

Janne C.H. Bromseth

# Genre trouble and the body that mattered

Negotiations of gender, sexuality and identity in  
a Scandinavian mailing list community for lesbian  
and bisexual women

Doctoral thesis  
for the degree of doctor artium

Trondheim, May 2006

Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Arts  
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture

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# **Genre trouble and the body that mattered**

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Dr. Art. –dissertation 2006  
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture  
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To Isa



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# Preface

*Once upon a time, there was the Internet. It offered possibilities of communicating through text, and many spoke of it as a mixture between written and oral. Since nobody could see who was typing, and since it was possible to participate without telling everyone else your real name, there were also many who believed that the internet was more democratic, making social and cultural patterns of power less visible. And since nobody could see you, people could play and experiment with identities in ways that were impossible in physical contexts. 'The Real and the Virtual' was born, built on the old hopes and hypes of separating body and mind. This story about the internet became very dominating, and was told by researchers, the media and everyday people — over and over again. Even if more and more people started using the Internet as an integrated part of their everyday life, at work, to talk with friends etc, the story of the anonymous, fluctuant and theatrical internet still is a loud voice in the choir singing the different tunes of what internet communication is — also called 'hegemonic discourses'.*





# Chapter 1.

## Mediated discussion groups as situated practice

### Introduction

17/1-01

*Today I have read a lot of messages on Sapfo, a Scandinavian closed e-mail list for lesbians and bisexual women, and looked at some other lists with other subjects. Sapfo has a lot of activity — a lot more than Euro-Sappho. Interesting to see that many of those who participate use nicknames on the list. Don't know if they are pseudonyms really (from a wish to camouflage themselves), but maybe more nicknames. The names are mostly short, un-gendered, and a little 'cool'. Some of them use a lot of IRC-inspired emoticons (\*laughs\*). Is it a relatively high ceiling for constructing femininity here — with both room for toughies and more feminine connotated ways of expressing oneself? [...] Someone mentions an example from another international list where it is not allowed to have 'a high temperature' in the discussions or quarrels, as a contrast to Sapfo (does this signalize that the Scandinavian lesbian culture include more features connotated to masculinity than to a 'narrow women's culture'?)*

(From research diary)

In 2001 I subscribed to Sapfo, and e-mail distributed discussion group restricted to women, aiming in particular at women identifying as lesbian or bisexual. For every message that fell into my e-mail box, I got increasingly fascinated with the lively and many-faceted group, and its participants, sharing openly from their lives and engagement with each other. What made me particularly curious, was firstly the kind of hegemonic femininity that was created in the group. As opposed to what I had read in a number of other studies of discussion groups for women, they did not seem to reject heated discussions in the ways they related to each other (Herring 1996b). Secondly, another unusual feature that I noticed, was that there was no-one in particular that had the main responsibility for administering the group socially. The social

interactive tasks of welcoming new list members, as well as sorting out conflicts, was a shared collaborative responsibility between the list members. At the time I had just started my dissertation project. I wanted to investigate how gender and discussion culture were created and negotiated in different mediated Scandinavian discussion list contexts: as socially and culturally situated processes. After browsing around the Internet, peeking into quite a number of discussion groups in my hunt for material, I got the feeling that Sapfo was what I was looking for: a non-commercial and stable group for women, with high activity, that seemed to fulfill many social functions in its participant's lives.

Because most of the research of internet use and gender is North American, my aim was to contribute with material from a different cultural context by using Scandinavian groups. I had previously studied two Norwegian male-dominated discussion groups, one with the subject of radical politics and the other aiming at doctors practicing general medicine. Towards the end of the millennium, there was a considerable increase of female Internet-users in western world countries. From looking at gender-mixed, but male-dominated discussion groups in the middle of the nineties, I therefore wanted to see what kind of discussion group activity that existed for women. How was gender — and hegemonic femininity — created as part of social identity in groups organized specifically on the grounds of gender? Many of the women-only discussion groups I stumbled across in my search for web-situated and e-mail distributed communities were organized around health-related issues and sexuality. Since I was in a questioning stage of sexual identity myself, I also discovered that the net was an important arena for sexual minority groups. Combining the two, I started to search for Scandinavian women-oriented sexual minority discussion groups.

These spaces are often mediated as open access web-forums, and are characterized by the hybridity of both being easily accessible to a public audience, and at the same time working as a space to share intimate thoughts and information. As Munt et al describe it in relation to their study of a lesbian online group:

*‘The discursive construction of the forum raises the question: what kind of space is this? The Internet involves a variety of spatial practices that are both public and private. Commercial, but open access domains such as Gaygirls.com require consideration because although they are a public space, they can also engender intimate forms of communication. There is a sense that the supposedly public space is partially closed because participants construct ‘private’ utterances that they would not convey to certain audiences, such as their family.’ (Munt et al 2002: 128)*

Sapfo is a mixed social space, where both intimate and personal thoughts are shared as well as being an arena for heated political discussions. It is 'easily accessible', where the only criterion for joining the group is that you identify as a woman and do not express anti-gay opinions. It is still not located in the most public spheres of the Internet though, being organized as a mailing list without publicly accessible archives, as opposed to the lists I had been working with before (that both had public message archives).

Originally I looked for groups requiring participants to give their full names, wanting to use the same criteria for self presentation as my former groups.<sup>1</sup> Through the work of mapping what actually existed, however, this wasn't as easy to accomplish as I thought. Many of the groups I found that fulfilled my search criteria had the option of participating anonymously, as was also the case with Sapfo. As I reflected early on though, I did not perceive the anonymous self presentations as a way to create fictional characters, but rather as a way to tone down the embodied person typing. However, as we will see, the option of participating anonymously on the list turned out to be more central in my study than I had imagined.

### ***Computer-mediated communication: diverse and situated social practices***

This study of Sapfo focuses on computer-mediated group communication as *situated processes*. By following the group as a participant observer, I headed out to look for patterns of how they created group community and interaction norms on the mailing list, and how gender and sexuality gained meaning in the sexual minority context. What does this imply? To be able to pick the appropriate formulations and create meaningful exchanges at the right time and place when interacting with other people, we are dependent of knowledge to help us define: 'What type of situation are we dealing with here and now?' (Goffman 1974). We act in relation to a set of socio-cultural rules of a specific activity that both help us to behave according to the situation ourselves, as well as to be able to interpret and make sense of the actions of others. Are we discussing politics, playing theater or bonding intimately with friends?

Mediated group interactions are, in line with other forms of interaction, contextualized practices. They must therefore be understood in relation to their communication genre, local

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<sup>1</sup> This criterion was also related to ethical and methodological perspectives, and the possibilities of obtaining informed consent from the involved participants, where the possibility of reaching the involved group members is highly dependent on the mediation form (see Bromseth 2002 for further reflections).

situatedness, participants and social purpose. The Internet and internet-mediated communication is often associated with 'identity-play in synchronous (same-time) cyberspaces'. This is a perception that has been heavily produced by the media, through people's perceptions as well as through research, theory and choices of data material (Elvebakk 2002). The net as an arena for social interaction is also often related to the theater metaphor; where the written bodiless self presentations allow for shifting identity masks in a fluctuant and global social landscape. Net-mediated communication is, however, diverse in both usage and genre. The basic difference between the more playful genres online and the discussion list genre that I study, is most importantly the social purposes for the activities taking place, re-presenting realizations of *a non-fictional genre* where the primary aim for the texts produced is to negotiate meaning in relation to specific topics. Mailing lists are further a form of 'asynchronous' written interaction that are distributed via e-mail, something that means that the participants are not communicating in same-time, as the chat, or in each other's presence, as in face-to-face interaction.

Diving into researching the group dynamics and presentations of selves on mailing lists, I found the mediated 'discussion list genre' to be an activity that had little to do with the image of the fluctuant and theatrical Internet. The story of the net as an anonymous mask play still has a strong voice, but is hardly a suitable characteristic of internet usage of today. The discourses — the stories and understandings shaping and creating what the Internet is and should be as a social mediation technology — are different from actual practices. The net is not one common public net-mediated sphere as little as it is one kind of mediation form. With the commercialization of the net, and the explosive growth in users and user groups, as well as a development of the technology and the possibilities of communication modes, the net is today used for a wide range of social purposes mediated through a diversity of mediation forms.

As much as the Internet is talked about as a global phenomenon, it is the mediated room understood as part of everyday life and as local social practices that are the main foci of this text. Internet communication consists increasingly in locally oriented practices in the Western world, in countries where a majority of the population are internet users (Mueller 2002). This interrelation between on-line and off-line also has consequences regarding what exactly is seen as central foci in studying a mediated group (Slack and Williams 2000). What are the contexts influencing and being used as resources in creating community, how are they drawing on notions of an established 'net-culture' and of 'local cultures'? What are the links between online and off-line social spaces in creating group culture?

The interaction patterns that develop in a mediated group are related to genre, social purpose, mediation form, socio-technical organization and group member's background, location and relations (Baym 2000). These are important macro- and micro-elements of the *situated social activity* that makes ground for the interaction culture developing in a mediated group. One of the important findings in my previous work was to identify what seemed to be particularly relevant 'ingredients' in the processes of creating group culture on electronically mediated discussion lists — the construction pieces so to say. The major discursive frames I found as the most influential resources in creating interaction culture in my last study was the Internet as context on one hand and the local cultural context that the group is connected to on the other. In spite of the differences in the specific content of the elements and how they were realized, the type of contexts they related to as well as central organizational features that seemed to matter, were strikingly similar for the processes of creating and defining the mediated social rooms.

