

PARENTAL CONCERNS REGARDING YOUNG CHILDREN  
AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY. AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE  
INVESTIGATION IN THREE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES\*

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the effects of the development and widespread diffusion of digital technologies is that in contemporary homes children are being exposed to those technologies since birth. The present study aims to identify the general ‘climate of concern’ and to map specific worries that parents have with respect to their young children’s digital lives.

The study was theoretically framed by the intersection of parental mediation theory with media panics theory, and relied on data collected in three European countries (Portugal, Romania and Slovenia) as part of JRC project Young Children (0–8) and digital technologies. The data were collected in 2015, through family visits, this paper focusing on semi structured interviews that took place with parents.

The results show that parents of children under 8 years old are concerned about health-related issues, screen addiction, exposure to age-inappropriate content, social exclusion by absence or under use of digital media, concerns of losing opportunities for

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essential (non-digital) childhood experiences, bad school performance and learning the “right” skills for the future. If some of these concerns echo public discourse on the risks of technology, parents in our study trimmed these fears and adjusted them to their current situation and their parental mediation practices.

**Keywords:** young children, digital technology, parental concerns, parental mediation, media panics.

## INTRODUCTION

At a time when children – from birth and sometimes before it (Leaver, 2017) – are, in a way or another, involved with digital technology, the public and parental discourses on this phenomenon are still linked with almost eternal issue of children’s screen time. (Blum-Ross, Livingstone, 2016a) Moreover, as some studies have shown, parents of very young children (aged between 0 and 8) do not express much of anxiety regarding their children’s digital technology use, but mostly consider themselves in control of their children’s media diet at this age. (Chaudron *et al.*, 2018, van Kruistum, van Steensel, 2017, Marsh *et al.*, 2015) Starting from the Portuguese, Romanian (Velicu and Mitarcă, 2016) and Slovenian (Lobe, 2016) data from the Young Children and Digital Technology project (Chaudron *et al.*, 2018), we aim to explore parental worries related to their young children’s digital media use and explain why these worries are, as it will appear, rather at a low level and expressed in general terms than on specific ones.

This study approaches parental discourse within an explanatory framework situated at the intersection of parental mediation with media panics theory. The next section briefly discusses these theories, constructing the theoretical framework for the analysis. Then we describe the study and its data collection and the methodology of the current analysis. The third section presents findings from three national cases (Portuguese, Romanian and Slovenian). The last section discusses the findings within the presented theoretical frame and focuses on their policy implications.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### PARENTAL MEDIATION

Rooted in the media effects paradigm, according to which media have negative effects on children, the theory of parental mediation advocates for and explains how parents could mitigate these effects by using different mediation strategies (Valkenburg *et al.*, 1999). The number and names of these strategies vary over time, having also been influenced by the technology that made the object of mediation. Thus, if in the television era, researchers talked mainly about active or instructive mediation, restrictive mediation and (social) co-viewing (Nathanson,

1999, Valkenburg *et al.*, 1999), later on, the internet multiplied the number of strategies. For instance, the EU Kids Online project (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011) advocated for five such mediation strategies, adding to the older ones, the safety dimension and also taking into account the technical possibilities parents have to mitigate children's access to the internet (Durager, Sonck, 2014).

Within a context where technology tends towards diversification and multiplication, sustained by new technological assets such as touchscreen technology or internet-connected toys (Zaman, Mifsud, 2017; Sefton-Green *et al.*, 2016), researchers tend to essentialize these strategies according not to the exact parental practices, but to the general mediation style based on the driven values. For example, van Kruistum and van Steensel (2017) describe three main mediation styles – regulation, guidance and giving children space –, whereas Livingstone and her colleagues (2017) shrink even further and talk about only two mediation styles, namely enabling and restrictive mediation.

