HOW HARD IS TO RESEARCH THE ONLINE BEHAVIOUR OF CHILDREN?

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This paper is an essay, a "life story" of my PhD research, on the topic of challenges that arose along the process, from choosing the right subject to establishing the most appropriate methods for reaching the pursued results. Thus, the article will emphasize the main stages that a beginner researcher has to overcome if he or she plans to study children’s behaviour in a space that is uncontrollable and its dynamics could have a negative influence on the results, the viability, the sustainability or the credibility of a short term research that uses online data.

Keywords: Online, Children, Behaviour, Research, Methods.

INTRODUCTION

It is not easy at all to earn a place of your own in the international scientific community, especially for someone who confronts with the first stages of this process for the first time. Having a different range of access to documentary materials researchers from all over the world might face at a time the same difficulties. After acquiring the theoretical background and before going to the field to look after their subjects researchers have some practical choices to make that will influence their project.

The process of establishing the final coordinates of a research – the topic, the theories, the participants, the methods or the ethical principles – can be difficult for a beginner. It is a huge responsibility if we take into consideration that every single research is a potential contributor to the development of what we call science, in our case, social science. To produce a scientific statement it is necessary to have a theoretical and empirical background to sustain it, and this kind of background is hard to achieve.

Today’s reality is not an easy one to analyse in order to produce some generally available truths or as we said, a scientific statement. Maybe that is the reason why the researchers focus now on types of analyses of the social reality that does not imply generalization but a reflexive investigation. So, there is no stress for demonstrating some old or new theories. The postmodernist approach of a research gives us a freedom of choice and every scholar may produce science by personal interpretation of the results of his or her research or by presenting under new ways the existing theories.
We could choose the same face of the reality that we want to analyse, as previous researches, but we might give a personal reflexive interpretation or might use methods that was not used before for the same area of sociological investigation.

It is not necessary to have totally different researches. Otherwise, it would be impossible to account everything that was written on this planet in a specific academic field about a subject so that one may choose a complete different aspect to investigate.

We are not against the fact that two people investigate the same aspect with similar methods because the reflexive insight and the personal contribution of those involved could lead to different interpretation and to complementary results. On the contrary, it should be a very interesting perspective and maybe a new scientific reality that the postmodernist ways to approach a research may offer the possibility to analyse similar social problems by applying the same methodology but with different results. This would be the researcher personal touch and the particularity of his or her reflexive involvement.

WHY A RESEARCH WITH AND ABOUT CHILDREN?

As my dissertation paper had the theme “European protection of child’s rights” I was interested in researching the same area and trying to deepen the approach initiated. About two-three years ago in a period when everybody started to talk about world economic crisis and its effects were widespread both in the responsible countries and those that had connections with their economy, the phenomenon of globalization returned into attention.

It is a widespread opinion that the process of globalization was highly influenced by the ascent of the information and communication technologies which allowed the flattening of the world, as Friedman stressed (2007: 87). The newest digital technologies changed the characteristics of every day lives as we had to incorporate these instruments in it – in both levels, personal and professional – in order to keep the pace with our community evolution and to accept the role they gained in today’s world.

Primarily, the information and communication technologies represent a must have for young people whose lives are a combination between real and virtual socialization and communication, namely the young, for whom the Internet opens opportunities and the exposure to new types of risks likewise.

Previous researches concluded that children are a vulnerable social category in both environments, real and virtual. So I decided to do a research with and about children, choosing those aged between 10 and 17, as they proved to be the most victimized online.

WHY ABOUT THE ONLINE BEHAVIOUR?

I have decided to study the online behaviour of children because nowadays they are using a lot of digital devices and have an important part of their lives connected to the Internet. I considered it a challenge to find out more about the influence of the cyberspace on their behaviour, their ability to protect themselves in such a tricky environment and the differences between their real and online behaviour.

When I set the topic of my PhD research I confronted a first dilemma: whether to approach children as victims or as predators of the cyberspace. But looking to my 3 years old nephew who at this age is an expert in online games I focused my research to the first approach in order to
discover the risks they expose themselves to while being online, risks that are influenced by the vulnerabilities of their behaviour.

Following two main aspects of the online behaviour of children – the care for the protection of personal information disclosed online (especially on social networking sites) and their reaction to stranger online approaches – we will try to emphasize the vulnerabilities that put them at risk. For the first part of it, the focus groups, the research will also use adult participants as we expect to obtain data and information that will allow us to come to a conclusion from a comparative perspective. Both points of views, children and adults, are equally important as we would like that our research provides useful explanations and conclusions for social actors (public institutions or NGOs) involved in prevention activities for a safer use of the Internet.

The same dilemma came along with another one: how general should the approach of the online behaviour of children be? To consider the entire virtual space or to stick with a smaller partition of cyberspace? Having in mind previous researches that underline the role of the social networking sites into young people’s lives, we choose to study their behaviour on such online communication platforms.