On a *macro level* this connects to the groups' Internet mediated situatedness and their topics within a specific national cultural context, and the discourses associated with them. On a *micro/interactional level*, it relates to the social and organizational infrastructure of the group; their social purposes, group of participants and their off-list relations, how the list was run and administered, as well as the outspoken netiquette statements. My particular focus of research was to see how it all influenced the interaction contexts when negotiating social identity in form and content; as colleagues in a medical profession on one hand, and as politically engaged radicals on the other. That the mediation form is textual asynchronous interaction rather than face to face communication is one factor influencing the processes, but hardly the only one. The two groups as nationally oriented networks with professional vs. political aims were as important. As a social activity, the Norwegian doctors discussing professional issues on The Doctor's List might be more comparable to a non-mediated professional meeting context than with 17-year-olds chatting synchronously for hours in the middle of the night.

To be able to understand a mediated group as a *community of practice* then, we need to know something about its situatedness, both in terms of social purpose and group of participants, its local cultural relations and mediation genre. When I set out to do my study of Sapfo, defining the interaction frames was an important starting point. Firstly, what are the common features characterizing online communities for sexual minority groups, and how can they be understood as 'local cultural practices'? Secondly, what is particular about Sapfo as a) Scandinavian and oriented towards lesbian and bisexual women and b) organized as an e-mailing list? In this chapter I will situate

Sapfo by drawing a picture of the socio-cultural landscape of Internet-mediated communities for queer people, the background for why Sapfo was created and how it is organized.

# Situating Sapfo in the landscape of net-mediated spaces

## *A minority-based community*

What kind of mediated social room is Sapfo if we try to situate it culturally and historically in the Internet geography? Sapfo can be understood as a minority forum, specifically aiming at lesbian and bisexual women in a Scandinavian country, mediated as a restricted access mailing list without public archives. The Internet has become an important tool and arena for many minority groups that are socially and culturally marginalized, to meet, share experiences and discuss across time and place:<sup>2</sup> 'Computer-mediated communication and networking is a useful mechanism for disadvantaged groups in their efforts at collective action and empowerment.' (Mele 1999: 292, in Alexander 2002). Research reports the positive aspects and new possibilities offered by the net to visualize marginalized voices and create supportive minority networks across time and place. Mitra (2001) points out that public media in general have provided a restricted access sphere with little room for minority voices. Many scholars within the field of internet studies have discussed the possibilities mediated interaction spaces might have for minority groups to create community and subversive counter-culture in non-physically located spaces, and their meanings as hybrid half-public spaces (Wakeford 1997, Mitra 2001, Brockington 2003, Ladendorf 2004, Gajjala 2004). Or rather, the meanings of creating community on the basis of minority positions that are generally constructed and interpreted like 'the deviant other' — as homosexuality.

On the other hand, in spite of utopian beliefs that the internet is more democratic and socially equalizing because of the absence of the body separating the typist from the text, social and cultural divides are re-produced in internet contexts. Judith Butler's statement, that bodies matter in differentiated ways (1993), is also true online, through discursive productions and negotiations of cultural hegemonies. Not necessarily as material representations, but through our images of sexualized, gendered, aged and

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<sup>2</sup> See f ex Gajjala (2004), Mitra (2001) and Brockington (2003) in relation to ethnic minority groups and mediated communities.

ethnically marked bodies in interpreting others and presenting our selves (Sundén 2003). This may be observed through how net groups are organized, how bodies are textually represented and the ways they are made relevant in online interaction. Hierarchical social positions are re-produced, amongst others visible through what makes up the normal and the deviant, the marked and the unmarked. This is visible both in participation patterns, values and ideology dominating the content of the net. A range of studies show how social hierarchies are produced online through practice, through playing with cultural stereotypes (Nakamura 2002), as well as how they are made visible by online harassment towards women, non-white people and homosexuals (Hall 1996, Herring et al 1995, Harcourt 1999, Nakamura 2002).

Another aspect is that there will always be a limit to how liberating it can be to 'escape' identity categories online, as related to life offline. Nobody lives their entire life online. As Kolko et al (2000: 8) point out: 'neither the invisibility nor the mutability of online identity makes it possible for you to escape your 'real world' identity completely'. Race, gender and sexuality matter no less in cyberspace than they do in other social contexts.

### ***Queer online communities: escaping heteronormativity and 'gay-bashing'***

'The major attributes of lesbian community is providing insulation from hostility in relation to sexuality, promoting visibility, providing guidance of behaviour and self-interpretation, and being situated politically in relation to hegemonic systems. [...]

(Shane Phelan 1994 cited in Munt et al 2002)

The Internet technology has made it possible to create community across time and space, but if community actually develops, and how, is dependent on the people creating them (Jones 1998). The question is not whether mediated communities are 'real' or not, but if participants *experience* a sense of community, and how they actually create them (Ladendorf 2004: 104). As Ladendorf sums up, experiencing a shared identity with a group is a question of *imagining community* (Anderson 1991), and this is a term also many CMC-researchers use to characterize socially well-functioning online groups. Radhika Gajjala (2004) describes her case study Saw-net for South-Asian women as: '[...] an imagined virtual community of South Asian women based on the imagined possibility that they share many common issues, experiences and beliefs.' (2004:15). Group identity based on a certain shared reality/subject position is here understood as something socially constructed and individually experienced. The crucial question in

CMC-research, then, is *how* a sense of community is actually created and done actively, as social practice, by situated participants (Baym 2000, Sveningsson 2001).

Ever since its early days, the Internet has been important to people identifying as queer, gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual — or other non-heterosexual identity labels (Alexander 2002, O’Riordan 2005, Correll 1995, Hall 1996, Wakeford 1997). New opportunities have opened up for creating sexual minority-based subcultural community through web-pages and a range of mediated interactive communication spaces, where people can get information and interact with each other. Unlike the days before the Internet, it is no longer necessary to travel, for many, long physical distances to get in touch with a gay community — or, show one’s own interest in it by visiting the local gay bar. The established notions and practice of queer community, building community on the basis of minority sexuality, has been furthered and expanded to online spaces:

‘Moreover, the communication between individuals enabled by the presence of these web pages speaks to the continued expansion of the queer community across national borders, building on the development of gay ghettos and communities formed when queers began moving into cities during periods of urbanization throughout the twentieth century.’ (Alexander 2002: 80)

By turning on the computer, one can access mediated queer spaces in a simple manner, fast and with no risk of being seen by the neighbor as one enters. Since heterosexuality is the organizing norm in most societies and cultures, and homosexual desires are subject to more or less discrimination legally as well as culturally, many people are not open about their minority sexual orientation. This is particularly characteristic when one starts to question one’s own sexual identity as different from the heteronorm in the initial phase of exploring same-sex desire. The Internet is in this sense a unique way of getting in touch with other queers, both because of the easy access to people living in other places, but not least as personal information about the identity of the embodied person communicating does not have to be visible unless one chooses so.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the creation of queer spaces on the net has not been without resistance and struggles (amongst others by being denied user-access from established server providers). They are hence ‘embedded within both institutional and cultural practices [...] confronting homophobia’ (Wakeford 1997:27). Further, gay, lesbian and transgender net spaces also work as arenas where

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<sup>3</sup> Correll (1995) found that the lesbian group she studied was particularly important to people who did not have a lesbian network in the physical surroundings, and to people who were not open about their sexual orientation.



struggles like these take place. According to Kira Hall (1996), many of the gay oriented groups in general have problems with verbal harassment and flaming, mostly from heterosexually self-defined men. Because of this they are often organized as restricted access groups controlled by a moderator who reads the messages that are sent before they reach the whole group.<sup>4</sup> Bombarding online gay-sites with insults and harassing behavior have according to Hall been found as a common problem, and 'gay bashing' is described as 'a fun net activity' by certain net-users, in line with harassing other groups of people such as feminists, radicals and their like (see also Ward 2000). According to a recent Swedish study, homophobia on Nazi and racist web-pages is increasing, and seems to grow faster in number than racist utterances (Bernhartz, Dalsbro and Lagerlöf 2005).

The first group aimed at queers was started as part of the Usenet discussion groups already in 1983 (Wakeford 1996: 23), the soc.motss.<sup>5</sup> Since then, queer groups have grown and expanded in terms of topics, mediation forms and user plurality, in line with general developmental patterns of access to and usage of the Internet as technology and social arena. However, it must be pointed out that although the Internet has been used for a long time by queers, this does not mean that such access is an option for *all* queers. Sexual orientation intersects with other social subject positions, as Nina Wakeford points out, and having access to the Internet is step number one to participating online, resources that 'are surely not equally distributed amongst the diverse groups of lesbians, gay men, transgendered and queer folk, as far as we know from online demographics' (Wakeford 1997: 22). Today, the digital divide is particularly related to the Western world vs. third world countries, class, and age (Haythornthwaite 2001).<sup>6</sup> However, the gender gap is one of the social divides that has evened out the most during the latest years in the countries where access has increased among the population in general, in particular in the Nordic countries (Gansmo et al 2003).

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<sup>4</sup> This is also documented by Correll 1995 and Nip 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The abbreviation stands for 'social' ('soc'), i.e. the social groups of the Usenet, and 'members of the same sex' ('motss') (O'Riordan 2005). According to Kate O'Riordan, this group has had a more queer practice theoretically spoken than many of the sites and groups being created online at a later point, in the sense that the latter are built on stricter divisions of available queer identity labels when logging on.

<sup>6</sup> In the Western countries, the amount of users in a country is on an average 40 – 60% of the population. The Nordic countries have amongst the highest percentage of users as related to the population in whole, with an average of 75%. The USA are still on top of the list concerning the number of users, counting 185 millions. There is an enormous gap between these numbers and most African countries, where for example Nigeria with its 128 million inhabitants has 100.000 users. South-Africa has the highest access in Africa, where around 10% has access in 2005. Source: Click statistics: <http://www.clickz.com/>.

