



Internet uses in pandemic times: (new) practices and perceptions

João Estevens, Jussara Rowland, Mónica Truninger, and Ana Delicado
Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal

DIPRC2021: Digital Inclusion Policy and Research Conference
14 September 2021



We, the Internet



Internet and COVID-19

“We live now in the age of ubiquity, where the internet is experienced by many as a way of being, a point driven home by the central role of digital media in life, work, exercise, virus tracing, obtaining essentials during the 2020 pandemic lockdown” (Markham, 2020, p. 10)

The rise of telework, telehealth, e-learning, and e-shopping (Mouratidis & Papagiannakis, 2021)

Online activities remain complementary rather than substituting physical relationships with others (Kaufmann et al., 2020)

Higher risk for feeling isolated and emotionally distressed (Brooks et al., 2020)

Connecting electronically with friends and family was a way to cope with imposed isolation (Juvonen, Schacter, & Lessard, 2020)

Fluid boundaries between the public and the private affecting the experience of time-space, productivity, and intimate relationships (Carreri & Dordoni, 2020)

Project: We, The Internet

- Deliberative process involving over 80 countries on the future of Internet governance
- Promoted by Mission Publiques, with the aim of informing the United Nations' Roadmap for Digital Cooperation
- Stakeholders' dialogue (June) and citizens' dialogue (October) in 2020
- Topics discussed at the citizens' dialogue: 1) Internet and me; 2) my data, your data, our data; 3) a strong digital public sphere; 4) artificial intelligence; and 5) internet and the future.
- Global report available at: <https://wetheinternet.org/>

Online dialogue in Portugal

- Online dialogue using Zoom as a platform (all participants were internet users, online recruitment)
- 86 participants: not a representative sample although diversified
- Two groups: one in two half-days, another in a whole day (6 hours of discussion)
- Link to short videos on each topic sent beforehand (most participants did not see them)
- Topics debated in breakout rooms, after a short introduction and before a short questionnaire; qualitative activities
- Discussions were recorded and transcribed

Data analysis

- We focused on one specific question of our script during the 'Internet and me' discussions: **Have you changed the way you use the internet during COVID-19 pandemic?**
- Qualitative approach
- Thematic analysis of **17 online group discussions** in Portugal
- Focus on the activities where the change in the use of the internet was felt the most during the pandemic: types of change, constraints, but also opportunities.

Dissimilar experiences

- Access

There was a perception that the access to the internet is uneven, with some groups having more literacy and resources to use the internet, while others face more difficulties (relative digital injustice).

- More/less intensive users

Users who did not use the internet as much before the pandemic were forced to adopt new uses. More frequent users of the internet did not change their uses even if some mentioned they were using the internet less due to saturation.

Remote work: a matter of job-life conciliation

- New possibilities

For example, in relation to remote work, it is something that I would have liked to have had the opportunity to do [before], but I work in a company that was very conservative in this respect. They think people have to be there to work, and this ended up forcing the company to give us this flexibility.

- Time management

Today I work at 10pm, whatever time it is, which has its positive and negative points. I can manage my day, but the time I spend at work... the time I spend relating to work is longer because my work is no longer restricted to the office.

- Job specificities

I am a ballet teacher and I had to teach all the classes by Zoom and Google Classroom. So, I had a lot more work than I would have had face-to-face. (...) when it was by Google Classroom I had to record the class beforehand, publish it, and then receive the videos from my students and correct them one by one on video. In other words, the work I used to do in one-hour classes became, I don't know, four hours at home. It was very complicated.

Education: different but the same

- Continuity

I was taking an [undergraduate] course and having access to the internet enabled me to complete the course. Otherwise, I would have been stuck there for two months and maybe I would only have the certificate next year. With the internet it was possible to take classes and follow the work.

I missed the face-to-face classes. But, it was a good alternative. Otherwise, it wouldn't be possible to have classes.

- Different experience

As a student, I felt quite affected by this whole situation, especially when I was in lockdown because all the classes suddenly became online, I spent whole days on the computer, watching classes, doing assignments, everything, I felt quite dependent on the computer. At the beginning it wasn't very bad but then, at the end of the semester, I was already feeling a bit... a bit exhausted. And I also felt that it was much more difficult, at least for me, to follow the subject than if it had been in face-to-face.

Online classes are not for me as they make me lack more concentration in the class. It is almost impossible to pay attention to the whole class, not even half of the class, because there are so many distractions around.

Access to online contents: 'survival mechanisms'

- Entertainment

Without the internet COVID-19 would have been much, much harder. And with Netflix and Spotify and all that stuff... I think I caught up on everything, all the series I had behind on a list that I thought I would never see. So, it was a very important survival mechanism.

I spent more time on the computer watching entertainment because most theatres in Lisbon presented online shows. I got tired of watching shows, films, many things.

- Physical exercise

The parish council where I live has zumba and gymnastics classes and we can [take them]... we are at home, if we are being ridiculous, nobody sees.

Before we had the idea that to do exercise 'I need to go to the gym' or 'I need a personal trainer'. Now, with COVID, I saw that there are so many tools on the internet from Youtube videos to the websites of Nike and Adidas that we really don't need to leave our homes to do exercise.

Online shopping: necessity is the mother of invention

- Necessity

I think that online shopping increased exponentially and people lost their fear of buying online. There was a large group of people who were still afraid and who, due to this situation, were forced to go this way.

I use the Internet even more, namely to shop online (...) to avoid COVID. Then, for example, yesterday I was supposed to make a payment at the ATM and instead of going there, I paid by mobile phone.

Although I still don't know this internet stuff very well and I'm afraid of doing some kind of shopping, I am doing it much more often because of this situation.

- Convenience

I don't know if it is because of pseudo depression or being bored, I started doing a lot of online shopping. I think it happened to some people around me and it was thanks to the internet that I made those purchases, some useful others that probably didn't make much sense.

As we have MB WAY, I noticed that I started shopping there [online] (...) [before] I had to leave my home and, for example, go to Lisbon to shop for clothes. Now I've learned that I don't need as I can shop at any time. So, I think it has increased a lot the consumption.

Online communication: the importance of affective ties

- Approximation

I couldn't go to visit my grandmother and I bought her a tablet, installed the internet and it was possible to have another kind of contact with my grandmother. If it wasn't for the internet she would be isolated.

I happen to have feedback from several friends with young children who say that they used to see their grandparents once or twice a week, on the weekend, and now they see them every day because they can talk through a video call.

- Connection

I was already paying a lot attention to social networks but I was not very active. I am more an observer, but I confess that, especially during the lockdown, I felt the need to interact much more than before because we were confined.

I also found a way for all of us [whole family] to be closer. We made WhatsApp groups, we were always arranging games and stuff, so we weren't always watching at [COVID information]...

Other topics

- COVID-19 online information search
- Access to e-Government and digital public services

Conclusion

Positive and negative issues:

- Flexibility: time management
- Connection: feeling of 'shared experience'
- Complexity: difficulties separating both work life and private life
- Overload: learning and saturation

Family context, job, and previous uses of the internet mediated how participants experienced the internet during the pandemic

COVID-19: created the conditions for (some) digital inclusion, but also exposed differences concerning access and literacy

Thank you!

Questions? Comments?

You can contact me at joao.estevens@ics.ulisboa.pt



@joao_estevens