Some researchers argue that parental mediation theory has weaknesses. From the point of view of the new sociology of childhood, one major weakness is the child's utter exclusion from the process of mediation. Thus, in an attempt to give children a voice, Haddon (2015) challenges the perspective on parental mediation, exploring not the actions parents have undertaken, but children's perception of them. He argues that although in most cases, children are pleased with parental intervention, there are also situations in which children treat it rather negatively, resisting or opposing it. Other critics (*e.g.* Clark, 2011) argue that not only are children's voices largely absent within parental mediation, but also is their agency, despite the space for interaction with their families that new media afford children. Thus, Clark proposes a new form of mediation, participatory learning, 'that involves parents and children interacting together with and through digital media' (2011: 322). Ponte and her colleagues (2017) pointed toward 'reverse mediation', where children are savvier than their parents and help them use the technology. Another weakness of parental mediation is to consider it a fixed strategy, whereas, as shown by recent studies (van Kruistum, van Steensel, 2017), parental mediation is a dynamic process, in which parents continuously adapt their strategies to children's age (Chaudron *et al.*, 2018), family structure (*e.g.* the existence of older or younger siblings), time and space (*e.g.* dinner time, or restaurant situation).

#### *MEDIA PANICS AND ITS CRITICS*

If the parental mediation paradigm assumes the existence of (negative) effects of media on children, media panics studies rather dismiss this initial assumption, pointing on the way media inflate the topic of media effects on children. Relying on Cohen's (1972) concept of moral panic, Drotner (1999, p. 596) defined *media panics* as a form of moral panic, directly related with the arrival of a new medium, characterized by:

*'the new media is both instigator and purveyor of the discussion; the discussion is highly emotionally charged and morally polarized (the medium is either "good" or "bad") with the negative pole being the most visible in most cases; the discussion is an adult discussion that primarily focuses on children and young; the proponents often have professional stakes in the subject under discussion'.*

Although acknowledging the explanatory power of the moral panic theory, McRobbie (1994), argued for a revision of it, showing that a clear separation between media and social reality is not correct and that in the new media landscape the relations between the media, the agents of social control, the folk devils and the moral guardians has changed in a more complicated and less linear pattern than described by moral panic theory. As such, McRobbie (1994) showed that uncritical and excessive use of moral panic theory instills fear in the public that generates either helplessness, and political powerlessness leading to immobilism, or anger that urges action to seek remedies and solutions. But even if no one argues against the importance of understanding media-constructed anxiety and discerning it from other public / parental concerns, finding reliable means to get to the latter is an epistemological challenge for researchers. (Buckingham and Jensen, 2012)

In their critical analysis of media panic theory, Buckingham and Jensen (2012) argued against the overuse of the concept in public debate and research alike. Among the problematic aspects of this theory that Buckingham and Jensen (2012) identified, there are: the assumption of some hidden intentions of panic promoters (either media itself or 'moral entrepreneurs'), its claimed rationality (against the irrationality of those who are victims of moral panics), the discursive frame 'us' versus 'them' that acts as an argument and its political use for re-establishing the generational order. Thus, the two authors pleaded for moving beyond the dichotomous frame (*i.e.* media is either good or bad for children), toward alternative theories that would approach the parental and public concerns less ideologically and more contextualized. This way, Buckingham and Jensen (2012) argued, researchers do not just dismiss people's concerns linked with media as being irrational, timeless and universal, but 'understand them in their own terms' (p. 419), as culturally rooted and rational. Moreover, moving beyond media panic theory toward context specific analysis of parental concerns, researchers are able to 'draw the line between a proportionate, objective response and an irrational panic'. (Buckingham and Jensen, 2012: 418)

To sum up this section, we would say that in order to map parental worries related to the risks of technology for young children, we have to consider not only the explicitly expressed parental concerns, but also their mediation practices that in general answer to more hidden parental concerns. Moreover, in order to understand these concerns, the analysis should be cultural and contextual rooted, allowing to separate genuine concerns by those emulating media panics discourse.

## METHODOLOGY

### *DATA COLLECTION METHODS*

The data discussed in the present paper were collected as a part of the international project “Young Children (0–8) and digital technology”. The main purpose of the study is to explore young children’s and their families’ experiences with digital technologies. The project was coordinated by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and started in 2014 with a pilot in seven EU countries, and then extended with a second-wave of data collection in 2015–2016 to sixteen. Third-wave interviews, monitoring change over time, took place in 2017, across 10 countries. (Chaudron *et al.*, 2018) The analysis offered in this paper derives from data collected during the second-wave of the project.

