

## **Investigating the domestication of convergent mobile media and mobile internet by children and teens: preliminary issues and empirical findings on opportunities and risks.**

**Investigación de la domesticación de la convergencia de los medios móviles e internet móvil por parte de niños y adolescentes: cuestiones previas y hallazgos empíricos sobre las oportunidades y riesgos.**

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### **Abstract**

The paper, starting with some preliminary considerations about the new mobile media ecology, in which today's children live, and with some data about the diffusion of mobile internet and smartphones among children, aims to focus on three main points. I first ponder the new opportunities and new risks arising for children from the diffusion of such technologies, and the related usage practices, looking at some preliminary empirical findings, coming from qualitative researches I conducted with some of my colleagues from OssCom (Giovanna Mascheroni and Maria Francesca Murru), about the domestication of smartphones, mobile social networking and location-based practices in the Italian youth context. Then, I explore the new challenges in parental mediation, starting from qualitative evidence gathered from Italian parents. I finish illustrating the contribution of the new European project *Net Children Go Mobile towards* filling the current knowledge gap regarding European children's mobile internet and convergent mobile media use, risks and online safety.

### **Keywords**

Mobile media, mobile internet, children, opportunities, risks.

## 1. THE MOBILE MEDIA ECOLOGY

We are facing a convergent and networked media ecology (Ito et. al. 2009) where the so-called mobile media associated with the spread of mobile internet are assuming an increasingly important role with children and youth digital cultures.

With the term "mobile media" we refer to all portable, personal and convergent multifunctional devices (such as smartphones, tablets, feature phones, portable games consoles and Mp3/Mp4 players, ebook readers) connected to the internet via wifi or 3G/4G (Hjorth and Goggin 2009, Goggin 2011a). Thanks to their portability, the internet can technically be accessed anywhere, anytime, though not exclusively used while on the move.

Looking first at the broader social significance of these technological developments, mobile phones have integrated functions and features typical of computers, which have turned them into 'smartphones'. At the same time, new mobile devices (smartphones, but also tablets), have new hardware and software affordances, thus becoming complex digital environments based on online convergent technologies. They support an ever growing repertoire of communication practices and online activities, combining ones already supported by previous generations of mobile phones (such as telephone calls, text messages, games, radio, music, photos) with activities usually performed on computers, the internet and social media (email, instant message services, social network sites, maps, video, television, vlogging) and with new activities such as those related to location-based services, and performed through apps (which shape new experiences of use).

Moreover being personal and portable, mobile media make practices of media consumption and online activities more flexible and personalised, and create new spaces of privacy within the domestic/school/public context. This privatisation of access and use fosters the pervasiveness of the internet in children's daily lives and implies the creation of different social conventions of freedom, privacy, sociability, and - not least - supervision by parents and adults.

Indeed new generation mobile systems, remediating functions and redefining the cultural identity of the 'ordinary' mobile phone, represent a shift of online practices from the desktop computer to the various settings of everyday life. These changes lead scholars from different disciplines to define this socio-

technical environment as 'post-desktop', a label, which highlights the increased mobility afforded by portable computing devices. This post-desktop reconfiguration entails a progressive colonisation of "real" life, which reshapes the interaction of social actors with time, space, communication, cultural consumption and production.

The transition from mobile phones to mobile media, which confronts us with radically new forms of 'media engagement', turns the practice of 'going mobile' into a crucial feature of contemporary audiences, the so-called "networked publics" (Ito 2008) and "always online audience" (Goggin 2011b).

## **2. RAPID DIFFUSION OF MOBILE INTERNET AND SMARTPHONES AMONG CHILDREN**

What we are observing is a rapid diffusion of mobile Internet and smartphones among children, as a EU Kids Online II survey highlights<sup>1</sup>.

At the time of fieldwork in the 2010, around a third of 9-16 year old internet users said that they used a mobile phone or a handheld device (e.g. iPhone, Blackberry or iPod Touch) to go online, and older children and children from lower SES are more likely to access the internet from mobile phone or a handheld device (Livingstone et al. 2011).

