

Babeş-Bolyai University
Faculty of Sociology and Social Work
Cluj-Napoca

From Unequal Access to Differentiate Use: Persistence of
Digital Inequalities among Romanian Adolescents

Doctoral Thesis

Summary

Supervisor:
Professor Petru Iluţ, PhD

Doctoral candidate:
Bianca Fizeşan (căs. Balea)

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Key words: Digital Divide; digital engagement; digital inequality; digital (Internet) skills; digital natives; Internet usage; online opportunities; self-efficacy; social class theory; social inequality.

Introduction

This thesis argues that socioeconomic background is a significant predictor of children's digital outcomes and cause variations in their levels of Internet skills, confidences in use, and digital engagement, which in turn are mapped into existing social inequalities. Further, in some cases, the existing inequalities are amplified indicating support for the conflict paradigm. Moreover, in lines with social inequality theory, differential use among children can convert into differences in children's socioeconomic status since adolescents from higher educational background are better skilled, are more confident, and undertake a wider range of online opportunities, which can be converted into digital support for parents. Thus, by providing high quality access and owning digital skills, families with higher socioeconomic background pass on to young people their assets and manage to secure their position in the market economy. Therefore, the present thesis offers support for the embracement of the Internet, seen at the beginning as an emblem of free and open society as an active reproducer and possible accelerator of social inequality (Witte and Mannon, 2009). In addition, the present dissertation challenge digital natives narratives, by illustrating that adolescents embed the Internet in their everyday lives differently as some of them make use of the most advanced and creative online activities while most of them tend to settle for the common and less gainful ones. A final and significant statement of this present thesis is that for an adolescent in order to turn into an experienced user once he embedded the Internet in his everyday life is a matter of skills, experience, and time spent online, being less a matter of socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES). These understandings emerged from secondary analyses on EU Kids Online II international research database and qualitative group-interviews with adolescents, using several theoretical approaches.

Impetus for this research

In the context of the Digital Agenda for Europe's aim to have every European digital, starting with children, a particular concern raised among the policy makers regarding children needs and vulnerabilities on the Internet since the number of them is increasing rapidly. Flash Eurobarometer (2008) shows that 75 per cent of children in EU27 were online in 2008, according to their parents. Romania is at the bottom in this hierarchy with 68 per cent of parents admitting that their child is using the Internet. Through a recent communication named "European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children" 2012, the European Commission expresses the necessity for the Internet to become a place of opportunities for children to access knowledge, to communicate, to develop their skills and to improve their job perspectives and employability. Among the opportunities to which this report refers are play, learn, innovate and be creative, communicate and express themselves, collaborate and engage in society, to be more aware of the world around them, and to develop essential skills, and exercise their rights. An increasing body of literature shows that while some children and adolescents already take-up these online opportunities that the Internet has to share, the majority of them rely on common activities (e.g. School work related, online playing) missing most of the gratifications. According to EU Kids online II (Hasebrink et al., 2011) children in Romania are considered new and unskilled users that undertake few online opportunities and encounter many online risks. In spite of these characteristics, there are few studies addressing this issue in Romania whilst most theoretical. The current thesis attempts to strengthen and extend this scarce body of work by exploring patterns of access and use among children and adolescents in Romania. Further, it will investigate the most powerful determinants and barriers that cause variations in their levels of Internet usage.

Since the research on children's Internet access and use are in some regards scarce, especially in Romania, maybe understanding the problem of digital inequalities both at a global and individual level could provide some insights on the specific issue advanced above. Findings suggest stark disparities between world regions with a concentrated number of users in developed countries. Moreover, the current picture of physical access inside the European Union highlights an intriguing situation. While Northern and Western EU countries have crossed the fault line of the digital divide, Southern and Eastern EU countries are still struggling to exceed EU rate (73%). Regarding Romania, Eurostat (2012) places our country on the last position among

the EU countries with respect to its Internet diffusion rates and a number of other dimensions of Internet uptake. In addition to this significant lag in Internet diffusion rates, Romania is also facing difficult problems with regard to differences in Internet use among its individuals based on their region of origin. Furthermore, if we consider individual variables like age, education, income, and employment status digital inequalities are far from closing as some are deepening.