Queer net-space is not one space representative for all queers, but many overlapping social spaces mediated in different ways (Wakeford 1997: 22). Nina Wakeford outlines the outgrowth of different kinds of what she refers to as 'cyberqueer spaces', structuring them by how they are mediated and organized (building on lesbian net-pioneer Amy Goodloe (1997)). As the technology has developed, the text-mode of communication has been supplied with other media, such as graphical images, sound, and video, creating different kinds of communicative possibilities for people taking part.<sup>7</sup> Today, then, there is a great variety in mediation of representation and interaction, synchronous or asynchronous interaction modes, through web-pages or interactive communities, accessible through the web or being e-mail distributed. The variation in spaces ranges additionally in terms of social purpose as well as the degree of publicity characterizing a certain space. A development that has marked the organizing of queer groups since the World Wide Web, is an increasing amount of commercial actors creating and owning queer-oriented portals.

What seems to characterize many of the queer net-spaces situated on the web of today is a form of multimedial and multifunctional sites, offering a range of social activities within the same site (see O'Riordan 2005, Bromseth 2003, Berg 2002). Combining news updates and interactivity, they aim at and contribute to creating a sense of community, separate spaces for 'us' queers/homosexuals.<sup>8</sup> These sites often require that potential participants create a standardized home page on the site to be able to communicate with other members in different ways, so that the start page is public, but the rest is for subscribing members only.<sup>9</sup> Once 'inside', members often have the possibility of sending instant messages to other members, chatting synchronously and participating in discussion forums, amongst others. It is hence an efficient way of organizing as it creates a framework where different social tasks can be carried out in an easy manner, usually just by clicking one's way around. Simultaneously, using a design

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<sup>7</sup> As Wakeford points out, most of the research that was done on queer net-space in the middle of the nineties is on text-mediated groups though. After she did her overview, several studies of multi-mediated queer portals have been carried out, but the main focus seems still to be on textual interaction as main analytical source material. See Munt et al 2002, Alexander 2002, Nip 2004.

<sup>8</sup> If they actually succeed in creating community depends on the experiences of the participants over time, if the space works as a place where people regularly meet and interact with each other, or if it is mainly a place to pick up others to arrange sexual meetings for instance. O'Riordan (2005) points out that some of the queer commercial sites that she has come across often market themselves as 'communities', even if this is not the way they work in practice if one stick to a strict definition of the term.

<sup>9</sup> These sites are increasingly run commercially, as Kate O'Riordan (2005) also points out, and to a certain extent based on paid subscription in order to have full rights as a member.

such as this creates a certain boundary around the community. The problem with harassment of gays in queer-oriented net-spaces is common, and is often dealt with by having gate-keeping instances, through restricted access and/or through responsible moderators having an overview of the interaction taking place (Wakeford 1997: 27).

### ***Hegemonies within queer community online (as off-line)***

Parallel to the problem with homophobia online, there are certainly also hegemonies *within* the gay community. Sexual minority subject positions intersect with other social positions and hierarchies of power; ethnicity, class and gender in particular, as well as more subcultural internally based patterns of power (Rosenberg 2002). The white, middle-class North American men have dominated the Internet in number and usage, which is true also for queer online spaces; the male white North American middle-class gay represents the average queer internet user. As Kate O’Riordan puts it: ‘as with off-line queer spaces, the boys seem to have more of it’, characterizing the largest queer commercial portals in the UK as ‘very much a boy’s toy’ (2005: 2). The largest online communities describe themselves as being directed towards all queer/gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people, additionally there are a few spaces that are aimed at women, bisexuals and transgendered persons in particular. In practice though, the majority gay communities reflect the hierarchies within the gay community: the gay male having the default position, dominating quantitatively as well as qualitatively through cultural norms, women and transgendered being marked deviances. In Norway today for example, taking a look at the leading multi-functional site for GLBTQ<sup>10</sup> and gay friendly people, Gaysir, shows a jolly picture of five smiling men in the editorial board of the site. There are additional separate spaces (situated online and as e-mail distributed discussion lists) that are directed towards women, bisexuals and transgendered persons in particular — the minorities within the subculture.

Social and cultural hierarchies of power are present and reproduced in *active participation* online, and within specific groups, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. In general, women oriented groups (for queers, lesbians and bisexuals), that are confronted

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<sup>10</sup> The abbreviation stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer, that includes the most common non-heterosexual or transgender identity labels. I will sometimes only use the label of ‘queer’ to refer to all of these subject positions at large; ‘queer’ has increasingly come to work as a unifying term.

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with both sexism and homophobia, are to a larger degree organized as restricted access mailing lists, in order to create 'safe spaces' and protect the group from unfriendly intruders. Many of the female queer net users and members of the women-only discussion group SAPPHO that Kira Hall interviewed had bad experiences with participating in gender-mixed gay discussion groups, receiving hostile and insulting messages from men (Hall 1996). This was an important reason for joining separatist restricted-access online spaces for lesbian and bisexual women, because they experienced them as 'safer places' avoiding heterosexism as well as sexism in general, something that also Wakeford supports:

'The research of cyberqueer discussion lists suggests that for many users the lists are places to socialize, meet new friends or lovers, but can also be an important 'space of refuge' from other lesbian, gay, transgender and queer worlds, some of which are themselves online (Hall 1996, Wincapaw 1997).' (Wakeford 1997: 31)

Queer and heterosexual women's participation online is of course about more than 'fleeing from sexism and homophobia' in separatist closed women-only groups, and these spaces may also result in strict normativity of how to perform gender and sexuality in acceptable ways (Wakeford 1997, Hall 1996). Power is at work, through well-known traditional patterns — also online.

Even if many queer sites and groups online today, following the development of the queer influence, market themselves as inclusive 'rainbow-sites', welcoming everyone independent of how one identifies (as queer, bisexual, lesbian or just curious), there is often in interactive practice a more restricted attitude towards acceptable ways of identifying (O'Riordan 2005: 2). There is an obvious antagonism in queer subculture of signaling a diverse and welcoming queer community on a discursive level, and a 'policing of community' within the subculture in practice, through productions of identity hierarchies and norms in presentations of selves and interaction. As Ladendorf expresses it:

'Of course you don't free yourself completely from norms, values and identity markers when you go online, but at the same time the Internet, as all other media and technologies, frame the communication that takes place, and the representations that are made possible.' (2004: 25, my translation).

Language is an important tool and resource in creating identity and in negotiating what is right and wrong, important and not — in particular in a medium where textual communication is the dominating mode of interaction. Further, these processes are

culturally situated. What unites women in an online-group, both related to hegemonies of content and form, is hence a highly contextual matter.

### ***The importance of culture: European/Nordic cyberqueer groups in a USA-dominated net-landscape***

The Internet was born in the USA, technically and culturally. It has in practice been far from the utopian image of a global village that Marshall McLuhan once offered (Halavais 2000, Mueller 2002). Historically, net-communities targeting people from a smaller geographical/cultural area than the USA were generally developed at a later point, following increased Internet access and use amongst a more culturally diverse group of people.<sup>11</sup> In general, this has resulted in more locally oriented web-sites and groups in European countries, and an increased linguistic plurality. The oldest discussion network Usenet, for instance, has led to 'local departments' created at a later point — such as Usenet Norge (Munch 1997). Both of the Norwegian groups that I studied previously were started because their initiators had been participating in and inspired by a 'North American ancestor', and recognized a need for a more locally oriented group.<sup>12</sup>

The patterns of early North American quantitative and cultural dominance, and how they have changed over time, seem to be valid also for queer net spaces. When I started browsing the Internet myself in search for queer groups and sites for women in my own coming-out period, it was striking that a majority of them were dominated by users from the USA. They produced a linguistic as well as cultural dominance that shaped the discussions. Another example that illustrates this cultural normativity is the story behind several European discussion groups for lesbians in Europe. The founder of the lesbian/bisexual discussion group Euro-Sappho, the Finnish academic and lesbian activist Eva Isaksson (1997), describes her motivation for starting the lists on their homepage. After having been a member for some years of several 'international'/North American list serves from the early 90s, she started a number of discussion groups aiming in particular at European lesbian and bisexual women out of frustration of feeling culturally marginalized:

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<sup>11</sup> I need to underline that what I am concerned with here are patterns of 'everyday use by most people', not the pioneer groups with a particular interest in or advanced skills in computer and/or internet technology in itself.

<sup>12</sup> According to the two groups' initiators, they both told me that their own participation in an international group on the same subject gave them the idea of starting a nationally oriented group on the same topic.

The year was 1994. It was spring. There was the One and Only list (US)SAPPHO, the mother of all lesbian lists. By then it had become big. [...] It seemed quite futile to be a small European piece of spice among a large mass of Americans who were in pursuit of topics of interest mainly to American lesbians.[...] After writing and writing, and being aware that my bytes would continue to add an exotic Finnish flavour to the sea of its postings, I knew that the time was becoming ripe.

Euro-Sappho aims in particular at women from European countries and was one of the first mailing lists for lesbian and bisexual women in Europe and is still alive and active today.

Presentations of selves and community formation are culturally situated processes. Nina Wakeford calls for more research of cyberqueer contexts within other cultural contexts than the North American:

‘If performance is the measure of identity, how does performance vary with cultural location? Most cyberqueer activities have their origins in the USA. There is a strong likelihood that this will influence the level and nature of participation, yet no cross-cultural work has been undertaken.’ (1997:35).

In order to understand the content and meaning of constructions of social identity norms for how to ‘be lesbian in the right way’, it is crucial to see them as culturally situated processes (see chapter 5 for further discussions). Cultural normativity has in general been a problem within CMC-research (see Bromseth 2001) — more specifically the domination of Anglo-American perspectives, Elm Sveningsson and Sundén argue in their introduction to a new Nordic cyberfeminism anthology (forthcoming):

‘[...]far less studies have taken as their point of departure other countries’ conditions and experiences — for example the Nordic countries. Feminist studies of digital media cannot afford to keep up its current Anglo-obsession. It needs to become more inclusive. It is our belief that the particular, local and concrete do make a difference in relation to the production and consumption of digital media.’