THE DOCUMENTATION STAGE

Reaching the documentation stage of my research, which is a continuous one and will last until the final writing of my PhD thesis, I faced the lack of documentary materials, theoretical and empirical, so that another decision came almost by itself: to use the Internet as a documentation tool. In order to cover these gaps I identified and turned to some useful solutions such as: documentation stages abroad which offered me the access to well-equipped libraries and assured me the necessary materials, free downloading of articles and e-books from the Internet, maximum exploitation of free trial periods to main journals of interest and our faculty protocols for free Internet access to international journals.

Also, the consultation and the processing of the materials were accompanied by several difficulties because of language barriers. In some cases it was difficult to find corresponding words in Romanian and more time was spent on translation and data processing. It became necessary to approximate the terms so that one may give each idea a proper meaning in Romanian. Sometimes we found the needed correspondence, in other situations we kept some English words (such as “online grooming”, “site” or “predator”), trying to express the same idea in Romanian.

THE OBJECTIVES

We consider that setting the objectives of every research is one of its essential stages because it creates a close connection with the theoretical background and the methodology, all influencing and determining each other. No specific order is compulsory. From personal experience, regardless of the theoretical amount of information, the field experience and the interaction with the participants are the most important sources of ideas.

Each stage was not effectively independent of the others because it is hard to decide the subject without finding previous similar inquires or to establish the objectives without having in mind the participants and the specific social spot that you want to study.

Sometimes we start the field research having in mind a well defined structure of the research project but there are cases when the empirical research leads to a complete reorganization of it as
we can identify new realities that were not previously discovered or studied. Anyway, the theory and the practice in social research cannot be separated, there is a constant relationship between the two ingredients because “the issue for us as researchers is not simply what we produce, but how to produce it” (May, 1993: 20). The understanding of such a relationship is a characteristic of reflexivity “which focuses not just upon our abilities to apply techniques of data collection, but to consider the nature and presuppositions of the research process in order that we can sharpen our insights into the practice and place of social research in contemporary society” (May, 1993: 21).

After a long period of change and adjustment of the objectives we finally set the following ones: to outline the features of the online behaviour of children on social networking sites related to the aspect of personal data protection (disclosed elements); to identify children’s attitude towards online unknown approaches and the management of such situations; to establish the level of accordance between what they revealed and their actions and to offer a comparative perspective between children and adults’ opinions.

THE METHODS

In this point of the research project we have faced the dilemma of the type of methods that we had to choose, namely qualitative or quantitative. Hitherto, for the study of the impact of information and communication technologies on children’s lives and their attitudes and behaviour in online activities there were used various methods, qualitative and quantitative, in both traditional (offline, face to face) and postmodernist versions (online).

The tendency to strictly separate the qualitative and quantitative methods no longer meets the reality of today’s social research which proved that their combination would conduct to more complex findings and would offer a better perspective of the aspects studied. That is the reason why “in the everyday life of research practice beyond methodological discussions, a link of both approaches often is necessary and useful for pragmatic reasons […] without any premature subordination of one approach under the other” (Flick, 2005).

We choose qualitative and the triangulation methodological strategy for our research which implies the application of different methods that can complement each other, namely focus groups of two types (face-to-face with children and online asynchronous via e-mail with adults), provoked observation and qualitative analysis of data collected from social networking sites. We took into account previous recommendations about the application of qualitative research if the intention is to allow the children to express their own opinions about situations, aspects or contexts which directly concern them (Lobe et. al., 2007: 17).

We do not intend to ask children directly about risks but we will use this combination of methods to identify how aware are about the online risks they expose themselves to by analyzing their answers and their real actions on social networking sites.

The novelty of our research will be assured by the combination of the methods, as we will try to deepen the answers that children gave during the focus groups not by in-depth interviews but by provoked observation. This method will allow us to test, at least partially, the sincerity of children’s statements by confronting them with their effective actions on social networking sites.

Using online methods is a risk taking because, although we can admit many advantages of them like less financial expenses, less stress for the participants as they involve into the research depending on their free time and less work for the researcher with the transcript of the records, such methods may raise other important issues that we will discuss below.
ETHICAL ISSUES

One of the most important issues of this type is the consent for the research. For the focus groups with children we choose to require consent equally from the head of the school, the parents and the participants themselves. Why asking for children’s approval? We intend to give a postmodernist approach of our research with children by treating them as social agents with an active role in our project and with the right to express a personal opinion about their involvement in such an activity.

On the field we confronted the following challenge: we could not obtain some consents from children’s parents because they migrated to other countries to work and a written approval was almost impossible. We tried to solve this problem by reaching an online agreement via e-mail, objective that proved to be also difficult to achieve as most of them do not use Internet or use it rarely. Considering this, the online agreement would have delayed the start of the research. Our final decision was to consider as sufficient the consent of the head of the school and of the child.