However, an extensive review of the literature concerned on the determinants of digital inequalities among individuals found that addressing the digital divide as a simple binary distinction between people, based upon their access/or lack of it to the Internet, is not satisfactory. Therefore, the traditional understanding of access has slowly been replaced by a number of concrete operational definitions, which resulted in a framework for the digital divide in terms of the social inclusion agenda, changing its meaning into digital inequality or digital inclusion. Several scholars refer to this stage as the second level of the digital divide, idea that emphasize the shift from referring to the digital divide as binaries of access/no-access or use/non-use to the range and quality of use.

There is a substantial theoretical gap regarding the nature of the links between digital and social exclusion approaches. While social exclusion is a topic that was discussed intensively by sociologists and economists for a long time, resulting in a long list of social and economic measures required in order to diminish these inequalities, few scholars tried to connect them with digital exclusion issue. This leaves a theoretical gap in the digital inequalities literature. Drawing on the work of several studies, which argue that online situation reflects offline society and as long as social inequality continues to exist offline there be no equality online and vice versa, this present thesis proposes a theoretical framework which connects the social inequalities theories with those of digital inequalities through the lens of major conflict perspectives. Accordingly, the Internet access and usage can also be seen as assets, which the dominant class use in order to preserve their privileges, and, consequently, their power. Differences in Internet use among adults have the potential to perpetuate rather than challenge class advantages that parents pass on to their children. Studies suggest that SES background is associated even with the children's online competencies. First of all, children that come from privileged backgrounds are more likely to use the Internet than their counterparts from less

privileged backgrounds. Second, the evidence suggests that class advantage pass to the next generation in regards to digital skills too. Children from high status families are more skilled than those coming from low status families. These connections reinforce the importance of investigating the main determinants of variations in children's Internet access and use.

In spite of the importance of this topic, there is scarcity in the theoretical and empirical development regarding the nature of digital engagement among children, mostly because to measure the level of digital inclusion it is still a controversial issue. Therefore, most of them focus on the effects of the new media diffusion on children's lives and children's experiences, needs, and concerns in terms of media usage. Regardless of the subject, the majority of these studies use a quantitative approach while the in-depth qualitative work remains almost unexplored. However, the present literature offers two main approaches in order to measure digital engagement, quantitatively through an evaluation of the number of things that people do using the technology or through a qualitative method by focusing on the nature or content of engagement. The present thesis will address this gap in qualitative studies by exploring children's digital engagement in Romania through the lens of digital literacy and digital inclusion theories.

Another significant gap in the literature reveals a striking lack of research on adults or children that, for some reasons, are excluded from the online world. Research on these individuals almost exclusively resumes at statistics regarding their number and main motivations for being outsiders. Whilst some of this present work attempts to theoretically account for differences among online outsiders based on their motivations, most remains unexplored. Studying both adults and children, who are not using the Internet, represents a significant part of digital inequalities issue, which could provide valuable explications regarding the perpetuation of digital inequalities. Furthermore, a theoretical and methodological approach centred on those excluded from online community could provide valuable information in respect of opportunities that Internet has to offer since there is no common sense about the effect of the Internet on people's life.

Hypothesis, Objectives, and Research Questions

Hypothesis

This thesis hypothesizes that, for some Romanian adolescents the Internet is a valuable, engaging, and gainful resource while, for the majority, it remains a random and rather trivial one. Therefore, a more nuanced sociological approach would help understand how demographic variables (both parents and children related) and Internet use indicators (both parents and children related) determine variations in the way children and adolescents engage with the Internet in everyday life.

Objectives

This research is guided by the following objectives:

- o Identify the main determinants of the variations in Internet access and use worldwide, in European Union, and Romania.
- o Identify the main determinants of the variations in children and adolescents Internet access and use, in EU and Romania.
- o Understand how digital inequalities persist among adolescents in Romania even when they make use of the Internet on a daily basis.
- o Investigate the main determinants and barriers that teens encounter when trying to engage in the most advanced and creative Internet use.

Research questions

The following research questions are explored in the secondary analyses and through focus-groups:

Are there digital differences among children and young people in Romania?

- Do differences in access and usage of the Internet translate into differences in user's socioeconomic status?
- Are there connections between adolescents' Internet use, skills, and parent's educational background which implicates the Internet in the reproduction of class privilege in Romania?