More specifically, 12% used a handheld device to go online, which is likely to be a smartphone. In addition to this, it should be noted that 49% go online in their bedroom. This defines a picture of internet use becoming privatized, individualized and mobile.

Adding to these findings, but moving to a different socio-cultural context, a recent report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart 2012) indicates that 23% of young Americans aged 12-17 have a smartphone, and ownership is higher among the oldest teens.

Also an another international level, "Children's use of mobile phone", an international comparison research conducted in 2012 in Japan, Chile, India, Egypt and Indonesia with children aged from 8 to 10 (GSM Association and the Mobile Society Research Institute within NTT DOCOMO 2013), provides that 27% of child mobile phone owners have a smartphone and children's

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<sup>1</sup> EU Kids Online network is funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme in order to coordinate and

smartphone ownership in India and Indonesia is double that of their parents. Moreover 54% of all child mobile phone users access the mobile internet and this increases to over 87% when looking exclusively at smartphone users. Furthermore almost 32% of child smartphone users surveyed list their handset as their primary device for accessing the internet. As regards the Apps and social networks, of those children who access the internet via their mobile phone, 57% download or use apps and 49% use it for social networking.

However, questions about this take-up remain (Haddon and Ólafsson forthcoming). While it may seem like an automatic progression to use ever more sophisticated mobile phones to go online, this process is not so straightforward and is influenced by technical, infrastructural, social and contextual considerations.

For example, previous studies (Haddon and Vincent, 2009) indicate that children were very wary of going online via their mobiles chiefly because of the costs, given that children's telecoms expenditure, when financed by parents, can give rise to domestic tensions and has been an issue for decades.

Apart from the matter of adoption, more research is needed to understand how the very hardware and software affordances of different mobile devices (such as screen size, keyboards, touch screen, different Apps, etc.) influence the choices children make when using these devices.

### **3. NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND NEW RISKS**

Such a rapid adoption of convergent mobile media and the changes associated with mobile internet access at home, school and when out and about provide contemporary children with potential new opportunities, while at the same time exposing them to new risks<sup>2</sup>.

With regards to opportunities, mobile media may represent resources for overcoming the digital divide among children who do not have access to domestic broadband connectivity (Castells et al. 2006, Ling and Donner 2009) but their use may equally result in new divides, especially between children who are mobile-only internet users and those able to access the internet from

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<sup>2</sup> As the EU Kids Online data demonstrated, risk does not necessarily result in harm (while 41% of children aged 9-16 have experienced at least one of the risks surveyed, 12% of children say that they have been bothered or upset by something on the internet. See Livingstone et al. 2011

a variety of platforms (desktop PC, laptops, games consoles, handheld devices, etc.) and places. Prior research indicates that different platforms do not lead to the 'same' internet experience (Donner et al. 2011).

Among those children who are already online, being able to access the internet from anywhere and stay in "perpetual contact" (Katz and Aakhus 2002) with peer groups by means of mobile devices may further expand specific opportunities associated with internet use, namely sociability, self-expression, learning, creativity and participation. The 'ladder of opportunities' (Livingstone and Helsper 2007) identifies a progression from basic to more creative and participatory use, whereby the more children use the internet the wider array of opportunities they take up, and vice versa (Livingstone et al. 2011). But if in one scenario the increased connectivity afforded by mobile devices support that progression, thus promoting online skills and expertise in use, this is not inevitable and has to be examined empirically. In fact, previous research suggests that children tend to restrict their online practices on mobile media to a small set of mundane, primarily communication and entertainment activities, while neglecting the opportunities more appreciated by adults, such as educational and participatory activities (Haddon and Vincent 2009; Mascheroni, Murru and Scifo 2011).

