The dangers of Social Media.
A case study on children age 10 to 12

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Abstract

Since the year 2000, The Children's Online Protection Act (COPA) tries to protect children under the age of 13. However, nowadays millions of children below 13 years old are active users of Social Media. We show some of the dangers the children are exposed and we try to propose some safe alternatives. We conducted a case study on our local community by asking primary schools children from Sibiu (Romania) questions about their involvement in social media. We present some initial results from an ongoing study, started in the late 2012.

Keywords: Social Media, social consciousness, community question answering

1 Introduction

1.1 What is Social Media

We can find one of the most comprehensive definition of Social Media in [1]: "Social media encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company-sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites and forums, Internet discussion boards and forums, moblogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and social networking websites, to name a few." Some examples of Social Media can be found in Table 1.

Type of Social Media sites	Example
Social Networks	Facebook
Multimedia (video) sharing	YouTube
Photo sharing	Flickr
Business Networking	LinkedIn
Collaborative sites	Wikipedia
Virtual world simulations	Second Life
Commerce communities	eBay
Micro-blogging	Twitter

Table 1. Examples of Social Media

Many researchers focus their work on the opportunities offered by the continuous growth of the Social Media Networks ([2], [3], [4])

However, there is only little research (or even concern) on the dangers of the Social Media. A simple experiment demonstrates this. We use Google Search engine with two strings: "opportunities of social media" and "dangers of social media". In the first case we received 2.260

results, while in the second one only 82 results. Most of the research on the impact of Social Media over the children and young people is focused on the social aspects ([5]).

1.2 Some of the benefits of Social Media

There are three different cases on which we can discuss about the benefits of Social Media: the children, the teacher and the parent.

1.2.1 The benefits for the children

- Children have a way to see the influence of their social networks on school activities and the other way around
- They can connect their academic and social actions to a wider horizon of information
- Realize that their online actions leave a digital footprint and teaches them responsibility, good citizenship, safety or the importance of a good reputation
- Makes classrooms more engaging through a larger horizon of voices (ex: Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, Skype)
- Develop collaborative skills (very important asset in this century) – children work in groups, teams and comment on each other's tasks and can engage in discussions with their colleagues or teachers
- Receive the skills needed not only for highschool but in a future carrier also
- Encourage and reward the use of technology in school and in their life in general

1.2.2 The benefits for the teachers
- Brings the community of teachers together to better handle education related issues
- Friendly environment to discuss new ideas and exchange information
- Inspiration for new ideas in the classroom
- Increases professional engagement and spurs continuing education and training
- Boosts inter-cultural and cross-cultural information exchange in the field of education

1.2.3 The benefits for the parents

- Boosts dialogue between teachers and their students
- Increased presence in the classroom and greater control of the curriculum
- Ensures greater transparency for educational units
- Helps in better grasping teacher and class expectations

1.3 Some of the dangers of Social Media

The activity and behavior of children should be monitored by parents all the time. They are most vulnerable to social media dangers and they should be kept away from possible tempting illegal activities.
One of the biggest threats is represented by so called predators hiding under fake Social Media profiles. It is now easy for predators to pose as another child having the same interests as our children. If a kid accepts a predator as a friend, he can find all the information he wants to know, such as the age or the real home address.
The child identity theft, another cyber-crime, is increasing at a high rate in the last years. It is much easier to set up a phishing scheme for a child, especially if the kid has access to a credit card or if the parents use their credit card information using the child account (for instance to buy some online game items).
Cyber bullying and Social Media harassment represent dangers that appears mostly because there is no physical presence, making the children less inhibited to say inappropriate things.

2   Social Media for children

If we want a safe alternative to Facebook and other similar Social Networks we should have in mind safety and age-appropriate fun. To build a social network for children we should include all the traditional features provided by standard social networks, like chat, multimedia upload, profiles, comments, ratings. Furthermore, additional features like games, contests and virtual gifts should be considered. Maybe the most important thing is that social networks for children should include is the parental monitoring feature.

In [6] we have found a list of safe social networks for children.

