



Children Online: A Participatory Visual Approach

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Abstract. The present research note is an overview of a case study¹ based on a series of inquiries into elementary and high school children's online media use. In March 2012, a survey (N=761) showed that young people from a Transylvanian school² had shifted online as their premier source of information, with no significant divide between rural and urban environments or between girls and boys.³ In June 2013, a focus group discussion suggested high school students' critical attitude towards information and communication technology (ICT) use, with a strong sense of purpose and environmental awareness.⁴ In September 2013, a new series of inquiries set off, aimed at assessing 8–9-year-old children's attitudes towards ICTs and the Internet. Participatory visual methods offered both unique data gathering opportunities and media education tools. Key results of the case study show striking similarities with the Net Children Go Mobile research findings:⁵ privatization of ICT access and use, and the pervasiveness of the Internet in children's lives.

Keywords: children, Internet, Romania, visual methodologies, participation

1. Why a Participatory Visual Research with Children?

While participative research has emerged as a method of collaborative approach to scientific inquiry for more than three decades and aiming at a more ethical approach to stakeholder involvement in the process, visual research set off systematically mainly after 2000. A “pictorial turn” (Mitchell, 1994: 11) has developed as a cultural paradigm shift in more theoretical studies, whereas a

1 Conference paper: *Towards the Good Society: European Perspectives*. Bucharest, 23–26 October 2013.

2 Historical region of central Romania.

3 Bakó et al., 2012.

4 Bakó, 2013.

5 Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2013: 5.

“visual turn” (Jay, 2002: 87) marked a more pragmatic and interdisciplinary setting lately. According to Thomson (2008: 10), “current interest in the visual stems from the simultaneous proliferation of the means of making images and the proliferation of image-based systems of communication in everyday life”. Proliferation of the visual methodologies in the social sciences resulted in a series of case studies and textbooks aimed at guiding newcomers to an emerging world of inquiry (Richards, 2011; Rose, 2001; Smith et al., 2005; Smith, 2008; Thomson, 2008; Van Leeuwen–Jewitt, 2001). Critical, warning voices have also been heard (Buckingham, 2009): visual studies can easily slide into naive empiricism or – at the opposite end of the spectrum – into blurry theoretical ramblings. Thomson (2008) also warned researchers about the difficulty of interpreting images, given the fact that they are not neutral: they are socially constructed realities through complex processes of selection, processing and editing. At the same time, images are polysemic: they can be “read” in various ways; therefore, visual analysis has to be “systematic, thorough and open to scrutiny” (Thomson, 2008: 10).

Participatory approaches to the visual offer a range of opportunities, as highlighted by Richards (2011: 6): “visual outputs produced by participants can be analysed for what they reveal about the way people choose to represent themselves to others and how they identify what is significant about their lives.” Meanwhile, a participatory approach takes research and researchers out of the “ivory tower” and gives them a better grasp of the realities they study. From the perspective of the participants, their involvement in the research process makes them motivated and thus keener on investing time and energy in revealing the world in which they live.

Children are already immersed in a multimodal visual world: participatory visual research is, in fact, a trigger to revealing their life-worlds. As Thomson (2008: 11) put it: “they like working with visual tools and media: photography, drawing, cartooning, multimedia production and film-making are already part of their image-saturated everyday lives.” Conducting participatory research in schools is both convenient and safe: it is a space of organized action, to which children are used to. Young people are ready-gathered, task-oriented and set for learning and involvement – although Prosser remarked critically that school is often a “non-teaching space” (2007: 16) because it is created by adults, according to their ideas. Thomson (2013: 8) highlighted some benefits of conducting participatory research with school children:

- addresses issues of importance to students and therefore serves their interests;
- allows marginalized perspectives to be expressed;
- uses students’ experiences to develop approaches and tools;
- can make a difference.

