Sunday homily. In Malta 51 per cent (Discern, 2005) of the population attend Sunday mass and therefore listen to these teachings. Moreover, this topic is frequently discussed by the Church's media. Parents are constantly reminded about their duty to oversee their children's use of online technology.

Research context

The two studies in this chapter were carried out on the Malta island, which is the largest of the three Maltese islands in the centre of the Mediterranean. Malta has an area of 246 square kilometres and a population of approximately 440,000 people (World Bank, 2017), making it one of the most densely populated countries in the Europe. Malta joined the EU in 2004 and is the smallest of the 28 countries presently part of the EU. Given the widespread proliferation of new media in Maltese families, the studies tried to identify the challenges Maltese parents face. The results would enable comparisons with other European countries and equip the MCA[1] with evidence upon which to base interventions targeting parents.

The first study was a survey conducted during November and December 2014 with children aged between 8 and 15. During the same period a second questionnaire was distributed to their respective parent or guardian. The aim of the research was to investi-

gate and compare parents' perception of their children's internet use and to find out how knowledgeable parents were of the children's online activities and whether they had the skills to help their children online. The parent and child questionnaires[2] were based on the research carried out by EU Kids Online (Livingstone et al., 2011). Some questions were modified[3] to reflect the Maltese context and to enable longitudinal comparisons with data collected by MCA in previous years. Once finalised, it was pretested and the research proposal was approved by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee.

Cluster sampling was used. Participants were selected by randomly choosing four schools (two Primary and two Secondary) from each of the six demographic regions of the Maltese Islands. Schools in Malta can be run by the state, the church or independent educational organizations. All three types were represented in the sample. Meetings were held with the respective teachers to explain the data collection, which was carried out in class. Two thousand children and parent questionnaires were distributed. Paired parent and child questionnaires (n=1,324) were given the same index number to enable matching of parent-child data. The data was analysed using SPSS. When comparing the answers given by parents and children, clear differences emerged.

A second in-depth study was thus carried out to understand the lived experiences of parenting children in the digital age. Four focus groups were carried out with a convenience sample of 26 parents of children aged 8 and 16. Parents who had at least one child in this age group were contacted through local community groups in Malta by the researchers. Parents who accepted the invitation to participate were given information about the research together with a consent form. In all, 26 parents took part in the study, 15 mothers and 11 fathers.

The discussion focused on how their children used the internet, what the parents were worried about, safety strategies they employed as well as any negative experiences their children went through while online. These discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Inductive thematic analysis as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data. The next part of the chapter will discuss the findings from both studies to identify parents' awareness and management of the risks their children face online.

Discussion

The studies offer some insights about the ways parents in Malta deal with online risks, and the possible implications related to the mediation styles used. Though Malta is small, insular and Catholic, some of the results found are very similar to those in countries very different from Malta (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014).

Perceptions and awareness of risks

Many of the parents who participated in this study seemed to have a negative attitude towards the internet and the risks associated with it. Table 1 presents the percentages of

children and parents who agreed with statements about the risks associated to internet use. While children's responses seem to indicate that most of them are aware of what could go wrong, the discrepancy between child and parent responses shows that parents are even more cautious. While over one-fourth of children feel safe online, only 8 per cent of parents felt that this is a safe place for their children.

Table 1. Risk perceptions (per cent)

	Child	Parent
It is important to use privacy settings on SNS	78.8	80.6
The internet is a safe place for children	26.3	8.0
It is safe for children to make new friends over the internet	15.7	3.3
There are no risks if children post photos of themselves on a social network	12.2	6.0
I am not worried about the personal information there is about my child/myself on the internet for others to see	13.9	23.2
It is fine for children to post things publicly on SNS	11.4	6.2
Others may post photos of me/my child without permission	7.4	3.8
I would be willing to meet someone I made friends with over the internet	12.7	n/a
It is risky for my child to meet with people they got to know over the internet	n/a	56.8

Comment: Based on children's questionnaire and parents' questionnaire: Tick which of the following statements you agree with. (Multiple response question). n=1 324 paired questionnaires.

The negative impression parents seem to have of the internet was iterated during the group discussions. While parents did mention the benefits of the internet, these were often overshadowed by the wide range of concerns and fears they had about their children's safety. The themes related to the parents' awareness of benefits and risks of the internet are presented in Table 2 below.

Parents' major fears were that their children could be exposed to pornographic and violent content and that they could be groomed by pedophiles or cyberbullied. They also expressed apprehension that their children could get into trouble and that home is no longer a safe place for them since they could be bullied even when at home. They felt that children were not developing adequate social skills since they spent far too much time chatting and watching videos. Parents also believed that the time spent online could be better used for other offline activities.

