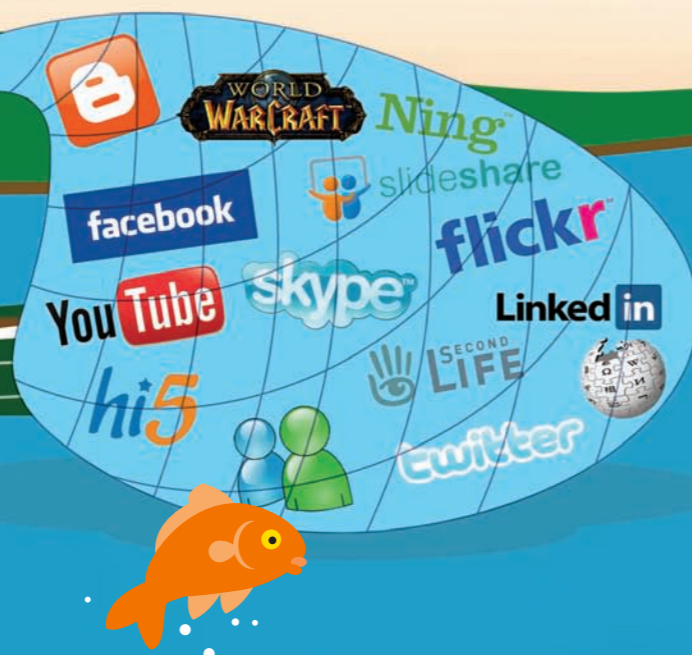
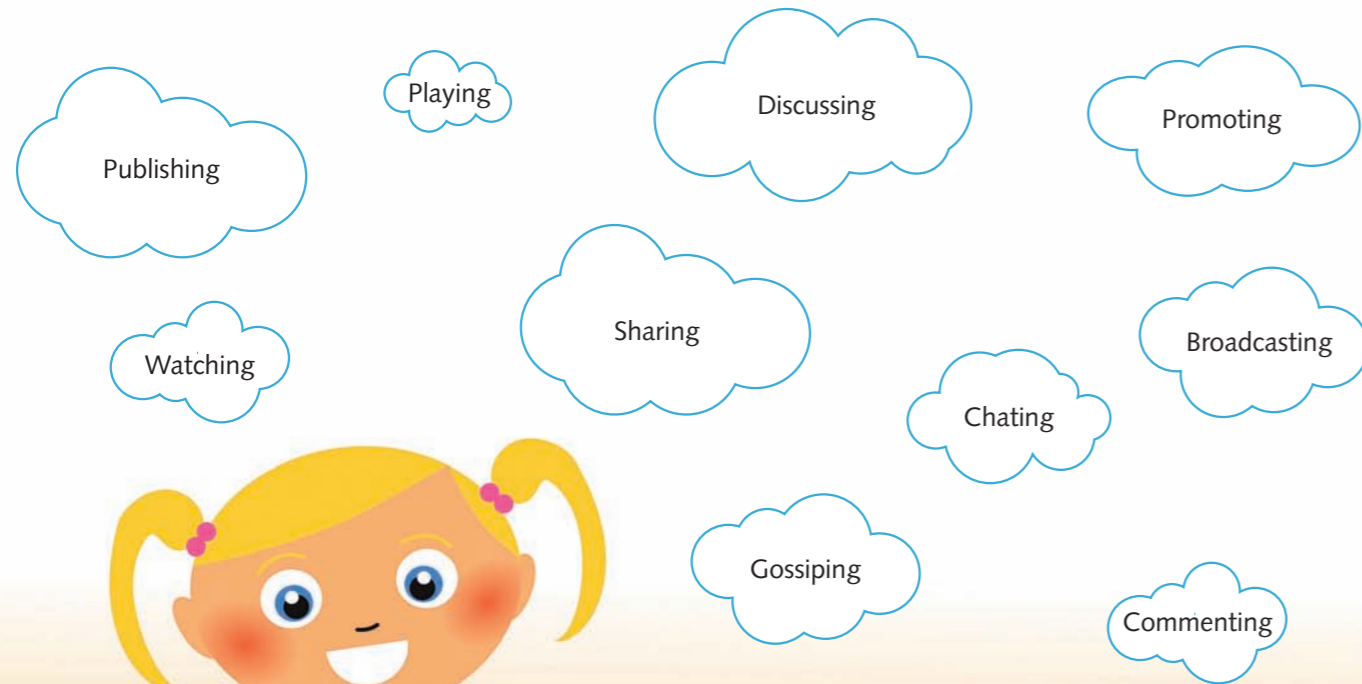


INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

CAUGHT UP IN THE WEB

Authors
Sara Pereira, Luís Pereira, Manuel Pinto

Design & Illustration
Pedro Mota Teixeira



Presentation

This booklet closes a series of three brochures which put young people and the media at the centre of the discussion. After television and video games, social networks come up as a central topic that is prevalent in the daily lives of a significant number of people.

The goal of this publication meets the purposes of the previous booklets, “TV and Me” and “Videogames–Stepping up to the Next Level,” to provide parents and educators with information about the relationship between young people and new media. The goal is to promote a more critical use of and approach to such media, namely, social networks. Social networks have been growing exponentially and their

impact on the socialisation and communication processes of their audiences is undeniable. As with traditional means of communication, following social media networks with suspicious eyes might cause educators to neglect a powerful resource and a widespread reality in young people’s daily lives. On the other hand, analysing and questioning the impact of social networks on our private and social lives and, in particular, the lives of young people are an excellent way of maximising their potential. This is the contribution we wish to offer through this booklet, which, along with the previous booklets, is the result of a Media Education project awarded by Evens Foundation (Belgium) in 2009.



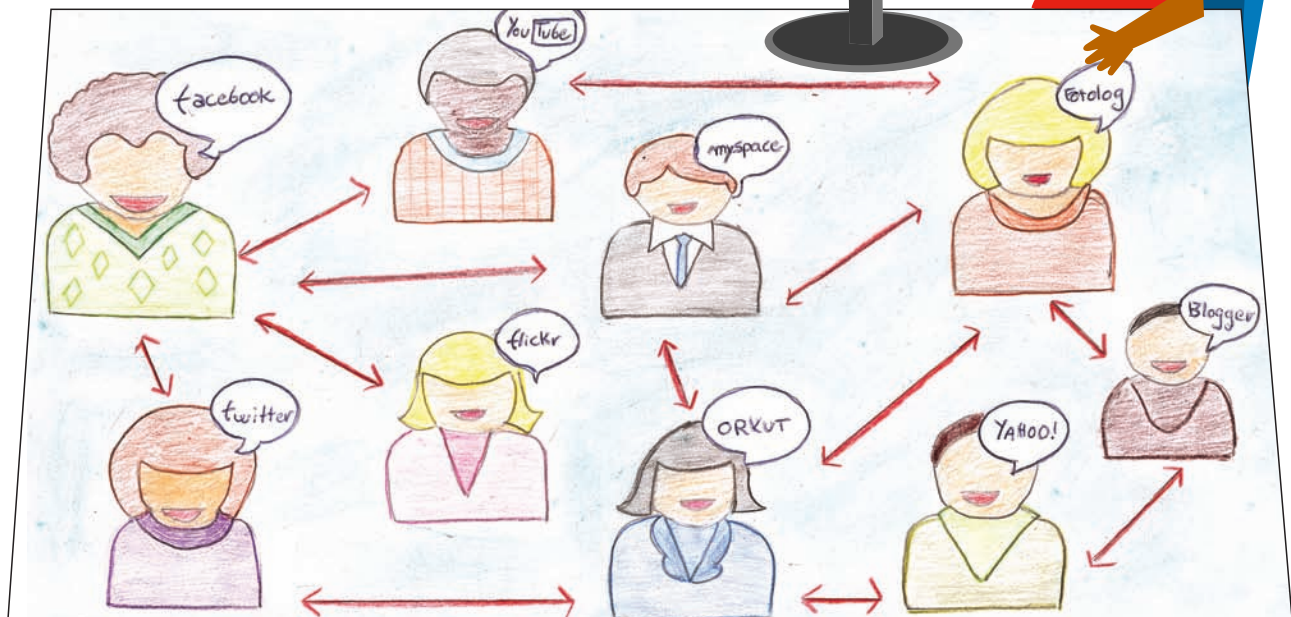
What are Social Networks?