Wilkinson (2000: 4) also formulated a wide range of arguments on why we should involve children in the research process:

- participation is a right (UN convention on the Rights of the Child): the right to have their opinions on the matters that affect them;
 - to gain better knowledge on their views and priorities. Involving children and young people in the research process helps illuminate key issues and concerns.
 - for more effective action: case studies show a better decision-making and follow-up process when key stakeholders are involved;
 - to measure properly how effective we are: this means involving children and young people in the process of collecting, monitoring and interpreting results;
 - empowering children and young people: by “letting children decide what is important to them, we have the basis for a joint analysis based on a more equal power relationship between adults and children.” (Wilkinson, 2000: 5)
- Inspired by Hart’s idea on the “ladder of participation” (1992: 8), Wilkinson developed a model showing progressive levels of children’s involvement in the research process.

Table 1. The “ladder of participation”: Wilkinson’s conceptual model (2000: 5)

IV. Children/ community control research (identify question, carry out and analyse research)
III. Children/ community carry out research in partnership (involvement of stakeholders is shared at all stages)
II. Outsiders plan research and do analysis but involve children/ community through participatory methods/ approaches
I. Outsiders plan and analyse research and do not use participatory methods/ approaches

Wilkinson (2000: 6) addresses a key question: when is children and young people’s participation appropriate? Before planning and implementing a participatory youth research, we should ask ourselves:

- if it is a vulnerable group, is participatory research the most urgent thing to do?
- is the research going to bring benefits for the young people?
- does the researcher have the abilities and skills to conduct participatory research?
- do we have enough resources to implement participatory research, minding diversity?
- do we have access to young people?
- do those supposed to participate have the skills to do so?
- does participation involve disruption or creating imbalances at micro/ macro levels?

Having all these ideas in mind, a researcher has to consider carefully whether s/he can carry out or not a fair and methodologically sound inquiry into the

children's world by involving them, or s/he rather should use traditional, non-participatory methods and tools.

2. Children's Drawings as Means of Sensemaking

Drawing is more than making marks that have a meaning, Hall warns (2008). Today, there is a shift from a mainly psychological, decontextualized approach to children's drawings to a broader, socio-cultural focus of the research (Anning, 2003). In an increasingly multimodal communication world, literacies have to adjust and give more space to the visual. While noting the challenges drawing research involves, Eldén (2013: 78) acknowledges the difference visual research can make in understanding the complex world of today's world, where – as Anning has put it, “schools should build on young children's flexible approaches to combining speech, action, drawing and sound in their activities” (2003: 6).

We started up a participatory visual research in a school from Romania during September and October 2013, with the support of eight teachers who agreed to bring the topic “My family and the Internet” in their drawing classes with elementary school children. We designed the task as a contest: children were asked to produce the drawings at school, using coloured pencils, and informed them that the best drawings shall be exhibited at a later date. A number of 128 thematic drawings resulted in the period of October 4–14, which have been digitalized afterwards.⁶ While age is a critical factor that makes a difference in the ways in which children conceptualize relationships and objects – as shown in pictures 2 and 3 –, a number of patterns have occurred irrespective of their age or gender. They will be analysed in the next section of this study.

As part of the participatory process, we have asked 16- and 17-year-old students from the same school, at a Sociology class, to help interpret children's drawings. A random sample of 42 drawings were distributed to students organized in small groups and their comments recorded on paper. Before that, the 11th grader students had been asked to sketch the plan of a poster titled “My family and the Internet”. Youngsters were struck by the colourfulness and aesthetic character of smaller children's drawings as compared to theirs, but also by the lack of deeper understanding and knowledge of the 8–9 year olds on “what Internet really means” (boy, 17). Meanwhile, a brainstorming was conducted among teenagers: they were asked to write down the first two things that came into their minds when they hear the word “Internet”. Most of them depicted the benefits, but the harms, too.

