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***THE USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES AMONGST MINORS IN THE BALEARIC ISLANDS***

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## *The Use of New Technologies amongst Minors in the Balearic Islands*

The relationship between young people and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is undoubtedly an area of interest in education; not in vain we are facing what might be called the first electronic generation; a generational cohort with particular characteristics and traits. This article presents the preliminary results of the first phase of a research project on the use of new technologies by young people in Mallorca (the Balearic Islands, Spain), which was carried out by the Department of Education Sciences of the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB) during the first semester of 2004.

- **Introduction**

Information technologies are being introduced into our life at a vertiginous rate: for example, while radio took over 40 years to reach 30% of North America's population, television took 17 and the Internet only 5 (Nielsen/Netratings, 2002). However, this rapid incorporation and assumption of ICT is not taking place at the same rate across all countries, generations or social sectors<sup>1</sup>, nor are its repercussions the same. Clearly, young people in developed countries have adopted ICT tools so quickly and to such an extent that they can be labelled the first electronic generation or e-generation. Young people between the ages of 4 and 17 account for a third of all Internet users and spearhead a deeply interesting social transformation: society has gone from a cathodic generation to an electronic generation in a very brief period of time. The former would be characterised by the use of late twentieth-century technologies (television, videos, personal computers, video consoles, walkmans, CD players...), which in most cases are uni-directional and do not permit interaction or develop creative capacity: users are simple consumers. The e-generation has more sophisticated technologies at its disposal

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<sup>1</sup> The perverse effects of the so-called "digital gap" or "digital divide" on which abundant literature exists are more than well known.

(Internet, mobile phone, DVD, interactive video games...), which make a high level of interactivity and creative use possible; in this context ICT users are consumers and creators at the same time. These very important changes shaped the coordinates of the last years of the past century and the first years of this one, a premonition of a future based on the constant technification of developed societies.

Minors are meeting the world of ICT at increasingly early ages within this context, thanks especially to changes in the family environment: the introduction of new technology in Spanish households. For example, according to the latest available data, over 12 million people (AIMC, 2004) in Spain connect to the Internet daily from their homes, so ICT are “natural elements” in young people’s eyes.

To summarise:

- more and more people have access to and use ICT;
- they are using ICT with increasing frequency from their homes;
- the Internet and ICT are becoming “natural elements” in the family environment;
- young people have quickly adapted ICT into their daily routine and become what may be called the “first electronic generation”;
- young people are coming into contact with new technologies at increasingly early ages.

- **The need for research into the field of the social use of the Internet by minors in the Balearic Islands**

The socio-economic characteristics of the Balearic Islands explain why it is one of the regions with the highest Internet penetration rates in Spain. In the last General Media Study (AIMC, first quarter of 2004), the Balearics ranked fourth behind Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque country (AIMC, 2004). Although data on penetration levels is available, little exists on how Spaniards use ICT. Macro-statistical data from connectivity studies exists at the national level only, such as the percentage of people who connect, the places they connect from, the portals they visit most and the search engines they use to find information on the Internet, for example, but little else. And there is even less data available on the relationship between young people and the Internet in the Balearic Islands. This gap does not occur in other settings - especially in

Anglo-Saxon spheres where a multitude of studies have been developed in recent years on the relationship between young people and ICT (Livingstone, 2002; Valentine & Holloway, 2002; Piette & Pons, 2001; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001; Department of Education and Skills 2002 & 2003; Livingstone, S. et al, 2004; Wolak et al., 2003; O'Connell et al., 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2003; SAFT, 2003), although, in Spain, studies have recently been undertaken to analyse the role of ICT in the life of young people at a general level (Sánchez & Aguaded, 2002; Defensor del Menor de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2002; Amorós et al., 2002; Valor & Sieber, 2004; AIMC, 2004).

This project addresses the almost complete dearth of information on the relationship between young people in the Balearic Islands and the Internet and ICT. The preliminary findings from the first phase are presented in this paper. The project has two phases: the first is an exploratory stage with a qualitative focus which aims to decipher the main profile of the relationship between young people and the Internet in the Balearic Islands. The second phase, which also includes quantitative aspects, examines the nature of this relationship in depth and analyses the extent of the phenomena detected in the first part.