In all countries, researchers conducted separate in-depth qualitative interviews with children and their parents. All interviews followed an observation protocol prepared in advance. As the study was highly exploratory, researchers could adapt the agreed protocols to specific interview contexts, taking into account different countries, cultural and family characteristics, while still focusing on research questions.

Ethical issues were regarded with high sensitivity, obtaining informed consent from parents and children, listening to children closely, compassionately and with respect. Complete anonymity was assured and all participants were provided with detailed information about our research.

### *SAMPLING*

In its second, extended phase, the study was conducted in Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Russia, Spain, and Switzerland. At least ten families per country were selected using snowball and purposive sampling. Each country aimed to address diverse family structures in terms of children’s ages and gender, family composition, and income. Families with at least one child under eight and at least one parent were included. In each family, at least one parent and a child aged between six and eight years, using digital technologies at least once a week, were interviewed.

For this paper, we privileged data from Portugal, Romania and Slovenia, on which the authors have a direct knowledge. In Slovenia and Portugal, samples included ten families (per country), while in Romania, eleven.

#### DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

A typical family visit consisted of three stages. After the introduction of the project, it began with a warm-up activity with an Insafe book<sup>1</sup>, where introductions were made. Qualitative in-depth interviews with selected children, aged between six and eight, followed afterwards, preferably in their room, alone or in interactions with siblings. To facilitate the interview, innovative and age-appropriate tools were used – e.g. children showing their toys and how they play, researchers using a card game through which children casted their preferences about online and offline activities and gadgets, drawings of favorite digital activities games. Parental interviews with each parent separately followed the parent's protocol based on a semi-conducted pattern and revolved around children's use, parental mediation, and parental worries. An informal chat with all the family, where anyone had the chance to make additions to their contributions, wrapped up the visit.

#### DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

All family visits were documented in a form of photos, taken either by children or researchers; interview audio-recordings; and researchers' field notes. All qualitative interviews were transcribed ad verbatim, organized in thematic categories and interpretatively analyzed for parental worries (or lack of them). The main data analysis method used in this chapter is thematic analysis. This is a form of analysis to understand ideas emerging from qualitative data by arranging them into identifiable patterns and thematic categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic categories that emerged from Nvivo coding are as follows: risks of / concerns of health-related issues (e.g. vision, excessive screen time, lack of exercise, sleep, bad quality of sleep, etc.), screen addiction, exposure to age-inappropriate content (violence, bad language, sex), social exclusion by absence or under use of digital media, nostalgia of childhood of before digital time, concerns of losing opportunities for essential childhood experiences, mainly outdoors, bad school performance, learning the "right" skills for the future.

In the results section, each category is interpreted in a form of a case study for each selected country. The interpretation is backed up by ad verbatim citations from parental interviews.

#### PARENTAL ACCOUNTS ON CONCERNS IN PORTUGAL, ROMANIA AND SLOVENIA

##### HEALTH ISSUES

At this age, parental concerns over screen time revolve around the (perceived) **negative health impact** it is likely to have. In Portugal, the biggest

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<sup>1</sup> Insafe (2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2015) Activity Book – Play and learn: Being online, European Schoolnet, Brussels.

concern for parents was health-related consequences of over-use of screened-media. In most homes, parents expressed the potential negative effects of excessive screen-time on eyesight, sleep, and concentration. Some were also concerned that the excess of digital technologies will have an impact on children's health, generating problems such as sedentarism and obesity, as well as affecting the development of their social skills.

*PT07m<sup>2</sup>: "I think they are going to miss a lot in terms of human relations. For me, these new technologies, because of social networks like Skype and such, do not bring people together, [they] drive them apart."*

In Romania, parents frequently mention headaches and problems in vision. It is only at older ages that parents start worrying about the impact of screen time on **children's school performance**. **Other health issues**, related to obesity and sedentariness, are explicitly excluded by some of the parents, who suggest that their children's outdoor and sporting activities 'compensate' for their digital practices.

Also in Slovenia, the most frequent parental concern about using digital technologies by small children is also **health related**. Parents believe that spending long hours behind the screen can cause significant health problems, referring to bad posture and vision problems. Therefore, in most homes, parents use time restrictions and make a lot of effort to offer children high quality offline alternatives to spend their time.

