This article is an overview of my study of children’s online chat with a discussion of later research. The study draws on observation of Norwegian chat rooms and interviews with children and adolescents from 1999 to 2000. A decade ago, the Internet represented a new phenomenon and web chat was typically a many-to-many form of communication. Fundamentally, children who communicated in online communities ten years ago were, as today, co-producers of mediated communities within the framework of contemporary technology – and the surrounding social context. The article questions whether the networked publics today display a broader range of their identities and as such receive responses that are individualised in more detail than ten years ago.
Much has been written about the Internet as a dangerous medium where children expose themselves to so-called stranger danger and other risks in a public space. Other accounts describe the potentialities of children to develop new skills, and to establish and maintain social relationships through online social networking (Tingstad, 2003, 2006; Willett, 2008, 2009; Boyd, 2008). Online communication happens in a virtual space that has in recent years, since the Internet was first introduced, shifted from being an often crowded and rather unpredictable space, with lots of comings and goings in public, towards technologies that enable users to limit the number of people they communicate with, at the same time as allowing them to reveal themselves publicly in new and more sophisticated ways; such as with pictures, profiles, relationship updates, comments and so on. Whereas early-adopters in 1999 used fictitious names and profiles, and talked about new and wonderful technologies such as MSN, IRC and ICQ that were yet to be widely adopted, technology today offers a broader range of social network sites that enable users to choose from various ways to create individual profiles and limit the number of chat partners.

This article is an overview of my study of children’s online chat (Tingstad, 2003) with a discussion of later research. It presents features characteristic of the early phase of online communication among children and adolescents in Norway a decade ago, and discusses some of these features with reference to research on online social networking carried out more recently. In public discourse, web chat, which was a common term in the literature at that time, was the subject of much concern, often linked to cases where young girls had been abused by men after meeting them in chat rooms. Educationalists and linguists discussed whether online chat would destroy proper written language since chat language was more similar to speech (Cameron, 2001). These discourses were, of course, part of established anxieties concerning changing childhoods and the claim that media blurred the boundaries between children and adults (Postman, 1982). In those early days of the Internet, some saw the emergent rise in virtual communities as a kind of compensatory activity, as access to informal public spaces in the physical environments where people lived became more restricted (Rheingold, 1991). One of the questions asked in my study was whether children, through the use of new communication technologies, were recapturing a public space of their own, as playing areas they might have used formerly had been replaced by buildings, cars and roads, and their time, to a large extent, had been organised and controlled by institutional structures such as schools and formal leisure activities such as music classes and sports lessons.

Seeing children as active participants in - not just passive receivers of - culture, upbringing and teaching (James et al., 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Giddens, 1984), my study approached children, not only as audiences in these new media environments, but also as co-producers of what happened there. This approach is later conceptualised as networked publics, seeing young people to be “writing themselves into being” through their online interactions (Boyd, 2008, p. 129) and emphasising the variety of ways people engage in shared culture and knowledge.

Methodology

My study draws on 14 hours of observation of two Norwegian chat rooms, as well as observations, interviews and e-mail communication with eight children between the ages of 11 and 14, and their parents, in their homes from 1999 to 2000. The manager of one of the web sites was also interviewed. It is important to note that when this empirical study started less than half of homes with children aged between 9 and 15 had access to the Internet, whereas today nearly all do (Vaage, 2000, 2009). In the early days of mass Internet use, communication in chat rooms was an activity for the few adopters of the new technology. In 2000, chat was one of the categories in the statistics on Internet
use, whereas today Internet statistics are more differentiated and net society is the common phrase used (Vaage, 2001, 2009). Whereas 14% of 9 to 15 year-olds reported having used chat the previous week in 2000, 66% of the same age group said they used net society sites regularly in 2008 (Vaage, 2009). A decade ago, the Internet represented a new phenomenon and web chat was typically a many-to-many form of communication (Holm Sørensen, 2001) for the few. Today, more young children (from 5 years old) are on the net, not least because television channels encourage them to be (The Norwegian Media Authority, 2010).