The preliminary findings presented here arise from data collected in the project's first phase, which took place between April and June 2004. 137 minors between 6 and 16 years of age were interviewed<sup>2</sup> - 71 boys and 66 girls - and the second phase is to be carried out during the first semester of 2005. The interviews, which lasted between 25 and 55<sup>3</sup> minutes, were conducted individually and taped for subsequent transcription and future analysis.

- **Main findings**

The following are the main areas of analysis involved in planning this study:

- a) Connectivity
- b) Uses of the Internet
- c) Attitudes towards the Internet

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<sup>2</sup> This age group was chosen as it coincides with the obligatory school age in Spain.

<sup>3</sup> We wish to thank all the participants for their collaboration in this study as well as the help provided by Mar Rayó and Jaume Perelló in the data collection phase and El Liceu school and Esporles public school and the Calvià Town Hall Teachers Centre.

- d) TV vs. Internet
- e) Mobile phones

**Connectivity:** As might be expected, young people in the Balearic Islands have incorporated the use of the Internet into their daily life. For the most part, they access the Internet from home, followed by school, cultural centres and libraries and friends' homes. They usually connect several days a week (a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 7) and older children between the ages of 14 and 16 connect most frequently. They prefer to surf the Internet on weekends, while the time slot they prefer is between 7 and 10 p.m.. Younger children admit that their parents set specific times they are allowed to spend on the Internet. Almost all participants had access to the Internet from their homes and most of them said that the main reason their parents decided to connect to cyberspace at home was to provide them with a study tool and resource. A similar occurrence took place with the purchase of personal computers of the end of the 1980's and early 1990's. According to data from the participants, the trend is currently moving towards broadband Internet connection from home.

This data, which coincides with other studies and work recently developed in Spain (AIMC, 2004; Valor & Sieber, 2004; RED.ES, 2004), reveals the widespread nature of access and use of the Internet in our social and cultural setting.

The uses young people make of the Internet vary according to the places they connect from. At school, for example, the Internet is employed as the object of study or an educational tool and its use is very limited; "*The Internet at school is not fun*"<sup>4</sup> (M., age 13) for young people.

**Use of the Internet:** Almost all the participants said that they taught themselves how to use and extend their use of the Internet; nevertheless, their first contact was at the side of an adult: father/mother, teacher or older sibling. The Internet encourages and promotes the principles of "learning by doing" as no prerequisite learning is required;

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<sup>4</sup> The quotes that accompany this paper are extracts from the interviews conducted. We have chosen the fragments that best illustrate the responses from the interviews and helped readers understand the findings of the research.

on the contrary, learning about the Internet can only take place through using it. Items are no longer first invented and then used afterwards, but rather use is in itself a permanent source of invention. The knowledge needed to use the Internet is only a very limited part of what the tool can do.

The Internet's potential as an access to sources of knowledge is not what leads young people to connect assiduously to cyberspace; they connect because the Internet serves them as an additional way to channel their interests as part of a peer group and as individuals.

Young people's uses of the Internet can be classified into two major categories, of which the second clearly predominates:

- a) *The Internet as a source of information for schoolwork.*
- b) *The Internet as a channel of entertainment and fun.*

#### a) The Internet and the school

The minors interviewed drew a sharp distinction between entertainment and learning and were clearly uninterested in the Internet's educational possibilities. The Internet is entertainment when they are chatting, using MSN messenger with friends, accessing information about their hobbies or playing online and it is learning when they are looking for information for school. However, they only search for information when their teachers ask them to. On the basis of the data from the interviews, young people do not reflect critically about the information they find, search in depth or contrast different information. In the opinions of the young people interviewed, the Internet is predominantly linked to leisure time and peer intercommunication; its possibilities as a channel of knowledge and reflection are relegated to a very secondary place. *"The best thing about the Internet is that you can meet and talk to a lot of people. I don't know, I think it's the best. I know there is a lot of information, but for me the best thing about it is being able to talk to my friends"* (D., age 14). These data leads to a series of reflections which are only briefly noted here:

First: The principle of technological determinism based on the idea that technological potential will change the ways people behave is relative. Is a true information and

knowledge society being born in the wake of ICT or, on the contrary, is the trend advancing towards a society of cybernetic leisure?