6 All drawings are uploaded in a virtual gallery, at:
<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9ykobpucfx1hd0q/AADKqAsTVhPtyBuK4vv97aWxa?dl=0>

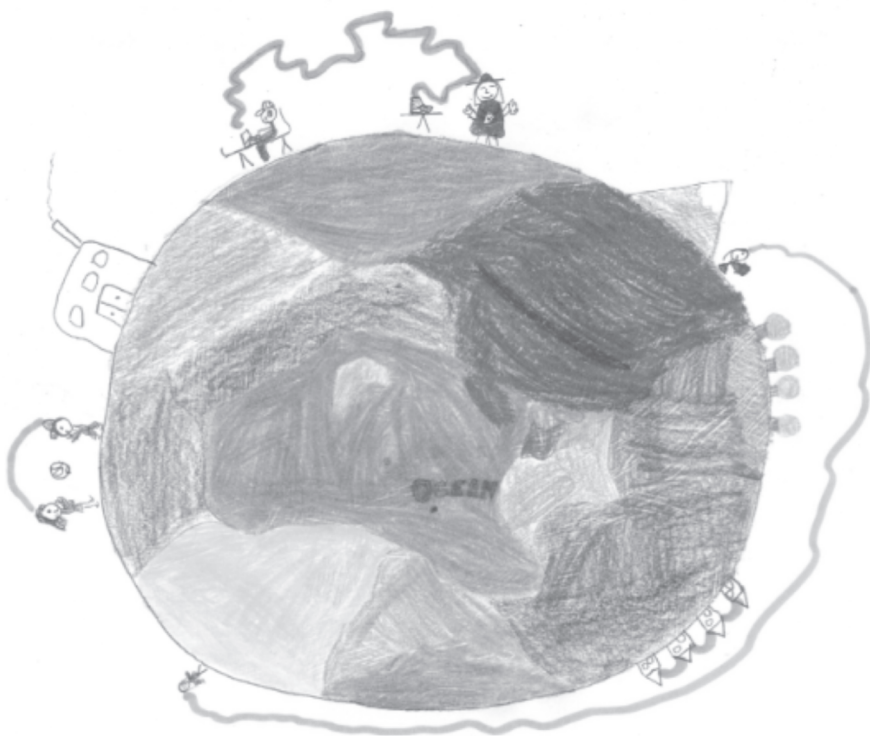
Picture 1. “My family and the Internet” (boy, 8)



While emotional expression of joy and enchantment can be clearly depicted – all the protagonists are smiling and gazing at the computer screen showing the search engine Google, the use of space is rigid and conventional. Space construction is linear, according to Lange-Küttner’s classification (2008), and representation is bidimensional. There is a minimal use of perspective, as shown in the size of the parents, situated close to the computer like “bodyguards”, as opposed to the smaller figures: the children.

A more rich set of experiences and skills, but also the age difference can bring about a merely different approach to the topic of a child’s family and the Internet, as shown in *Picture 2* below: she understands the multilayer character of the new medium that connects devices, houses, and people. We have singled out the drawing shown in *Picture 2* because it is the only one out of 128 pieces of work that gives a thoughtful, complex and advanced understanding of what online communication really means – in fact, out of the private space of their homes. Internet is pictured as a global phenomenon: green wires are bridging oceans, mountains and personal differences.

Picture 2. “My family and the Internet” (girl, 9)



To conclude, drawings are strongly connected to the socio-cultural context in which children live, and even more to their age (Anning, 2003; Hopperstad, 2010; Toomela, 2002). The more they develop in their mental and manual skills, the better they can represent relationships, perspective, objects' function and the broader significance of people's actions. Meanwhile, a topic of relevance to their lives – the relationship between family and ICT use, between everyday life and the Internet, given as a task at drawing classes to children from 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades – can provide useful insights both for the researcher and for the children themselves.

3. Children and the Internet: A Case Study

The idea of conducting a participatory visual research at a Transylvanian school has emerged after drafting the report of a survey conducted in the same school among middle school and high school students. In March 2012, a number of 761 young people have completed a questionnaire aimed at assessing environmental

awareness and media use, and for the 11th and 12th graders career choices as well. Response rate was as high as 91%.