The chat rooms studied were POPIT and SOL. At the very beginning of the study, these were the sites that were most frequently used by the children I interviewed. Both of them were parts of commercial web sites and they still exist, with a more extensive commercial wrapping than a decade ago. POPIT was exclusively designed for children and became operative for the first time in Norway in January 2000. The site was soon made available in Danish, Swedish and Finnish and was established as an alternative to existing web sites, which the editors deemed “not suitable for children”. SOL offered, in addition to other services, a special site for children and young people.

Since web chat was a new phenomenon, I approached it by simply asking: What is going on in an online chat room? How and why do children and adolescents use web chat and what enjoyment do they gain from it? After having tried different methods, I logged on with a nickname in order to carry out the online observations, lurking around as a hidden observer, remaining silent, such as other users often did themselves. I had tried to introduce myself as a researcher and realised that communication stopped if I did so. I also tried to participate, but when I entered the room and behaved as an ordinary participant, other people, not surprisingly, talked to me and expected me to reply.

The position as a hidden observer might, from an ethical perspective, be questioned, although it is recommended in the methodological literature (Patton, 1990). Paccagnella (1997) recommends hidden observation to prevent the observer influencing the situation. Indeed, my main argument for choosing this approach was simply that this was the only possible way to study the phenomenon without disturbing it. Another argument was that this kind of communication actually happened in a public space where I was one of the crowd. Communication like this was open and accessible to anyone; everybody had a nickname, and pretending was a part of the convention. Thus it was likely that many of the participants were aware of the room as a public space.

I use the term children and adolescents about the users, even if their offline identities are a matter of uncertainty. Both the interviews and the observations confirmed the impression that children formed the overwhelming majority of participants in the two chat rooms I observed. The data indicates that girls participated actively more frequently than boys. However, this conclusion is a matter for discussion, since boys often chose girlish nicknames and this could therefore bias the perception of the participants’ sex.

Changing childhoods?

With increasing access to a global and convergent media culture, where different media, e.g. television, Internet, telephone and printed media are ‘melting’ together, children have become participants in a social arena that provides new possibilities for individual exposure, identity formation and community-shaping. Online communication, made possible by modern technology,
enables children to engage in social practices and cultural discourses in ways that appear to have both similarities and differences to more conventional forms of communication where people talk or play face-to-face, write letters or talk on the phone, for example. Talking is here to be understood as an activity where social knowledge is reproduced and created (James, 1995). One of the arguments in this study is that online chat rooms are spaces for social practices, demonstrating children’s participation in reflexive processes.

Giddens (1990, 1991) describes some of the changes in modernity using the concepts of *disembedding*: the processes where social relationships are detached from local and binding contexts and *reflexivity*: the way in which social practices are constantly examined and transformed in the light of new information about these practices. A key issue in social science is to explore how different and changing social and cultural contexts influence people’s potential for social action, participation and citizenship. In some sociological theory, social and cultural processes are seen as taking place, not as a linear development, or as a kind of social evolutionism, but rather as a series of discontinuous breaks, implying that society is changed and re-organised according to new principles (Giddens, 1990).

Children’s online communication does not occur in a social and cultural vacuum, but happens in a world that is socially and culturally formed, “never simply between you and me as individuals” (Kress, 1993, p. 5). Certain characteristics of web chat - such as anonymity (you ‘dress up’ with a nickname and a chosen personal profile), spontaneity, the high numbers of participants and immediate responses - led me to expect this kind of communication to generate different kinds of social relations between the chatters than those that arise in situations where people are together face-to-face. Characteristic of social network sites is a type of networked public with four properties that are not typically present in face-to-face public life (Boyd 2008). These are persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences. Since this kind of communication can be recorded for posterity, you can easily find somebody’s ‘digital body’ online. This can be copied, and there is no way to distinguish the original from the copy. Lastly, “it is virtually impossible to ascertain all those who might run across our expressions in networked publics” (Boyd, 2008, p. 126).

I wanted to explore how web chat might encourage children to explore *social identity*, seeing this concept as a dualism between *to be alike* and *to be different from* (Gullestad, 1989); the encounter between the culture and the self, where *culture* is manifested in characteristic forms of actions, attitudes and habits, and where people individually create meaning and identity. In this respect I expected web chat to show evidence of children’s participation in modern reflexive processes, in which this dualism was in action. What happens when children meet in chat rooms where those who talk do not necessarily know each other, do not see each other, and are inherently dependent on each other’s presence to have somebody to talk with?