*SI05f37: "My main worry is that my kid's vision would be impaired and that he developed a bad posture due to using the tablet too much. He is in a very strange position, curled in a way and then the only move is sliding his finger... truly worrying..."*

A very interesting view was offered by a father who is actively using computers and other digital technologies for work (programming). He adopted a more critical stance toward these concerns and, based on his experience with digital technology, dismissed them arguing for other specific concerns.

*SI03m36: "If they used it a lot... I would be worried... I mean... well, I don't know... They kept telling as a child me I would damage my eyes because I used to be in front of the computer all the time... but I did not damage my eyes, my vision is still very clear. They kept telling me i will damage my back and also my back is still in great condition. Hm... I actually think there are no real health concerns... My true and only worry would be if my children had their own devices (tablets, smartphones) that they could communicate with anyone as if they were on the street... I think to*

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<sup>2</sup> The code we use for referring to individuals and families should be read as follows: first, there is the name of the country, the number identifying the family, then the role into the family (m stays for mother and f for father); in some countries, also the age of the parent is mentioned.

*control what a child is doing is actually wrong... but you have to talk on a regular basis with your child to gain their trust... so that the child can know they can tell you anything, even if doing something wrong. You cannot be angry at your child if they do something wrong and do not know better”.*

#### SCREEN ADDICTION AND EXCESSIVE USE ISSUES

In Portugal, addiction and excessive use issues are closely connected to health-related issues as parents believe that health problems are the consequences of overuse of screened digital technologies. In most homes, they set restrictions related to the time use and some parents also refer being worried with addictive behavior of their children.

*PT07f: “He [son, 6 years old] gets completely altered [when he is playing games on the tablet]”.PT07m: “He is addicted!”*

In Romania and Slovenia, parents see the addiction and screen issues more as a future threat. In both countries, the majority of interviewed parents see excessive use as a possible (or sometimes inevitable) future problem, but not for the time being. They considering their strategies of reducing time of use efficient, mainly by offering them (outdoor) alternatives.

*RO10m39: “They access the computer only while I am at home, and they ask me, ‘Mom, can I?’ (...) I didn’t let them use the computer much. I (...) It’s better for them to play in the street, with other children. That’s what I think. There will come a day when I won’t be able to take them away from the computer, but until then...”*

*SI01f40. “...that it will completely overtake my child, that he would not be able to stop looking at the tablet ... this worries me much more than the content itself.”*

In Romania, what is seen as excessive use of digital technologies is already present in some families, where parents often argue with their children regarding time of use. In some cases, parents feel at ease with ‘older’ media, and time spent watching them is seen as something ‘natural’ (seeing animals on TV is a sort of ‘immersion in nature’), whereas they object time spent on digital devices.

*RO09m29: “I don’t particularly fancy the fact he [son, 7 years old] spends so much time on the tablet, PSP or on the internet. I keep telling him: dear, let’s give these eyes a break, watch something else for a change. So we watch a cartoon, a movie (...) animal programs.”*



Also in Slovenia, a few interviewed parents are anxious about psychological consequences, *e.g.* addiction. They expressed their worry about children spending too much time on the tablet and the possibility of getting addicted.

*SI04f35: "My main concern is addiction ... spending too much time behind the screen... not yet, but soon, I feel. We will need to find a way to prevent that."*

#### **EXPOSURE TO AGE-INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT (VIOLENCE, BAD LANGUAGE, SEXUAL CONTENT)**

In Portugal, parents do not express concerns with age-inappropriate content or other dangers *such as cyber-bullying or contact with strangers*. They acknowledged social media as a serious reason for concern, but for older children. They also believed their children still lacked the skills for more complex internet uses, and consequently were not exposed to such dangers. However, researchers observed that some children were exposed to age-inappropriate content on YouTube, to intrusive in-app advertising, and to contact with strangers on game apps that included chats.