#### **4. SOME TEMPORARY AWARENESS ON OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS BASED ON THE EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

We can expand on these considerations by looking at some empirical findings emerging from two different exploratory studies, conducted in the Italian context, in two different period: the first - sponsored by Vodafone Italia and conducted in January 2012 - looks at the domestication of smartphones and mobile internet among preadolescents, in order to investigate which are the new forms of smartphone appropriation by preadolescents, and which are the perceptions, life experiences and mediation practices by parents.

A total of four focus groups have been conducted: three with parents of children aged 10-13 who are smartphone owners and users, and one with children of the same age group. Participants were selected through a theoretical sampling procedure and were selected through a screening test in order to balance the composition of each group with respect to the parenting style: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful parents were

included. Groups were also balanced so as to include both mothers and fathers, since, as we have seen, gender differences influence attitudes towards technology and the adoption of parental mediation strategies. Overall, 24 parents aged between 36 and 51 (14 mothers and 10 fathers) took part in the research.

Since most research in this field has been criticised for being adult-centred, and since discrepancies among parents' perceptions and children's experiences are systematic, one strategy is to incorporate child-adult divergence in the research design (Livingstone & Bober, 2006; Livingstone et al., 2011). To reach this goal, and to compare children and parents' accounts, we decided to hear also children's voices, and we selected 4 boys and 4 girls aged 11-13 among sons and daughters of parents who participated in the focus groups. Focus groups schedules covered the following issues: attitudes towards smartphones and mobile internet; perceptions of parenting styles and parental roles; perceptions of children's relationships with smartphones; risks perceptions; parental mediation strategies.

The second qualitative research considers the appropriation of mobile social networking (access both from an ordinary 3G mobile phone and from a smartphone) and the connected use of location-based services by adolescents. The data were collected in June from 24 teenagers: 5 group interviews with girls and boys aged 14-17 (friends, classmates, sport team) were conducted along with 1 focus group with 8 girls and boys aged 14-17 who don't know each other. The research questions we addressed in this explorative study were related to the practices, meanings and social representations of mobile social networking: if the appropriation of mobile Facebook is shaped by the previous domestication of the mobile phone or by the practice of social networking; and to what extent, and how do they use location-based services.

#### **4.1. FROM MOBILE TO SMARTPHONE AND FROM SOCIAL NETWORK PC ACCESS TO MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORK**

The findings of the first research highlight, more than anything else, the existence of a great divide between parents' expectations and the effective use children make of these new mobile technologies. Parents interpret them as an aid in supporting children's independence and parents' need for supervision:

*(f, 47, user): For me the phone is control, a way to always reach them. For them, it's playing, taking pictures, listening to music.*

and a new potential education resource, mainly used for entertainment and socialising:

*(m, 44, user): Using it only for calls is a waste*

*(m, 46, non user): data for research, connecting to the internet can help you study*

*(m, 43, user): Let's say that the main use for smartphones nowadays is social networking.*

Furthermore, they recognize the stereotypical use associated with smartphones, leading to a "limited" internet:

*(m, 44, non user): on a smartphone you don't really browse. You have Facebook, Messenger, but you can't do great things.*

Moving on to the second research, I would like just point out some findings related to some issues we have seen since now. The first is the confirm that the gap in hardware and available services (such as apps) between traditional 3G mobile phones users and smartphone users shapes the experience of appropriation of mobile internet and especially mobile social networking: the incorporation is deeper and wider among those accessing Facebook by apps, irregular and limited among those accessing it by browsers.

Moreover, if the availability of flat web packs promotes more intensive use, teenagers are more likely to have a pay per use subscription (which enables higher parental control). Their use is limited also by the low diffusion in Italy of wifi hot spots in public places.