Site	Age	Observation
ScuttlePad	7+	intended to create a safe online space for children
Togetherville	7+	permits connection to Facebook friends of the parents
Yoursphere	9+	it has a strict membership rules and all sign-ups are vetted against a database of registered sex offenders
Franktown Rocks	10+	creates a safe spot for kids to listen music
GiantHello	10+	similar with Facebook, but with much more attention to safety and privacy concerns for children
GirlSense	10+	closed at the moment we write this paper
Sweety High	11+	social network for girls witha very good privacy.

Table 2. Safe social networks for children

3   Case study

3.1 Social Media usage

Some of our prior case studies emphasize the idea that the children are attracted on different activities using the computers, especially games and social networking. Figure 1 shows some of our results. First figure represents the answer to the question "I'm using the computer for…", the second one "I'm using the computer … hours/day" and the last question is "What are you searching on the internet?".
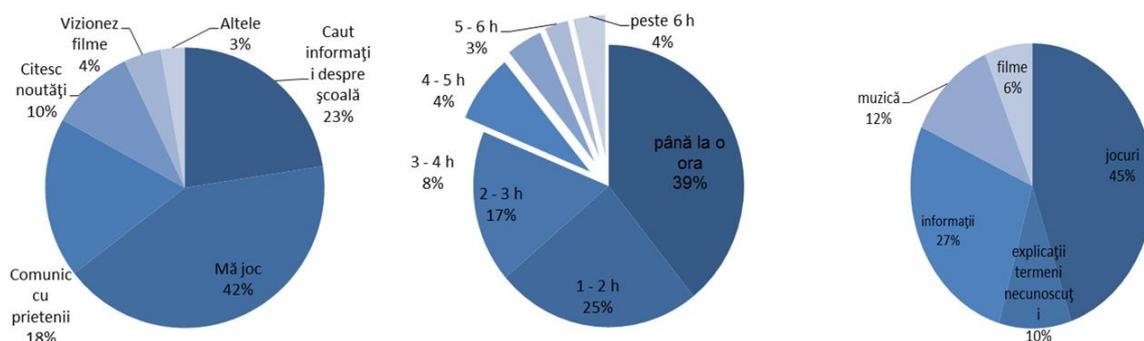

Figure 1 – Some initial results

The study was conducted in 2011 over almost 400 children ages 8 to 12. One important observation from this study was the fact that at age 10+ more and more children use computers to communicate with their friends and they exceed the 2 hours/day of using the computer. However, out study did not ask the children about their online social behavior.

An ongoing study, started in the late 2012, is about the way children aged 10 to 12 use the social networks and how it can affect their life. We obtained results from around 80 children, but more

results are yet to come. First question was a multiple choice one: "Select the Social network you've heard about" (Figure 2).
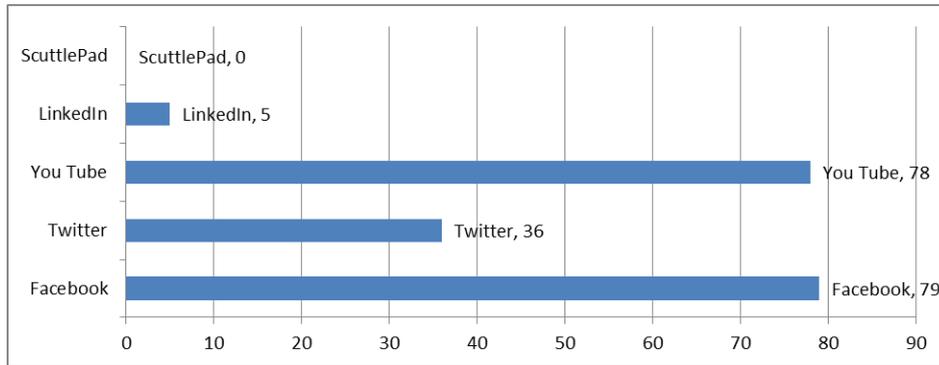