> The computer is in your house. Before they used to go to school and find bullying there and home was a safe haven, but now it's not a safe haven anymore because they have access. (Female, age 45)

Parents were aware it would be unrealistic to expect their children not to use the internet or not encounter any risks. Even though this was often difficult for them to accept, they were conscious that they needed to mitigate, not eliminate, risk.

You want to manage the risk. You can't not have internet in the house today be-cause it's an interactive tool – you would be losing out on a lot, even for school. Today they will tell you to visit this site and get this information. (Male, age 45)

Table 2. Parents' awareness of risk online

Category	Codes	Themes
Awareness	Benefits of the internet	Research
		Schoolwork
		Efficiency
	Fears regarding their child's safety	Home no longer a safe haven
		Inappropriate content
		Fear of the unknown
		Breaking the rules
		Getting into trouble
		Inappropriate contact
	Concerns	Unable to communicate
		New distraction
		Time issues
		Not knowing how to help
	Risk	Cannot be eliminated
		Cannot be controlled
		Letting go
		Can be managed
		Child can be the perpetrator
		Not new risks
	Intention	Accident
		Mistake
		Looking for trouble
		Repetition

While recognizing that the internet could offer many opportunities for learning and development, parents have great concerns regarding the inevitability of online risk and struggle with balancing conflicting needs. Parents' attitudes could also impact the children's openness to explore the online world and their feelings of shame and guilt. For parenting to be effective, the parents' authority should be in balance with children's agency particularly regarding issues such as self-expression and autonomy.

Preoccupation with screen time

As Table 2 indicates, one of the parents' concerns was related to the amount of time their children spend online. One father, when talking about his 14-year old boy regarding this issue, says:

If he had his own way, he'd spend days on end, and also nights online. From our end, we limit this time (Male, age 40).

Parents often found themselves in a bind:

the problem is that nowadays while studying they need the computer... and they waste time (Female, age 47).

In the survey, children and parents were asked to specify the amount of time the child spent online. There is a substantial difference between the children's responses when compared to their parents. It was clear that most parents (65%) underestimated how much time their children spent online. Over 13 per cent of the children said that they were always online during weekends; however only four per cent of parents were aware of this. This result could be partially due to the perception of what it means to be always online. For some it might mean that the child is constantly using the internet while for others it might mean that access is always available (mostly through mobile devices) and the child can access the internet at any time.

There were also discrepancies between what parents allowed their children to do online and what the children claimed they did. Table 3 indicates that the greatest differences were observed in the areas of chatting, video calling, watching videos and doing schoolwork.

Table 3.   Activities carried out online (per cent)

Activities	Children	Parents
School Work	69.9	87.8
Browsing	44.5	38.0
Playing Games	80.3	84.4
Social Networking	43.2	38.2
Chatting	45.9	28.2
Email	29.4	22.3
Video Calling	41.0	26.2
Downloading Music or Films	36.4	25.6
Streaming Music or Films	33.9	24.3
Watching Videos Online	71.2	59.9
Blogging	11.1	3.5
Online Shopping	18.3	4.5
Upload photos videos or music to share with others	n/a	12.8
Give out personal information	n/a	0.6

Comment: Based on children's questionnaire: Which of these activities do you do on the internet? and parents' questionnaire: Which of these activities is your child allowed to do on the internet? (Multiple response questions). n=1,324 paired questionnaires

Parents seem to fear that their children do not use the internet wisely. It could be argued that this fear was previously experienced about television, with the difference that the internet is ubiquitous and parents' fears cannot be allayed just by restricting viewing time and censoring content. In the focus groups, parents expressed a sense of loss of control, sometimes even feelings of helplessness. Maltese parents are still quite preoccupied about the time children spend online, notwithstanding the fact that they underestimate this time. This suggests that Maltese parents still need to shift their focus to how children use screen time rather than focus on the amount of time they spend online.

Choosing the lesser of two evils

Parents were asked to rate their own ability to help their children when something bothers them online. More than 77 per cent of parents responded that they could help their children. When asked about the safety measures parents applied online, only 1.6 per cent applied the extreme form of restrictive mediation of not allowing their children to use the internet. The most common activity was speaking to their children about online dangers (67.2%).

Table 4.   Monitoring activities carried out by parents (per cent)

I make my child aware of the dangers she may encounter on the internet	67.2
I keep track of the websites my child visits	66.0
I am aware of the people with whom she interacts	44.6
I use software to prevent spam, junk mail or viruses	42.8
I check the messages in her email or chat history	39.1
I check which contacts and friends she adds	36.9
I stay nearby when my child uses the internet	36.8
I am strict on the time my child uses the internet	35.3
I check her profile on social networking sites	33.6
I use blocking or filtering software	28.9
I do not let my child use the internet	1.6

Comment: Based on parents' questionnaire: What safety measures do you you normally apply to keep your child safe when using the internet? and Which of the following actions do you take? (Multiple response questions). n=1,324

Parents were also asked how they helped their children online. 58 per cent of the parents said they talk to their children about online activities. This result is comparable to the results obtained by Net Children Go Mobile (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). Over 50 per cent of parents help their children with difficulties, explain why some websites are harmful and suggest ways to use the internet safely. However, when compared to their European counterparts (Livingstone et al., 2011), Maltese parents seem to talk

less about ways of behaving towards others and dealing with troublesome situations. This could indicate that they do not feel comfortable discussing such matters, possibly because they deem their knowledge and skills are lacking, as the survey replies seem to suggest. Some parents kept track of the websites their child visited (66%) indicating that they also monitor their online activity to ensure their child's safety. This trend is more apparent when the child is under 11 years.

