

Chapter IX

Internet Chatrooms: E-Space for Youth of the Risk Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of Risk Society to contextualize the current 'youth problem' and the emergence of the techno-genre, Internet relay chat (IRC), in advanced capitalist societies. It argues that unsympathetic social policies combined with increased levels of surveillance in physical environments have contributed to the uptake of virtual space and online chatrooms as a means of social contact and engagement for youth. To the uninitiated, 'chat' is an ungovernable space of indecipherable codes, virtual skulking, and suspect subcultures. The chapter begins with a description of the rhetorical conventions of chat and a review of extant literature on it. It examines adult responses to teen chat through investigation of their representation in newspapers and compares this with text from 100 chatrooms. The purpose of this was to investigate whether adult prohibitions about chat are justified. Data showed that chat is a discursive space with highly regulated protocols and social mores, and that its delegitimation can be construed as an exercise in social control and governance over the textualities and sexualities of youth.

For both progressives and traditionalists the youth problem described and symbolized a period of acute transformation...In the highly dramatic perceptions of a dramatic era, youth was either damned or beautiful. (Fass, 1977, p. 16)

Youth is a material problem; it is a body...that has to be properly inserted into the dominant organization of spaces and places, into the dominant systems of economic and social relationships. (Grossberg, 1994, p. 34)

INTRODUCTION

“Damned or beautiful.” This provocative phrase encapsulates the intensity of adult anxiety about youth in America during the turbulent 1920s. Yet these signifiers pertain equally well to the ambivalence and moral dread adults harbor about young people today. Forces of change that society faced at the beginning of the twentieth century—industrialization, urbanization, the changing status of women, and the desire for personal fulfillment through leisure—continue unabated at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As youth then were a focus for the strains of a new century, so too public sensibilities in this late modern moment remain on high alert about the attitudes and activities of those who are defined primarily by their age (cf., Lee, 2001).

Most current discourses of youth—both popular and scholarly—are typically essentialist, conceptualizing *adolescence* as an unproblematized biophysical phenomenon, and framing *adolescents* as psychologized individuals deemed to be less than adults in terms of age and maturity. By contrast, I consider the concept of youth to be a discursive construction, one that functions to universally position them as *other* to the construction of *adult*. In order to avoid this mutually oppressive and unhelpful binarism, I focus instead on the sociological concept, Risk Society, as a means of contextualizing what is uncritically termed, the “youth problem.” This is a deliberate strategy aimed at shifting the burden of critical scrutiny from the young to those with social responsibility and a duty of care towards those who, though young chronologically, comprise a physically, culturally, and emotionally complex and differentiated social group. More specifically, the chapter examines issues of youth and risk through a focus on the communications form, Internet relay chat (IRC).

As social and cultural practices, new literacies emerge from particular sociohistorical contexts. A raft of economic, political, and technological developments have recently afforded the widespread use of chat as a means of social interaction for youth. A key reason for choosing chat as data was that this socially significant genre remains relatively under-researched and under-theorized. To the uninitiated, chat is an ungovernable space of indecipherable codes, virtual skulking, and suspect subcultures (Valentine & Holloway, 2001). This chapter debunks that myth through a technical description of the chat genre and a consideration of the reasons why so many young people are turning to online environments for social contact and engagement. It describes the responses of some adults to this techno-textual phenomenon through examination of the representation of chat in newspapers and, through analyses of chatroom exchanges, considers whether adult concerns and prohibitions are justified.

INTERNET RELAY CHAT: SOCIAL E-SPACE

Internet relay chat is a form of social interaction that allows groups of people to converse in real time by typing messages on a computer screen. IRC is one of the many new technosocialities—along with instant text and video messaging, e-mail, networked game-playing, and blogging—afforded by computer networks, tele-existence, and cyber-corporeality. Because the rapid-fire text of chat screens can seem incomprehensible to the uninitiated, a description of the codes and rhetorical protocols that render it different from conventional print text follows.

Chatrooms—sometimes called channels—are created and “owned” by individual users

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