

WYŻSZA SZKOŁA GOSPODARKI EUROREGIONALNEJ IM. ALCIDE DE GASPERI W JÓZEFOWIE



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**ETHICAL ASPECTS
IN THE USE OF THE WEB.
CIVIC EDUCATION
AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP**

ABSTRACT

Constant use of the web, not only in the work environment, exposes users to a high risk of cyberbullying, scams, deception, solicitation, and identity theft, and requires extensive reflection on various ethical and legal aspects. However, the Internet can also be useful for doing extensive research or tracking down friends and relatives with whom to communicate and chat, wherever in the world they reside. We have seen how useful the technological media and the Internet have been during the lockdown for both education and socialization purposes.

Constant use of the web also leads to observing basic norms of protection for oneself and respect for others. The norms of proper use of the Internet services are called *netiquettes*, which involve avoiding browsing risky sites where one can fall prey of fraud or infect one's pc with viruses. E-mail writing rules are also defined, according to which the sender and subject should be clearly indicated in the first part of the message, without divulging further sensitive data. One should not publish others' images, cultural contributions, artistic works without their prior consent.

Fundamental is conscious browsing under parental supervision for minors, who are often the most exposed to cyberbullying, body shaming, sexting, challenges and various kinds of manipulation from Youtubers and influencers. Let us think how deleterious it is, for both adolescents and adults, to witness on the web scenes that are traumatizing and inappropriate in language, content and images. Facebook and Instagram make connections travel fast and can also affect emotional relationships by producing stress, tensions, doubts and insecurity even among established couples.

To cope with the myriad dangers of the web, in addition to the many initiatives of several Ministries and announcements of the Postal Police, digital citizenship programs have been launched in schools of all orders and grades. For example, let us recall the *Syllabus* linked to the *Connected Generations* program. The latter included the dissemination of videos and short films to warn users against the dangers of the web. Students already use PCs, I-pads, cell phones and smartphones connected to the Internet constantly, they are really good at surfing, ideating, researching and communicating, but excessive and superficial use can expose them to unimaginable dangers and hurt their sensibilities irreparably. Students already make constant use PCs, I-pads, cell phones and smartphones connected to the Internet: they are very skilled at surfing, ideating, researching and communicating, but excessive

and superficial use can expose them to unimaginable dangers and irreparably hurt their sensitivity. Every school adhering to the National Digital School Plan has been enriched with so many technological supports, even to be lent to pupils for use. The question has been raised as to how ethically correct it is to let children roam on the web freely and thus expose them to danger and trauma. The answer lies in education, careful parental supervision, and the so-called child locks, such as the Parental control. School and family are, therefore, called upon to work together to protect minors and guide them in carrying out, in this regard, a joint training and educational action aimed at safeguarding the younger generation and preventing anxiety, depression and eating disorders.

Adults using the Internet also incur serious risks: let us think of the many scams in purchases, attempts to fleece money, identity theft, online gambling and grooming attempts.

KEYWORDS: *cyberbullying, ethics, digital citizenship*

Digital citizenship consists of an individual's ability and capacity to participate in society online.

Use of the Internet involves rights and duties for any user, who is responsible not only for their own fruition, but also for the messages they create and publish, which produce effects and elicit reactions in those who read them. We will always have to refer to the keywords of digital education, which are free spirit and responsibility.

In these extraordinary technological instruments we can find some interesting causes for reflecting on social, cultural and ethical issues. One must necessarily reduce the negative effects of the Web while trying to increase the positive ones, such as sociality and creativity.

In the global Infosphere we are usually online or offline^[1]. At various times of the day we are on and off the Internet, connected and not. Adolescents do not properly distinguish between being on and off the web. A recurring commitment in adults is to check their email, chat window, Facebook and Instagram accounts in addition to their work communications. Checking messages becomes a compulsive action adults are fully aware of, because,

^[1] Cfr. Floridi, L., *La quarta rivoluzione*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore 2017.

having been trained long ago, they can adequately distinguish between real and virtual life.

On the other hand, children and young people have had to assimilate this new dimension quickly and invasively. This social phenomenon has been described by philosopher Luciano Floridi, a professor at the University of Oxford, where he conducts the Digital Ethics Lab with mangroves. These plants live in tropical environments, are always in salt and fresh water at the same time thanks to their roots, which are hanging and ensure a gradual exchange between the two types of water. In the web, the fruition of news is mixed with reality. New generations do not have a clear conception of this hybrid situation. For children and young people, the environment is constantly online. Even only a denial, a missed response, an offensive phrase or image can cause an individual, especially a teenager, deep bewilderment and damage to their self-esteem^[2]. Let us think about how ethically incorrect^[2] it is to criticize a teenager's physical appearance, which is the so-called body shaming. It often occurs among teenagers to taunt a classmate. The epilogue is most sad: if not supported properly, the teenager can fall into such frustration that it can lead to bulimia, anorexia, depression and even suicide.

Even adults can be criticized via the Web for a self-image, an opinion, or even a membership in a soccer team fun club.