The range of practices teenagers engage in when they access Facebook from their mobile is was at the moment limited due to the structural constraints just mentioned, supporting the idea that the mobile internet experience differs from the online PC-based experience. Popular Facebook activities such as video and photo upload, comments and especially the chat, are difficult to perform on mobile devices. This results in a perceived sense of "inefficacy" and of "not being there":

*I don't upload anything from my mobile; it takes too long (f, focus group)*

*You do more or less the same things, but you cannot speak to anyone so it is much more boring (f, group 2)*

*You are online but you are not there for your friends, I mean, you are on Facebook but they cannot see you are online, and so it is as if you were not online (f, group 2)*

#### **4.2. PLACES AND CONTEXTS OF USE**

In relation to places and contexts of use, it emerges that, although used outside of the domestic environment, especially during longer periods away from home, such as when on holiday, where a fixed connection is not available, so to using the mobile as a substitute for domestic access:

*It happens that I access Facebook from my mobile, usually when I am on holiday, or when I don't have my laptop with me, but not in normal days (f, group 2)*

*Usually when I am at my grandparents', who don't have a pc, or when I am travelling, and when I don't have access to my laptop (m, group 3).*

It also becomes a relevant complementary domestic access point, when the domestic pc is not available, because the computer itself or the room is shared with siblings, or when connection is temporarily unavailable, or when the computer is in another room:

*I have wifi at home so I use mobile access almost once a day, because the pc is shared with my brother (m, group 3)*

*At night, when I come back late, I don't turn on the computer so that my sister doesn't wake up (m, group 4)*

Mobile and fixed domestic access are also attributed specific different functions and patterns of use: while the pc is perceived as the medium for immersive and time-spending experience, the mobile is more apt for quick sessions and intermittent but continuous flow of communication. It therefore enables a micro-mobility in domestic contexts and promotes further flexibility in domestic spaces of media consumption:

*Having a wifi I use the phone from home when I want to be quick, while the pc is on for at least two hours (m, group 4)*

So with the awareness gained from these explorative researches we can affirm that the portability of mobile media enables more flexible practices of media consumption and communication, by reducing time and space constraints. This

can occur even within the domestic context, where the smartphone can become an 'alternative' to PC-based internet experience, as children no longer have to share computer access with other family members, promoting processes of privatisation and personalisation of internet uses. However, we need to examine whether other constraints on the use of such devices remain, temporary or long-lasting, such as their cost, the availability of a 3G connection, the preference for using the domestic free wifi connection and that fear that expensive hand-held devices such as smartphones may be stolen or damaged if taken out into different public spaces, including schools.

### **4.3. RISKS FROM PARENTS PERSPECTIVE**

The intensification in space and time of the practices related to computing, internet and social media use, which mobile media enable, may extend the exposure to a range of online risks already highlighted by EU Kids Online research (Livingstone et al. 2011) such as content related risk (on sites, in mass messages, images, etc.); contact-related risk (usually from adults); conduct-related risk (usually from other young people) and other risks as addiction.

One thing that seems fundamentally to have changed is the speed at which these risks may occur via mobile devices. We need to understand whether the immediacy with which children can distribute and share UGC, for example related to sexting (Bond 2011) and cyberbullying by means of their mobiles, leads to them acting without first reflecting on the negative consequences of their actions.

There may be an intensification of risk, for example through growing exposure to inappropriate and unwanted content (violent, pornographic, commercial, etc.) and increasing addiction to the devices themselves and to the practices they enable, for example social networking or gaming.

We can have a look at some examples of the concerns parents have when it comes to children and mobile internet access. Parents are worried about unsupervised access to the internet, and its perils (inappropriate content, grooming, sexting, frape):

*(m, 44, user): content that is the opposite of what you're looking for.  
Content inappropriate for that age*

*(m, 44, non user): I'm disturbed by violent content, fighting, mutilated bodies.  
That's disturbing*

*(f, 49, user): I'm scared my children will be solicited, rather than the content they may find.*

*They can find that anywhere*

*(f, 36, non user): there's also soliciting via fake nicknames: how do you know who is hiding behind them?*

*(m, 44, user): girls allowing themselves to be filmed naked for money*

*(f, 51, user): we were in France in an Apple store, he forgot to log out of Facebook and some strangers wrote all sorts of things on his profile*

They are also very aware of aspects such as the addictive nature of the devices that encourage extended and intense use:

*(f, 50, user): it becomes a great distraction*

*(m, 44 non user) instead of going out they dumb out with this thing, both for the time they spend and the content. If it's only Facebook it's not okay... the risk is dumbing down, it closes minds instead of opening them.*

#### **4.4. RISKS FROM CHILD PERSPECTIVE**

Moving on our teens interviewees, they tend to have a low perception of online risks in general, and an even lower perception of risks associated to mobile access to SNS.

