

# Young People's Net Cultures

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## INTRODUCTION

Sweden has a large number of Internet users, and on a global scale only Iceland had more Internet users in 2002 (ITU, 2003). The European Union-funded project SAFT (2003a) found that 87% of Swedish children have access to the Internet at home. Today Scandinavian media focus on alleged serious problems caused by children being online. Despite these media reports, however, it appears that Scandinavian parents and children talk little about the Internet and its effects on life (Bjørnstad, 2002; SAFT, 2003c).

In Sweden, consensus is strong regarding adult responsibility towards children. Parents often organize forums for different aspects of the child's life. Many parents and teachers consider it bad form not to participate in these activities, ranging from meetings to taking the children by car to all their activities. This shared notion of what adult responsibility means forms a background to the debate concerning children and the Internet. At an early stage some Swedish schools discussed whether pupils should be allowed to use the Internet during school hours, despite the Swedish government having placed large resources into giving all schools access to the Internet and every pupil an e-mail address (Chaib & Tebelius, 2004).

However, in the discussions of this development, the children's voices were absent; the threats against children were defined by adults. This is not surprising in view of a pre-figurative learning culture in which adults follow a tradition of warning children against threats posed by everyday life. Moreover, these threats are basically the same from generation to generation. New threats originating from the Internet might cause adults to warn about a reality which seemingly differs a great deal from the reality they know. Thus it should be interesting to investigate children's views of what threats the Internet poses and how to deal with them.

## NET CULTURES

Net cultures are activities on the Internet and the cultures that evolve around them (Dunkels, 2004). Net cultures can be viewed as emerging in a context that the Internet creates. When children enter this context, they learn how to interact with others and how to make use of the possibilities as well as to avoid negative phenomena. This ongoing learning process can be viewed from a socio-cultural perspective, in which knowledge and skills are seen as products of our environment (Säljö, 2000). Säljö also claims that learning and what is considered useful knowledge change with history and culture.

The learning taking place through a computer connected to the Internet can also be seen as situated learning (Smith, 2003) where beginners are in the periphery, learning from experts, and gradually move into the center of the community, becoming experts themselves.

### Children's Strategies Dealing with Threats, Abuse and Bullying over the Internet

The following is an account of a pilot study, conducted in November 2003 through February 2004: "Children's Strategies Dealing with Threats, Abuse and Bullying on the Internet."

### Research Questions

The focus of the study is on the children's own counter-strategies against what they themselves define as threatening or negative on the Internet. Questions of interest are: What do children find threatening on the Internet? How do children cope with these threats? How have they developed these strategies? Do boys and girls differ in this respect?

## Method

To receive in-depth answers, qualitative interview was chosen as the method. The interviews took place in a chat forum for three reasons. The first is that children interesting to this study are online and likely to be accustomed to computer-mediated communication; the second is that chatting facilitates data collection and makes transcription unnecessary (Bordia, 1996). The third reason is economic and practical.

## Sample

The Swedish net community *Lunarstorm*—with about 10% of Sweden's 9 million inhabitants as members—helped me get in touch with children of the right age. This seemed to be a good idea at the planning stage, since I wanted to interview children with experience of interacting on the Net. The manner in which the informants were contacted, explained below, made the sample small and perhaps skewed. The intention was to interview 15 children between the age of 10 and 13. Of 3,000 *Lunarstorm* members who received and read the invitation letter, I ended up with six children to interview, five girls and a boy, all 12 or 13 years old.

## Ethical Considerations

Besides the ethical considerations pertaining to any research project, there are special issues when children are involved and when the Internet is the medium. When contacting children on the Net, any adult must be very clear concerning her identity, to minimize the risk of misunderstanding. Doing this without being explicit about your identity and agenda may cause children to act in a careless way when contacted. There is also a risk that parents suspect that a pedophile posing as a researcher is contacting their child. The Internet might encourage us to perform covert observations of children online. Such investigations could produce interesting data, but should be avoided for ethical reasons.

The letter the Webmaster of *Lunarstorm* sent to the *Lunarstorm* members described my project and asked interested children to show the letter to their parents, who then were to contact me at the university via telephone, e-mail, or mail. Twelve parents responded, all by e-mail, and I sent these families a form to sign their approval. Only after that I contacted the

children by phone to establish contact. We used *Lunarstorm* for making appointments, but all interviews took place in a chat forum that I control.

The chat tool creates a nickname consisting of the word *nick* and a randomly chosen number every time a person logs on to the server. If a person logged on to the chat *elzachat* at 4.33 pm and received the nickname *nick70*, this was displayed as:

[16:33] \* *nick70* has joined #*elzachat*

We used *Mirc* as a tool, placing it on our own server. All chat logs were kept on the server and on my own hard drive. It was at all times possible to see how many users were connected to the interview chat, so that no one unauthorized could monitor the traffic. *Mirc* is an uncomplicated tool, and there were very few problems when the children started using the chat forum. They accessed the chat through its Web interface, and thus there was no need to download any software.

## Written Conversations

The characteristics of conversation are affected by the context in which it is conducted. The study's interview chat is an example of a computer-mediated, real-time written conversation (Dunkels, 2004). One circumstance affecting this study is that the parties were in different locations with no visual or audio contact. Another factor is that all participants had previous experience of chatting. This context shapes the interview, but also the product of it—the text for analysis.

When transcribing an interview, the text you end up analyzing is not the interview, but an image of the interview (Elmfedt, 1997). The transcriber's ambition is to create as accurate an image as possible; nevertheless, it remains an image. The interview itself exists in another medium. Written conversation on the other hand exists only as a text. The text is not an image of the dialogue—it is the dialogue. The paralinguistic markers that enhance any conversation (Hård af Segerstad, 2002) are visible in the shape in which they were created rather than interpreted and transferred into another medium, which would be the case of a transcript. An example of paralinguistic markers is when a girl being interviewed asked me if we may finish at ten past four. To show me that this

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