Second: The fundamental role teaching staff plays in the beneficial use of the Internet is highlighted. Only their adequate intervention can help the Internet change learning processes and help young people to take advantage of its potential.

Young people have integrated the Internet into their daily life based on 1) the cultural parameters that shape their interests as peers, 2) their relationships with communication technologies and 3) their attitude to school content.

One interesting phenomenon associated with the use of the Internet for educational purposes is the growing and widespread use of the Internet to plagiarise schoolwork. The majority of participants ages 13 or older admitted using the Internet to partially or totally copy schoolwork. *“If I have something to do for school, I go the Internet, search in Google and a whole lot of pages come up; I pick a few, copy what they say and turn it in to the teacher”* (C., age 16). *“I often go to pages like ‘elrincondelvago.com’<sup>5</sup> and look for documents I can use. Not always, but sometimes I find things I can use; there’s a little bit of everything”* (E., age 15). *“I’ve never done it because I don’t have a computer at home, but a lot of my friends do it”* (T., age 16). This is a very troubling phenomenon which has been noted at universities in recent years and this study noted its strong roots in the lower levels of the educational system. It is surprising to see how young people clearly understand which subjects can be plagiarised, in most cases social studies and the humanities, while they admit not copying work for sciences and maths because of the difficulty involved. *“I especially do it for history and literature. They don’t find out.”* (C., age 16). *“I’ve only copied philosophy schoolwork, work on philosophers. A friend told me that he did it and I did it too. But I’ve only done it twice, for philosophy (...); it’s just that I think that the teacher doesn’t read our work”* (J., age 16).

#### b) The Internet as a means of leisure

The uses of the Internet for entertainment purposes can be broadly classified into four main categories: *the Internet as a communication tool; the Internet as a source of*

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<sup>5</sup> A website that compiles large numbers of school papers indexed by subject for both secondary school and university subjects and studies. Papers and essays can be downloaded free of charge (<http://www.rincondelvago.com>).

*information; the Internet as a platform for playing games online; and the Internet as a tool for downloading music, games, ringtones and logotypes for mobile telephones.*

In contrast to what might seem to be the case, the Internet does not appear to alter minors' socialisation principles, but rather extends and modifies some of the ways they takes place. Minors<sup>6</sup> are habitual users of chat rooms and especially of the instant messaging programmes (with Microsoft's Messenger the most popular by far) that have become one of the Internet's most widely used resources. They prefer a "controlled" system which makes instant messaging programmes possible to chat rooms and it appears that they know how to choose one or the other system – chat rooms or instant messaging - depending on their purposes. When they are looking for formal interpersonal communication they choose instant messaging, where they encounter their "contacts". To the contrary, when they want to waste a little time they visit a chat room, usually one that revolves around a topic. The capacity of young people to create formal communication networks with their peers is surprising. The formal networks of contacts they create through instant messaging programmes intermingles individuals belonging to the subjects' different private spheres: classmates, friends from other activities (sports, hobbies...), families, neighbours, etc., resulting in a large community of sometimes over 20 subjects who communicate and exchange information on an almost daily basis. Some of them even have audio and image conversations through WebCams, although this resource is still infrequently used. The use of the Internet as a tool for interpersonal communication is especially true of young people between the ages of 12 and 16. Participants prefer instant messaging to chatting as they know who they are talking to in the former: *"The Messenger is better. I have a better time because I talk to my friends and I don't have to put up with the stupid things people say in chat rooms. I don't like chat rooms, they aren't good for anything"* (O., age 15). *"I think that the Messenger is better. You talk to your friends, I don't know, I think it's better"* (M., age twelve). Minors who visit chat rooms choose chats on topics, preferably close to their geographical area - in this case, the Balearic Islands – and are very careful when doing so. They appear to be aware of the possible risks associated with the anonymity chat rooms provide; according to their statements, they make a very basic use of these communication channels and have never established contact with a chat room acquaintance outside the Internet. *"Once a boy said he wanted to arrange for us to meet,*

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<sup>6</sup> The youngest children – between 6 and 11/12 years old – say they do not visit chat rooms or use instant messaging, while the use of both of these is widespread among pre-adolescents and adolescents.

