# Online independence and autonomy, and the privacy rights of children and adolescents in Latin America[[1]](#footnote-1)

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The global economy and society are becoming increasingly immersed in the digital era and Latin America has been part of this trend, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This new paradigm modifies activities and processes in most areas of life: it changes the ways of social relations, of acquiring information and knowledge, of doing politics and how we produce and commercialize goods and services (among others). Technology, however, is ambivalent, as it brings opportunities as well as risks. Consequently, promoting its benefits should be intentioned by public policies that approach technology from a people's perspective, because it involves several dimensions of wellbeing (ECLAC, 2017).

In Latin America, a region characterized by high levels of inequality, how do we guarantee that no one is left behind, and that the opportunities brought by the digital era reach everyone? Digital transformations have the potential of reproducing and increasing existing inequalities  
The access gap is a clear example of exacerbated inequalities, which is evidenced in income, area of ​​residence and age. In relation to the first, in 2018 nearly 23 million households, half of the total number of households with no Internet connection, were in the two lowest income quintiles (I and II). In turn, in the region 67% of urban households are connected to the Internet, while in rural areas only 23% are. In terms of age groups, young people and older persons are the least connected: 42% of those younger than 25 years and 54% of those older than 66 are not connected to the Internet. The least connected groups are children aged between 5 and 12 and adults over the age of 65, while the most connected are people between the ages of 21 and25 and between the ages of 26 and 65 (ECLAC, 2020) Therefore, while is true that the ability to access the Internet from telephones, tablets and other devices has given rise to a generation for whom being connected is part of daily life, the structural conditions of the region should not be underestimated as they may reinforce exclusion

Children and adolescents are protagonists of this connected era and are gaining access in increasingly diverse ways and at an earlier age, with mostly unknown consequences. These changes have an unquestionable impact on the forms of learning and challenge the educational system, as well as parenthood. The challenge lies in building digital skills and strategies for social inclusion, online security and self-care.

Digital technology can facilitate children’s ability to exercise their right to express opinions, promote their civic participation and provide a channel for their freedom of expression and information. It can also foster the development of social and communication skills, promoting creativity and interaction. However, the use of the Internet during childhood and adolescence also presents risks that should not be ignored, such as access to inappropriate or sensitive content, and infringing their privacy rights. Also, children and adolescents need guidance, which may affect their independence and autonomy if the limits of parents´ protections are not well defined.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989, sets out the fundamental principles for promoting children’s rights. At the time, the Internet was virtually non-existent in everyday life and is not directly mentioned in the CRC, but the principle of guaranteeing the fundamental rights of children and adolescents also applies to the digital world. Children must learn and develop skills to navigate the digital world during this stage of life. These abilities go beyond learning operational skills and include cognitive and ethical capacities that will enable young people to build and fully participate in the society to which they belong (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2014).

In 2004, UNICEF presented a set of ten e-rights, including the right to free expression on the Internet, to online leisure activities and play, and to the educational opportunities that this environment offers. Based on these rights, it is argued that those who are not connected are missing out on educational resources and access to general information, as well as opportunities to learn digital skills, explore friendships and establish new forms of self-expression (UNICEF, 2017).

Although the generational digital divide is clear in terms of younger generations’ proximity to and ease with using digital media and devices compared to the adults around them, adults still have a key role to play in helping them develop the skills required for digital inclusion. To reap the benefits of digital technologies and mitigate the risks, children and adolescents need skills that go beyond purely operational or instrumental abilities. They also need to develop the cognitive and social skills that will enable them to use these technologies in a thoughtful, ethical and safe way.

The areas and types of online participation activities by children and adolescents are key in terms of their rights and autonomy to use digital space. Table 1 shows the activities that are more or less widespread among children and adolescents in Brazil, Costa Rica, Chile and Uruguay according to the Kids Online Survey. The results suggest a “ladder” from commonly practiced to rarely practiced online activities. Most children do not reach the point where they commonly undertake many of the civic, informational and creative activities that are indicated as opportunities of the digital age. The age group analysis shows that, in general, as age increases, the percentage of those who engage in each of the activities also increases.

