

Chapter 52

Youth and Online Social Networking: From Local Experiences to Public Discourses

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ABSTRACT

Often, young people do not have a voice in the public debate on internet safety and online social networking, but as this chapter will demonstrate that does not mean they do not have an opinion. Based on responses from 2400 Danish adolescents to an open-ended questionnaire, the authors discuss their accounts of good and bad experiences with social network sites. Furthermore, they analyse how youth (aged 12 to 18) position themselves as users of social network sites both in relation to very concrete and local experiences from their everyday life, and in relation to public media discourses. They discuss how they portray themselves as 'responsible young people' by distancing themselves from the public or "grown up" discourses represented by e.g. their parents or the news media.

INTRODUCTION

There are many who believe that young people act without thinking online and communicate with one perverted man after the other. But some of us just use the net to communicate with the people we already know, and we are careful.¹

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2919-6.ch052

The quotation was written by a 14-year-old girl as a comment in an online questionnaire which provides part of the empirical basis of this chapter. The quote captures quite well the essence of what the chapter is about, since it highlights the tension between what young people experience online on a local and day-to-day basis (communicating and hanging out with friends), and then wider public discourses which surround their use of new media

(which tend to highlight the pitfalls and dangers for young people). As suggested by Herring (2008) public discourses on young people's use of technology often seem to be expressions of adults' "hopes and dreams" or "fears and anxieties", rather than reflecting adequately young people's own experiences. Herring (2008) identifies three forms of public discourse (Media Production and Advertising, Media Commentary and new media research) which have the common traits that they: produce or re-produce overly optimistic (utopian) or negative (dystopian) accounts of young people's use of media, and represent an outsider view (adult) on youth's online practices. She explores the ways in which young people contest or condone of these public discourses governed and produced largely by adults. She suggests that youth are characterised by a dual consciousness or awareness where: "young people are aware of adult representations of their generation and orient to them, while simultaneously orienting to their own experiences" (Herring, 2008, p. 78).

In this chapter we analyse and discuss these tensions or dual awareness from the point of view of young people themselves, and with basis in different types of empirical data. The aim of our analysis is to emphasise and report from an "insider perspective" by drawing on ethnographic research, and by giving voice to youth's own statements and reflections on online practices, as they were expressed in an online questionnaire.

We find the notion of 'dual consciousness' interesting, and while Herring (2008) seems to ground the concept primarily in a broader, more general reading with only some concrete examples, we will discuss the concept in relation to a number of empirical examples. Thorough empirically based knowledge within this area is an important research contribution these years. Particularly because the topic of young people's online social practices is subject of much discussion and concern in the general public debate. As Sonia Livingstone has pointed out there has been "a notable discrepancy between the high levels of

public concern over children and young people's use of new media and the paucity of empirical research conducted" (Livingstone, 2002, p. 3). With that in mind, this chapter is based on five years of ethnographic research, a comprehensive open-ended questionnaire about Danish adolescents' use of social network sites and a media content survey and analysis.

The chapter represents a particular aspect of a research project concerned with Danish adolescents' use of social network sites (an investigation carried out by the first author). The overall aim of the research project is to understand how social network sites are integrated into the everyday lives of 12-18-year-old Danes, and how everyday teenage life is represented, mediated and acted out in the digital space. The research process started back in late 2004 where focus group interviews with young people about their use of technology and media revealed that a particular social network site (Arto.dk) was hugely popular among teenagers. Simultaneously, media stories portraying this site as crawling with sexual predators and bullies began to surface. The main author became interested in why the site was so popular and loved among adolescents; but also because of a growing concern with what seemed to be a huge gap between youths' experiences, and then the stories portrayed in the news media.

In order to explore this, a child-centred approach has been adopted² (Hake, 1999; Kampmann, 1998) and several types of data have been collected, including five years of participant observation, interviews, informal conversations, an open-ended online questionnaire and a media content analysis³. The project took its departure in intensive participant observation and engagement with online youth practices (which also included monitoring news media, as we shall return to). In particular observations have been carried out on the site Arto.dk, but has been expanded to include other sites as well (e.g. as participants have moved). To critically examine and extend findings and observations from the ethnographic engagement

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