*but I didn't want to, I don't trust it (...) I have a girlfriend who arranged to meet a boy in Palma one day. But when she got to the place, no one was there (...) she went with a girlfriend of hers*" (I., age 15). They also take advantage of the anonymity chat rooms provide to experiment with supplanting their personality with another more attractive one, in their opinion: *"You can invent yourself in a chat room because no one can see you. It's the best; you can say whatever you want to"* (C., age 16). *"I have a lot of nicknames; I change them around. I think most things people say in chat rooms are lies"* (D., age 14). The way they use language in chat rooms and instant text messaging programmes is very similar to how they use text messages (SMS) from mobile phones.

Minors hardly use any other communication channels associated with the Internet: e-mail, for example, is ignored. They value live contact in real-time over any other circumstance, preferring instant communication to the asynchronicity of e-mail. *"I never send e-mail; I don't like it. I prefer chatting or sending messages on the mobile phone. E-mail is for people who work but I don't use it"* (S., age 12). *"I have an e-mail account but I don't check it (...) not only that, people are always sending me stupid messages and I'm scared of viruses"* (R., age 13).

As for the use of the Internet as a source of information, young people find it to be an inextinguishable source of content. They usually have an assortment of pages they are familiar with and visit regularly, although they often use search engines to look for information on topics that interest them, which range from sports (football, especially for boys) to musical groups, games and the Internet (programmes, pages specialising in downloads, etc.), personal hobbies, etc.. Interestingly, young people do not use the Internet to consult news and current events (newspapers, television channels, radios, etc.) the way adults do. *"I look for 'mangas' (a popular cartoon). That's what I like best. I have a few pages I visit every day because they post new 'mangas'"* (C., age 12). *"I don't know, music pages, Big Brother, I think that's what I look at most"* (M., age 12). *"I look at the pages from the Majorca football team<sup>7</sup> and motorcycles with my father"* (J., age 8).

Minors, mostly boys ages 12 and older up in this study, also use the Internet to play games online with. This is a very common form of cybernetic entertainment: they connect to servers which allow them to play their favourite games online. They

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<sup>7</sup> The participant is referring to the R.C.D. Mallorca football team.

sometimes connect from cyber cafés to play online with friends and take advantage of the broadband connections that these cafés offer - their main reason for going there.

Downloading music, films, games, mobile phone ringtones, etc., are other fundamental aspects of the use minors make of the Internet. Most admit downloading music, games, ringtones and logos for their mobile phones from the Internet and are conscious of infringing the law— although in the case of ringtones and logos for mobile phones, most young people pay for them and often download them from their own phones. They usually use peer to peer or P2P programs to share and download music, games or films and admit they never pay for it. *“I copy music from the Internet with my brother (...) he’s the one who knows how to do it. We enter the name of the song and copy it; afterwards we can listen to it on the computer”* (O., age 10). *“I download films, games for my ‘play’<sup>8</sup> and music with eMule<sup>9</sup> (...) I have ADSL at home and I leave it downloading all day long”* (C., age 16).

Minors’ null participation in e-commerce and e-business processes is striking: none of the participants made purchases online, although in some cases they commented that they would like to but cannot because they do not have a current account or credit card.

**Attitude towards the Internet:** Young people do not show a special euphoria or enthusiasm for the possibilities the Internet offers. This media is not very revolutionary or novel to them. The fact that they were “born with it” makes us think that they avoid the mythifications - positive and negative – which are usually proffered from an adult point of view. They obviously do not consider the Internet a mere passing fashion and assume and are aware that their future includes it, but as a means of support which cannot be renounced in certain contexts. *“The Internet is really very good. You can play games and it has a lot of information. I like it”* (D., age 8). *“The Internet is useful for everything you do. But there will always be things that you cannot do on the Internet, I don’t know, like go to class, I think there will always be classes; I don’t think they can do away with them”* (S., 12). *“Of course I like the Internet; it’s fun. But I also like to play football and watch television...the Internet isn’t the only thing there is”* (J., - age 7).

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<sup>8</sup> The participant is referring to a Play Station console player.