Also in Romania and Slovenia, mostly concerns in children-appropriate content is mentioned by parents. Although some Romanian parents mentioned incidents where children accidentally encountered some sort of sexual content, parents do not necessarily consider this a problem, as long as children do not actively search for such content. To them, more stringent to cope with is the violent content, which they see as being ubiquitous in games:

*RO05m35: "They all have to include some fighting aspect. The dinosaurs had to fight and kill each other and any game has, ultimately, something violent in it."*

A specific concern related to violent content is the algorithm used by YouTube to suggest content. The suggestion mechanism makes many parents feel insecure and be on alert, monitoring their child's activity online, or taking technical measures to restrict the respective content:

*RO05m35: "I'm not interfering, but I am careful about the films. From one video to another, as Youtube suggests, it's likely they may get to something very violent."*

*RO01m45: (recounting how she got to set the parental control on YouTube) "So I think I bumped into something myself, initially and realized, look, one click away there's a film potentially... (she hesitates, beat) I don't remember what it was, exactly. Something aggressive (much more confident). And then I searched for the setting. I guess that must have been the case. So at first I didn't think to do such a thing, because the child was too small – she was, I don't know, two or three, I*

*thought she's got no place to get there, but look at that!, I was showing videos to her, she was curious and clicked, let me see this one, and that one and the other one – she was seeing the previews – and I realized she could get to click on one which is not ok. And then I searched the settings.”*

In Slovenia, only a few parents raised concern about contacts and content but mostly in a hypothetical way as their children are not there yet with their basic use of digital technologies. Most parents consider a sincere and open relationship with children as better alternative to installing blocking software as a way to prevent children to suffer from harmful content / experience online.

*SI02f35: “...some problems can be solved by installing a filter of blocking program. Although this might not be really effective as it is then only at home computers... what about everything else... What I am truly worried about is... am... that she would not tell me, not talk to me if anything unpleasant, bad would happen to her. Therefore, I am trying hard to establish an honest and gentle relationship with her. Even though, I am still wondering if she will tell... or she will bottle unpleasant things up and wonder tell or not to tell mom.”*

*SI05m42: “I believe that talking to my child will have a much better impact on how she will react when experiencing something bad online as opposed to using some automatic program to block harmful stuff. I am making an effort to let her know she can rely on me even if she makes a mistake... I don't know...”*

#### SOCIAL EXCLUSION ISSUES

Not only the overuse of digital technology is seen as problematic, but also the underuse or the lack of access. Thus, in general, parents are aware that absence or under use of digital technologies can result in social exclusion of their children. However, the majority believes this can be a future cause of concern and it is not yet observed at this age and stage of their children's lives. They recognized that they are indispensable for their children's future and very useful.

*PT03m: “Technology builds, it supposedly facilitates work and life to humankind. If I don't give her [daughter, 7 years old] access to it, I am excluding her from the world we live in currently.”*

In Romania, parents express mixed perceptions and attitudes towards digital media. For some, the issue of social exclusion is linked with the fear of parental exclusion from children's lives, technology playing at this age the role of the umbilical cord through which parents stay in touch with the child. (Haddon, Vincent, 2014).

*RO05m35: "Around six (he asked): "Mom, I will soon turn seven, will I get a phone?", and mommy's answer was, "No, absolutely not." Then he took us separately. He took daddy separately: "Dad, when I'll turn seven...?" and dad said, "No, it's out of the question!" Then he took it to his aunt, and the same, she said no. That, until we experienced the first field trip we did not know anything about him from morning till dusk; and it was also his school mistress' first field trip with them and she wanted to see who is she dealing with, parents-wise, who's a control freak and cannot stay out of touch with their own children. And then we said it's strictly to this avail, and wrote Santa and then Santa brought the phone, with a note, I told you, where it said it's only for field trips and camps".*

In Slovenia, for children under the age of eight, which were included in this study, parents do not see a lack of access as a sign of deprivation for their children.

*SI09f33: "I believe that children before the age of at least eight are too young to be exposed to it. It is quickly rather too much than too little."*

#### NOSTALGIA OF CHILDHOOD OF BEFORE DIGITAL TIME

In all three countries, parents expressed a strong sense of nostalgia for their own childhood. Concerns of losing opportunities for essential childhood experiences, mainly outdoors, were raised. In Portugal, they regretted that their children could not enjoy certain perks, such as **having closer contact with nature or playing outdoors** with friends often (which is considered not to be safe anymore). Worse, they regretted that sometimes their children did not want to enjoy outdoors activities, because they preferred staying indoors and playing with tablets or smartphones.