Figure 2 – Select the Social network you've heard about

The second question was "I'm using… at least once a week". The results can be observed in Figure 3.
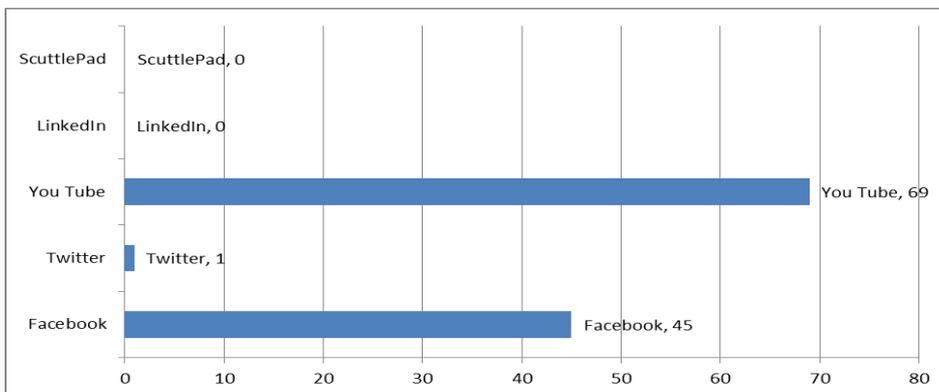

Figure 3 – Usage of the Social Networks

Even if You Tube has much better results than Facebook, we have we can assume that only a small number of the children are registered You Tube users, even if we did not specifically ask it.

We ask about the Social Networks designed for children (Table 2), but **none** of the children even heard about them.

3.2 The dangers of Social Media

Our study focused on the main three dangers of the Social Media for the kids: predators, phishing scams and cyber bullying.

We have asked the children "Did you talk on-line with strangers?" (Figure 4). The results are selected from the children that have an active FaceBook account.
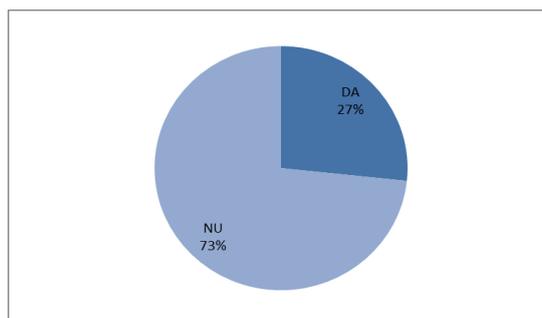

Figure 4 – "Did you talk on-line with strangers?"

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However, the children consider that if an on-line profile is on friends' list means that person is not a stranger.

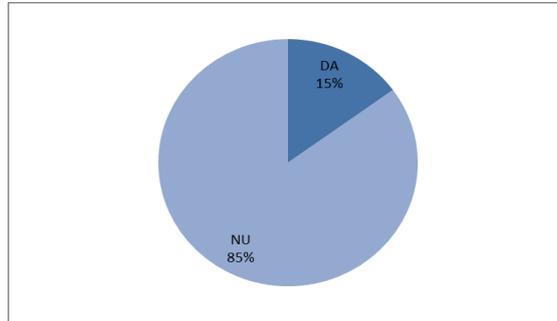The next question was: "I know what a phishing scam is" (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – "I know what a phishing scam is"

In this case it is clear that only a few children are aware of the possibility of virtual theft. Anyway, the best way of avoiding this is to never let the children to buy from the internet without adult supervision.

The last question was about cyber-bullying: "Did you sent any mean messages?" (Figure 6)
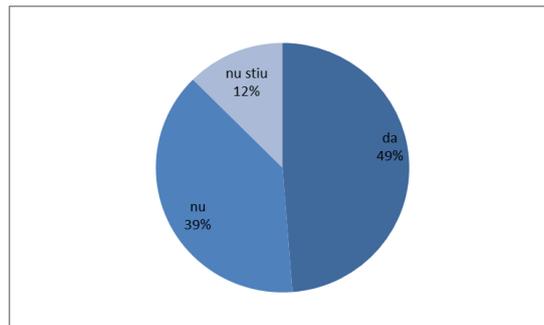

Figure 6 – Did you sent any mean messages?

The children, hiding behind computer, are feeling free to be mean with others, to provoke strangers or friends or to invent fictional things about peoples or situations.

4   Conclusions

Even if we still need to gather more results some conclusions can be made:

- The children under the age of 13 use Facebook, some of them on a daily basis
- The children are not aware of the dangers lurking beneath social networks
- The parents are not aware of the dangers of using social networks

The main question that still remains to be answered is "What do we do to change this situation?"

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