In the Nordic countries, there are a few studies focusing on the productions of gender and sexuality in Nordic online contexts (Berg 2002, Paasonen 2003, Paasonen forthcoming, Laukkanen 2004, Ladendorf 2004, Fornäs et al 2002, Sommer 2003), but to my knowledge there are no in-depth studies of Nordic women-oriented queer communities. A number of online communities and

discussion lists for gay, lesbians, bisexuals, transpersons and queers were started in the last part of the nineties, targeting users speaking Nordic languages — both oriented towards users in one specific country or Nordic countries altogether.<sup>13</sup> Nordic communities and lists being created by and for women seem to increase in representation during the last part of the 1990s and onward (Bromseth 2003), something that is statistically parallel to the increase of women net users (Gansmo et al 2003). They represent a mix of independent sites and groups, owned by organizations and commercially run web portals, but have followed the development described by O’Riordan (2005), where commercial actors to a larger degree capture the majority of users.<sup>14</sup> From the beginning of the 2000s, after the IT-bubble burst, there seems to have been a development where large media companies that had put money into sponsoring amongst other web magazines and communities aiming at a gay audience, were either closed down, or started to charge their members for services to maintain their activities (Ladendorf 2004, Bromseth 2003).

The queer subculture is in general internationally oriented, and the Nordic is a cultural and geographical unit that queer communities in the Nordic countries position themselves in relation to. The Norwegian, Swedish and Danish lists and sites that I found during my study are all characterized by targeting explicitly people living in the Nordic or Scandinavian countries.<sup>15</sup> The largest commercial portals in both Norway and Sweden of today, Gaysir and QX, both have many thousands of members, working as a space both to meet new people, get updates on news and gay-oriented events, as well as chatting with friends who are logged on on a daily basis.<sup>16</sup> Berg (2002), who has studied two Swedish online communities for queer men and women, characterizes these spaces functioning as ‘a platform for homo-, bi- and transsexuals

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<sup>13</sup> See Ladendorf (2004) who has done a study of Swedish queer feminist online magazines, and contextualizes some of the developments of subversive net-magazines (in particular feminist and Swedish) in her chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Martina Ladendorf documents this development in the Swedish queer online communities, where the two largest sites, from being free, started to charge members for certain services from 2003. I have found a similar tendency on Norwegian queer sites (see Bromseth 2003).

<sup>15</sup> To different degrees of course. What is interesting is that for the online communities, this is visible in the technical and social design, as there are more than one option for ‘country/geographical location’ in the menu when creating a personal page, sometimes even with the option of choosing from a range of towns in one of the neighbour countries as well.

<sup>16</sup> In 2005, the largest Nordic community, based in Sweden, is QX with over 90.000 members. The lesbian/queer netmagazine Corky is now also owned by QX. Gaysir has around 30.000 members. For women in Norway, there is one smaller non-profit online community that has been run since 1996, and still going strong, Roterommet. This site is particularly characterized by an intersection between online interaction and arranging off-line events and meetings in the largest cities in Norway.

— social 'minorities' standing in 'contra-discursive' relation to the surrounding contemporary society — to communicate.' (2002: 7).

### ***Cyberqueer space connecting online and off-line***

Wakeford (1997) and Alexander (2002) argue that it is important that cyberqueer studies are not restricted to studying 'performativity online', but also to analyze and contextualize queer online communities and sites within a socio-political dimension; their relations to movements for social change and hence, to off-line global and local contexts:

'I argue here [...] that we can examine and question queer usage of the internet in terms of three interlocking modes: varieties of representation, community formation, and the movement for social change.' (Alexander 2002: 82).

Cyberqueer spaces are (in line with other net spaces), increasingly, locally oriented practices. In countries with high internet access there has been an explosion of groups and sites directed towards inhabitants of a specific country or region in particular. Mueller (2002), who studied a range of Swiss Usenet groups and chats, found that most of the frames of reference that are produced in the interactions are local, linguistically and thematically. When it came to conflicts and technical norms, though, the norms were referred to as 'standardized global' and 'traditions of the net'. Mueller names these interaction contexts as culturally 'glocal'; with frames of reference related both to local culture as well as the global net culture. As Halavais (2000) argues, it seems like we rather than wanting to meet people that are different from us culturally, seek cultural and sub-cultural familiarity.<sup>17</sup> Mediated communication is increasingly an entwined part of everyday social practices, something that implies that the people we communicate with using mediation technology and the ones we meet physically to a certain extent overlap. Even if these connections between online and off-line sociality has been a much recognized and discussed topic in the research field, very few studies have been committed to exploring them in full (Nip 2004).

Joyce Nip's study of The Queer Sisters and their bulletin board for queer women in Hong Kong, started by an activist group, is an excellent example that combines the different perspectives that Alexander suggests as a fruitful future focus for cyberqueer

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<sup>17</sup> Out from a selection of 4000 web-pages Halavais found that web-pages are more likely to link to another site hosted by the same country than to 'cross national borders', and if they do, they are more likely to lead to pages hosted in the United States than to anywhere else in the world.



studies. She describes the online group itself and its functions, as well as its relations to and differences from the off-line organization running it. Nip concludes that even if the online group did not have the effects the political organization the Queer Sisters hoped for, the bulletin board contributed to an increased sense of community amongst the users. Both as related to the online group itself, but also through achieving a sense of belonging to a local queer community in Hong Kong. Nip concludes that:

‘online spaces are not necessarily autonomous from their off-line counterparts. Rather, the autonomy of the online community is contingent upon technology and a number of conditioning factors, the most important of which is the original purpose and intention behind creating the space.’ (Nip 2004: 410)

The interrelation between off-line and online social contexts is also central in this study of Sapfo. In starting to observe the mediated interactions on the mailing list, I increasingly discovered how the political and social off-line subcultural contexts were entwined with what took place in the group. Similar to Nip’s study, Sapfo was started by an identity political organization for sexual minorities. The list members consisted of both political activists that were active in the off-line lesbian subculture, and women for whom the list was the only social room where they had contact with other lesbian and bisexual women, discussions representing a mix of social and political issues. What they shared (and created) is a notion of a subcultural community within a specific Scandinavian national cultural context — and some of the social and political premises for being female and living lesbian/bisexual within these frames.

## Sapfo, its micro-historical background and how it is organized

### ***The Organisation goes online:<sup>18</sup> first there were chats for men***

In addition to the online situated portals, which are mainly socially oriented, e-mail distribution lists (‘mailing lists’) are a common way to organize more content-oriented discussions. Sapfo was started in 1999, along with a number of other mailing lists, by the national

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<sup>18</sup> The background information in this part is based upon an interview with the chairperson of the Organisation.

organization for sexual minorities (that I will here refer to as 'the Organisation') in one of the Scandinavian countries (that I will refer to as the Country).<sup>19</sup> The Organisation was one of the first in the Country to offer Internet-mediated interaction services for GLBTQ-people in various forms. In order to develop the internal organizational work as well as provide better services for their members, they decided in 1996 to spend time and money on creating Internet-mediated services.

According to the present chairperson of the Organisation (that I will hereby refer to as 'the chairperson'), the question of spending time and money on Internet services was a controversial issue at that time. When they discussed it in the board, the main argument why the Organisation should try it out, however, was that it was cheap: it hardly cost anything to create e-mail-accounts for everyone active in the Organisation. The interactive channels for members originally started out with a guestbook on the Organisation's web-site. The visitors didn't only use it to communicate back to the Organisation, though, but started to leave messages for each other as well. Following this, the Organisation decided to develop synchronous chat rooms where their paying members could meet and communicate with each other. The chat rooms where in the first years dominated by men, in line with the net in general. It appeared to be a very important new meeting place according to the chairperson: ' [...] for many gentlemen, the chat was the only contact they had with other gay or bisexual men.' Interestingly, because the Organisation's chat rooms were almost the only interactive net-communication in the Country available at the time, and because one had to be a member to participate, the new net-mediated social spaces led to an enormous increase in membership numbers as a consequence. Even if the site today has been competed out by a number of commercially owned online communities for queer people, the numbers of paying members of the Organisation have been maintained on the same level since then.

The most popular chat-channel on the members' web-sites has been 'the boys' dark-room', where the primary goal is to meet other men for sexual encounters or other relational purposes. The dark-room was originally one room, but after a while several dark-rooms were created, organized after different geographical parts in the Country, a division still present today. A synchronous 'dark-room' was created for female members too, but some specific problems appeared in regulating the social space so that it would fulfill its purposes. These problems were related in particular to the

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<sup>19</sup> Because of the small cultural context, and a certain sensitivity characterizing the material, I have chosen to anonymize which country this is. This was a dilemma of course, because it makes it more difficult to contextualize the study. See chapter 3 for reflections about this ethical decision.

group of participants being (lesbian and bisexual) women, as I will describe below.

Sociality online can be organized in many different ways. The chosen form poses specific challenges and possibilities for regulating and controlling the space.<sup>20</sup> The chairperson points out that some of the weaknesses of the synchronous mode of chat-rooms, where everything takes place in present time, is that it is more difficult to have an overview of what is happening in the rooms at all times, in order to prevent law-breaking activities. All the web-pages and interactive rooms owned by the Organisation are edited by an internet editorial board, where the members have different areas of responsibility so that they cover all interactive activity. Examples of law-breaking actions taking place in the chat-rooms have been everything from drug dealing, distribution of child pornography, and of animal-sex. Since the editorial board is voluntarily based, and hence most of the regulation done by volunteers, it is difficult to secure that all chat rooms are under surveillance at all times.

