Interviews with Young People using Online Chat

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INTRODUCTION

When we first started using online interviews as a method for qualitative research, we had no thoughts about it being any different from face-to-face interviews. Being naturalized digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), having not used computers and the Internet from childhood but having become accustomed to them over time, we did not give the methodological issues much thought. However, when we started getting questions about our research, we understood that we took too much for granted. The questions that were raised made us question our approaches.

Internet Use among Young People

Sweden has a large number of Internet users, and on a global scale only Iceland had more Internet users per capita in 2004 (ITU, 2006). According to Safety, Awareness, Facts, and Tools (SAFT, 2003), 87% of the Swedish children between ages 9 and 16 have Internet access at home, compared to 85% in Iceland and 80% in Ireland.

The patterns of Internet use among young people have changed since the turn of the century. Private conversation channels, such as text messaging on mobile phones and instant messaging over the Internet, have replaced the open chat rooms that were popular at the end of the 1990s. Net communities have found their way into every home, having evolved from highly technical systems to applications that are relatively easy to use. This has opened up the Internet for the average user in contrast to the early adopter of new technology. A majority of young Internet users in Sweden are members of at least one Net community and use instant messaging on a daily basis (SAFT, 2003).

BACKGROUND

The focus of this article is online interviews, which we view as a special form of Internet research. There are also other online interrogation methods.

The chat interview is written and synchronous, although there can be different levels of synchronicity; in fact the parties can construct their entire answers before submitting them, making it different from face-to-face conversations. If we need to compare chat interviews to something well known, we might say that it is a combination of the traditional interview and a survey.

Performing research on children's activities on the Internet is an area where ethical codices are not yet fully developed. An ethical dimension is suggested by Hernwall (2001) who claims that communication with him via e-mail offered the children the possibility to act on their own terms and conditions. But it is also important to take into consideration aspects connected

Table 1. Some features of online methods compared with traditional interviewing. The article focuses on the last row: Chat Interview.

	Face-to-Face	Written	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Traditional Interview	X		X	
E-Mail Interview		X		X
Chat Interview		X	X	

to children's limited experiences of life (Enochsson & Löfdahl, 2003), and the younger the respondent the more difficulties she might have in expressing herself in a written medium. In addition to this the online medium demands certain ethical considerations (Ess, 2002).

Davis, Boding, Hart, Sherr, and Elford (2004) claim that online interviews are inexpensive, convenient, and can be more acceptable to people who do not want to or are unable to attend face-to-face interviews. The weaknesses according to Davis et al. (2004) are that online interviews are slow and that follow-up probing can inhibit the flow of the dialogue. The authors also claim that the lack of social and conversational cues present in face-to-face interviews can cause breakdown in turn-taking. Their experience is that these weaknesses make the text ambiguous. Other researchers claim that young people communicating have other ways of expressing those cues and emotions, which are qualitatively different from communicating face-to-face and cannot be regarded as *better* or *worse* (Hernwall, 2001; Hård af Segerstad, 2002).

All research involving humans has to follow certain ethical guidelines to protect the participants from harm (ACHES-MC, 1946; WMA, 1964/2002). The voluntariness of people to participate is particularly emphasized. The participants should be informed of their rights to abstain from participation or to withdraw their consent. Sometimes though, it can be difficult for a participant to tell the researcher that she wants to withdraw. When dealing with children, this matter is even more delicate and requires a lot of sensitivity from the researcher since children sometimes use extra-linguistic markers to signal their withdrawal (Enochsson & Löfdahl, 2003). Backe-Hansen (2002) also emphasizes the researcher's responsibility to make it possible for the children to withdraw throughout the research process.

Holge-Hazelton (2002) and Frankel and Siang (1999) discuss whether the researcher can be sure that the person at the other end really is the one she thinks it is. However, this problem is two sided. Johansson (2000) tried to find participants for her study in a common chat room, and comments she received showed that children online suspected her to be someone else than the researcher she claimed to be.

QUESTIONS

In this article we will discuss our findings concerning method and ethics when conducting online interviews with children and teenagers. The questions we will address are:

- What methodological and ethical issues are specific to online interviews?
- How can our method be developed further?

Method

This article is based on experiences from three different research projects in which children of different ages have been interviewed online (Dunkels, 2005b; Enochsson, 2006). The research projects' aims were not to study the method as such, so this article is based on analyses and reflections written down by the researchers during the process. The analyses are qualitative, and we have been looking at our own methods and the interview transcriptions in light of questions posed to us from colleagues and others interested in our research. When discussing the matter and consulting research articles, different themes emerged. The themes have been discussed, revised, and discussed again.

Online Interviews

The following is an account of the themes that emerged when analyzing our own methods.

Deception

Children are constantly being exposed to risks, and the Internet is no exception. Media focuses on the risks of being contacted by pedophiles and being exposed to sexual or racist content, among others (Dunkels, 2005a). When contacting children online the researcher must be unambiguous concerning her identity and agenda in order to minimize the risk for the children. The greatest risk is luring children to act in a careless way when contacted by adults. As described above, Johansson (2000) was suspected by the children in the chat room to be someone with dishonest motives.

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