

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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BOLIVIA

Preventing digital violence in schools



REDES Foundation

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Introduction

Between 20 September and 15 November 2012, a total of 1,121 students from nine schools were trained in 40 workshops on the prevention of digital violence. The workshops were held in the municipalities of Cercado, Tiquipaya and Colcapirhua in the department of Cochabamba. The content was developed by experts in internet governance from the REDES Foundation, who were inspired by the importance of educating new generations in the overall uses of the internet, in order for them to exercise their human rights as well as reduce risk behaviours online.

In order to carry out the workshops, it was important to develop an introductory methodology for schools that do not have experience, policies or activities to prevent or deal with crimes on the net. Diagnostic visits showed that schools lack adequate technology, infrastructure and connectivity, which greatly hampers learning processes using the internet. Overall, teachers under the age of 30 show greater interest towards this subject; on the other hand, parents have shown a great disregard and ignorance about the risks and vulnerability of their children online. We used online educational video games with free software,¹ using a mobile connection from the REDES Foundation.

Cyber crime and digital violence common in Bolivia

The REDES Foundation is now opening up a new field for work and research, which we are certain is of interest to Bolivia and Latin America. There is a fine line between computer crimes related to legal concepts which are formally criminalised in domestic law, and “digital violence” which is not recognised or penalised, but is affecting many people.

Bolivia does not have a specific legal framework to criminalise and punish cyber crimes. Moreover,

there is no institutional capacity to deal with them, because in late 2008 the Special Force Against Crime shut down the Computer Crimes Division. There is a lack of specialised judges and trained personnel in the judicial system. Moreover, in the public sector, there is also a lack of trained personnel in the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents, the Family Protection Brigades and the Municipal Comprehensive Services. Overall, there is a complete lack of knowledge among Bolivian schools, teachers, parents and students on how to deal with different forms of digital violence.

The core of the problem is that, whether we see it as a crime (in legal terms) or as digital violence (in social terms), we are dealing with the violation of human rights of various groups of the Bolivian population, particularly women, girls, boys, teenagers, young and sexually diverse populations.

Since 2010 the REDES Foundation has raised the awareness of the Bolivian public, denouncing the offences being committed against students over the internet and other internet-related problems, such as phishing, hacking, pornography, child pornography, lolicon² and shotacon,³ sexting, grooming, the trafficking of personal images, internet addiction and plagiarism, among others.⁴

During the 2012 workshops, we noted that the online rights violations occurred because people engaged in the following “digital risk behaviours”: a) placing a positive value on having large numbers of contacts on social networks, even if they are strangers; b) considering the mobile phone as an effective device to control people (family members, partners, employees), to the point that it is being used for harassment and dependency through SMS and calling; c) considering the searching of personal account information, emails and social network activity as a common practice; d) having a self-perception of utter vulnerability to harassment and anonymous messaging (“can’t do anything about it”); e) exposure to violent video games and interactive digital content; f) tagging and indiscriminate use of the images on other peoples’ social networks

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolicon

³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shotacon

⁴ www.enredomino.fundacionredes.org

¹ www.cuidatuimagenonline.com

and the internet; g) free access to porn in public internet cafés as well as easy access to “parental advisory” content through indiscriminate access to pirate DVDs; h) the social perception of internet addiction as something positive due to the high internet service costs in Bolivia.

Highlights

Research by the REDES Foundation demonstrates that a great majority of teenagers and youth in social networks expose themselves to the violation of their human rights. In May 2012 there were 966,560 teenagers and youth in Bolivia, between the ages of 13 and 24, with personal accounts on the social network Facebook, making them potential victims of digital violence and cyber crimes.

A study by the REDES Foundation with 700 students in 2010 showed that there is a high rate of exposure of new generations to violence through the internet and mobile phones. In the city of La Paz:

- Ten out of ten students do not know there are ways to find specialised information quickly and effectively on the internet.
- Seven out of ten students divert from their search when pop-ups or hyperlinks emerge.
- Seven out of ten students accept unknown contacts in social networks and display themselves over the webcam or exchange photographs.
- Three out of ten then go on to engage with these previously unknown individuals in casual encounters (frequently sexual).
- They have no references for finding information about how to exercise their own human rights.
- The direct relationship between the use of the mobile phone and the exercise of their human rights is unknown.

The 2012 research, which included data collection from 1,121 adolescents, also revealed that:

- Ten out of ten teenagers watched school fights filmed by Bolivian students on their mobile phones and/or over the internet.
- Ten out of ten students received frequently false and fraudulent messages (phishing) on their phones, including false awards which turned out to be related to cases of deceptive recruitment of people for human trafficking and/or sexual violence.
- Ten out of ten know a student whose email account or game account has been hacked.

- Four out of ten students acknowledge they have lost access to their accounts due to the use of public internet cafés. (Subsequently, research has shown that internet café managers use software to spy on the internet browsing of women and girls.)
- Ten out of ten students go online at public internet cafés, despite having internet access in their own homes or the homes of relatives and friends. Internet cafés are social spaces.
- All internet cafés lack the necessary security measures to protect children and adolescent users.

In addition, regarding the educational institutions, we found that:

- The educational community is not prepared to address the issue of digital violence in their schools.
- Parents, teachers and educational authorities fear technology, and feel protected by the myth that their children and students have a better understanding of technology than they do.
- Adolescents do not in fact have a deeper understanding of technology; they only know how to use commercial applications which in fact expose them to risks and cyber crime.
- There are a series of daily internet practices that violate the rights of girls and young women, including misogyny online, digital sexual violence, sexism and patriarchy online, homophobia, racism and xenophobia.

Final considerations

Our country has no specific legislation on cyber crime, and there are no conceptual or methodological frameworks that facilitate a comprehensive approach to the social effects of internet and mobile device use on new generations. It is also important to stress the particular vulnerability of girls and women in the Bolivian digital culture.

The REDES Foundation (based in La Paz) and CREPUM Foundation (in Cochabamba) are working on the definition of digital violence, generating new findings about a new crime: digital sexual violence. Research on this subject is an unprecedented contribution to Bolivia and Latin America.

The research aims at educating new generations in general, and women in particular, to configure their control over their privacy in all email, social network, gaming and personal and public user accounts, including mobile phone applications.

Due to the popularity and widespread use of social networking and gaming, many children and adolescents provide their personal information without knowing that all the information they share is visible by anyone worldwide. According to Miriam Rojas, an expert on the treatment of digital violence disorders and a psychologist at the CREPUM Foundation: “There is a marked tendency to make personal information public online among teenagers, due to the logic behind consumption and fashion. Teenagers imitate the images they see over the internet, showing themselves as movie stars, rock stars, celebrities and top models, assuming their bodies and images are products for the market, and disregarding the fact that they are engaging in potential risk behaviour.”

Action steps

Digital risk behaviours include the series of actions in which people overexpose their personal and private information over the internet. This behaviour is based on a false sense of trust or on a perceived need to access the various services available over the internet (such as games, social networks, websites and applications). In order to access these services, whether through computers, tablets, mobile phones, or most recently, digital TV, people feel obliged to give away their information.

Bolivian families have a high acceptance and positive perception of internet cafés and telecentres as leisure and recreation centres. This perception has a serious effect on people’s online behaviour, whether at public internet access points, at home or at school, and the way they socialise. This effect is mainly due to overexposure to harmful content over the web – and it is this exposure which needs to be urgently addressed. ■