If considered Bourdieuan approach on the ties between the Internet use and social inequalities, do children cultivate different forms of Internet practice based on their socioeconomic status in Romania?

- What are the main determinants, besides age, for a teenager to engage in an advanced, creative, and, consequently, capital-enhancing Internet use, in Romania?

Theoretical approach and Methodological rationale

Despite the recurrent controversy, it remained conventional among sociologists to discuss social inequalities in terms of discrete classes or strata whose members have similar levels or types of assets (Grusky & Manawai, 2008). This approach could be used also in studying the relationship between the Internet and social inequalities if we consider the Internet not only as a technological tool, but also as a social institution that has to be studied from a sociological perspective (van Dijk, 1999; 2005; Witte & Mannon, 2010). Several authors emphasize that people's Internet usage does not occur in isolation to their societal position and the social institutions they inhabit (DiMaggio et al., 2001, 2004; van Dijk, 1999, 2005; Hargittai, 2008). Moreover, these factors may influence the ways in which individual access and use the Internet. Accordingly, the Internet could exacerbate existing inequalities by increasing opportunities available to the elite while leading to the growing marginalization of the disadvantaged (Hargittai, 2008, p 936). Factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, education, income and wealth are also relevant to individual's Internet experience.

The importance of understanding inequality in Internet access and use as a form of social inequality, consequently as a source of social stratification, is further underlined due to the belief that online situation reflects offline society and as long as social inequality continues to exist offline there will be no equality online and vice versa. This means that, on the one hand, socially excluded people are less likely to have material and educational resources to engage with the Internet, or other technologies, in a meaningful way. On the other hand, those who are not using the Internet in a capital-enhancing way (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai, 2010) due to several socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. Age, gender, SES, and ethnicity) and psychological factors (e.g. Motivation, knowledge, skills) will remain in a societal disadvantaged position. Unfortunately, the theoretical work regarding the nature of the links

between digital and social exclusion is scarce (Helsper, 2008). While social exclusion is a topic that was discussed intensively by sociologists and economists for a long time, resulting in a long list of social and economic measures required in order to diminish these inequalities, only some scholars tried to connect them with digital exclusion issue (Helsper, 2008). Accordingly, those who are already social disadvantage are up to seven times more likely to lack material and educational resources in order to engage with technologies that are those who are socially advantaged (Helsper, 2008). Moreover, even supposing that these disadvantaged social categories get access to the Internet, they are unlikely to engage with technologies in the same way as privileged (Helsper & Galacz, 2009)

Therefore, in order to explain the disparities in people's Internet use emphasized by the figures presented in above sections we need to contextualize the problem of digital inequality as a source of social stratification. Refined approaches of this topic recognize that people's socioeconomic status influence the ways in which they have access and use the Internet and other technologies. Accordingly, in addition to factors as age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, education, and wealth, one's social surroundings are also relevant to one's ICT experiences (Hargittai, 2008, p. 938). Mainly, what this approach states is that the societal position that users inhabit influences aspects of their digital media uses that lead to differential Internet use. Furthermore, some uses are more likely to translate in beneficial outcomes than others. The question raised is whether this differential use can convert into differences in user's socioeconomic status. Several scholars tried to give an answer, and the majority of them suggest that certain types of Internet uses can result in increasing human capital, financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital while other types of uses may disadvantage the uniformed (DiMaggio et al., 2004; van Dijk, 2005; Hargittai, 2008). Indeed, there are findings that suggest that high-status and low-status individuals cultivate different forms of Internet practice. Users with a high status background are more likely to engage in so-called capital enhancing activities online than are their less privileged counterparts (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). DiMaggio and Hargittai (2004) refer to capital-enhancing activities as those activities that may lead to more informed political participation, help with one's career advancement, or consulting information about financial and health services. They are arguing that not all online activities are equally relevant to enhancing one's human,

financial, and social capital (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; DiMaggio, Hargittai, et al., 2004). As a result, those who know to make use of the Internet's vast landscape and how to use digital media to address their need can reap significant benefits from it. In contrast, those who lack abilities in these domains may have a harder time dealing with certain problems of everyday life, may miss out opportunities, and may also obtain incorrect information from unreliable sources (Hargittai, 2008).