Far from being a modern concept, the idea of a “social network” has been used for over a century to refer to the relationships between the members of a particular social system.

The concept has recently been applied to the Internet in order to refer to a structure constituted by people or organisations that share interests, motivations, values, and common goals. This network system is created and kept alive by the community shared by its members.

According to some researchers, social networks belong to a broader scope of “social media,” in which people’s interaction and intervention play a major role. This booklet uses this designation regarding all such means of

communication. Nevertheless, we are aware of the fact that the social networks have distinct goals and uses that may change along with the evolution of the communication tools.



Marta, 11 years old

Users of Social Networks

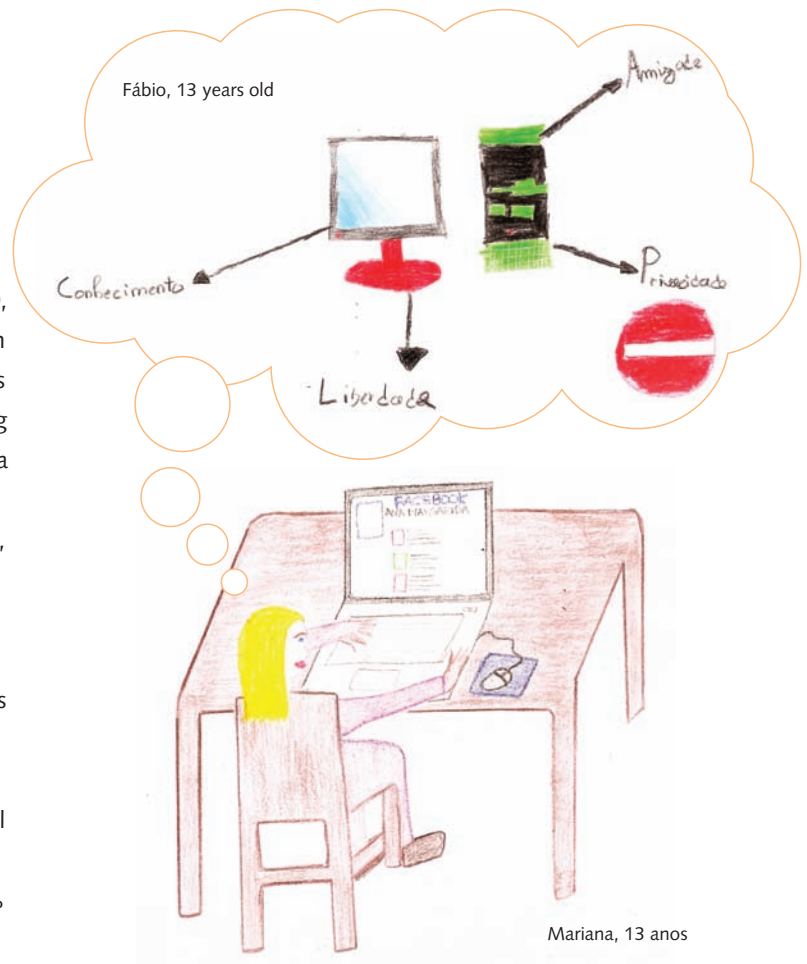
Several European studies show that the Internet has been incorporated into the daily routines of a large number of western European children in the last decade.

According to “Netpanel” by Marktest, in the first half 2010, 3,025,000 people over the age of 4 accessed Facebook from their homes in continental Portugal. This number represents 73.5% of Portuguese internauts and 87.7% of those surfing the Internet during that time period. The analysis of the data shows that people between the ages of 15 and 24 have a greater attraction to this type of Web site. In this age group, 88.7% accessed social Web sites during the same time period, whereas people aged 4 to 14 represent 81.1%.