The general rules for participating in the different interactive mediated rooms are stated in the guidelines for all activity on the Organisation's site (see attachment 1). In addition to following the Country's law, harassment of homosexuals in general is also prohibited. In the girls' chat room, a returning social problem was to keep the space for girls only. Unwanted male visitors disturbed the interaction frequently, making it difficult to maintain the dynamics of the synchronous communication mode in the room, the chairperson says:<sup>21</sup>

[...] but the girls' channel we've always had trouble with as men join in — and preferably heterosexual gentlemen who want to hook up with a lesbian couple — which is **so exciting**. They are convinced that they are the answer to all these women's ...what these women have waited for all their lives, because they have to be since they [the girls] want to be with girls; they just haven't met Mr. Right yet [...].

What the chairperson ironically points out in the quotation is a common problem also in other net-mediated spaces for lesbian and bisexual women, as well as in feminist groups (Wakeford 1997,

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<sup>20</sup> As the Internet has become increasingly entwined with societal infrastructure, social practice mediated on the net is to a larger extent considered as regulated by existing laws. This implies that if illegal practices take place, the server-company will be legally charged.

<sup>21</sup> This is of course, related to the cases where participants explicitly present themselves as male at one point or another during interactions, as the embodied person is not visible, but linguistically constructed. See chapter 3 for a more thorough discussion on this issue.

Ladendorf 2004, Hall 1996, Correll 1995).<sup>22</sup> This is however not a problem that is restricted to the Internet as a social arena, but a common phenomenon of patriarchal society that women have to deal with also in other social situations. Further, lesbian desire is a common heterosexual phantasm in mainstream pornography (Hardy 1998), and the phallic as symbolically dominant for understanding sexuality seems to make it hard to understand how women can enjoy each other 'all by themselves'. That no situation is complete without a man is however not restricted to lesbian contexts. Being approached by a man with 'Are you sitting there all by yourselves?' is a well-known phrase and experience for most women who have gone out to a bar with each other.

Because of these problems, the Organisation decided to create an additional space for women, organized as a restricted access mailing list to be able to regulate the space more systematically. A number of e-mail distributed discussion groups were introduced and added to the Organisation's site in 1999. They were organized in relation to a range of topics, aiming at different target groups within the Organisation. Sapfo is organized as what I define as a closed e-mail distributed discussion list in two senses.<sup>23</sup> Firstly, it is a gender-restricted list, as all potential participants who want to subscribe to the list have to identify as women.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, access to the list-postings is restricted to subscribing members, and it does not have a message archive, neither public nor private. Previous postings are thus only accessible on individual member's computers if they store them.

In the everyday language, many people today refer to all internet mediated communication as 'chatting'. However, different technical and social mediation forms create a variety of interactional frames, some more suitable than others for a certain social purpose. Whereas synchronous modes of interaction in the chat rooms are perfect for purposes such as flirtation, the asynchronous forms of e-mail distribution is an efficient way of organizing more content-related group communication (Baym 2000, Donath 1999). When the immediate presence of participants is not required, messages can be read and written whenever it fits

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<sup>22</sup> This was reported as a big problem at a Swedish queer net-space for girls, the net-community Sylvia, which is organized as a web-based community. Sylvia is run commercially, but has until the last year offered their services without charging their members. As from the spring of 03, however, you can sign up as a Plus-member and one of the advantages is that by paying a monthly fee, the member is secured not being approached by males if she doesn't wish to.

<sup>23</sup> However, the way different members describe the list in terms of its situatedness as 'public' or 'private', 'open' or 'closed' differs. Whereas some talk about it as an open list, because it is relatively easy to acquire membership, others refer to it as closed.

<sup>24</sup> This is a definition that also includes female-identified transpersons. However, not all members agreed that transpersons should be part of the women collective. See chapter 5.

your time schedule, and does not require the ability to write extremely fast. It is easier to store and also print messages, fixating the written content rather than see it scroll by in high speed.

In general, a mailing list can be organized more or less publicly, from displaying all messages in archives on the web for others to read to being restricted to invited people only, where one has to be member of the distribution system to have access to what is written. Also, the amount of information required from participants when it comes to revealing their actual names differs. The mailing lists I studied previously required that everyone should sign messages with their full real name, which is quite common on mediated discussion groups (Donath 1999). This is not always required in other contexts, like on Sapfo.

The target group is lesbian and bisexual women in the Country in particular, but Sapfo is open to all women independent of sexual orientation and nationality. The list is formally owned and run by the Organisation, and is described and presented as part of its web-pages (see chapter 4). To become a member of the list one is asked to contact the webmaster via e-mail, who will then add you to the list after writing to her. It is not necessary to participate with your full name. Using a nickname is allowed and accepted. As many of the list members are not open to everyone about their sexual orientation, the nickname and anonymity do in this context work as a protecting shield towards the outside world. It gives the opportunity to discuss freely and share life experiences with others in similar subject positions without being related to a specific embodied person. As one of the board members I spoke to pointed out, it is still a noticeable number of homosexuals who are not open about their sexual orientation, at work, to their families etc — even if the Country is one of the most politically progressive countries in the world when it comes to gay rights. Culturally though, there is a considerable amount of GLBT-people who have experienced being marginalized or discriminated, by family and friends, at school, work or otherwise.

### ***Social infrastructure and regulation***

There are several ways of organizing e-mail distributed discussion groups socially, concerning how it is regulated and administered, creating different frames for interaction and group processes. This is related to the social infrastructure of the group and in particular to how leadership is enacted (see Dutton 1996, Bromseth 2001). Additionally, it relates to the social rules for the group in terms of what is understood as proper and acceptable behavior and not, and how explicit and detailed these social rules actually are. Both of these conditions have an important influence on the processes of

constructing group culture on a discussion list, and the social and technical organization vary from one list to another: to what extent the group is administered formally and which grounds regulation takes place upon. Central issues of social processes in non-mediated groups are hence also at work in mediated groups, with some specific conditions related to the disembodied text-mediated context. An understanding that seems to be widespread, and one of the discursive 'truths' and values that the net is associated with, is that the less regulated a net-mediated discussion group is, the more democratic it is (Herring 1996b, Haug et al 1999).<sup>25</sup> This 'cultural truth' also seems to align with how the Organisation sees its responsibility as owner of Sapfo.

According to the chairperson of the Organisation, they supposedly let all their mailing lists be 'as free and self-regulating as possible',<sup>26</sup> with few interruptions from their owners, being left to sort out conflicts and organize themselves on their own as much as possible. This way of organizing an e-mail based discussion group is related to the group as being part of a superior organizational structure, with some organizing features similar to the Usenet discussion group network: each group can decide how they want to structure themselves, but are at the same time obligated to follow the general rules for all groups (Gotved 1999). The formal responsibility lies within the Organisation, but the group itself has the freedom to choose a structure and social form within the few basic principles that are listed in the superior statement that all their internet mediated groups are obliged to follow.

When the mailing lists were started by the Organisation, each group was supposed to have a person responsible for both the technical and social issues related to running the list on an everyday basis. However, concerning Sapfo it was difficult to find a person who was willing to fulfill all the tasks that are normally solved by a list administrator. This was because there was only one female member of the Internet editorial board in the Organisation at the time when Sapfo started. The board is doing the work of creating and maintaining the internet services of the Organisation.

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<sup>25</sup> This understanding is also related to the idea that both the bodiless context and e-mail distributed discussion groups are socially equalizing; the latter because everyone has the possibility to write without being interrupted. These assumptions have however not been confirmed by research. The participation patterns developing in a mediated discussion group are situated processes, and in many cases formal regulation influences democratic participation, encouraging a wider selection of contributing participants (Dutton 1996, Bromseth 2000). Similar to other group processes, the question is how leadership is enacted formally, and in a flat structure, how power is negotiated informally – with which social effects.

<sup>26</sup> Quote from telephone conversation, October 2002. The Organisation owns several discussion lists as well as chats, all of which have a responsible administrator who reports back to the board of the Organisation if something comes up.

Since the list is restricted to female participants, she was asked to take the technical and social responsibility for the list. But, even if she agreed to take the technical responsibilities, she did not want the responsibility of being a *social* moderator, according to the chairperson:

‘ [...] but this list master didn’t want to do this [take social responsibility for the list], but ‘I can take the responsibility when it comes to the technical issues’ she said, ‘I can do these things, but I don’t want to make decisions like that [deciding who should be thrown out of the list]’

As a result, in cases where there has been social conflicts of some sort, the list mistress has reported it to the board of the Organisation, who has then discussed and decided what actions should be taken in relation to it. Regulating the group as a social unit has hence been a two-step process, where the responsibility has been located ‘at a distance’ from the actual group context. This is an issue I will return to, and the implications this way of organizing seems to have had on the group at different stages of the study, particularly regarding conflict solving (see chapter 9). The ‘list mistress’ has never had a position as an active and visible list member, neither in regular discussions nor through active leadership within the group by visibly regulating discussions on the list.<sup>27</sup> In addition to being in charge of the technical tasks required to run the list, she has hence had an observing position from the side line.

This was quite different from the discussion groups that I had followed in my previous study, where the list owners both took the technical as well as the social responsibility for running the lists. They were active and visible list administrators, as well as being participating members in the groups. How they enacted the position differed however, and was a central part of the process of negotiating the interaction norms and creating group culture. There are several choices and possibilities of how to deal with conflicts and problems in the sense that they can be solved either on the list, in front of all list members— or be dealt with more privately, ‘behind the curtains’ through approaching individual members by private e-mail. To put it according to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to social interaction: there is a ‘frontstage’ that everyone has access to, and a ‘backstage’ where actions are taken and decisions made that have consequences for what takes place on the list itself (1959).

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<sup>27</sup> I have no additional information about her thoughts about how this way of organizing the responsibility worked as she did not want to be interviewed.

