

Chapter 6

Digital Neighbourhoods: A Sociological Perspective on the Forming of Self-Feeling Online

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to discuss how young people in Sweden relate to the Internet trying to picture how they developed and maintained relations online. The study revolves around the notion of self-feeling holding a few basic questions at the stake; how much time do young people spend online and in what different contexts? How does interaction take place in online communities and how is self-feeling constructed? The study takes on a sociological perspective on online interaction and leans on an interpretive approach represented by Charles Cooley. The study is based on eleven qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven Swedish young people made on the Internet in 2009. The results of the study point out that an excessive amount of time was spent by the interviewees interacting in minor online communities and services. The character of communication was mainly personal and intimate. Analyses make visible three aspects of why spending time online; to prevent loneliness, to create opportunities of inclusiveness and to avoid exclusion. Finally, the study discusses the construction of self-feeling as part of a socialisation process taking place in contemporary digital neighbourhoods.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of information society refers to major changes within communication and labour as well as the contents of work (Masuda, 1983; Webster, 1995). The ‘third wave’ of societal change has dramatically changed the society stressing

the importance to possess, handling and analyse information (Toffler, 1980). Much sociological research has been made from a macro perspective, taking the society as the point of departure, analysing the information society and information technologies. For instance one of the major sources in Sociology that focuses net cultures is Castells (1996) work from the mid 90ths on the organising of the Network Society.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-209-3.ch006

It can be argued that the field of net cultures lacks studies taking on a micro-sociological perspective focusing interactions between individuals and groups. This is a plausible standpoint concerning studies made in a Swedish context. However, the past five years the interest in the Internet has evolved as a multidisciplinary field seeing that social sciences put much effort into explaining and describing the Internet as an environment in which people lives with and in (Sveningsson *et al.*, 2003). The Internet is an arena that contains more than merely a technical infrastructure and in recent years the scope has been widened to involve the emerging field of digital arenas of young people occupied in identity forming activities (Buckingham, 2008), learning (Tapscott, 1999) and abusive practices (Dunkels, 2008).

In this study we will outline a sociological perspective on online interaction and net cultures in a Swedish context. The aim of the study is to discuss how young people are engaged in social interaction in the context of online communities. How much time do young people spend online and in what contexts? How does interaction of young people take place in online communities? How do young people construct self-feeling in online interaction? The study is based on sociological theories and in this matter we lean towards an interpretive approach seeing Cooley as central to how we can understand societal and cultural movements in our contemporaries. The sociological perspective of research may be useful to study human communication, whether online or not, and our study may contribute to a micro sociological perspective that focuses on the construction of self-feeling in online communities on the Internet.

NET CULTURES AND DIGITAL NATIVES

The Internet and digital media have become increasingly embedded in our daily lives. One central notion within the framework of net based

activities is ‘net cultures’ (Dunkels, 2007, 2009). It can be argued that ‘net cultures’ is a notion difficult to define due to its volatility. It can also be said that the inherent complexity of the concept depicts a distinction between net cultures and everyday cultures. Buckingham (1999) argues net cultures concern different fields or domains which are not limited to the area of Internet exclusively. The term net cultures have also been used as a tool (Tapscott, 1998) abandoning the demarcation between the net and the everyday life. Tapscott argues net cultures as a kind of cultural interaction which is displayed on the Internet. The approach of cultural interaction also makes the Internet a wider field of exploration embracing the contexts of learning, development and socialisation (*ibid.*).

The concepts of the ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’ were first introduced by Prensky (2001). Digital natives can be described as the generation that has grown up in the digital society being considered natives since they are fluent speakers of the digital language. In contrast ‘digital immigrants’ is a concept that refers to users who do not have a native understanding of the Internet and the digital world (*ibid.*). Digital immigrants are therefore forced to grasp knowledge about information and communication technologies to keep up with the developments of the technological field.

The discussion concerning digital natives and immigrants has also been addressed as an educational topic focusing the new challenges of the digital generation (Danielsson & Axelsson, 2007). The authors argue in the digital age many diverse opportunities have aroused for communication and learning. Also new questions have been stated, such as how identities are formed and how we may understand socialisation. It can be argued that research in this field has been trying to understand the conditions under which the new digital generation live, learn and work in the shadow of an old ‘analogue’ society. In this Tapscott (1999) stresses a change between the analogue society and the digital as a shift from

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