Along with these audience numbers, research in media studies has clearly shown the importance of social networks and the Internet in young people’s lives.

According to the American study “Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds” (2010), accessing social networks such as Facebook and MySpace is a favourite activity for people aged 8 to 18. The study reveals that 40% of young people spend an average of one hour a day accessing and using at least one of these sites.

The Portuguese study “Children and the Internet: Uses and Representations, Family and School” (2010), coordinated by researcher Ana N. Almeida, shows that the most popular sites are video pages and that 66% of young people use the Internet to post texts, music, or videos in blogs or social networks profiles.



The data show that online communication is a top favourite daily activity of younger generations. Faced with this reality, it is important for social agents to learn how to deal with and profit from it in order to enhance young people's welfare. As the saying goes, “It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness.”

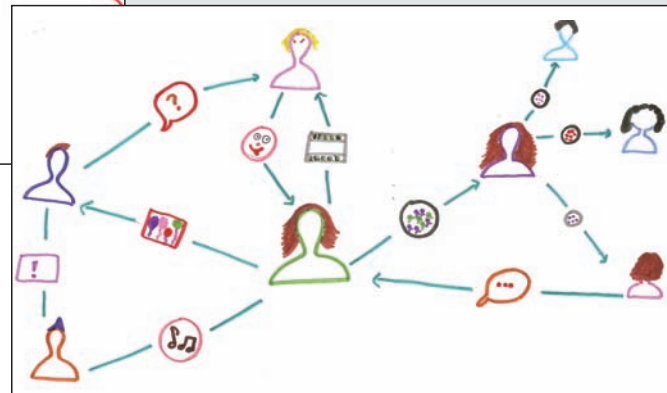
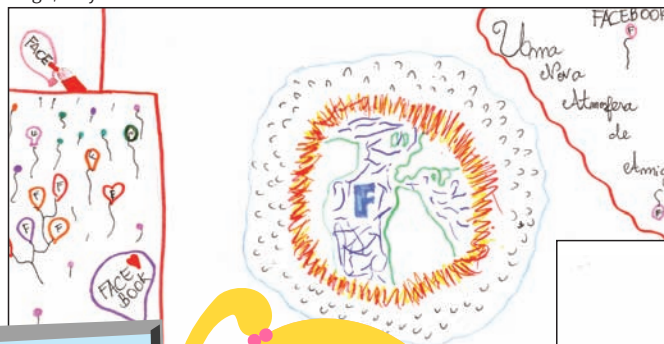
The Impact of Digital Media

As far as the influence of the Internet and particularly social networks in young people's lives are concerned, it is common to find contrasting viewpoints. Some have a pessimistic and simplistic perspective of moral panic, whereas other optimistic approaches spread marvellous compliments about technologies, which are somewhat naïve. Both points of view present distorted versions of this reality. It is important to search for a more balanced standpoint that takes both risks and opportunities into account.

Some authors claim that digital media such as the Internet impact the way that children read, learn, communicate, and interact with the world much more than any other means of communication. Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider that

children's virtual communication and relationships are shaped by their daily routines and real life interactions. In other words, the way young people interact in virtual atmospheres does not happen by chance. The real life contexts, tools, and skills they use to face reality are transferred to their uses of the Internet and social networks. Educating and guiding children towards a more critical use of social networks must begin with a broader concept of education, which is far more than teaching technological skills.

Hugo, 12 years old



Rita, 14 years old



Social Networks and Technological Evolution

Social networks, as we know them today, exist due to the easy access to the Internet, namely, through mobile devices that are extremely globalised. The generalised access to the Internet naturally increases the number of potential users of this type of Web site. Twitter, for example, would definitely not have the same impact had it not been for the number of mobile phones with Internet access.

Moreover, social networks influence the development of the Internet and technology. Easy access and simplicity of use are qualities often mentioned in the advertisements of numerous technological products.