*PT04m: "Kids don't play like we used to anymore. They don't play on the street. They [daughter, 9 years old, and sons, 7, 6 and 3 years old] must learn to play all together and to go outside. I don't like that they stay at home all the time, stuffed inside."*

As previously mentioned, in Romania, the **nostalgic discourse of childhood** comes in par with concern of excessive use. Parents try to reduce some of that by offering them outdoor alternatives.

*RO10m39: 'They access the computer only while I am at home, and they ask me, 'Mom, can I?' (...) I didn't let them use the computer much. I (...) It's better for them to play in the street, with other children. That's what I think. There will come a day when I won't be able to take them away from the computer, but until then...'*

*RO11m37: "They don't have a childhood anymore. Well, it's not my case, since I hold them tight. When the tablets appeared in the house, the kids did not*

*disconnect for two weeks. Thus, they (the tablets) were confiscated (...) until they came back to their regular schedule.”*

In Slovenia, almost every interviewed parent expressed a **nostalgic view of their own childhood**, outdoor playing and spending time in nature. They try to practice this “genuine childhood”, as one mother labeled it, as much as possible by providing children with attractive offline alternatives to screen time. Most interviewed parents are making a great effort to spend the days as active as possible and to reduce the screen time as much as possible. In this way, they believe, children have a sufficient amount of movement and activities and do not crave passive sitting screen time as much as they might.

*SI08m38: “We spend as much time outside as possible, playing in the playground, going to the woods, hiking, cycling. I believe there will be a lot of time to get more familiar with internet when they are older”.*

*SI09f33: “When I was a kid, we use to play outside and we were happy. Things were simple, life was simple. I still believe in that simplicity and want my children to get a feel of it. Screens are not everything!”*

#### **BAD SCHOOL PERFORMANCE**

It is only at older ages that parents start worrying about the impact of screen time on **children’s school performance**.

In Portugal, parents are generally attentive to excessive screen time, and a common rule in several of the homes is that children are only allowed to play with digital devices after they have finished their homework.

*Pt06m42: “He is only allowed to play after finishing his homework. School always comes before play”.*

The same approach seems to exist also in Romania where a big difference appears in parental concerns related to children 5 to 6 and for those that are 7 to 8 years old. As at older ages kids are in school, a new concern about children’s school results is expressed by parents, concern that imposes new rules in the use of digital technology.

*RO02m27: “Ok, yes. So she doesn’t need any laptop or computer until she’s done her homework. And I don’t let her do it in a hurry. So yes, that’s a rule. She’s not to come home and hop on to the computer, on this and that and in the evening to get to realize, oh, my God, there’s homework to be done. No. She’s coming home, she’s washing up, changing clothes, eating and then she tackles the homework”.*

In Slovenia, none of the interviewed parents expressed the fear of bad school performance due to the use of digital technologies at this particular age as the interviewed children are not in school yet or have barely started school.

#### LEARNING THE “RIGHT” SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

In Portugal, most parents also believe that digital technologies will be key in their children’s future, and consider important that they develop digital skills. However, only in a few families, especially those with higher formal education, do parents get involved in teaching and advising about digital practices.

*Pt09m36: “I like to help her [daughter] to choose the information that is good for her. It is important to help her to take the best advantage of digital technologies”.*

*Pt02f41: “I like to play with my son using Scratch. That way he is learning how to code. I believe that will be an important skill for his future”.*

*Pt10m42: “Digital technologies should be explored by parents and children together. That is the only way children will learn control and good use”.*

The same is true for some Romanian parents, again, especially those with a higher formal education who use digital technologies in their everyday lives and for work related purposes, in order to broaden children’s understanding and use of the internet, actively mediate their children, teaching them how to use the internet more efficiently. This approach derives from parental concerns that one should not only ‘use the internet’, but use it appropriately.

