Children and Social Media:

Opportunities and Risks, Rules and Responsibilities

MADRID • APRIL 29–30, 2010

Narine Khachatryan | Media Education Center, Armenia

Conference presentation • Madrid, April 29 and 30, 2010

Key message – Protection measures should go hand in hand with media literacy education.

When it comes to **youth** and **technology**, issues of **opportunities** rather than of **risks** dominate the minds of people in our country.

Breaking through the ideological curtain in the late 80-ies, the country found itself in geographical isolation and developed a competitive ICT industry, not constrained by physical borders.

Throwing off the shackles of totalitarian and censored media only 2 decades ago, the nation has not yet lost its ability to read between the lines and separate ideology from facts.

In the country, where the number of broadband Internet users is growing rapidly (nearly 7-fold growth since the last quarter of 2008) with an ever-greater demand for high-quality communication, purely protective measures do not gain much support from the public: fears of danger yield to tremendous opportunities for free communication, learning, creative expression and civic participation.



EuroDIG conference audience | Madrid, 2010

Moreover, the usefulness of Internet filters is often challenged for several reasons. One reason on the surface is that children very quickly learn to manipulate these tools. Beneath the surface, there is a deep belief that youth must learn to cope with complicated situations online to develop healthy immunity off-line. Finally, studies show that youth most at risk of on-line harms are still those at risk of offline harms.

The unprecedented everyday use of digital media by young children helps them to develop new social and technological skills. As they grow, kids learn what identity, privacy and self-image mean, how to distinguish between authentic and unreliable information, between news and advertising, and they learn numerous production techniques.

New technologies suggest new unprecedented opportunities for self-motivated and interest-driven learning and socializing for students and innovative, process-driven teaching and collaboration for educators.

Nobody questions that education is the main strategy to empower children to live in the digital era. But how will they use the new skills they acquire? Will they become producers of culture or manipulators?

How can negative and unethical use of new technologies be prevented? How can Web 2.0, with its sharable content and potential for becoming collective intelligence, be better exploited for democracy? These are issues to be addressed in different social, cultural, historical, local and global contexts.

Today we have 100 per cent mobile Internet penetration, and nearly 90 per cent of schoolchildren, including 5- to 7-year-olds, are connected to the World Wide Web through mobile phones.

With respect to usage and production techniques, children are ahead of their parents and teachers, so in an adult-driven world, the existing hierarchies are challenged.

In the Armenian context, which has historically become ‘child-centered’, adults do not fear that children will gain more power than they have.

On the contrary, the children and students, who are a major part of all Internet users in Armenia, can radically change the situation with the missing Armenian-language content on the Internet by becoming active producers of their own original resources.

We believe that carefully designed media literacy programs will help youth not only to overcome the challenges they face in the digital era, but also to take advantage of tremendous learning opportunities, improve awareness of ethics, respect for human rights and bring a lot of fresh and positive change to the online world.

Background:

Media Education Center is a non-governmental organization that has launched a number of media literacy, citizens’ online safety, and e-learning projects in Armenia since 2007.

In 2009, MEC started implementing Internet safety awareness campaigns, engaging teachers and young people. We invited government representatives to join our initiative, which began in schools

and reached the agenda of the Public Council of Armenia.

Since the beginning of 2009, 350 participants have attended workshops and round tables organized by the Media Education Center. A Safer Internet Day Committee was established to coordinate future activities.

Our activities are aimed not only at empowering citizens to use online and mobile technologies safely, but also at helping them make use of the incredible opportunities offered by e-learning, creative expression, and participation.