The correspondence between the Internet and Bourdieu's concept of capital has been made by van Deursen (2010), which attempts, in his work, to respond to the question 'How Internet contributes to social inequality since all forms of capital can promote inequality?' (p. 25). He talks about a mutual relationship between these concepts. Accordingly, all forms of capital affect Internet access. If, economic capital is vital to acquire the supporting means (e.g. A personal computer and Internet service), social capital helps the individual to learn to connect to and use the Internet with the support of others and to reach others. Furthermore, cultural capital is a tool used by individuals in order to cope with a diverse amount of available content supplied for people with different cultural backgrounds. In turn, the Internet affects these three forms of capital. Economic capital could be increased by finding a better job, social capital by extending physical networks to virtual ones, increasing civic engagement (Katz & Rice, 2002). Lastly, cultural capital can be enlarged by using the Internet for learning purposes (Van Deursen, 2010, p 25). The result is that as the following section illustrates, groups with lower levels of capital, economic, social or cultural, will not be able to use the Internet as a capital-enhancing tool and will remain disadvantaged. At the same time, those who come from a privileged background will have the resources to maintain their high position in the hierarchy of society or even to increase it. Therefore, rather equalizing, the Internet is likely to reinforce and recreates social inequality, which could enhance already the disadvantaged or the excluded (van Dijk, 2005; van Deursen 2010).

Drawing on the conflict perspective inequality rests on the power of the dominant class, which use its assets to maintain its advantaged position in society. If skills are considered a kind of asset (Van Dijk, 2005; 2006; Van Deursen, 2010; Witte & Mannon, 2009), then the Internet access and usage can also be seen as assets, which the dominant class use in order to preserve their privileges, and, consequently, their power. Furthermore, according to the same perspective, the advantages upon which

elite rest reproduce from one generation to the next. As a consequence, these new technologies may even exacerbate these inequalities over time as nonusers become marginalized from the Internet and popular forms of political, social, and economic participation (van Dijk, 2005; Witte & Mannon, 2009). If Internet access and use contribute to reproduction of an unequal class structure, then we would expect that access to the Internet and possession of digital skills to be passed on to young people to secure their position in the market economy (Witte & Mannon, 2009, p. 81). What was thought as an “emblem of free and open society” may become an “active reproducer and possible accelerator of social inequality” (van Dijk, 2005).

Witte and Mannon (2009) have challenged this scenario and found that children growing up in families with higher levels of SES would be more likely to spend time around adults who use the Internet and in homes where the Internet is available. Furthermore, their findings suggest a strong statistical relationship between parent’s education and the amount of support given to their child in respect to Internet usage. Accordingly, parents that graduated high school are twice as likely to have helped a child do something online while, among those with less than a high school degree, more than half do not even use the Internet and less than a quarter of them helped their children to use the Internet (Witte & Mannon, 2009, p. 74). Thus, differences in Internet use among adults have the potential to perpetuate rather than challenge class advantages that parents pass on to their children.

Applying secondary analysis on EU Kids Online II database, the present research challenged the connection between teenagers’ Internet use, skills, and parent’s educational background which implicates the Internet in the reproduction of class privilege in Romania. Witte and Mannon (2009) argue that teenagers acquire their Internet experience and knowledge through two mechanisms: in class privileged homes from parents who draw on their Internet skills, or in class-privileged schools, where technology resources are greater. Hargittai (2008) also argues that growing up in a household that has the latest technologies and digital media resources will make a difference when a child will encounter these tools in the classroom. Moreover, underlines Hargittai (2008) having siblings who can navigate the technologies will help in the transfer of relevant knowledge. Furthermore, living in an environment where an interest for discovering latest ICT options will allow young people to enhance more opportunities to develop knowledge in the domain of digital media

than in a situation which one is isolated without access to relevant technologies and knowledgeable networks. Regardless of the mechanism, children of parents with high SES will take up more opportunities from the Internet as they transition from school to work since employers value Internet skills (Witte & Mannon, 2009).