Within an anarchic social structure it is harder to know who is in charge, if any, since all regulating actions must be explicitly stated through written text in a mediated environment like this. On Sapfo, where these tasks are not formally or visibly dealt with by an appointed person, responsibility for most conflict situations has been left to the group itself and its individual members to solve. Most negotiations then have to be performed in the open social room of the list itself, implying that the power to define the boundaries of right and wrong is informally based, and is the result of active negotiations within the group itself. During my participant observation, this combination of a responsible board regulating the group socially 'at a distance' and the informal structures of power dominating the processes within the group increasingly became a central element for the developing interaction. This was in particular related to two specific conflicts where other social rooms 'behind the curtains' played an important part for what took place in the mediated group.

When I first signed up for Sapfo, the lack of an active list administrator and an apparent anarchic social structure were the two things that immediately struck my eye as elementary for the social structure that had developed. It seemed to have encouraged individual participants to take different kinds of responsibilities on their own initiatives. The social norms as a specific topic, were addressed firstly through a standardized introductory message from the web-master (which in this case is equivalent to the list mistress), which is quite common on discussion groups.<sup>28</sup> The introductory e-mail that I received when signing up for Sapfo was quite limited itself, but I was encouraged to visit a web-site by clicking an enveloped link if I had further questions about the list norms. The web-page contained a FAQ (Frequently asked questions) specifically addressing Sapfo (see attachment 2).

### ***Frequently asked questions — and their answers — on Sapfo***

The topics addressed in a FAQ touch upon technical issues such as how to unsubscribe and to send messages to the list, as well as the 'do's and don'ts of social behavior'.<sup>29</sup> Together they are often

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<sup>28</sup> A basic standard function of such a message is to secure that the subscription is made by the owner of the e-mail address herself, by asking the new member to confirm her subscription by replying to the message. Additionally, any other information seen as important in relation to the list can be included.

<sup>29</sup> The term itself has its roots back to the early days of the Usenet discussion groups in the seventies and has been re-applied by many discussion groups also outside of the Usenet ever since. See Munch (1997) for an analysis of the FAQ and cultural norms on Usenet Norway, Godtved's thorough descriptions of



referred to by the term 'Netiquette', which means 'etiquette on the Net'; a set of socio-cultural norms for a group. The FAQ is a common way in net-mediated communities to provide answers to questions about a group and its rules, in particular aimed at new members, so that the group and the administrator do not have to use time and space to relate to the same questions over and over again. Espen Munch, who studied norms on Usenet Norway, claims that in the anarchic structure where anyone can write anything, there is also a need for order and social control. One function of the official netiquette is hence to make the interactions functional, another is to create a set of defined values that new participants should follow to gain status and acceptance when participating in the groups. He divides Usenet Norway's main values in four categories, where the following social behaviors were seen as central: 'a) Order and overview, b) Self discipline and patience, c) Tolerance and reciprocity and d) Respect for long-term members' (Munch 1997: part 4, my translation). Mailing lists that are not connected to the Usenet are freer to create a different normative set of values, even if many groups still seem to re-produce many of the old Usenet-norms.

In the groups I had studied previously, the FAQ was created and updated by the list administrators themselves. Following the discursive changes on the list they added to or changed the social rules of the groups as they developed as time went by. On Sapfo, however, the FAQ had been created by one of the regular members of the list community, a programmer. She had made it on her own initiative, and it was stored as part of her own private web-page and characterized as an *unofficial* FAQ. The FAQ for Sapfo addressed three main issues, entitled 'subscription' (how to unsubscribe, send messages etc), 'individuals and role confusions', and 'social interactional guidelines'. Whereas the first addresses technical information, the two others are related to social issues. In the part '*social interactional guidelines*', the responsibility for most actions in the structure of the group collective, except for solving technical issues, is put on each individual list member first and foremost. Everyone should feel responsible for writing and keeping the list going, and if there is a problem with harassing behavior from other members, it is up to each individual participant to solve the problem herself.

In this sense it seemed to relate quite strongly to the hegemonic discourse of the Internet as an arena that should be free from regulation, building on an anarchic/libertarian value system (Herring 1995b, Haug et al 1999). This is the suggested action on the Usenet FAQ and netiquette guidelines for instance. The Usenet has had quite an influential impact on the discourse of

netiquette in net groups in general, in what seems to be understood as hegemonic values and practices. In case of harassment, which is maybe the most common social problem in discussion groups, three actions are suggested in the unofficial FAQ of Sapfo:

'The best thing you can do is to explain to her how you experience her behavior, and ask her to stop [...]. If someone is really attacking you, you can be sure that the rest of the list will react upon it. [...] Most often it resolves itself after a while, and if it doesn't, you can contact the Organisation through the list mistress and explain the problem to them.'

In a more strictly regulated structure, the list administrator would be the one to turn to in cases like this. Having a list administrator would not automatically mean that the administrator would be willing to regard social issues like this as his or her area of responsibility though. This was the case at the political list that I studied previously, where the administrator had an outspoken libertarian ideology, implying that matters of verbal attacks normally were up to each individual member to deal with. On Sapfo, however, according to the FAQ, there seemed to be a kind of a mixture of who was seen as responsible to solve conflicts. In the lack of a formal regulating instance it is up to each participant to deal with the situation, but simultaneously it was stated as a collective issue and collaborative responsibility and taken-for-granted that the group will react to it if somebody is harassed. This seems to be characteristic for feminist-oriented women-only groups, that Sapfo can be characterized as (Herring et al 1995). Finally, if the problem should persist, the advice is to contact the list owners, the Organisation.

The lack of an active list mistress and the informal regulation was explained under the part titled '*individuals and role confusions*'. It stated explicitly that even if some participants had a formal position in the Organisation, they were participating on Sapfo as private persons, uttering their own opinions, unless otherwise stated. Further, it explained the difficulties of finding a person who wanted to be a social administrator for the group, and how a collective co-regulating practice had developed as a result of this. This was described with pride as a well-working solution. One person was in particular mentioned by name because she was often mistaken for being a responsible person to turn to with questions and complaints, Malin, characterized as 'the ListBitch' — an informal and self-appointed title (and not to be mixed with the formal technical 'list-mistress'):<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Having a ListBitch is not uncommon in electronic discussion groups.

'Malin nags on all of us for not writing enough, and she also usually sums up all the messages of the month in a funny and readable way. She is however NOT list mistress and has no control of how the list is run or its register of participating members [...].'

When I began to get familiar with the list context, her position was quite apparent also in practice. In addition to the author of the FAQ and the ListBitch, many other list members also seemed to take active social responsibilities for everything ranging from welcoming new participants to sorting out and solving conflicts. Rather than being based on a formal structure of power then, the community seemed to build upon a more anarchic informal structure of regulation, however with a high level of communal responsibility on each individual member as both an important value and practice.

### ***Discussion norms, values and gender***

Hegemonic norms and values on the Internet are however not born in a cultural void, as I have commented on previously (Bromseth 2001). Value preferences and the strong hegemonic position of libertarian organizational forms in discourses about internet communication are also closely connected to the Internet's cultural North American liberalist roots. However, even if individuals and groups seem to relate to these values on a discursive level (for example in netiquette statements), their implications in practice through the social interaction processes taking place can suggest other values. The norms are in particular visible when the boundaries for what is understood as proper behavior are challenged, causing discussions about the norms on a meta-level. How should we discuss here, and what should be discussed? Who should be allowed as members of this group — what characterizes 'us'?

If members generally agree upon the answers to these questions and are satisfied with them, the need for negotiating such boundaries is less than if members strongly disagree about central parts of the interactional frames. A common understanding of the frames is however not the same as non-aggressiveness, for instance. If the acceptance of aggressiveness and adversarial linguistic practice is high, which has been a core issue dividing men's and women's preferences for interactional style according to the referred North American research corpus, this would be *a part of* the interactional frames.

Discussion style and values in relation to gender should not be reduced to a question of what 'women' and 'men' prefer per se though, but seen as culturally and contextually situated processes (see chapter 2). In my previous study, both groups were male-dominated, but created different forms of hegemonic masculinity

(see Bromseth 2000). This should most of all be understood in light of the groups' differing purposes and social functions; as a political group on one hand and professional collegium on the other. On the political list, members strongly disagreed about the hegemonic norms of discussion, in particular in relation to the practice of attacking other members verbally, something that happened frequently. This was interpreted as an individual right of free speech by the leading male participants in the group, and also valued as stimulating for the discussions. The female members and some of the younger men strongly disagreed, however, and protested against the valuing and the practices of adversariality, as they did not see them as fruitful for the discussions and the group. They did not reach through with their arguments though, and it often ended with participants leaving the list as a result. This was quite different on the list for doctors that I studied. The same discourse of 'free speech' dominated the outspoken interaction values, but in practice personal attacks were almost absent and reacted strongly upon by many list members if it happened. These conflicts often ended with an apology from the person stepping over the invisible line, made visible when it was crossed. Hardly any had left the list in protest. I concluded that discussion norms and values as related to gender can only be understood as situated processes, where a certain gendered body sign does not equal a certain pre-discursively determined linguistic repertoire.

As Kira Hall (1996) demonstrates, a non-adversarial discussion style is often used as a signifier by feminist women-only lists to signal that a participant is 'a real female typist', where a non-adversarial and supportive way of writing is understood as proofs of being a real woman. Even if Sapfo is a women-only, feminist-oriented space, the norms in this group differ somewhat with respect to the discursive femininity as described by North American research. They describe group norms that are characterized by a clear anti-adversarial policy and practice that is additionally positioned in explicit opposition to other mixed or male-dominated net-spaces (Herring 2000, Hall 1996).