Nonetheless, social networks have been triggering other changes in the way the Internet is seen. The term “Web 2.0”, created in our decade, underlined the importance and contribution of the users in assembling the corpus of information available online. One of the symbols of this idea is Wikipedia, the encyclopaedia to which everyone, not only experts, can contribute.

Site construction itself has experienced significant change.

The idea of placing the latest information at the top of a page is relatively common on most sites, but it became widespread because of the creation and use of blogs.

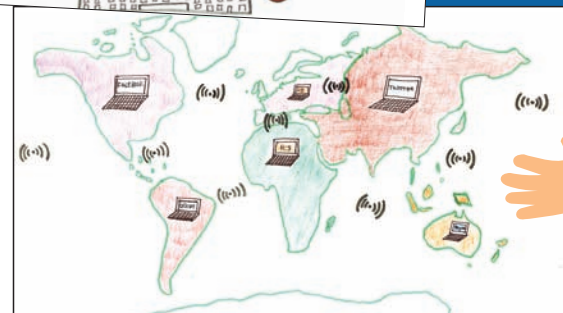
Facebook had the original idea of posting other people's information on personal pages, thanks to the technology of feeds. Twitter shares both features, with the difference that it limits the extent of publications to 140 characters, hence the name microblogging.

Most sites seek out interaction with their visitors by tempting them to post comments, adding them as friends, or inviting them as followers.

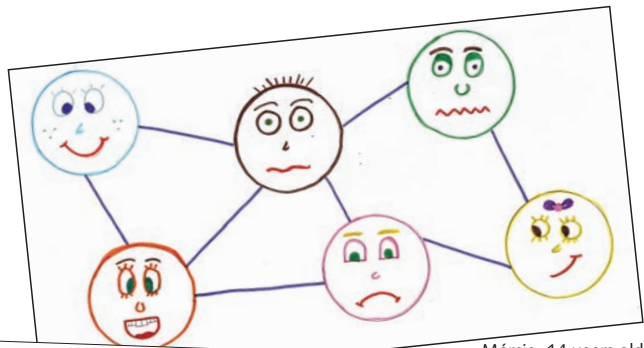
Miguel, 11 years old



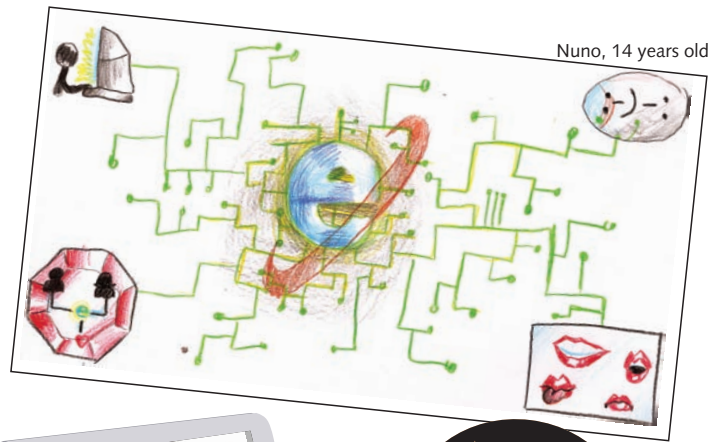
Bruno, 13 years old



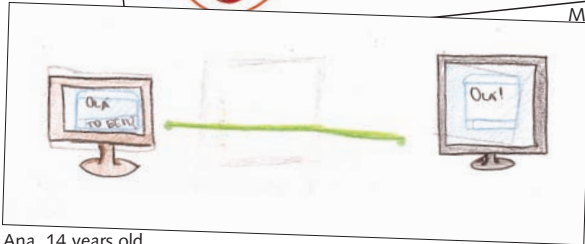
Inês, 14 years old



Márcia, 14 years old



Nuno, 14 years old



Ana, 14 years old

Paula, 12 years old



Social Networks: Just a Trend or New Ways to Communicate?