**Web chat: a virtual fitness-centre for quick-thinkers?**

Children and young people are - particularly in Western societies - confronted with the cultural ideals and practices of *being oneself* and *creating oneself* (Gullestad, 1996). These bring expectations of constructing identities as girls and boys according to cultural standards that encourage autonomy, individualisation and independence (Lee, 2001; Kjørholt, 2004). In the type of chat room I observed in my study, users had to define a personal profile with respect to age, sex, hair colour, clothes, mood and personal interests. There were rules for good net behaviour, warnings against breaking the rules and moderators who were authorised to expel participants who behaved badly, for instance by
flooding: the keying of rows of meaningless characters that occupied space for other participants. In short, chat was a kind of community with its laws and regulations. A participant could not, however, expect these to be consistent as they were continuously negotiated, adapted or rejected, and thus objects of children’s individual and collective inputs and co-production.

What did the children and adolescents enjoy about web chat, according to the data from 1999 - 2001? “To meet people and talk about everything” was the most common answer when I asked children why they used a chat room. But chat could be boring and there were many challenges to master, to ignore or to oppose. Chat was spontaneous, chaotic, fast, transient, anonymous, humorous, hostile and friendly; in short, as in life elsewhere. At first sight, some chat rooms could look like the walls of a public toilet, with sexualised nicknames and harassing comments and invitations. These were addressed especially to homosexuals, kids, childish or old people, girls, boys or people from an ethnic minority group: i.e. individuals or groups of people that, for one reason or another, at that moment, or in a particular context, were given certain characteristics, often with negative connotations. I interpreted this communication as the construction of cultural boundaries, but also as a way to explore cultural norms and values.

A newcomer could experience this flow of talk as completely incomprehensible or depressing. This impression was strengthened both by the pace and the particular kind of language that chatters often used. Abbreviations, arrows, rows of numbers and apparently meaningless combinations of letters and exclamation marks created a chaotic impression for a newcomer. However, a closer look showed that there were things going on in a chat room that were not obvious or directly available for a newcomer. Behind the chaos and hostile comments, it was possible to discover multi-layered, friendly and supportive communication with a complex mix of various activities, topics, codes, rules and conventions. Users also appropriated identities - of age and gender in particular - that were different from their offline selves. However, the communication took place as a continuous tension between maintenance and breakdown. Some people seemed to try hard to maintain the room as a nice place, while others did all they could to disturb, shout and bully until the censor program or moderators evicted them. For some, to challenge the moral code in the room was the main or even the only goal. As one of the boys (aged 12) said: “What happens if I press the key for half an hour?” A chatterer who had filled the room with rows of sexual expressions and invitations withdrew all he or she had said after being criticised by other participants in the room.

The message above can be read as an attempt to be excused and accepted in the room after having broken the rules. The social sanctions in the room probably caused a change of nickname, according to one of my informants (a girl, aged 11). SyBeRsPaCe did not return any more with this nickname, but he or she probably appeared after a while with a new one; a good strategy to escape from a bad reputation. However, as another of my informants (a boy, aged 12) said in response to this incident, “It’s very hard to change nickname all the time – you’ll get a bad reputation, you know”.

An online conversation that took the form of a huge quarrel had much potential for informal learning, from which children could calibrate themselves and prevent the room from total collapse. To succeed in a chat room (this usually meant to get a reply), children had to cope with many challenges, such as language codes and cultural codes, rules and conventions, which were not
necessarily obvious to a newcomer. In this historical stage of online social networking, a Danish study (Holm Sørensen, 2001) showed two main forms of chat. Firstly, reality-oriented chat was anonymous talk in a virtual room where you talked about yourself, about school and school work, parents and so on, and related to others as if they had the same intentions. Fiction-oriented chat was, on the other hand, talk in which you pretended to be someone else. This was a rather demanding task, as you had to live up to the identities you had chosen. The excerpt below from my interview with Erik (a boy, aged 13) describes the stress:

Vebjørg: Yes, I wonder, if you are talking for a longer period, you must be revealed.
Erik: Yes, you will reveal yourself after a while, I think.
Vebjørg: Yes
Erik: It depends….
Vebjørg: Yes, have you been stressed because you have tried not to be revealed?
Erik: Yes, but I… it depends on what I am doing. If I say I am another person, it is actually a bit stressful sometimes (laughs).
Vebjørg: Yes, to be that person for a while.
Erik: Yes, if somebody … if you know… if you are a person you know, talking with another … who knows this person
Vebjørg: Yes?
Erik: And then, in a way… oh, what was I…
Vebjørg: Yes
Erik: Then you have to think it over…
Vebjørg: To avoid being revealed?
Erik: Yes
Vebjørg: Too many things to take care of?
Erik: Yes

Turkle (1995) uses the concept of a social laboratory when characterising how people employ the Internet to experiment with constructions of the self. She sees this as a prominent feature in post-modern life. To emphasise the subjective position of children, I rather preferred to conceptualise the chat room as a social fitness-centre where there were equipment, tools, people and regulations; i.e. structures, in Giddens’ terms (1984), which constituted some prerequisites of possible practices. The results of the social exercise undertaken were, however, to a large extent, dependent on the individual abilities and willingness to contribute. “I’m not so often on chat, really – I can’t always understand what’s going on there,” one of the boys (aged 11) said. To some extent, chat communication seemed to favour the quick-thinkers: those with the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1995), who could cope with the rapidly changing codes, conventions and style – and the sudden events - in the room. A user was confronted with and explored social and cultural norms and demands which were prominent both in wider society and in the specific context of the chat room, such as those connected to presenting oneself successfully, engaging in appropriate (and inappropriate) behaviour and interests, showing competence to handle sudden challenges, presenting a youth cultural style, including sexual norms (and harassments), and protecting oneself from being exploited. In short, becoming advanced participants in a chat room seemed to be dependent on the
ability to handle cultural codes that were influential, not only within the particular site, but also in the given social and cultural context in which they lived their lives.

Creating privacy in public

During face-to-face interaction with peers, the fear of being teased, bullied or punished may prevent some adolescents from revealing their inner thoughts or opposing a majority discourse; for instance, to say that they are in love with someone, or to say no to a cigarette when their closest friend offers them one. In this respect the chat room represented a place to be protected from social sanctions and embarrassment offline. Yet the anonymity could also be viewed as a disadvantage with regard to the ability to develop close relationships. In particular, the insiders, who for some reasons were considered to be part of an online community (Sveningsson, 2001), tended to perceive the common room as being insufficient to satisfy their expectations of a good chat room. The most advanced children tried to explore how to chat privately; i.e. with a technological device that could limit the participants. Although they had little experience, they realised that it was only a matter of time before they might reach the level of technological competence that enabled them to “go private”. Thus, private and public meant something different in the context of online communication among these children during this period, when most of it happened in public. In some senses, Boyd (2008) argues, “public” is quite similar to what in media research is often called ‘audience’ as both terms refer to a group bounded by a shared text. The social network sites themselves “distinguish between public and private, where public means that a profile is visible to anyone and private means that it is Friends-only” (op.cit: 125).

The public discourses about children and the Internet have emphasised the potential dangers associated with paedophiles, who try to gain access to children via the net. When talk about sexual issues appeared in my study, one or more chatterers usually expressed an intensely negative attitude, often by asking people to leave the room or asking moderators to evict them. Such messages were particularly frequent when those who were in the chat rooms used particular words or invited other people to participate in net sex, for instance. With reference to face-to-face interactions, Corsaro (1997) emphasises that everyday activities in peer cultures enable preadolescents to negotiate and explore a wide range of norms around issues such as friendship processes, personal appearance, self-presentation, personal aspirations and relationships with adult authority figures. By participating in organised and informal games, verbal play routines and collaborative storytelling, “preadolescents explore developing norms and expectations about themselves and their place in peer and adult culture without the risk of direct confrontation and embarrassment” (op.cit:168). This description of children’s offline play may be significant and may also be as relevant online. However offline play is not necessarily an activity “without risk of direct confrontation and embarrassment.” In fact, we have seen the opposite; that offline interactions are perceived as more risky, suggesting that social identity may sometimes be better explored online.