Survey results (Bakó et al., 2012) have confirmed our hypotheses that Internet plays a key role in young people's lives and outweighs television as a source of information and entertainment. A surprising result was the lack of significant differences between rural and urban residences, or along gender lines: boys and girls were equally connected. As a continuation of the quantitative analysis, in June 2013, we conducted a mixed qualitative methods inquiry among a small group of seven students to whom we had privileged access through an extracurricular activity. We conducted a focus group discussion and a participatory visual research aimed at assessing ICT use among 14 to 17-year-old students. Students were asked to sketch "Me and my devices": it resulted in a series of highly critical approaches to conspicuous consumption and an environmentally-aware approach to technology use. When asked to pick their dream gadget, each student has chosen a piece that s/he considered either very functional (an e-reader, a quality digital camera), or creative (Google glasses). In the image-elicitation exercise, students explained: being part of the crowd longing for iPads or Samsungs is "not cool", "not interesting" but "worthless".

As a follow-up of this research, we moved our focus towards elementary school children. Although children and media literacy is an important research topic (Avgerinou-Petersson, 2011; Harris, 2010; Prosser, 2007; Seiter, 2004), we have found little empirical evidence on using visual methodologies to explore kids' ICT universe. We designed a small-scale participatory visual study for 2nd and 3rd grade students (8–9 year olds) and, given the enthusiasm of some teachers, we also involved some 4th graders (10 year olds): their drawings were instrumental for comparison.

Given the topic "My family and the Internet", the research was unobtrusive and merely scratched the surface of children's' anxieties or distress, but resulted in an interesting array of topics and representations. The drawing class was conducted by their teachers – at this stage, I did not have any direct contact with the children.

A visual content analysis of the 128 drawings has been conducted by categorizing data along a set of criteria: family representation (alone, with family), human–computer interaction (HCI) – sharing devices or using them individually, ICTs depicted (no device, single device or multiple devices), the space of ICT use (living room, own room, kitchen) and Internet representations. Two-thirds of the children have represented their families in a mono-device environment dominated by the desktop (71%). Only a third of the drawings (31%) represent ICTs as switched off: this suggests that using communication devices is strongly embedded into elementary school children's lives. More than a third of the children picture their families and ICTs in the living room and only 19% visualize

Internet use in the privacy of their own room. An interesting feature of children's online worlds is parental control, depicted either explicitly as supervisors or indirectly as shown in drawing 019 (see appendix).

4. Conclusions and Further Steps

We live in a world of a digital turn (Westera, 2013). Children, as much as ourselves, are bombarded with visuals and grow up in a “convergent media ecology, whereby significant opportunities for sociability, self-expression, learning, creativity and participation are provided” (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2013: 5).

As Richardson has noted (2011: 7), “participation is designated to counteract a ‘top-down’ model of research. Visual methods are a particularly good way of increasing and sustaining participants . . . If participation is enabled and managed effectively, it can have long-lasting impacts on the lives of participants as well as improving the quality of the research data”.

Children are among the most vulnerable users of the Internet, and therefore a growing attention and concern is given by researchers and educators to their media literacy. Meanwhile, there is a low level of media education in Romanian schools: teachers' extra efforts and extracurricular activities are the main channels to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for a savvy use of ICTs.

The next step of the research aims at gaining a deeper insight into children's online worlds by conducting a series of interviews with parents, educators, and also further visual analyses of drawings for assessing the level of digital literacy among the 8 year olds.

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Appendix: Selection from the 128 drawings⁷

Drawing 008. Multiple devices, multiple potential users in a living room



⁷ Picture frames inserted by the author of this article.

Drawing 015. Multiple devices, multiple individual users in a living room



Drawing 019. Child at a desktop computer, supervised and timed in a living room



Drawing 021. Multiple devices, multiple individual users in separate spaces