The strategies for managing risk that parents spoke about during the focus groups (Table 5) can be mainly classified according to the two categories of mediation mentioned by Livingstone and colleagues (2017).

Table 5. Risk management strategies

Category	Codes	Themes
Managing Risk	Enabling	Relationship with children
		Openness and honesty
		Teaching values and life skills
		Right and wrong
		Trust
		Using experiences to teach
	Restrictive	Limiting time
		Online time as reward
		Discipline
		Knowing passwords
		Checking and monitoring
		Filtering software
		Devices in a public place

The enabling approach emphasised trust and the importance of a relationship based on openness and honesty with their children as a way to understand what they are going through online, and for the children to know that they had a reference point when they needed to discuss something. Parents also taught children values, life skills, and the concept of right and wrong, by using real or anecdotal experiences related to the internet to teach lessons about online behaviour.

> I think the most important thing for us is, it's true that today it's a bit more difficult than before, but you have to keep a good relationship with the children. Because if they want to hide things from you they can hide a thousand things. That you're there for them and show them that you're their friend and when you need to make a stand you have to do it. (Female, age 47)

Apart from these enabling approaches, parents also adopted restrictive strategies to protect their children. They often mentioned limiting the time children could spend online, particularly when they had younger children or where it concerned the time spent online playing games.

> Aha – manage the risk, you can't say no, but at the same time you can't pretend this is nothing to worry about. You have to introduce certain types of processes and certain controls as we mentioned already like supervision, the material, the content, the position from where they operate, the filters – there are a number of filters that are designed for children so you can manage, but not remove everything either. (Male, age 45)

Another measure used by parents to prevent their children from using internet inappropriately was to set rules about where children could access the internet, such as the living room. They were aware and even admitted that this was becoming very difficult with mobile devices. Some parents allowed children to use the internet and social networking sites only if they knew the password and admitted to checking their children's profiles and search history to see whether there was anything dubious.

> Of course – we know her password and most of times when she's chatting we would be near her. (Female, age 38)

Parents who used restrictive mediation could only apply certain strategies at home and only when the children were young. Once children started growing up, parents' control diminished greatly and some realised that enabling mediation strategies were better.

When discussing their strategies, parents mentioned having to choose between the "lesser of two evils". For instance, they often chose to set up a Facebook account for their underage kids not to be left out. It was frustrating for parents to admit that all their efforts to give their children a good upbringing could be unmade by others online. Such comments reflect the religious cultural context in which parents tackle their struggles.

There seems to be disparity between the generation of adults influenced by Catholic values and the younger generation that was born in a new media environment. These findings could reflect how parents in traditional cultures, when faced with rapid technological developments might resist instead of embrace the changes. This adds to the other parenting pressures they have to deal with.

Conclusion

The results of these two studies show that parents are unsure of what the effects of the internet are on their children and fear for their children's safety. Parents face the struggle to constantly adapt their strategies because as their child grows up, the child's internet uses and activities change often. Technological changes are also rapid, and parents often have children of different ages and different personalities that also require diverse ways of approaching online risks. For parents to be successful mediators, they require a set of strategies to allow them sufficient flexibility to change approaches as required. Parents seem to be negotiating between restrictive and enabling strategies as they see fit depending on their beliefs. Training organised by the MCA, the Cybercrime Unit, local councils, parish groups and schools help parents understand how to achieve the delicate

balance between ensuring children reap the benefits of the internet while safeguarding them from risk. Not all parents are actively involved in this training and this is where the challenge for policy makers lies. It is easy to reach parents who want to participate and learn but some children have to survive online without any help from their parents. In such cases, we strongly believe that the role of the teachers is even more important and media education in schools could help create the space for this type of mentoring.

Notes

1. The two studies were commissioned by the Malta Communications Authority.
2. The survey included five sections: internet access, internet use and activities, risk perceptions, risk experiences and coping, and online safety.
3. One such question included a set of statements to assess parents' perceptions such as "The internet is a safe place for children who are my child's age". These statements were in both the 2010 and the 2012 versions of the questionnaire. The MCA requested that such questions be included to be able to draw comparisons.

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