The only risk that they explicitly connect to mobile social networking is addiction, which is perceived as affecting more girls than boys, and as a direct consequence of the urge to perpetual contact (the same urge that leads many of the interviewees to turn their mobile on at night as well). Addiction is therefore the inability to negotiate accessibility:

*We girls, yes, we are addicted to Facebook, boys, they probably spend more time watching tv, they are not online that much, they spend time in a different way I guess, I don't know (f, group 1)*

*Interviewer: imagine you had a web pack?*

*I wish I never had it. Otherwise I would be stuck on Facebook, I would be always on (f, group 2)*

*I would log in every 20 minutes, even every couple of minutes, just to check what's going on. It would be an obsession, it is already an obsession on the computer, imagine if I had it on my mobile! (f, group 2)*

Other general online risks mentioned in the group interviews and the focus group include: grooming, which is perceived as a gendered risk, which

concerns only girls, and which promotes social coping strategies (the peer group as a protection, and the shared practice of signalling a profile); privacy, with most of the interviewees who are aware of the risks associated with the dissemination of personal information online and therefore don't communicate their mobile phone numbers and address (though some teenagers still have a public profile because they lack basic safety skills); personal data misuse, especially when opening their profile from shared pc such as at school (nonetheless the practice of sharing password among friends seems quite popular); cyberbullying, perceived by someone as more common online since the perpetrator can hide behind anonymity; and gambling.

## **5. NEW RISKS**

So in addition to the general online risks, smartphones and other mobile, may pose new challenges in terms of risky experiences. We have seen, beyond current policy discussions of 'risk', that for children the main novelty posed by smartphones is an even more compelling pressure towards the perpetual accessibility of children to peers, on the one hand, and the constant availability to them of a multimedia environment. This can lead not only a potential addiction but also a conflict between the contexts in which children are physically co-present with others and their 'telepresence', involving immersion in digital activities (such as gaming) whereby children may isolate themselves from face-to-face interaction by being absorbed in the virtual world. We have seen how this interaction with mobile media is also one of the on-going concerns of parents, and also a source of tension.

Lastly in the public debate many attention has been given at the potential new risks associated with geo-positioning and near-field communication technologies that are able to locate one's position in space, connect the user with content, services and other users located nearby, access contextual information and interact with the surrounding space (Gordon and De Souza 2011, Wilken and Goggin 2012). Those geo-location services offer more scope for the abuse of personal data, geo-location tracking and threats to privacy (for many different purposes, be it for commercial goals or for grooming). Regarding these aspects, however, new concerns are emerging from our empirical explorative research on the appropriation of mobile social networking among Italian teens in light of the domestication processes taking place for the connected location-based services.

## 5.1. MOBILE LOCATION-BASED SERVICES

Most of our teens interviewees are resistant to the practice of localizing oneself and sanction it negatively in a ideological manner: Facebook places is socially represented as “useless”, “ridiculous”, “for people who have nothing else to do”. Interviewees, however, report emerging practices and the associated meanings.