<sup>9</sup> A free program which allows P2P files to be shared and downloaded.

They consider the Internet a solidly established, lasting phenomenon which fits perfectly into modern life. Most young people have a positive attitude towards the Internet and fondly view it as a useful and practical tool.

When they talk about the Internet's negative aspects, they usually mention problems associated with computer viruses, excess advertising and unethical content, highlighting racism and child pornography, among others. In most cases, they are not aware that regulation exists on the subject and base their comments on moral principles. *"I hate it when it goes slow, sometimes it takes hours to open a page; I get nervous; (...) I also don't like the advertising that opens without you wanting it to; you have to spend a lot of time constantly closing pages. I also think there are too many dirty sites, things like sex and naked women. That bothers me"* (S., age 12).

**Internet vs. TV:** Although young people admit spending more time watching TV than connected to the Internet, they say they prefer the Internet. They justify this preference by saying that they can do more things on the Internet. *"I prefer the Internet, there's more there. It has everything; you can choose"* (L., age 11). *"Everything is on the Internet, you can even watch television, it's much better"* (C., age 16). Minors appear to be very aware that television is a unidirectional media based on viewer passivity, while the Internet is a means which evolves on the basis of its users' actions. The Internet gives them the capacity to express themselves and freedom of choice (they can consult information on anything they choose to; it offers great entertainment possibilities and is a basic element for their education and future professional life. Without a doubt, for the youngest, at least, the Internet has ousted television as their favourite media.

**Mobile telephones:** Today's young people are the first generation to grow up surrounded by mobile phones and have rapidly developed the new ways to relate that this media makes possible. The youngest use mobile telephony for social purposes above all, because they have discovered new ways to relate to others by using mobile phones. Text messages (SMS) from mobiles, originally conceived to enable fast, agile communication between technicians in communication networks, have in particular become the favourite way to connect to friends any time, anywhere. *"I almost never*

*make phone calls. I never phone. I only message my friends. Making phone calls is very expensive, it's better to send messages*" (C., age 13). "*I don't know, 10 or 15 messages per day*<sup>10</sup>" (F., age 15). Thanks especially to the use young people make of them, mobile phones are no longer exclusively a voice transmission device.

Having a mobile phone is seen as something natural among the minors interviewed: only 28 of the 137 said that they didn't have a mobile phone but that they wanted one. The process of approach and use of this technology appears to follow a fairly parallel path in all the cases observed. Thus, in principle, mobile phones are something parents of minors have and use to call when they are not at home or at work. There comes a time when parents give mobile phones to their children motivated by two essential factors: minors' demands for phones and parents' perception that mobile phones can help them keep track of their children better. Most children inherit their parents' old mobile phone. This happens at a different age in each case, but in general this trend is occurring at increasingly earlier ages - during our research we found six-year-old children with mobile phones. Parents pick up the phone bills for a few years; in almost all cases they choose mobile phones with rechargeable SIM cards to control their children's spending more closely. After a certain time, which varies in each case, minors feel the need to change mobile phones and in general this is when they free themselves from direct maintenance by their parents - as far as mobile phones are concerned - although the truth is that in most cases parents continue to pay for mobile phone bills through the weekly or monthly pocket money they give their children. This usually happens when minors are between 13 and 15 years old.

Sending (SMS) text messages is by far the main use young people make of mobile telephones. For each phone call they make from a mobile phone, they send dozens of text messages. They usually use text messages to communicate with their friends and rarely message their parents and/or family. The content of most of the text messages they send has to do with aspects of their life such as: making dates with friends, asking friends if they're home and can be called, gossiping about their friends from school, warning that they will be late for dates, finding their friends in busy places, etc.. Young people admit using text messages to communicate with greater assiduousness than other media for three fundamental reasons: speed, low cost and the freedom mobile telephony confers.

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<sup>10</sup> The participant is referring to the number of text messages he/she sends from his mobile phone every day.