Furthermore, using in-depth qualitative group interviews, the present thesis has tested the theory of according to which the intergenerational transfer of online competencies is sometimes bidirectional. Studies show (Witte & Mannon, 2009) that teenagers with parents with low levels of education and income are less likely to help an adult with tasks online than teenagers with parents with medium and high education. Therefore, the parents of disadvantaged children are disadvantaged too since their children lack skills and experience. Statistical evidence from the Pew Internet & American Life project (as cited by Witte & Mannon, 2009) highlights significant disparities in the frequency of use and in Internet skills among teenagers that vary by parents' SES, although Internet access is widening. Assuming that parent's education and family income are strong indicators of class position, children in underprivileged families do not enjoy frequent Internet use and do not have the same Internet skills.

Thesis structure

The present thesis is laid out into eight chapters. Chapter two provide a literature review of the most dominant explanations for the emerging of digital inequalities. First it shows that the most significant social inequality theories could be used in order to address the digital inequalities among adults or children. Second, it emphasizes the debate between utopian and dystopian viewpoints of the digital divide, showing that while enthusiasts scholars argue that inequalities in Internet access may prove a short term phenomenon and a natural decline, the cyber-pessimists emphasize that the Internet information inequality will not disappear along with the increase of level of access as other, "deeper divides appear". Furthermore, chapter two indicates that both enthusiasts and pessimists approach the issue of the digital divide from the perspective of physical access. However, recent scholars highlight the need to leave behind the classic dichotomy and look deeper at differences within those who already use the Internet when studying digital divide. This shift is even more urgent as several findings suggest that simply having access,

independent of the quality of use and quality of speed and connection. Finally, Chapter two outlines the interconnectedness between social and digital inequalities relying on Internet access and use figures in EU and Romania.

Chapter three addresses the issue of digital differences among children following the main theories of digital inequalities presented in Chapter two. Firstly, it emphasizes the duality of the academic literature regarding younger generation and the Internet, with a special glance on “digital natives” theory. This approach claims that these young people, who have grown up with ICT, have sophisticated technology skills and a whole new set of cognitive capacities. However, the mainstream discourse of digital native narratives often omits that breadth of use, experience, self-efficacy, and education can generate differences in the way children and young adults make use of the Internet. On these lines, this theory is tested further by investigating if there are variations in use among children and adolescents in EU, findings mostly based on EU Kids Online II survey.

Chapter four outlines the digital inequalities among children and adolescents in Romania. This includes secondary analysis on EU Kids Online II database on Romania which emphasizes stark disparities among children along the lines of age, gender, and SES. In order to make use of these results and for the further analyses presented in the next chapters a brief overview on EU Kids online II survey is offered.

The purpose of chapter five, six and seven is to discuss the empirical data retrieved from the analysis conducted in the present research. It will do this by quoting both digital and social inequalities theories and digital natives narratives. Specifically, chapter five explores differences in terms of digital outcomes the adolescents possess in Romania. Drawing upon the data collected in the EU Kids Online II project, this Chapter investigates the differences in digital competencies and self-confidence of teenagers from Romania. Building on a conflict perspective which emphasizes how Internet use, understood like a package of specific knowledge and skills, plays a crucial role in maintaining inequalities the study presented in Chapter four by showing that parental background accounts for differences in their own use of the Internet but also in the digital skills of their children.

Chapter six aims to show how different digital engagement among adolescents from Romania persists even if they incorporate the use of the Internet in their everyday

lives. In order to identify variations in digital skills, self-efficacy and, therefore, in digital engagement of Romanian 9-16 year-olds, a path analysis was conducted using AMOS. Findings reveal that older children from higher educational backgrounds exhibit more digital skills and self-efficacy and a stronger digital engagement. Moreover, a more autonomous use and a higher amount of social support help children to involve in more online activities.

Chapter seven explores the findings retrieved from the in-depth qualitative group interviews. The themes explored involved further elaboration on the online activities that adolescents undertake, and the relation with their parents, with a special focus on the parent's support received regarding their Internet usage.

Chapter eight presents the principal theoretical findings of the current research and discusses the ways in which these findings confirm the hypothesis, meet the objectives and answer the research questions. Practical implications emerging from the findings are considered, and recommendations for future research are explored.