A standard opening question in the two chat rooms was: “Anybody who wants to chat?” For most of the children in my study, chat had become a daily routine and an essential part of their social life. The question, “Anybody who wants to chat privately?”, however, indicated a wish for a more intimate relationship, something that normally caused both excitement and suspicion. Those who wanted to chat privately; i.e chat with a particular user, were asked to key either some letters or numbers. By keying these rows of letter or numbers, as for instance 6666, (“Six” in Norwegian is pronounced ”seks” and therefore not a random chosen number), a user could at least be identified with a response. Sometimes the chatterers knew the ones that invited people to chat privately because
they recognised their nicknames. When this happened, they could for instance arrange a phone call. If they did not know this person, some of the children could type their phone number anyway, even when they had been warned against giving any personal details in a chat room. Sometimes the temperature rose. As part of my study, three of the girls shared one computer when one of them suddenly asked, "Is it possible that he might turn up on my doorstep?" They wondered whether it was technically possible for this person, who was presented as a 17 year-old male, to identify the owner of the computer and come to her house. They watched what people said and based on this knowledge, the type of nicknames and their previous knowledge about such nicknames, they discussed whether to trust this person or not. With warnings from their parents and net rules from Save the Children in front of them, they simply could not escape from the concerns displayed about the online ‘stranger danger’. However, my study contains no indication that any of the informants had personal experience with people that had offended them on the Internet. Contrasting many of the public anxieties about children and the Internet, online communication seems to be much more banal than sometimes assumed (Willett, 2009).

The excerpt below shows how web chat was used as a place to meet up, in order to make closer contact in pairs or small groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cool-boy&gt;Privat?000</th>
<th>Cool-boy&gt;Private?000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sviffer&gt;000</td>
<td>sviffer&gt;000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nettbayb&gt;vi møtes etter på jeg må chate med noen andre</td>
<td>nettbayb&gt;I’ll meet you later I have to chat with somebody else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KB&gt;snakke privat,tast 2000</td>
<td>KB&gt;talk in private, key 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BigOne&gt;någen som vil chatta?</td>
<td>BigOne&gt;anybody who wants to chat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nettbayb&gt;000</td>
<td>nettbayb&gt;000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hotgirl&gt;Hei er det noen som vil chatte privat med meg</td>
<td>hotgirl&gt;Hi anybody who wants to chat in private with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex&gt;2000</td>
<td>Alex&gt;2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes such initiatives to talk privately dominated the messages completely. When this happened, there were few visible participants and a vast audience, according to the participant list, which showed who was entering and leaving the chat room. Often there were a few main characters - sometimes just one - dominating the situation as well as the atmosphere. In addition to these participants, who probably did not represent a stable and fixed group, there was therefore a large group of silent listeners. All these people might possibly have been physically away from the computer for a while before coming back. Interestingly, many of them would start talking when the dominant characters and troublemakers disappeared. For various reasons, some people remained backstage while others were highly visible frontstage (Goffman, 1959).

The character of the chat room as an open and large space was perceived both as a possibility and a challenge by the children I interviewed. “The trick is to choose a good chat room,” said one of the boys (aged 13). A good chat room was one where he found friends and where exciting things happened. The 13 to 14 year-old children in the sample experimented with different chat rooms more often than the younger ones, who seemed to have more than enough challenges in coping with
one chat room. What usually regulated the choice of a specific chat room in preference to others was the probability of finding particular people, including friends they knew, supporting the assumption that most of the online interactions among children and adolescents happen between peers that know each other (Boyd, 2008).

The most experienced chatterer, an 11 year-old girl, was also the only child in the study sample to use IRC, something she did regularly and very confidently. IRC had to be downloaded and required some technical procedures in order to enter. Another chat facility was MSN, which subsequently became tremendously popular in the years that followed. In this system participants loaded people’s names into a messenger service that revealed when they were online to other users. This was a much more protected space, limited only to people known to the user. MSN was easy to download, but had thus far not been tried by any of the children in the interview sample. My informant Erik planned to try a new site that many of his friends talked about, ICQ (read: I seek you). “Heard about it today...many people are using it, you know.” He explained it as almost like an e-mail, “but it may be a chat, too,” he added.

Erik: As if somebody is talking to you, although you are not there. Then it comes...it is saved so you can go and have a look at what they have said to you. It is not such a huge program as those others. It appears in windows on the side here.

