

CORONAVIRUS AS A BURNING GLASS FOR DIGITAL RISKS?



The digital space represents a global interaction and communication sphere for all people. In this sphere children connect with young people and adults across almost all countries, cultures and age groups. The constant improvement and implementation of automatic translation programs, for example in social media, also means that language barriers in the digital space are becoming increasingly blurred.



This evolution, which is actually to be welcomed, promises at best the emergence of a kind of Internet-based global society, but it also presents a dark side. Criminology assumes that many forms of crime - regardless of the respective national criminal law - typically arise from interaction between people. There are few arguments to argue against the fact that this is not the case on the Internet - which actually makes it the first truly widespread and global crime scene in the world. Children, too, are a natural part of this educated global scene (or space) and are thus exposed to the digital forms of crime that go hand in hand with it. At the European level, children aged 9-16 spend an average of 167 minutes each day online (Smahel et al. 2019). In Germany alone, 97 percent of minors aged 12 and over use the Internet several times a week (Feierabend et al. 2020). Children are also intrinsically confronted with the digital risks of this area. These risks range from cybergrooming and sexual harassment in social media and online games, to the confrontation with extremism and violent content, to risks such as cyberbullying and stalking (cf. Bötticher 2020; Gabriel 2020; Rüdiger 2020). Almost 25 percent of children in the European Union who use the Internet have already reported having had at least one negative online experience in the past year (Smahel et al. 2019). The U-25 study from Germany even speaks of minors perceiving the Internet as a culture of injustice (Borchard et al. 2018).

In such a culture, breaking the norms is therefore more common than complying with them. It is precisely the omnipresent transgression of norms on the web, whether through hate speech, sexual harassment or even just daily phishing emails, that leads to a kind of digital transparency of crime (Rüdiger und Bayerl 2020). This indicates that the risk of a breach of standards on the web is apparently low, which further lowers the inhibition threshold for committing a crime. In this context, one can speak of the so-called broken web phenomenon (Rüdiger 2018). Consequently, these are not national phenomena, but rather the results of the globality of this digital space, which differ at most in their respective national criminal law classification, but not in the way that they exist as a phenomenon. As early as 2017, as many as 63 countries worldwide made cybergrooming, i.e. the online-based initiation of the sexual abuse of a child, punishable in one form or another (ICMEC 2017). Despite the obvious globality of the risks children in this topic are confronted with, there are no global social protection measures. Rather, it is not uncommon that the only protection that is considered useful is to increase the media competence of children. This is also understandable, as it is a mechanism that can be implemented nationally with relatively few resources, promising success for the protection of the child population itself. At the same time, however, society must consider how children whose parents are not willing or able to teach them these skills can also be protected. Interestingly enough, the results of the EUKidsOnline study for Germany point to a rather opposite effect of media competence. According to this, especially children with a high level of digital competence also showed high confrontation figures with digital risks (Hasebrink et al. 2019).

One reason could be that children with high level skills are more likely to be exposed to the digital space unsupervised than those without these skills. In this case, social protection and the creation of a secure digital space seem to be essential.

The current coronavirus crisis seems to reflect a kind of burning glass for digital risks in general, but for children in particular. Due to the global quarantine measures, it can be assumed that all age groups are spending and have spent more time online. From a criminological point of view, it must be assumed that the lack of an effective counter-strategy also leads to a corresponding increase in crime, simply because, on the one hand, potential offenders spend more time online and, on the other hand, children can encounter problematic content more often (EUROPOL 2020). Signs of this negative development are already emerging. The number of reports to Europol of child abuse deregistrations by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children increased tenfold from February to March 2020 (EUROPOL 2020). According to a survey by GDATA, general cyber-attacks in Germany are said to have risen by 30 percent in the same period (Berghoff 2020). Even though there has been not only an increase in digital crimes, but also in crimes in the area of domestic violence and domestic sexual offences, there is a particular lack of uniform, transnational counter-strategies. It will only be a few years before it becomes fully apparent what effect this has had on the development of crime during the crisis worldwide. However, one lesson from the coronavirus crisis must be that if people spend more time online, digital crime will also increase. A global digital space without physical borders also calls for a serious discussion for global prevention and repression strategies to counter this situation, as a kind of burning glass on this problem.

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