Conclusion

The present thesis argued against this homogenous view on this entire generation (i.e. Children and young adults) by emphasizing that generalizing the ways in which digital natives cope with these new technologies is a misconception since it fails to recognize the variations in children and adolescents' Internet usage. Moreover, the thesis approach support studies which suggest that the research of the relationship between children and new media should go beyond this basic dichotomy ubiquitous in digital natives' debate and should focus on developing a more comprehensive understanding of children's online behaviour (Bennet et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2009; Helsper & Enyon, 2009; Bennet & Maton, 2010). Drawing on this academic context, through quantitative and qualitative data, this research challenged the dominance of the digital natives agenda and turned its attention to the social context in which internet usage occurs. Several types of quantitative analysis were implied, out of which worth mentioning two path analyses, one cluster and one logistic analysis. As previous studies indicated (Bennett et al., 2008), far from being a homogenous generation, systematic differences are present in how children and adolescents incorporate the internet into their lives in Romania, even when all have basic connectivity.

As expected, the findings retrieved from the first path analysis show support for the theories that approach digital inequality as a source of social stratification since, in addition to age, gender, and SES, social surroundings are also relevant to Romanian children's online experiences. Moreover, in line with social inequality theory, differential use among Romanian children can convert into differences in children's socioeconomic status since adolescents from higher educational background are better skilled, are more confident, and undertake a wider range of online opportunities. Moreover, this differential use can convert, as previous findings show (van Dijk, 2005, Witte & Mannon, 2009), into digital support for parents. Thus, the power dominant class use the Internet as an asset to maintain its advantaged position in society (Van Dijk, 2005; 2006; Van Deursen, 2010; Witte & Mannon, 2009). As stated by Witte and Mannon (2009) and confirmed by this analysis, through different paths, such as providing high quality access and owning digital skills (van Dijk, 2005), families with higher socioeconomic background pass on to young people their assets and manage to secure their position in the market economy. Therefore, the Internet, seen as an emblem of free and open society (Van Dijk, 2005) may become an active reproducer and possible accelerator of social inequality.

The second analysis investigated the breadth and depth of the digital engagement among adolescents in Romania and found support for previous studies that show significant digital differences in internet use even if they make use of the internet everyday. In sum, the second path analysis present analysis argue that mere access is not sufficient for children to take up the same range of online opportunities and to make use of the Internet in an advanced and creative way. In addition, findings indicate that even when adolescents are using the Internet with the same frequency, i.e. Every day, the differences among them remain significant. Therefore, drawing on these findings it can be argued that considering an entire cohort equal only due their age is a misconception. The way children make use of the Internet and the gratifications they gain after using depend, as van Dijk (2005) showed, on the quality of access, on the level of skills, on the personal (e.g. Experience, self-efficacy, confidence), and positional resources (e.g. Age, gender, SES). Further, as underlined by the logistic regression analysis some of adolescents make use of the internet in most advanced and creative way by using different tools and techniques while most of them tend to settle for the first stages taking up fewer online opportunities.

Questioning the main determinants that lead to most advanced way to make use of the internet, the logistic analysis showed that for an adolescent in order to turn into an experienced user once he embedded the Internet in his everyday life is a matter of skills, experience, and time online and is less a matter of socioeconomic background. However, we have to keep in mind the path analysis' findings, which emphasize that online experience, time spent online, self-efficacy, and digital skills are all determined, through direct or indirect effects, by demographic variables (i.e. Age, gender and SES), even when age is hold for constant (all the analyses were conducted on 11-16 year-olds).

Finally, the originality of the present thesis is emphasized by the results retrieved from the in-depth qualitative group-interviews, which are consistent with the results of the previous quantitative analyses. In sum, qualitative data reinforce Gadlin's view (1978, p. 253 as cited by Livingstone, 2002, p. 179) according to which "there is less and less that parents can pass on their children, with any certainty that it will help them in the future". In other terms, parents have to bring up their children in a world significantly different from the world of their own childhood. Even in the situation when they understand the importance of ICT in children's life and they try to offer support in this regard by providing them the required resources (e.g. time, money, effort), they lack the expertise required to use these technologies (Livingstone, 2002). Thus children are being recognized as experts, being taken for granted that they know more than their parents. However, some scholars argue that these circumstances are only present in households with low levels of computers/Internet knowledge where children are likely to receive less informal support in gaining digital skills, compared to those children whose parents are competent computer users. Thus, we may be facing to a reproduction of digital knowledge which may result in deeper social inequalities.

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