Vebjørg: Mm

Erik: Such as...you see who has talked to you. And if you go in one day and just send messages to another person, so...then you have a number...you get...as if you get an address, but it is just a number.

Vebjørg: Exactly

Erik: And then you save lots of numbers, which...those are the ones you know...and then you write them...a message...and then they'll get it.

Vebjørg: Yes, it is a way to limit the large number of people?

Erik: Yes

Vebjørg: So you can choose some of them?

Erik: Yes, that’s possible. But as to... I think you can manage meeting just a few people, by searching for them.

Vebjørg: Mm

Erik: And you can save them and ask for their numbers.

The advantage of ICQ was, as Erik described it, the opportunity to talk with a limited and chosen group of people. “It is also possible to identify other people with a number.” Thus, he could take a look at earlier messages because he could save them. Maybe the best of all, he could decide whom he wanted to speak to. In this way he could be sure that the receivers would see the things he had written. “Those are the ones, you know,” he said. The way he talked about ICQ as both talking and writing, confirmed the impression of a mix between e-mail and chat, some of the qualities of an ordinary paper letter, and, as shown below, as a replacement of the phone.

E: If you give the number... there are very many on the net using ICQ, so you just can...if you want to arrange things, you just send...instead of calling.
V: Yes
E: Because he’s maybe…
V: There, you know, you will find someone interested in the same things as yourself?
E: Yes, in a way, if you… if I am playing [playing games], I meet somebody who is… an ok guy, I just… say the ICQ number.
V: Yes, but then you give an identity?
E: Yes, the ICQ number
V: Yes
E: But
V: You don’t have any scruples about doing this?
E: No

In this system the chat partners got a kind of personal identity to a larger extent than in the chat rooms Erik had used before. Although he had no experience of using it, he knew quite a lot about it and had great expectations. “ICQ is a sort of community of shared interests,” he explained. He probably perceived this kind of communication as being more serious and interesting than what he had experienced in chat rooms thus far.

ICQ gained increasing popularity during the latter part of the 1990s, Sveningsson (2001) argues. It was software with several functions that enabled users to see which of their friends were currently online, provided that they shared the same software and were listed on the user’s personal contact list. The software also provided fast and easy ways of contacting users through e-mail-like messages, web links or chat connections. ICQ was a faster way of contacting people than logging on to a chat room via a web browser. If you wanted to talk with a person you knew, many chose ICQ rather than regular web chat software. The technology developed in ways that responded to the users’ wants. A common feature in my data is, as we have seen, that after a period in the public chat rooms, and as they grew older, children preferred smaller groups, particularly with people they knew or shared some interests with.

Creating community – and boundaries

Community is, in everyday language, often thought of as a quality that emerges exclusively through face-to-face relationships. Having read about virtual communities (Turkle, 1995; Rheingold, 2000), I started my study with a kind of scepticism towards arguments that people could create community online. My reservations were anchored in a conceptual understanding of community, particularly when linked to children, as being more or less dependent on face-to-face encounters. However, the web chat that I studied uncovered what Sveningsson (2001) also found in her study; a sense of community and, interestingly, what I interpreted as an ethic of friendliness. Examples included the ways children talked about chat rooms as a place to meet people and the greeting rituals used when they introduced themselves and left. I looked in the material for signs of common interests, characteristics and shared culture among the participants and approached the data with a more open and analytical approach. This led me to see community as a social process involving the creation of meaning between members of a group of people who have something in common that distinguishes them from the members of other groups. Distinctions between groups are marked by the boundaries that are actively created (Cohen, 2000) and certain kinds of boundaries seemed to be useful to
establish and maintain a community of insiders. Boundaries were explored and marked in different ways: through language, topics, interests, status, friendliness, hostility, humour, instructions and greeting rituals.

| Brad_Pitt88>ER TILBAKE OM 20 MINUTTER DAMER | Brad_Pitt88>BACK IN 20 MINUTES LADIES |
| snill_gutt14>si hade til meg a jenter | snill_gutt14>say goodbye to me girls |
| kozzy>ha det snill gutt | kozzy>bye kind boy |
| snill_gutt14>jeg kommer igjen i kveld | snill_gutt14>I’ll be back this evening |

Two particular boundaries, which were continuously questioned, discussed and negotiated, were age and gender. These would be addressed through the questions, “How old are you?” and “Are you a girl or a boy?” A profile with information about age, appearance and interests, was, however, not sufficient for the children to be welcomed. To be part of the group of insiders, the newbies (Sveningsson, 2001) had to prove that they really were the ones they said they were, for instance by being tested in various ways. One of my informants (boy, aged 11) never passed such tests because he did not know the names of particular artists, football teams, etc. This means that community was something that had to be created.