*RO07f38: “I want to teach him how to better use Google, but it’s frustrating, because for what he needs to know, he has to write in English. I showed him an aikido master on YouTube and some aikido movements. Now I don’t know if he would’ve thought of searching it himself. But now that I showed it to him, he’s got the initiative of searching for it himself”.*

*RO06f47: “And I tried to explain nicely and calmly that it’s very important the spelling and that others notice such things. And that could make a difference one day, so it’s a good thing to learn the spelling, including online. Forget about the others: they don’t know, it’s their own business. But I’d like you to know, right? And I can see he’s careful about this”.*

Also in Slovenia, the majority of interviewed parents believe that as children grow, the digital technologies will step forward in their lives. They believe digital technologies will play a more important role in developing children’s literacy skills.

*SI02f35: “When the time comes, we will sit and talk to our children, so they learn how to use applications and sites with positive, educational and informative content for them and gain knowledge and skills that other children also will have”.*

*SI04f34: "We know that digital technologies are also good for children, especially when they start attending school. We hope school will teach them to look for the right information instead of memorizing that information as it was in the non-digital times."*

In one of the visited families, mother and father hold a very positive approach to digital technologies – parents realize the importance of being familiar and having the knowledge to use them in the nowadays information society. Especially the father wants to introduce children the various possibilities of use. For instance, he showed them how to make a Skype call, how to play games, how to code with a program language for children "Scratch". Through Cardboard 3D he showed them the solar system. On one hand, children are fascinated with what they see. On the other hand, they still prefer offline activities and parents playing with them. Father believes that when they grow a little, he will be more successful with his efforts. Mother plans to get more engaged in introducing them to various educational applications when they reach the age of eight, nine.

#### DISCUSSION: BALANCING CONCERNS WITH OPPORTUNITIES

Apart from feeling in control of children's technology use, sometimes the lack of concerns in the discourse of parents could be understood by how they balance the risks of digital technology with its opportunities. (Livingstone, 2013) The most frequent opportunities for children mentioned are educational opportunities (especially for learning English) and quality family time around technology. Playing together, with digital technologies involved, is another recurring family activity that showed up during the interviews – either between siblings, or between parents and sons / daughters, either side-by-side or one after the other, teaming in the same account, sharing **advice**. Most of the parents believe and practice co-use. In this regard, digital technologies are seldom used as a part of punishment-reward system.

In all three countries parents are concerned with time screen and the derived health problem of overuse. While almost everywhere time-restrictive parental mediation practices (Chen, Cheng, 2016) are in use, parents still mention health related problems as an echo of media panic discourse. (Drotner, 1999) In Slovenia, addiction as a psychological deviation was mentioned as a problem. While parents have the overuse concern hanging over their heads, being in control of it is seen only as a temporary situation. Most of the parents still mention it either as a future concern, or as other families' problem. Called third-person effect (Perloff, 2002), or optimistic bias (Cho *et al.*, 2010), this discursive approach of public worries that are circulated by media shows the fragile situation of parents caught between media discourse and their understanding of their specific current situation.

Whereas in Slovenia and Portugal sometimes parents state it explicitly that they are not concerned with inappropriate content, in Romania this is an issue many parents mentioned, not related with sexual content, but with the ubiquities of violence. This could be due to the fact that in Romania the issue of media violence and its impact on children is relatively new, occurring only after 1990 (with the fall of the communist regime) as before the scarcity of TV content broadcasted and the state censorship made the topic irrelevant. (Velicu, 2012) The deconstructed discourse of such media panics are not yet present, and therefore Romanian parents are pressed by this panic-loaded discourse. As we noticed before, the concern for in-appropriate content pairs sometimes with concerns on algorithms-based suggestions for online content made available by some internet platforms resulting in a more genuine, present and personal parental concerns. (see also Mascheroni, 2018)

Although parental concerns for inappropriate content rely on ‘children’s right to innocence’ assumption, our data showed that not all the inappropriate content is treated likewise by parents. Whereas for violent content parents actively engage in a ‘purging’ activity aiming to clean as much violence as possible from the online content children access, regarding the sexual content they do not pursue a similar strategy. In this case parents declared being satisfied if children do not actively search for this kind of content, a sense of fatality and resignation being associated with children’s accidentally exposure to this type of content. This difference could be explained by the fact that, as Buckingham and Bragg (2004) noticed, while many studies searched for the effect of media violence on children, very few actually approached the effect of sexual content and pornography on children and even less on young children. Moreover, as other studies have shown, children do develop effective strategies to cope with the unwanted sexual content (d’Haenens, Tsaliki, 2012), a not so concerned attitude from parents’ part being therefore welcome.