The discursive norms on Sapfo oppose the list culture of the US SAPPHO as described by Hall (1996), that she characterizes as 'aggressively collaborative'. Sapfo is collaborative in practice, but not in an explicit essentialist feminist ideological way. Further, the level of aggressive behavior towards other participants could be pretty high at times, but in general they were able to solve their conflicts without members leaving the list as a result of it. Personal attacks were in general not directly devalued and prohibited as such, but there appeared to be a silent agreement about how and to what degree adversarial behavior towards other members was accepted.

## Sapfo as a community of practice

### ***Keep up the writing! Constituting community through textual interaction***

The life of a discussion list can be short, and many never get past the first little seeds of good intentions of lively discussion that existed when it was created. It takes more than just the technical possibilities to create community (Jones 1998). Establishing a stable and active net-mediated community of any sort is the result of some successful social work by its organizers and participants. As is true for trying to create whatever group to meet, physically or mediated, its target group and subscribers must quite simply find it worthy of spending time upon. Without activity, no group!

When I started to get familiar with Sapfo as a participant, it had already existed for two years, having 350 subscribing members. The social interactional frames characterizing an electronically mediated community, its social boundaries, are both expressed and created through explicit texts *addressing* them as well as in the ongoing interactions themselves, as also pointed out by Godtved (2000) and Baym (2000).

Discovering that list members actually referred to a past in the ongoing interactions is in itself a crucial sign of an established mediated community, separating it from more fluctuant interaction spaces. Both Stine Godtved and Nancy Baym, who have worked with discussion group contexts (Usenet discussions), highlight the importance of *time* in these processes, and the frequency of returning participants. Creating group norms and the boundaries defining a community of practice are negotiations of the valued forms and content that define a group. What is seen to characterize 'us' in opposition to others? A mailing list having a relatively stable and active group of participants where activity stretches over a longer period of time hence develops into a social unit in itself, often described and created by using place-metaphorical terms. This was for example apparent through how list members related to Sapfo when leaving it or returning to it after a period of absence; describing it as something stable and as an independent 'living' place that one leaves, returns to, loves or misses. Simultaneously, it was described as something fragile, in periods of low activity or conflicts, expressing worries that the list could 'die' as a result.

The written e-mail messages produced by the group members are in contexts like this the only means of interacting and establishing a social room, as all other ways of expressing agreement, annoyance or any other response are not visible unless it is sent to the list as such. As pointed out by both Baym and

Godtved, as compared to other net-mediated forms, the mailing list creates some opportunities that are particularly suited for being able to develop group community that stretches over time, due to its flexibility of participants' activity and presence. Participants do not have to meet at a certain time, and the e-mail mode of interaction is simple to use and cheap, as messages can be both read and written without being online.

Also, since Sapfo is organized without an available message archive, activity is in particular a key issue for the list as 'alive or dead', and the level of vulnerability is high. If people don't write there is no group, and no visible traces of it either, except for its introductory page online. This vulnerability is not only related to the e-mail mediation form, but intersects with the purpose of the list, group of participants and their relations. The importance and value of the list is closely tied to the social functions it fulfills in life for different people, and how it is entwined with other social arenas (Wellman 1999). The Doctor's list enabled general practitioners of medicine to keep up with discussions directly related to its members' professional life as general practitioners in Norway, and was hence beneficial for a central area of social life. Many of its most active participants were further situated on the countryside, with no other colleagues to discuss work-life issues with; for them the list hence functioned as a unique 'lunch-room' in which to bring up medical as well as political subjects.

On more hobby-oriented lists such as Baym's soap-opera fans or Godtved's Tolkien-readers, or my own socialists, with weaker relations between group purpose, participant relations and institutionalized social life, the benefits of participating in the group as a social unit in itself are even more important. What one invests of time in a group must be worth what is gained from it. Exactly what 'this' is, and for whom, differs of course — and to what degree, being involved as a devoted and active member or as a casual reader (also found in Gotved 1999).

The list administrators in my previous study both referred to this vulnerability and their fear of the lists dying as related to periods of low activity or during conflict situations. Through their own experiences from other lists, they pointed out particular situations as well as specific periods of increased vulnerability of the lists; firstly in the initiating phase when establishing the groups, secondly during summer holidays and thirdly during periods of severe conflicts. In relation to all three, they both told stories showing that they in different ways took an active responsibility to inspire and create activity and to prevent conflicts from developing to a destructive level, 'gardening' their lists carefully to prevent them from dying. But how was this kind of gardening work being carried out on Sapfo, how was activity stimulated and passivity/destruction prevented in this context with

a more complex structure of communal responsibility? These are central questions I will take with me into the empirical narrative.

### ***Creating norms and boundaries through linguistic practice***

Nancy Baym (2000) identifies three major dimensions in the creation of group culture online in her study of a Usenet-situated fan community discussing soap operas. These are the mediated context, the contexts of the topic they relate to and last, the group as a community of practice, describing the two first as 'pre-existing contexts that become meaningful only in the ways in which they are invoked by participants in the ongoing interaction' (2000:5).

She further highlights the advantages of different theories of the practice approach as a frame for studying mediated communities in an overview. The main advantage of the practice approach is that language is an important tool in the socially and culturally situated processes of enacting and instantiating a community's structures through recurrent and habitual ways of acting: 'The social meanings invoked by language include situational purposes or goals; situational structures or conditions; the interpersonal identities of the interlocutors; the frame or genre of events; and the beliefs, values, norms, and mood of interaction.' (2000:22). Since language in the text-mediated environments is the only means of structuring the community, its frames and contents must be actively created and negotiated through linguistic practices. Similar to Baym's material, Sapfo is a text-only environment, the mailing list genre creating a specific set of practical as well as discursive resources in these processes, as I have touched upon earlier on in the chapter.

The second important context I have addressed, related to Sapfo's topic and target group, is the list as a lesbian subcultural community, situated in a Scandinavian country. We have already looked into its group norms and interactional frames as described in its FAQ, an explicit text about the valued and devalued practices of this mediated community — the 'do's and don'ts'. The creation of the social boundaries mainly takes place in the dynamic interaction on the list itself. The normative frames as expressed in a FAQ do not necessarily correspond with or include all of the social rules of what is practiced (Gotved 1999). The group interaction offers an understanding of the cultural codes that seem to characterize the interaction, understood within its context; how frames are interpreted, practiced and negotiated.

In approaching a group ethnographically, it is only through studying the group processes that we can see and analyze the relevance of contexts and discourses; as they come to life through the participants' textual productions of them. The realizations of

the mailing list genre within a lesbian oriented group are not given and pre-discursively filled with content, in spite of its pre-existing categorical framework, but actively created and negotiated through practice. The recurring social patterns in the interaction context then, and the influence of what Baym calls 'pre-existing structures' are hereby not given, which is also why I prefer to use the term of situatedness. Baym also points this out, however; that the importance of these structures in a specific group and exactly how they become meaningful can not be foreseen as participants make use of the recourses at hand in creative non-predictable ways. What were the patterns of practices occurring again and again, making Sapfo exactly ...Sapfo? And how were they in turn related to the group's situatedness? These are questions I will return to in the empirical chapters. We will first, after a short outline of how this text is organized, look into the core issues for the boundary-work taking place Sapfo, defining group membership as well as being important topics of discussion in themselves: the social categories of gender and sexuality. What do categories as woman and lesbian mean, how are they produced discursively — and how are they relevant in relation to identity processes, individually as well as in creating subcultural identity in groups like Sapfo?

### ***The Story of Sapfo — a drama in four parts. How the text is organized.***

The characterization of qualitative research texts as narratives and storytelling has become popular following the postmodern paradigm. A scientific text is always a product of a situated researcher, from the choices made in questions asked to what to illuminate as interesting in the material collected in trying to answer them. However, I had never expected that my ethnographically inspired study of Sapfo would turn out to be an amazing narrative of its own, even without my analytical voice trying to make sense of it all, with features close to the genre of a classical Greek drama.

I decided to leave my planned article collection dissertation about mediated discussion group communities behind, to be able to focus on these events and the analysis of them. I have chosen to follow the chronology of the story as it developed, the actors involved in it and my own increasing access to information about what was going on in the social room of the group. What took place behind closed doors at specific points of the story in other related mediated and physical social rooms? Simultaneously, I approach the story with an analytical gaze filtering events through focusing on the social meanings of gender and sexuality in this mediated context, and its cultural situatedness in a Scandinavian country and the local lesbian subculture. My analytical focus, my own position



as a researcher and participant changed along the way, as a result of both what happened and the social rooms I accessed and got information about. In knitting the story's two levels together, I try to use this shift in position reflexively as a resource as we go along, in addition and contrast to the other voices I allow to speak.

I have divided the development of the list into a drama in four parts, from the moment I joined the list in 2001 till I ended my fieldwork in 2003. Each part represents a developing period of the community where its features change in different ways and degrees, using a social interactionist approach.

In the first part (chapters 1 – 3), I situate the empirical study, mainly by relating it to other relevant research and by describing my research strategic choices. In chapter 2, I give an overview of the theoretical frame of interpretation that I have used to analyze the material. This frame is grounded in the understanding that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and culturally situated processes, and language an important tool that creates and shapes understandings of reality in these processes. Chapter 3 gives an overview of my methodological approach, online ethnography, and reflections related to the ethnographic process in different stages of the study.