Parallell to excluding conversations, there were also including conversations in these chat rooms. The extensive level of induction and guidance of the less skilled was an example of the inclusive style that was manifested repeatedly by the chatters. Various studies show that peer-to-peer teaching about digital media is more common than learning such skills within the framework of formal education (Buckingham, 2007; Skaar et al., forthcoming). A European study shows how children and adolescents’ convergent media learning is more advanced and differentiated in their leisure time than at school (Drotner, 2002). With reference to the concepts of situated learning and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), my data illustrate learning as participation in the social world. The enjoyment gained from continuously ‘dressing up’ in a written masquerade was accompanied by challenges about how to present and protect oneself, as well as how to establish relationships and maintain recognition and anonymity, closeness and distance. Referring to a recent study of British teenagers and their use of a particular social networking site, Bebo, dimensions of the life stages of adolescence are a way of understanding the significance of this site in teenagers’ lives (Willett, 2009). Typical of the tensions involved in people’s positioning of themselves as subjects, her study indicates that the site is serving particular purposes in relation to the informants’ identities as teenagers. In my study, the children used the chat rooms regularly, even when they said they were fed up. As one of the girls said, “I’m getting so tired of it, but it’s great fun”.

Writing oneself into being

Chat rooms can be seen as tools for children in their identity formation. This concept refers to the passive process of being formed, but also to the act of creating or taking form, i.e. both the structural and the individual aspects of identity formation (Giddens, 1991). Historically, identity has been seen to be connected to work, social class, family and nation, while identity today is described in terms of structures, and social and cultural groups and spaces. The technological achievements of the last century have produced a radical shift in the extent and nature of our exposure to each other. One important argument is that the emerging technologies have saturated the human self with multiple
voices and disparate positions for being (Gergen, 1991). Consequences of this are fractional relationships, i.e. relationships are built around a limited aspect of one’s being. The Internet, in particular, is often conceptualised as a space with unlimited boundaries to freely create multiple identities, independent of dimensions such as time, space, body, age and gender (Haraway, 1991; Turkle, 1995).

The flexibility in the chat rooms that I studied offered children and adolescents the possibility to pretend to be another person, with a fictional identity where they could make up biological sex, age and physical characteristics, without being revealed. However, far from “freely creat[ing] multiple identities”, questions about their own and others’ individuality - age, sex, style, music tastes, popularity - constituted an ongoing theme in these chat rooms. Thus, the numerous attempts to write oneself into being (Boyd, 2008), make oneself visible, create boundaries and calibrate oneself vis-à-vis others were parts of ageing and gendering processes that were closely linked to social and cultural frames, but also to their offline individual identities.

Boys seemed to underestimate the extent of their own chat activity, in that they claimed to be observing rather than writing, a girlish activity according to some of them. In spite of this claim, they showed a high level of knowledge about the sites, the technology and the content. Chat rooms appeared to be a gender-mixed arena where children, as expected, crossed some boundaries related to sex and age by displaying gender cross-dressing (Thorne, 1993): pretending to be a girl when they were a boy, and vice versa. One of the girls would pretend to be older than she was, hoping to meet older boys, “because boys of my age are so childish” (Frida, aged 13). One of the boys (aged 12) actually used girlish nicknames sometimes because he then got more replies.

According to Corsaro (1997), the focus on age can be perceived as a Western phenomenon, because grouping of children is much less age segregated in non-Western societies. He also argues that there is a growing debate as to whether girls and boys have different peer cultures. A common assumption has been that girls’ and boys’ socialisation belongs to two different cultures. However, Corsaro warns against accepting this view of children’s gender relations too quickly. As with the question of age, this assumption is based on studies of white, middle and upper class American children. Corsaro argues that there is little evidence to support claims for universal patterns of values and social relationships by gender. This argument is supported by Holloway and Valentine (2002) who argue that the simple boy-girl distinctions in attitudes to, and use of, computers are inappropriate. One should therefore be careful not to draw hasty conclusions about this issue.