We faced skeptical reactions when we informed that the focus groups will be videotaped. But we overcame this impasse by preparing and delivering for those interested a complex annex containing a very detailed presentation of our research including goals and means and also the researcher commitment to comply certain specific rules regarding confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

FOCUS GROUPS: THE RULES

Up to the moment when we wrote the present paper we managed to conduct eight focus groups with children (aged between 12 and 17 years old) and two with adults. Previously we had studied a lot of documentary materials about the focus groups rules, from preparing the guide of questions to the atmosphere that we must provide during the progress.

Practically, we found out that it is not so easy to follow strict rules when you work with children. Although not recommended, we had to choose the school as the location for organizing the study because, otherwise, according to their teachers, it would be very difficult to get their parents consent. Also, in order to empathize with children and to encourage them to provide elaborate answers, without being limited to yes or no, we had to approve once in a while their answers by shaking the head, as they expect you to do so as a guarantee that their contributions to the discussion are useful.

During the organization of the focus groups with children some questions emerged spontaneously being determined by the responses of children or some interesting situations presented by them. This context permitted to the participants “to feed off each other’s ideas” (Hundley, Shyles, 2010:419). On the other hand, very often we had to ask them to focus on the question as they tended to deviate from the subject.

It might be hard to believe but in adults case the conduct of the research induced a higher level of stress. You wonder why? It was because we had to e-mail a lot in order to remember them about their involvement in the research and to give a lot of explanations along the entire process. Curiously or not it was much harder to keep them motivated along the process than to convince them to accept the participation.

One focus group lasted even a month because the participants had various working and relaxing programs so that we gave everyone the chance to choose his or her own moments of answering in order to best fit with the emotional state and psychosocial factors. Also, we did not press them to answer in a specific period of time. Nevertheless, after a week of silence on their
part we had to remember them about the research and the importance of each contribution for the next stage of the project.

For adult participants we applied the asynchronous form of the online focus group as we took into consideration the advantage of it underlined by Murray “the participants can read other’s comments and contribute a comment themselves at any time, not necessarily when anyone else is participating” (quoted by Rezabek, 2000).

For the two types of focus groups two questions guides were prepared, almost similar, little changed and adapted to every age category and life experience. For example, for children one of the questions was “Day by day, for what kind of activities are you using the Internet?”, and for adults the same question was formulated as “For what activities are children using the Internet?”.

FIRST CONCLUSIONS

For today’s children the normal means daily use of mobile phones, computers and any other digital device that can assure them constant connection to the Internet, to virtual space. It is something usual for nowadays because of the wide spread of the information and communication technologies. The problems arise due to the time spent and the activities carried out online.

While being online children come across with some determiners of insecurity and they might confront the risk of being lured and exploited by online predators. The vulnerabilities of their behaviour are also influenced by psychosocial factors, such as: emotional state, the family, parental monitoring or personal ability of self-managing the online relations with unknown people.

Previous researches had shown also that spending too much time in front of the computer and on the Internet can be related with a poor parental monitoring and, together with other psychosocial factors (such as reduced self perception profile or weak social and communication competence in real world or minimum social participation and involvement), can determine high level of risks on the future development of children and gaps in their personality and social identity construction.

Beyond the risk of being online groomed or harassed by adults predators, excessive use of the Internet combined with lack of parental surveillance may determine specific problems concerning involvement and socialization of young people in real life. On the other hand “children who perceive a high degree of parental monitoring are likely to be well adjusted, taking fewer risks with adverse health outcomes and seldom participating in anti-social activities” (Heim et. al., 2007: 446).

Our findings confirmed previous conclusions according to which “children and teens are often more sophisticated than their parents with respect to the Internet, and...young people are in many cases independently negotiating decisions about their online privacy” (Livingstone and Bober 2003, 2004, quoted by Micheti et.al., 2010: 130).The research shows the need for public information campaigns dedicated to parents about the social networking sites and the risks involved, some of them not being familiar at all with such Internet’ applications and connected problems.

We could say that only today’s generation, the so called net generation, which grew up digitally (Tapscott, 1998), will be prepared to educate the following generation in order to conduct to a safer use of the Internet.

Returning to the question from the title – How hard is to research the online behaviour of children? – we could say that it is not hard to make such an incursion as long as you work hard,
put a little of passion, respect your collaborators and the research participants, respect the ethical principles, learn from your mistakes, ask for help when you need it and take into consideration previous advices.

The online (in)security of children is influenced both by their natural abilities to work with the computer and to use the Internet applications and by their education acquired in family or at school due to their parents, teachers or friends involvement.

For the future our intention is to insight the problems identified and to insist on those not so easy to seen vulnerabilities of children’s online behaviour that could make them a target for the online predators who know or learn how to speculate and use it in their own advantage so that they succeed in grooming children and fulfil their criminal goals.

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