Young people have invented an entire glossary of abbreviations for words and expressions that they use with total naturalness. Sending and receiving large numbers of messages a day combined with the economisation in letters the SMS system requires (since it only allows 160 characters to be written) has led to ingenious ways to say more using less. This phenomenon, studied in depth by fields such as linguistics on university campuses, leads young people to use the same style of writing in different settings than mobile phones on certain occasions, especially in school. Most admit having had problems with teachers because they occasionally use SMS abbreviations on homework or exams - especially the most habitual in Spanish: *q* instead of *que*; *xp* instead of *porqué*; *ad+* instead of *además*; *tb* instead of *también*; etc.-. “*A q ora qdmos?*” instead of “*¿A qué hora quedamos?*” (Example of a message sent by C., age 16) “*ola cm stas? A 5 ns vmos en CP. Bat b viene. Bsos*” instead of “*Hola, cómo estás? A las cinco nos vemos en CP. Besos*” (Example of a mobile text message sent by F., age 15).

Another interesting aspect of mobile phones and young people is that the latter are almost constantly transforming the appearance of their mobile phones and change ringtones very frequently. Thus, personalising mobile phones is a very important factor for young people. They want more than to merely have a mobile phone and use it; they also take its appearance, new ringtones and the sounds it can produce very much into account. They usually download logos and ringtones by sending text messages through the mobile phone itself to a specific phone number which charges them a price for the service. On fewer occasions, ringtones and logos are downloaded from the Internet.

It seems that the craze for third generation mobile phones has still not taken off among young people. Although most minors would like to own one, they admit that the high cost of purchase and services offered is the main reason why they do not.

When asked, “*If you had to choose between your mobile phone or the Internet, which one of the two would you choose and why*”, young people tend to prefer mobile phones to the Internet. They feel they use mobile phones more and believe they will soon be able to connect to the Internet from their mobile phones at a very low cost. They believe that the future of the Internet will pass through mobile phones and not vice versa. Despite that, most of them had a hard time choosing between the two options.

- **Conclusions**

*A panorama that requires constant observation and revision:* The changing characteristics of ICT require on-going attention. Technology is sometimes created for one specific purpose, but is then transformed by the way people use it and its original function changes –cited above is the example of mobile phone text messaging. And all this takes on further importance if the focus of interest is on young people and their relationships with ICT. Young people’s own characteristics make them rapidly adaptable to changes and very porous to any new use, which they personalise and naturalise in a very short time, as is the case with the Internet. But there is no doubt that this naturalisation of ICT is changing day by day in an ongoing evolution which should be constantly investigated. From our perspective as researchers, we should be continuously taking the pulse of this evolving process that is shaping the profile of today’s societies. Therefore, findings such as this article’s should be understood as points in a constantly evolving flow which serve to generate questions rather than provide responses.

*A little bit of everything:* It seems that minors are capable of planning their free time on different activities and not centring their leisure time exclusively on the Internet. It does not appear that they surf the Internet for the mere pleasure of surfing and wasting a little time; they know what they want and they discover and invent ways to attain it. The Internet has become part of the life of minors in a natural manner and has not caused substantial changes in their customary activities but has rather become just one more activity for them.

*Positive attitude:* The Internet is seen – and especially experienced – by minors from a very positive prism. The freedom and autonomous communication the media gives them are its most positive aspects, in their opinion.

*Depending on the space:* To a large degree, the places young people access the Internet from shapes their use of it. They have very different ways of using and experiencing the Internet, depending on where they connect from. The Internet at school is work, toil that is not very attractive and bores them – a rebuke for teachers. To the contrary, the Internet at home is especially leisure, mixed with a few drops of study. The Internet in cyber cafés is entertainment and shared experiences.

*Immediacies:* Young people value the Internet's inbuilt immediacy – in accessing information, in communicating, etc. – as one of its most basic and positive elements. Thus, they choose the more immediate possibilities the Internet facilitates compared to those with slow reaction times and results which are not immediately generated.

*The school, education system and cultural changes originated by ICT:* The vertiginous and continued alterations imposed by ICT in all spheres makes agile and rotund changes necessary in how knowledge is transmitted. More than curricular content, what is required is generating a general disposition, even better a general predisposition, towards learning by communicating and producing. As indicated by the data in this study, schools and in general terms the educational system do not cover this need.

*Entertainment-Communication:* Without a doubt, the entertainment-communication tandem is the basic pillar on which minors' relationship with ICT rests. The Internet is not a tool used for studying or looking for information.

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