Media are increasingly intertwined in social, political and economical processes which are taking a global form. These changes require a rethinking of both how media culture should be researched and how children and adolescents act reflexively in a socially and culturally formed world. Beck (1992) argues that social changes, such as those tied to new kinds of settlements have great consequences for people’s social interactions. Social relationships and social networks have to a greater extent than earlier to be individually chosen; social ties are becoming reflexive, so that they have to be established and maintained and constantly renewed by individuals. Beck emphasises that the ability to choose and maintain one’s own social relationships is not an ability everyone has by nature. This is a learned activity, dependent on issues like social and family background. The reflexive conduct of life, the planning of one’s biography and social relations, give rise to a new inequality, Beck argues, namely “the inequality of dealing with insecurity and reflexivity” (op.cit.:98). In this respect we face, not just the question of a digital divide - a highly discussed concept in media research - but also a reflexive divide between those who have the necessary communicative competence and
those who do not. Through a convergent media culture, children get to know otherness (Drotner, 2002). In addition, I argue that children and adolescents also get to know similarities, since media (chat rooms included) raise questions and dilemmas they are familiar with and which therefore are recognisable to them.

Concluding remarks

I emphasise communication as a dynamic process and have looked at some of the characteristics of chat rooms, and the content and conventions they encompass. With reference to Kress (1993), I argue that communication, in addition to sharing mutual construction of meaning, is a matter of contestation and contradiction, involving issues such as power and authority. In the chat rooms I studied, this could be seen as tensions between participants, who expressed different standards of behaviour, deemed different topics as appropriate or moved between different levels of reality, for instance by changing nicknames and dressing up with various identities. On the one hand, there was the written masquerade and the chaos, which enabled children to hide in a secret room where they could either have fun or even explore serious matters, based on whichever sudden thought that came to mind, such as issues about school, music or television. On the other hand, the participants could decide when and how to be visible. When talking disparagingly about homosexuals, an ethnic minority group or childish people in the room, however, the chat took on a character that was concretely and closely connected to social and cultural values and attitudes that had probably not come from the children in the first place. When children dissociated (with exclamation marks) from different kinds of human attributes and characteristics, I interpreted this as a way for them to ask what counts as appropriate or acceptable in society. In this respect, talking dirty, for example, may simply be for the purpose of trying out, to see what happens, to explore sexuality or as an invitation to others to negotiate cultural values. When disparaging or extremely kind comments, such as “Fucking bitch” or “I love you as a friend” appeared in the chat room, these messages usually generated an immediate counter-reaction by some of the participants. In this respect, exaggeration of emotions and expressions often initiated discussion, argument, negotiation or support. To interpret the comments quoted above as disparaging or extremely kind is, however, value-loaded. In some youth cultural settings, such comments are probably a part of a common vocabulary, and illustrate the complex and dynamic character of online communication where an essential aim is to make oneself visible, whether playing oneself or a ‘dressing up’ as someone different. Fundamentally, the number of children who communicated in online communities ten years ago was less, but as of today, they were co-producers of mediated communities and ‘constructed themselves’ within the framework of contemporary technology – and the surrounding social context. In that sense, there are many similarities between the ways in which children participated in networked publics by the time of the new millennium. The huge difference between that period and today, however, is the emerging conglomerate of potentials both for private and public display and networking in which the ‘language’ is extended to include not only words and typed symbols, but also photos, moving images and music. Further research may show how children’s online communication and social networking, historically, has developed to a position where they are increasingly displaying a broader range of their identities and as such receive responses that are individualised in more detail that ten years ago.

References


Willett, R. (2009). “As soon as you get on Bebo you just go mad”: Young consumers and the discursive construction of teenagers online. Young Consumers, 10(4), 283-296.

1 The terms user, participant and chatterer are employed as equivalents.
2 The methodology is further described in Tingstad 2007.
3 www.msn.no/computing/messenger/Default.asp
4 www.icq.com/icqchat