Let us think of political or entertainment figures often subjected to unimaginable criticism. Let us think of how many stalkers or hackers flock to the Web. The former carry out real persecutions of individuals, who, developing anxiety and fear, are forced to completely change their life habits. A concrete response to the crime of stalking is provided in Italy by the Decree Law converted by Law 38/2009^[3]. Family stalking is also as hateful as ever, reflecting a possessive and sick relationship. What about then mobbing, a term introduced in Italy by Harald Ege^[4] to indicate the persecution, intentional isolation, denigration, offense or slander of a person in the working environment via e-mail or chat. The dreaded hackers travel on the Web extremely fast, bypassing

^[2] Cfr. D'Auria, A., *A lezione di autostima. L'arte della conoscenza e della consapevolezza di noi stessi*, Cinisello Balsamo (MI), San Paolo Edizioni 2021.

^[3] Cfr. Decree Law 11/2009, as converted by Law 38/2009; Penal Code, art. 612-bis.

^[4] Ege, H. – Tambasco, D., *Il lavoro molesto*, Milano, Giuffrè Editore 2021.

all barriers. They are great experts of computer systems and software. Their background in computer science is extensive and detailed. They seek to subvert technology to succeed in stealing something of value or demand ransoms for attacks on governments, hospitals or banks. When hackers intervene, such dangers as trojans, ransomware, and hoaxes are always around the corner.

The Internet is also information and education, as it brings us news about peoples, places and events so far away from us; however, it can also influence our choices and lead us to increase our consumption of goods. One sometimes delegates to an algorithm the choice of a certain trip, hotel, holiday location, instead of another.

In the most recent debates, the problem of friendships and romantic relationships arising in chat rooms is also addressed from the ethical viewpoint. In real life, people meet each other and, if there are affinities, one establishes affectionate, friendly relationships. On the web, people can have many friendships and even reach exorbitant numbers of friends, but, if something regrettable happens, there is no one at their side to support or console them, apart from a sea of likes and smiles with the most various expressions. Friendship, instead, should be cultivated constantly: only in this way are good and lasting relationships woven. These dynamics become even more delicate when it comes to romantic relationships, born in chat rooms, where the best side of oneself is shown, the most appealing image, also figuratively speaking, is displayed, and it is not certain that the interlocutor is real, loyal and truthful. Nowadays many people seem to have forgotten that in a relationship one needs to rely on someone – e.g. on a partner or a husband – with whom to gradually establish a relationship of trust and esteem. An interchange or circular pact is established that is welded over time. With the web, nothing is certain, and one must insist on educating, or rather armouring the new generations to face the many dangers of the web. In this regard, school and family should act in concert to prevent, alert, educate to an objective view of what is proposed by the Internet^[5].

Adolescents place too much trust in the web, almost as if it were a real person; in order to be part of a virtual community they are ready to accept its language, vocabulary and modalities. Even just establishing any kind of relationship

^[5] Decree of the President of the Republic 21 November 2007, n. 235.

in chat rooms causes a lowering of defences and alertness. The compulsiveness with which adolescents check chatrooms creates a suspense, a horizon of waiting, in which one grasps the web line as an extension of oneself.

Even after the pandemic confinement, many teens continued to stay indoors. Due to the distancing, young people lost contact with their peers and no longer felt their closeness. It took time to start interacting again, but the habit of chatting, playing games and surfing the web for many hours a day remained.

It is necessary to interact with real people, as chats can hide fake profiles and conceal many dangers. It would be advisable to use netiquette and rules for a mindful use of Net services, avoid dangerous sites that could also transmit viruses, use rules for sending e-mails, do not publish other people's content without their consent, protect privacy and abstain from misbehaviour.

Educating for digital citizenship means leading young people to developing their own worldview, an appropriate critical sense, and autonomy in their judgements. They must become capable of expressing and enhancing their individuality in an autonomous and needs-responsive manner. Young people, but not only them, will have to become even more cautious when navigating and careful not to run into scams and dangers. Ethically correct will also be to respect and not draw on others' work, always complying with the copyright rules. We are a long way from 2001, the year in which Prof. Mark Prensky coined the term 'digital natives', referring to children and young people born in the years of the great digital launch who have used technologies quite spontaneously since their earliest years.

Young people have felt technology at their side immediately, using it for a wide range of tasks, from doing homework to carrying out research, and, more broadly, for learning in a different way than before. School staff has had to adapt quickly to promote young people's learning processes based on searching, storing, producing, and sharing content. The digital transition has been made not only by teachers, but also by the pupils' parents because of the need they felt to follow their children. Parents have, therefore, become 'digital immigrants', pioneers in contributing, together with the school, to educating children to digital citizenship.

Education should be lifelong (the so-called 'lifelong learning') and based on quality basic education for all. In schools, pupils' parents should also be taught,

so as to reinforce their intention to defend themselves against fake news and websites that sometimes carry viruses, misinformation and dangers.

It is crucial to pay attention to the behaviour of pre-adolescents and adolescents. It is true that teenagers' moods and behaviour can change during adolescence, just as many young people change physiologically. Parents, above all, should respect their children's intimate spaces by sharing interests and being vigilant without ever being intrusive.

We have to start being alarmed when teenagers stay alone in their rooms for too long, if they dodge social occasions, if they start neglecting sports and friends. None of us is against the development of either digital technology or the web, as they are also beneficial to the teaching and learning process; however, we feel it necessary for the web to be ethically governed and juridically ruled, so that no problems arise due to an incorrect and irresponsible use of this valuable instrument.

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