First of all, teens’ location is made visible to their network, using it as a symbolic resource for identity, to be socially displayed and shared:

*Because they want to show that they’ve been to that particular place; it’s just an image thing; to show they were together.*

A practice that at the moment seems more connected to the out-of-the-ordinary experience of being in that determined place, but that certainly meets a need for embedding and contextualization of identity:

*Sometimes I use it, it depends on the place where I am, if I’m by the sea or at Gardaland [a famous Italian amusement park], these special places; Then it depends on where you are, not if you’re just in a cafe! If you’re at a Formula One race, yes.*

Secondly, they find the need to communicate the location because implicitly this information indicates the social situation of the subject and it establishes the limits of his/her communicative accessibility:

*I’ll check in at University so they know they can’t disturb me...*

Next, socializing one’s location on Facebook can also make it possible to coordinate the action and interaction, replacing a text message or a phone call, as stated by a boy:

*I was there waiting for him outside University and I didn’t see his scooter, I didn’t know if he’d already gone away, if I’d had the i-Phone I’d have used Facebook places.*

Moreover, publishing an updated location status may foster unplanned face-to-face meetings. So it is a practice oriented towards increasing in-presence social interaction with people from the user’s social network. This being a completely new practice with respect to traditional mobile communication. The following is how a girl imagines its use:

*Like I’m here, and there’s someone who just got off the closest subway stop, at 7 I’m leaving, and maybe he’s getting back to the subway, he sees I’m here and says: “oh do you want to walk together?”; So if someone’s interested in you, he’ll see it and go there.*

Finally, to “check in” to one’s own Facebook page also means to activate a virtual form of appropriation of a new place:

*I use it, for example I've been to New York and then I checked in.*

## **6. PARENTAL MEDIATION**

After considering the first way of domestication of mobile media and mobile internet and the related new opportunities and risks connected with the incorporation in the child everyday life we are now going to consider the parental mediation issues. The portability of smartphones and their personalised and private nature, derived from ordinary mobile phones, poses new challenges to parents' ability and willingness to share and supervise their children's use of online media. As a matter of fact one of the major source of concern is represented by increasing privatisation of internet access and use, which encourages the diffusion of an individualized culture of media (the so-called "bedroom culture", see Livingstone and Bovill 2001), due to the a substantial number of European children access the internet from their own bedroom without parental supervision (Livingstone et al. 2011). In this scenario, the diffusion of mobile media among children increases the internet's pervasiveness in children's every day life, creating new spaces of privacy. Finally, besides the increasing privatisation of access and proliferation of mobile technologies, parental regulation of media use may be hindered by the so-called "generational divide", that is the fact that often children are more experienced with the internet and new portable media than their parents.

Mobile media can facilitate technical and monitoring mediation; many mobile operators are selling specific Apps that allow parents to monitor, ex -post, children's online activities or restrict their online access by time or kind of practice (eg. inhibiting social networking).

Yet, mobile access may make active mediation, more difficult. The sharing of activities is increasingly complicated by the small dimensions of the screen, which also hinder any kind of occasional monitoring (like discretely glancing at a distance).

At the same time, the limitations on parental mediation cannot only be physical but can result from the social and symbolic dimension of mobile phone usage. In most cases, mobile phones are perceived as strictly personal devices, much more so than a PC, and belonging to the intimate sphere of youngsters. Access by adults and parents to this private area can be perceived as constituting an act of privacy violation and may require considerable negotiation between family members.

Thus, it becomes necessary to explore the new conditions under which parental mediation is taking place, in order to shed light on the new kinds of restriction and possibilities they consider when trying to mediate their children's internet experiences.

Are they already keeping up with the new challenges of mobile access? Are they simply applying existing mediation strategies or, on the contrary, are they negotiating new spaces for sharing and discussing mobile access to the online world? How parents perceive the new mediation tools that have been offered by mobile operators, whether they consider them a useful way to support their supervising role or a technical 'solution' that actually weakens their pedagogical goals. And if restrictive mediation and monitoring are becoming more difficult, it is important to assess whether parents are adopting alternative approaches, for instance relying more on talking with children about their online activities.

### **6.1. EMPIRICAL FINDING ON DIFFERENT PARENTAL MEDIATION STRATEGIES**

We try to answer at some of these questions looking at the findings emerges from our research involving parents of children who own a smartphone, and seeing how Italian preteens parents adopt different mediation strategies and often a combination of more, according to parenting style, attitudes towards technologies and household's moral economy (Silverstone, Hirsh and Morley, 1992).