Table 1: Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay: Online participation activities by 9-17 years old, by age group, 2016/2018

(Percentages)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Activity | 9–10 years | 11–12 years | 13–14 years | 15–17 years | Total |
| Discuss social/political issues | 5.1 | 9.9 | 16.9 | 21.6 | 15.6 |
| Create and share your own video/music | 14.0 | 15.9 | 20.2 | 23.8 | 19.5 |
| Learn about activities in your community | 12.2 | 18.6 | 21.1 | 23.0 | 19.5 |
| Participate on a website where people share their interests/hobbies | 9.0 | 16.3 | 24.8 | 35.1 | 22.9 |
| Talk to people from other countries | 13.3 | 19.6 | 28.0 | 35.3 | 25.4 |
| Look for work/study opportunities | 15.9 | 21.7 | 31.4 | 45.3 | 30.8 |
| Look for information on health/diseases | 26.1 | 34.9 | 37.5 | 46.1 | 37.5 |
| Read/watch the news | 26.0 | 35.3 | 44.1 | 52.6 | 41.5 |
| Learn something new | 54.2 | 61.0 | 68.7 | 75.6 | 66.1 |
| Chat online | 44.8 | 60.8 | 75.1 | 83.0 | 67.6 |
| Use a social networking site | 34.0 | 68.8 | 82.8 | 89.9 | 69.3 |
| Play online games | 75.3 | 74.0 | 70.2 | 63.5 | 70.0 |
| Watch videos | 73.7 | 78.0 | 86.4 | 86.5 | 81.4 |

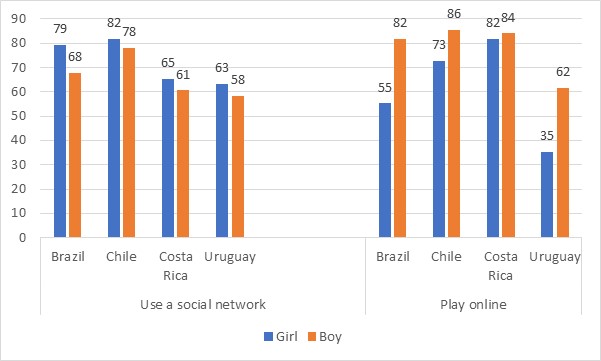
Source: Claro & others in Trucco & Palma eds. (2020), based on the Kids Online surveys for Brazil (2016), Chile (2016), Costa Rica (2018) and Uruguay (2017) and calculated using the simple average of the four countries.

Note: Percentage of children and adolescents who perform each activity at least weekly, by age and in order of frequency. The shaded cells indicate the activities performed by half of the age group or more.

While the idea “that the more online activities, the better” should be carefully considered, it is important to understand the gaps that exist within the activities with the greatest potential to benefit the development of children and adolescents and to define public policy priorities. Furthermore, there is still a need to better understand the specific ways in which different online activities benefit the development of children and adolescents. In terms of their digital rights, for example, the use of social networks is very high in this region and among adolescents, thus it requires more attention. Social networks use is more common in girls than boys, particularly those that have a stronger visual platform, such as Instagram (see chart 1). Through these sites, new codes of communication between peers emerge, but also important risks of overexposure and vulnerabilities arise concerning the mental health of adolescents. On the other hand, playing online is more common in boys. In these spaces, other types of practices and skills are developed in the digital world and many of these also involve sociability. This difference reflects behaviours that reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, which become more accentuated in adolescence, where men give themselves more space for playing and women are more oriented towards aesthetics and self-image.

**Chart 1**

**Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay: connected children and adolescents that have used social networks and-or played online in the last three months, 2016/2018 (percentage)**



Source: ECLAC, based on the Kids Online surveys for Brazil (2016), Chile (2016), Costa Rica (2018) and Uruguay (2017).

Not all children adolescents know the risks associated with social networks use, and the harm it may cause other people to access their personal information and use it for undesirable purposes, affecting their present and future experience. The consent for the use of personal information in a digital network is usually granted —without knowing it—from the exact moment in which one accepts the privacy policies (Acedo and Platero, 2016; Cobo, 2019). On average in ten Latin American countries[[2]](#footnote-2), 65% of 15-year-old students say they are taught at school about the consequences of posting information online such as Facebook or Instagram (PISA, 2018). Also, among the most common risks that people are aware of and which are publicized by the media are harassment and cyberbullying, which infringe upon children's honour and reputation, protected under articles 13 and 16 of the CRC, as well as privacy.

The findings of Kids online surveys in Latin America (Dodel and others in: Trucco and Palma, 2020) show that between 30% and 40% of children and adolescents were exposed to or accessed content that was distressing or upset them, but only half of them spoke to someone else about the incident; discussing it with someone else can be a protective factor in dealing with harm. Moreover, 10% to 40% of children have accessed or been exposed to sensitive content (e.g., content on suicide, anorexia, drugs, or violence), which was more prevalent in girls than boys. Receiving and sending messages with sexual content is a somewhat more common practice, especially among older boys and adolescents. While the studies did not look at whether receiving or sending of these messages was consensual, only 10% of children and adolescents in Brazil, 4% in Chile, and 3% in Costa Rica felt uncomfortable or harmed by this type of content, once they receive it. Among them, older girls and younger children were the groups that expressed the greatest discomfort. These highlights situations of harm linked to cultural stereotypes and norms that are common in populations that are traditionally more vulnerable in this area. Finally, the difficulty of self-regulating the use of digital devices is one of the most prevalent problems.