Studies showed that risks and opportunities of the internet go hand in hand; children that are more exposed to online risks being the same with those who are more prone to taking advantage of online opportunities. (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011) Our data showed that parents align with these conclusions and deem some risks as acceptable (*i.e.* not subject of concerns), as they considered them balanced by the opportunities technology offers to their children, in general related to the children’s current academic achievement (*e.g.* learning English). Nonetheless, there are different narratives, depending on if the technology is used in school or not. Thus, if there is a school request for using digital technology from the first grades, parents have a good opinion on technology and allow children to use it more willing (Portugal case), whilst in Romania and Slovenia, there is no such a request. Therefore parents tend to see children’s use of technology having a rather negative impact on school grades, except when the parent knows for sure that children use some educational app.

Another opportunity that parents from all countries evoked is the family quality time around technology. While in Portugal and Romania this is framed as parents and children finding a common ground for sharing and co-using (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011), in Slovenia this seems to be a conscious form of parental mediation that aims to increase children's trust in parents and their knowledge about the internet. Thus, Slovenian parents aim to establish a trust base on which to open the communication with the child acknowledge children's agency and manifest a 'child-centered approach to socialization'. (James, 2013)

In line with other studies that highlight the parental concerns with children being prepared for a digital future (Blum-Ross, Livingstone, 2016), parents acknowledge the importance of technology in children's future and with this incentive are more willing to deal with current concerns.

Parents expressed a strong sense of nostalgia for their own childhood. Although they do not directly blame digital technology for this loss, they nevertheless opposed the nature / outdoor time with technology-based time. As such, the reading of this nostalgic discourse in terms of media panics theory (Drotner, 1999) in which everything that is new menaces 'the old good time', seems to be appropriate.

#### **CONCLUSION: PARENTAL CONCERNS – INHERITAGE OF MEDIA PANIC BALANCED WITH PROPER EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE**

Most of the parents tend to mild their concerns in the light of their own experience with digital technology and their parental mediation strategies. Indeed rare are the parents that categorically say that digital technology is entirely 'bad' or 'good' for their children under 8 years old.

Thus, parents in general contextualize their views about digital technology (what, when, where). Most of the time the 'good' part of their account rely on personal and direct experiences whereas the 'bad' part is mainly an echo of general public fears and concerns. Accounts of real concerns are present in the interviews when the family had to face a real and tangible problem like negative signs of overuse of digital technology by one member of the family at a point that would impact the well-being of the entire family or behaviour linked to the use of the technology that would shock the family values.

Despite witnessing panicking discourse about technology and its influence on children in media and in public space (Mascheroni *et al.*, 2014), the parents we interviewed seem to be able to contextualized it into their own situations and reduce their level of declarative concerns following their parenting strategies that can be enabling or restrictive; participative or protective. What exactly shapes these strategies was not the object of this study to look at, but we can advance as an hypothesis for a future study the idea that, among others, parental digital skills



have a role to play in parental decisions. Moreover, the parental strategies are probably influenced by the image parents have on childhood in general.

At a practical level, these results confirm Buckingham and Jensen (2012) ideas, showing that parents are not as irrational as media panic theory sometimes consider, but that even though sometimes influence by some public discourses in respect with what should be concerned with, they digest them related with their own family. Another thing that emerged from this study was that parents need a space to confront their own concerns with similar parents or with more evidence based data.

From a methodological point of view, the presented study is an exploratory study, including ten families per country. Hence, the discussed results are in-depth insights in the lives, practices, concerns and behaviors of these families. Would we attempt to make broader conclusions and generalizations, these results could be used as a starting point for designing a measurement tool that could enable us to conduct a representative survey to determine how our current results could be transferred and applied to a wider range of families across countries.

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