Active mediation of children's smartphone use is by far the favourite strategy, though, most parents tend to overestimate their engagement with children's online activities for reason of social desirability. The first form of active mediation of internet use and safety is a conversational strategy:

*(m, 48, non user): we have to teach them what is right and wrong, give them a direction rather than saying nothing, explain, it's not always easy but we try to*

*(m, 44, non user): I know they visit certain websites, but they have to discover these things, the important thing is sharing*

Another form of active mediation is sharing their children's online experience by remaining nearby or actively guiding them:

*(f, 40, user): I opened Facebook for them...*

*(f, 43, user): my child uses my profile, I haven't allowed him to have his own, so he uses mine.*

*We have many relatives around the world and it's the only way to keep in touch.*

Besides this co-usage practices, active mediation is also aimed to promote opportunities and coping, and to reduce potential harm for negative online experiences, a form of risk prevention:

*(f, 47, user): he left his profile open to everyone so I explained how to restrict it*

*(f, 46, user): there's nothing to spy on. I tell him and explain how to block things,  
I tell him it's private and he needs to keep it to himself*

*(f, 44, non user): if you happen to be contacted by a stranger tell me and we'll report  
him, that's what I taught him*

*(m, 44, non user): I like being involved in these things.. My dream is that he reaches  
an understanding of right and wrong, and he can be an example.*

A second parental mediation strategy is the monitoring activities, such as checking the history of websites visited and the list of apps downloaded. In the parents perspective, monitoring plays an educational function, as a guide for children which helps them incorporate parental norms:

*(m, 43, user): I control and supervise everything, the computers are under control, a  
log of everything they do is on my computer, I can check from the office, I have a home  
server... With a smartphone it's more complicated. When they leave it out I ask them  
«let me see what you've done recently”*

*(f, 40, user): I look at their phone to see what's been downloaded*

*(f, 11): my mom checks every message as soon as it arrives, who sent it and what  
they're doing, and every time I use the PC, she checks my history*

However, some parents think that this strategy has some limitations, mostly the weakening of the mutual trust relationship:

*(m, 13): I would delete my history just to spite them. You don't trust me, so I delete it,  
even if I could show you*

Restrictions are another common strategy adopt by parents, preferably in combination with active mediation. Parents tend to establish usage rules, related to certain times of day:

*(f, 11): I have time restrictions, I can't use it all day, but only a few hours, once I've  
done my homework*

*(f, 13): For example no later than 9.30 PM to certain situations and places:*

*(f, 44, non user): I give them rules, whether they're at home or out, no phones at the table*

*(f, 50, user): I don't allow them to use it when they're out, because at home they're monitored, but not outside...*

*(f, 44, user): you don't use it at school, you only use it if I'm there*

and to certain uses and contacts:

*(m, 44, non user): I'll break my daughter's legs if she joins Facebook. It's too early*

*(f, 44, non user): for example you have people requesting friendship and you tell them if they don't know them, delete them.*

However, the efficacy of restrictive mediation is questioned, for different reasons:

*(m, 43, user): Blocking their phone is useless, because they use a friend's*

*(m, 44, user): the idea of forbidding something is wrong, I think, because it means not teaching them about trust...*

*(m, 44, non user): the more taboo something is, the more you're challenging them to beat it*

*(f, 44, non user): You shouldn't forbid, you should explain how to behave, like in school, a kind of ethic*

Finally technical restrictions are the least favourites form of mediation. Those parents who use them understand parental controls as tools for protecting children, especially younger ones:

*(m, 44 non user): not for fear that he may look for something strange, but you can find some violent things, even unwillingly, so it makes my life easier...*

and supporting parents when their authority is contested and ruled are evaded:

*(m, 44, user): we tried to educate them since the beginning about the usage, risks, security, but in the end she always fell short, because they do it by themselves, we had lost control, so a friend installed a security system*

*(f, 43, user): well the way to forbid it is by blocking, otherwise how can you know, and they learn how to erase tracks immediately so how can you?*

*I wouldn't know how else to monitor them*

However most parents are uncomfortable with parental controls because these tools are blamed for being intrusive, thus compromising the trust in parent-child relationship:

*(f, 49, user): my son asks me not to use these things (parental control software) because it would mean I think he does bad things:*

Moreover they are they are deemed as poor educational tools, since they prevent children from acquiring helpful knowledge such as specific safety skills and developing resilience against online risks, weakening forms of self-learning and growth:

*(f, 36, non user): I deactivated for other reasons, because he went on these sites without reason, he didn't understand the difference between right and wrong*

*(m, 48, non user): they must also grow up one day, and learn about these things*

Starting from this preliminary empirical evidence it seems that the main challenges posed by smartphone and more in general by mobile convergent media to parental mediation, in reducing children exposure to online risks and promote positive uses, is the managing of their children's rights to privacy and growing independence.

## **7. NET CHILDREN GO MOBILE: A NEW EUROPEAN RESEARCH PROJECT**

The paper has presented some considerations based on explorative empirical evidence related to the children's smartphone appropriation and parental mediation in the Italian context that provides a picture of the processes by which the adoption of new convergent and networked mobile media is taking shape among younger Italian population. But research on how young people incorporate convergent, mobile and personal media into their everyday lives and practices, is still limited. Moreover, apart from some questions in the EU Kids Online research, the current knowledge base regarding young people's practices relating to the convergent mobile media lacks cross-national data.

The EU Kids Online study indicated the degree of country-based variation. In fact, a variety of national factors (namely the diffusion of wifi public connections, the cost and availability of flat rate web packages, the cost of the devices and the diffusion of other portable devices such as laptops) may

influence not only whether a mobile device is chosen, and which, but also how and where it is used (Scifo 2008; Bertel and Stald in press), resulting in cross-national differences in online experiences (e.g. intensive vs. occasional use). Up-to-date and comparable findings on which European children use which convergent mobile media to access the internet, what practices they engage in, and whether mobile-only internet users are on the rise, are still lacking.

That are the reasons why a new European Project called "Net Children Go Mobile" was promoted and founded by the 2012 Safer Internet Programme (GA n° SI-2012-KEP-411201), framed in accordance with Action 4.1 (Knowledge enhancement project: investigating the impact on young people of convergence of technology), namely to 'investigate through a quantitative and qualitative methodology how the changing conditions of access and use (mobile devices) bring greater or lesser risks to children's safety'. The project will involve 4 European countries, namely Italy, UK, Denmark and Romania, and will sample the population of kids aged 9-16 who are internet users<sup>3</sup>.

How can this project contribute to our enhancement of knowledge?

Net Children Go Mobile aims to provide new, relevant, robust and comparable findings regarding activities children engage in when they go online from mobile devices, and which are the opportunities of mobile internet, and divides in usage, skills and participation among children aged 9-16 who are internet users. Hence, the Net Children Go Mobile project will first provide a basic understanding of the factors shaping children's adoption and use, and why cross-national variation exists.

With regards to risk, the goal of the project is to explore the incidence and nature of online risks associated with accessing the internet by means of mobile devices, as compared to online risks more generally; pointing out which children are particularly at risk and why, by examining vulnerability factors; whether new mobile communication practices and contents generate new risky interactions and experiences, and to what extent and for which children they turn into harmful consequences.

Finally, the project will show how the technological and socio-cultural changes, that reconfigure the media ecology that children inhabit, pose new challenges in terms of the mediation of internet safety, by parents, teachers and youth

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<sup>3</sup> For more details see <http://www.netchildrengomobile.eu/>

worker, thus identifying and disseminating key recommendations relevant to the development of safety awareness initiatives in Europe.

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