Research in media studies indicates that social networks have been growing exponentially in recent years and that this trend is here to stay and prevail. Some authors claim that the Internet might enhance social participation by creating, opening up, and allowing for more and newer contexts of social involvement and mobilisation. Nevertheless, the fact that the Internet offers more opportunities to communicate and partake does not necessarily mean that the levels of citizens' participation will increase. It is crucial to motivate young people to express their opinions and learn how to do it. Schools, families, libraries, civic associations, and even peer groups play a major role in this matter.

It is extremely important to question whether the number of technological gadgets and tools that help create and keep these networks is actually helping people to communicate better. The quality of communication is a key criterion to assess the usefulness and quality of the use of social networks in our lives. If the answer is negative, then the idea that the Internet allows for an endless sea of information and contacts is, after all, deceitful, because certain types of uses may become stuck in quicksand or plunge into swampy soils.

Privacy and Identity: Data Sharing and Safety

The anonymity that the Internet gives its users often makes them hide behind it. In social networks, there is normally a familiar identity behind the contents that are shared. It is known that adolescents like to communicate with their friends in spaces and in ways that are not influenced by adult interference or supervision. Social networks provide young people with the possibility of being “invisible” to their families.

At the same time, it is imperative to understand that the messages published in these contexts might be accessed almost instantly by a broader audience. Therefore, this content should not harm other people's privacy and identity. Published content may remain available online even after being removed from the sites where they were first published. Just as in real life, there are certain rules and ethic principles that regulate online relationships. Internauts should feel responsible for their actions, just as they should in offline interactions.

Likewise, parents should apply their educational responsibilities to their children's online lives by talking to them about the negative consequences of not respecting other people's privacy and identity. The preservation of personal data and private information is also a central issue that young people should be aware of in order to use the Internet in a safer and more efficient way.



This type of dialogue is not easy to create for many reasons. Parents do not always feel at ease with technology and children generally associate older generations with a certain degree of digital illiteracy and, consequently, a lack of authority to approach this type of issue. In addition, the adults' discourse is incoherent from the very beginning because they are the ones who most frequently reveal personal data, photographs, and other types of extremely intimate information. A recent study by AVG, a company that develops computer protection software, revealed that parents, uncles, and grandparents frequently posted photographs of their babies and that 82% of children had their photographs published online before the age of 2. The act of publishing personal matters and content in online contexts is what makes social networks operate, since this type of information was shared only in private circles in the past.

Living together with the dilemma of what is shareable or not forces users to establish limits for themselves and to think beyond the present moment. This is a challenge that should be debated with young people. An honest conversation can be an excellent intervention strategy. This type of reflection has been brought to debate by social networks in several contexts, such as the Parliament, courthouses, football clubs, and many others.

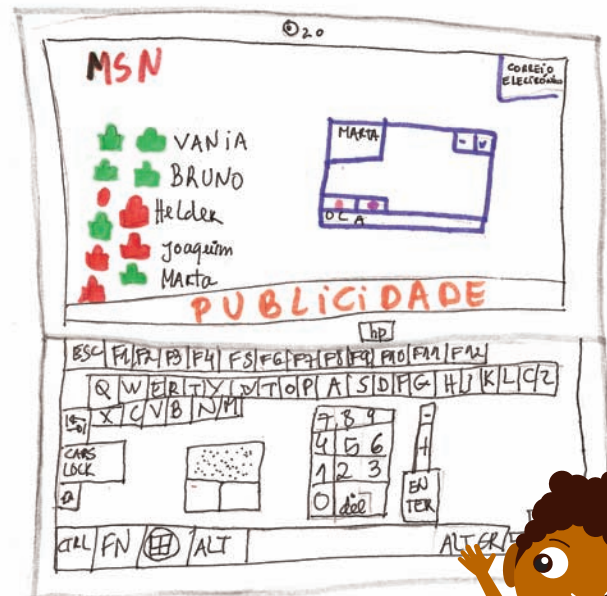
Research and the Use of Information and Media Content

Many of our daily tasks can be made easier through the use of social networks. Publicising initiatives, raising awareness for a cause, greeting someone on his/her birthday, looking for a job, keeping up with the latest news, and sharing photographs and states of mind are only some of the uses from which we can profit. Internauts make use of their networks of contacts to pursue this type of objective. On the other hand, problems like copyright or the impact of shared information are not as accounted for as they should be, so it is important to create mechanisms to filter and prioritise information. The fact that information is available online does not assure its reliability. It is increasingly relevant to recognise the sources, assess their value in terms of the purpose for which they are being used, and, of course, refer them appropriately.