All these phenomena require attention and new policies to provide children with the skills they need to exercise their rights and ensure their coping skills in an age where the Internet is a major part of their lives. Given that various groups of children and adolescents have very unequal starting points in terms of their skills, attitudes and coping strategies, the role of States, schools, communities and public policies, in general, is key to guaranteeing their rights and ensuring their well-being. It would also be extremely helpful to provide safe spaces where children and adolescents feel they can talk about these issues with key individuals in their environment (e.g., family, teachers and professionals).

Children's and adolescents’ digital skills are key for managing their exposure on social networks, and in general for taking advantage of opportunities and reducing risks online (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). Chart 2 shows the results for skills related to critical evaluation and protecting privacy (UNICEF, 2019). Children had relatively high privacy skills, according to the data analysed. In the case of Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica, the skill that was mentioned in the lowest proportion was knowing how to change privacy settings, and children were most prepared to how to remove contacts. In contrast, in the case of Uruguay, the category in which the highest proportion of children said they were skilled, was knowing what information to share and which not to share, while the lowest proportion was in knowing how to remove contacts.

Chart 2: Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay: Privacy and information skills among children and adolescents who used social networks

(percentage)

Source: Kids Online surveys (Brazil 2018, Chile 2016, Costa Rica 2018, Uruguay 2017).

Digital skills development among parents and guardians is essential to promoting both safe use of the Internet and the opportunities it offers children and adolescents. It is important to understand the sources of information and support resources available to these adults, as well as to compare them to those they would like to have, to be able to better guide the development of relevant initiatives. However, the digital inequalities that occur in the domestic sphere are offset to a certain extent in the school environment, within the broader and more disparate context of digital education policies in the region. Efforts to address the digital divide must go beyond infrastructure availability, and this is even more true about children and adolescents, given that greater access occurs in contexts marked by socioeconomic, cultural and territorial inequalities. On average, in 7 Latin American countries[[3]](#footnote-3),26% of 15-year-old students access the internet for more than one hour a day in school, while in OECD countries 40% of the students do (PISA 2018). There is a long way to go in closing this gap.

Based on the available data (Martínez and others in Trucco and Palma, 2020), in Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay teacher mediation focused on setting rules and limits for Internet use prevails compared to other forms of guidance and monitoring. Because the school environment is a strategic area that can be leveraged to democratize opportunities associated with online participation by children and adolescents, as well as to mitigate possible risks, it is essential to develop teaching skills for active mediation. In other words, teachers must be able to guide, expand and monitor Internet use by children and adolescents rather than simply limit it. To this end, in addition to addressing teachers' initial and continuing training needs, digital literacy will need to be well incorporated in schools, either as a specific subject or as a cross-cutting skill. The data suggest the need to strengthen information and empowerment channels for families so they can be involved in mediating Internet use by children and adolescents. Among these channels, schools once again have a key role to play as they are identified by parents and guardians as a desirable and necessary point of reference. It is important to take this into account when developing campaigns or digital literacy programs.

To benefit from the opportunities made possible by these technologies to exercise their rights, children and adolescents must learn how to participate in the digital age by reducing risks and adopting coping strategies. Such skills go beyond learning operational skills and imply the cognitive and ethical capacities that will enable young people to build and fully participate in the society to which they belong (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2014). Furthermore, concerning the protection of these rights, public policies and regulations must hold the private sector – especially large virtual platforms – accountable.

Finally, it is required to advance in generating joint digital, social and economic strategies so that barriers and gaps are addressed from different dimensions. This highlights the importance of intersectoral dialogue. As technology is a means and not an end, it is essential to create standards (privacy, rights, accessibility) for the creation of platforms, and everything related to the digital economy. To generate profits, many firms in the field of personal digital technologies push towards users' addiction to platforms, games, websites, etc., rather than promoting digital inclusion. In this sense, more efforts are needed to protect consumers (especially the youngest) and to foster digital inclusion (for older adults, disabled population, indigenous population, rural areas).

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1. The analysis presented in this document is primarily based on the research findings of the Latin America Kids Online network (Trucco and Palma, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, and Uruguay. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)