The use of online information for scientific purposes must observe a number of explicit rules in terms of citing sources. The publication of content on social networks should also take not only the authorship, but also the reliability of information, into account. By recognising the potential of social networks to spread and share ideas, it can be pernicious to do so by manipulating content or by using the social networks as mere vehicles of those messages.

It is therefore fundamental to learn good search and research practices in order to know when to rely on sources of information and be aware of the fact that the first result presented by a browser does not reveal everything about the theme that is being analysed. It is important to contrast

different sources of information and to bear in mind that they should be as diversified as possible, so as to realize that the Internet is not the only source available. It is of utmost importance to consider these issues from an early age and help children apply this knowledge to their school projects and activities.



Nelson, 12 years old



Fighting Excess, Addiction, and Alienation



Some activities have a beginning and an end, so they are perfectly measurable. Reading a book, watching TV, or playing a videogame can be limited to a certain time limit. Yet, a mobile phone with Internet access can be used 24 hours a day by answering messages or comments whenever they come up. Even so, saying that someone spends their whole day using social networks might be a mistake. It is easy to see that the dilemma for educators in general and parents in particular is undeniable.

First of all, the pressure to belong to a social network can be enormous. In some cases, including some Portuguese initiatives like “Escolinhas” and “Kuska,” systems with a higher level of protection were created in order to solve this problem. The most common networks have a system that blocks users under a certain age, but that is easily solved by simply changing the birth date.

What is the Ideal Age for a Young Person to Create a Hi5 or Facebook Profile? There is no obvious answer to this question and the decision would surely be a better one if previously negotiated within the family.

After creating a profile, it is fundamental that educators follow a process of intervention, in which there is a thin line between mediation and intrusion, at least from a child's standpoint. Building a relationship based on intimacy and trust between educators and children is paramount, not only as far as social networks are concerned, but also with regard to everything else.

As to the duration of the use of social networks, one aspect to bear in mind is whether online relationships and friendships are replacing personal contact in the child's real life or not. The hectic pace of modern life often leads to the isolation of children and social networks have a tendency to fill that void. It is important to detect alarming signs of excessive use of this way of interacting with the world because it may create barriers in the child's interaction with people who are physically close to the child. These new ways of expression can be used to manifest creative potential, but they can also become places of neglect for others' rights and identity. In situations of offense, calumny, or publication of acts of violence, authors and their accomplices should be held accountable in terms of the effects of such behaviours in other people's lives.

Social Networks, Participation, and Citizenship

There are no conclusive results on the influence of the Internet in terms of citizens' participation. Some studies reveal that the Internet may not have a direct and linear impact on civic participation by young people, underlining that there are other factors at stake, such as the way the media are used, personal interests and motivations, as well as the role and importance of the media in young people's lives.

Some studies indicate that young people who primarily use the Internet as a means to access information tend to show higher levels of participation, whereas those who use it mainly for entertainment have lower levels of civic engagement.

In any case, there is some consensus regarding the idea that the Internet holds great potential in incrementing participation, even if the dominant activities in cyberspace serve commercial and entertainment purposes.



Afonso, 12 years old



Joana, 14 years old

As fundamental arenas of citizenship, schools can play a major role in this matter by motivating online participation. Many young people with Facebook profiles do not use forums or blogs and are not even efficient enough in using their email accounts. This is therefore also a matter of quality of communication.

Digital literacy, as part of civic participation, can contribute to a better quality of life because it helps people understand how communication and information are built and displayed, which contributes to making sense of the world around them.



Débora, 15 years old

Suggestions for Families

In programmes or guides about Internet safety, it is common to find advice for control and supervision by parents, such as placing the computer in a common room of the house so that the screen can easily be seen or keeping up with the history of sites visited by the children. There is also software that allows parents to block certain Web sites.

Family supervision is obviously important, but what actually makes the process more efficient is being there for children and talking to them. Investing in both protection and empowerment is crucial in helping children deal with the media in a safe and healthy way.

- **Empowering to Protect:** It is important to talk about the time spent online and help children become aware of it. Parents should also reflect upon the images and comments that are published, discuss the risks of personal exposure on these sites, the principles of identity and privacy, and the threats of violence and cyber bullying. Tackling these issues is key in helping young people become conscious of the presence and impact of these media in their lives.

- **Signing into the Networks Children are Using:** In order to keep up with what their children are doing on social networks, it is often suggested that parents create their own accounts and check out their children's and friends' activities. That is obviously not possible for all parents. Moreover, children may dislike having their space invaded. On the other hand, it can become a different sort of expression and interaction between parents and children, as well as an interesting way for parents to get to know their children, their friends, and their topics of conversation.

- **Learning about the Reality of Social Networks:** The Internet is a part of children's lives and it can be a challenge for adults to unravel their universe. As has been previously discussed in this booklet, it is an ever changing reality, which can make the process a lot more difficult. However, it is easy to realise how much information and news there are about social networks. Therefore, keeping up with that is a major part in understanding this reality.

- **Creating and Promoting Children's Participation in Activities that Involve Personal Contact:** It is easy for children and young people to get hooked on technology because there are so many gadgets and tools available nowadays. Although it is not always easy, it is important to create "technology-free" activities that promote interactions with classmates and friends without screen mediation. Going out for a walk, playing football, riding a bicycle or roller-skating, chatting in an open space instead of through a computer screen are healthy activities that should be systematically promoted.

Suggestions for Schools and Teachers

- **Include the Issue on the School Agenda:** It is easier to talk about the dangers and negative consequences of social networking, but it is equally relevant to emphasise the importance of creativity, participation, and citizenship. Discussing the risks is normally a sensitive topic for adults, but it is certainly essential to be aware of them. Empowerment and digital literacy tend to be neglected because grown-ups have a propensity to think that “children already know everything about technology.”

- **Managing Private and Professional Life:** Should a teacher be friends with his/her students on Facebook? Is it appropriate for a teacher to add students to their contacts? These issues should be previously analysed to avoid undesired intrusions both in the teachers’ and the students’ lives.

- **Communicating and Exchanging Information:** Social networks can be an excellent way for teachers to post warnings, make suggestions (for example, about music, cinema, travelling, etc.), and stimulate creativity and communication. This obviously requires time from the teacher, so it is important to establish some rules, namely, with regard to timetables and subjects that may be discussed.

- **Using Social Networks in School Tasks:** Apart from the platforms that are specifically used for educational purposes, social networks can be used to perform some tasks that enhance learning, for example, role play. They can also be a profitable means of exchanging information and publishing educational resources.

- **Diversifying Media Use and Consumption:** The most popular networks are often the only ones that children access. It is important to enhance children’s knowledge about the different available tools and discuss the specifics and potential of each one.

- **Considering the Benefits of this Activity and Helping Children Reflect upon its Impact on their Lives:** Teachers often fail to recognise the media as tools that should be thought about, discussed, and used. The fact that they usually regard them as means of entertainment and leisure and as exclusively belonging to the personal sphere makes them neglect the presence and power of social networks in the process of socialisation. New media are a substantial part of children’s personal, social, and cultural development. Finding out more about children’s media habits and bringing this issue into class discussions are excellent strategies for bringing up more informed consumers and citizens. It is of the utmost importance to allow young people to talk about their activities on the Internet and the sites that they visit. Above all, listening to what they have to say about their online lives is paramount.