In the second part, chapters 4 – 10, you find the analysis of the empirical material that I picked out and organized into a chronologically based story. I have chosen the narrative chronology as a presentation form because the different parts are important contexts for each other, in order to give a coherent picture of the negotiating processes over a longer stretch of time. We will follow Sapfo through four 'scenes'. 'The happy days' is meant to work as an introduction to the list, and focuses primarily on the social functions of Sapfo; it describes the group interaction in a period when conflicts did not dominate the discussions in a negative way. Why were people there and what did they get out of it at the time when I entered Sapfo, making me instantly feel enthusiastic about the lively community? In 'Stormy days', Sapfo enters a phase with severe political disagreements, rooted in sexual identity politics and its relation to feminism. When the discussion turns into a meta-discussion, the boundaries for group identity and group membership are explicitly negotiated, both in relation to form and content. What are the positions taken in this negotiation process, and with which consequences for the group community? How is the self-regulating way of organizing the community, without a formal administrator, a problem when severe disagreements occur? In 'Days of Thunder', the political conflict leads up to an event that causes strong emotional responses amongst list members, and creates a mode of distrust and insecurity within the group. My question is; how and why? The negotiations center on understandings of the online 'written' self as related to the embodied typist. What are seen as accepted forms of presentations

of selves in this particular anonymous mailing list context, and how can they be characterized in terms of modern versus postmodern understandings of selves? 'Days of silence' is a concluding reflection following the periods of conflict.

Each scene is meant to describe features and incidents that I will characterize as important 'nodes' in the developing cultural context, highlighting processes of change in group culture and the interaction frames themselves that took place in the group. In order to clarify the characteristics of each 'stage', I use some narrating features from the literary genre, playing on the emotional mode that in general dominated the list in the different periods. In narrating, I also try to use the emotional reactions that episodes in different periods created in me, from my mixed position as participant and researcher entwined with the voices of the other participants. Because of this way of writing, the analysis is rather implicit during the narrative part of the chapters. The explicit analysis will mostly appear at the end of each chapter, as well as in interludes between chapters, and in the final discussion (chapter 11).

The 'scenes' take the interaction in the developing list context itself as a point of departure, and could be described as 'frontstage', to put it in Erving Goffman's terms (1974). The mailing list is a social room that all participants in the group have access to, and the actions taking place there works as a foreground and analytical anchor for the study as a whole. In addition to the mailing list messages, I also got a peek 'backstage' through interviewing participants on Sapfo and the Organisation that owns the list.

In between some of the chapters, there are texts that I call 'interludes'. These are meant to work as spaces for the methodological and analytical reflections that attracted my attention at a particular point in the data collecting process.

## Chapter 2.

# The importance of categories: Categories as boundary objects

'My declaration to life as it feels right now:

'Tired of identity politics, tired of...Tired of everyone being so weird, and of no one being weird the same way as me ;-)

Tired of 'being forced to' hang around places for girls who like girls (with (or without) more) just to have a chance to meet someone who is wonderful to me, no matter if it is web-communities, mailing lists, the Organisation, Pride or ceramic courses.

I want to be able to meet someone to love between the bookshelves at the library!

Which is something that I have always wanted to be able to.

But in particular since I have become so extremely Tired. Of not being able to just be, of everyone else who just can't be. I want to raise issues that are important to me. I want to work for issues that are important for others, but only if they feel reasonable, because I want life to be reasonable for everyone, but I do not want to be associated to everyone who find their way to the GLBT-world. GLBT-issues don't exist. I am normal. We are all deviant. Don't count me into some sort of deviant outsider-community. I am me.

I am not one bit queer. I am not poly, I am not more perverted than people at large, I am not bisexual, I am not lesbian (not today), I am not homosexual.

I am just an ordinary unusual woman who has fallen so intimately in love with and been turned on by other women and who wants to fall intimately in love with (and be turned on by) someone in the future again. And who doesn't expect at all that it should be anything else than with a woman.

I have no intentions of challenging borders more than what I Am for that sake.

I want a small house with a small garden and a rather large dog and a challenging job and someone to share my life with and I both want children and not.

And now I'm on my way to the library, to sulk between the book shelves until the woman in my life finds the time to show up!

You now where I am...'

(List message, Hannah)

## Boundary-work as cultural processes

My analytical approach is rooted in social interactionism, cultural theory and a social constructionist perspective on reality, with focus on identity, gender and sexuality in particular. I focus on the construction and negotiation of group culture and social identities, more specifically the situated interaction processes in a particular text-mediated context.

A key term in looking into these processes is that of 'boundary-work' (Barth 1994). Certain identity positions can be understood as working socially, culturally and psychologically organizing through how some people repeatedly are made different from others, producing understandings of 'us' and 'them'. Sexual orientation is one of these positions, which interplays with other social identity positions. To be able to operationalize analysis of cultural processes fruitfully, Barth suggests a division into three analytical levels that are important for interpreting a particular context: macro-, meso- and micro-level. In practice though, they are entwined and work together simultaneously.

Why and how is the concept of boundary-work a fruitful approach to lead us through the specific events that took place on Sapfo? Within an understanding of group culture as actively constructed and situated processes, social identity is created through developing and negotiating social codes. What is central here is what Barth describes as 'the social groups' boundary processes [...] and not the total sum up of all the cultural material that the [ethnic] boundary surrounds.' (1994: 175).

Language is one of the important resources used in negotiating identity through social practice, along with a range of other symbolic practices, when doing 'identity work'. In the text-mediated context, it is through linguistic interactive practice that these processes take place. As Sue Widdicombe (1998) points out in a summary of different social constructivist approaches to understanding identity, *linguistic interaction* is where the shaping of collective social forms take place, integrating the 'social' and 'the individual' (Widdicombe 1998). The theories of Barth (and Cohen) have a central position within an understanding of culture as interactive boundary processes:

In Barth's (1969) view, collective social forms are generated through interaction, and it is here that boundaries and group distinctiveness, as well as relevant criteria of membership, are developed and hence collective identities and individual identities are produced.

(Barth 1998: 198).

The main challenge then, is to ask how the boundaries that construct a group are actually constituted, and what is made into *boundary objects*. A boundary object is a specific point of reference that plays an important part in creating and negotiating community (Davies and McKenzie 2004). What it is that works as a boundary object within a certain community of practice differs, from physical objects to certain types of knowledge or information. The main function is that boundary objects help create a shared understanding within (and across) a community of practice, of 'who we are and what we do'. Researching the construction of group culture, the question is both to look for patterns of practices that work to *unite* 'us', and how a 'we' is simultaneously defined in relation to 'others'. What is particularly relevant in the analysis of boundary-work on Sapfo is how group membership is negotiated through exclusion processes; negotiating what 'we' are *not*.

*What* are the central boundary- and identity markers on Sapfo that are made relevant? What becomes important symbols for what separates a worthy group member from an unworthy, as well as for separating the group from other social groups? Which social phenomena are boundaries negotiated through? These are important analytical questions I try to highlight in different parts of the empirical narrative, to capture how social identity is constructed through boundary work. In this context, *gender and sexuality* are made particularly important as boundary objects to create and negotiate social identity. In what ways are they made meaningful, and how are they interrelated?

## **Sexuality: Constructed categories or pure nature?**

'Historically one has always used power to maintain the gender order and the desire that should unite women and men. If the maintenance of the heterosexual matrix in different ways requires massive support it should be obvious that it cannot solely be a question of something unproblematic and naturally existing, but something that in many different ways makes heterosexual women and men out of people.'

(Tiina Rosenberg, 2002: 71, my translation)

Essentializing the understandings of social identity has had a strong position ever since Freud's influential psychoanalytical theories early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Anbjørg Ohnstad points out:

The psycho-analytical way of thinking [of selves] is so integrated in us that it will influence how we perceive and understand ourselves. The

understanding that we are shaped by our upbringing, the effect of the unconscious conflicts, and the understanding that something in us is 'authentic', is a part of our culture (Ohnstad 2001: 217, my translation)

Within the postmodern paradigm, the focus in qualitative research has increasingly come to be on the processes of *constructions* of reality, rather than on trying to find 'the reality': How do people make sense of reality, and how are phenomena made sense of and created in different arenas? Parallel to social constructionist perspectives, a branch that has developed as part of it is post-structuralist theoretical and analytical approaches to social phenomena (Jørgensen and Philips 2002).<sup>31</sup> As for sexuality studies, this theoretical shift implies amongst others understanding sexuality not as social expressions of an inner sexual desire, but rather as something socially and culturally constructed within a certain normative framework. Post-structuralists focus on the production of meaning through discourse: how subjects are positioned by discourse, and what individuals make out of them in social practice.

There are many ways of defining and using the term of discourse, both theoretically and methodologically. In linguistics, discourse is often used on a micro-analytical level, as 'meaning above sentence level', or 'language in use'. I prefer to use 'context' to characterize situated interaction on a micro-level, and use discourse to characterize meaning-making processes on a society level which is the most common form of usage in the social sciences. I use discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term,<sup>32</sup> which sees discourse as 'forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices' (Baxter 2003: 7). Power is always a central constitutive force in Foucault's concept of discourse, as different ways of understanding reality compete with each other in meaning-making processes.

In our society sexuality is understood as a central part of identity. In *discursive productions* of sexuality, certain forms of desire are

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<sup>31</sup> Feminist social constructionist and post-structuralist approaches are closely associated, and discourse analysis is a common method within both. According to Judith Baxter, they are different from each other in the sense that post-structuralist feminists focus to a larger extent on 'the more troublesome issues of working with spoken discourse [...] the unresolved tensions, competing perspectives, shifts of power, ambiguities and contradictions inherent within all texts.' (2003: 2). I will not further this discussion here, but see Baxter for an overview and discussions of key-terms in feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis.

<sup>32</sup> Discourse are produced and negotiated on all levels, though, and discursive productions on the micro-level are an important focus in my analysis of the group interactions.

positioned as more normal than others through a binary opposition. As Pia Lundahl (1996) puts it:

‘What we call ‘subject’, ‘I’, ‘sexuality’, ‘gender’, ‘identity’ etc. I rather view as discursively produced. I hereby also mean that homosexuality is not about an expression of an inner or essential sexuality (as little as heterosexuality is) but a discursively produced necessity for the maintenance of heterosexuality. All differences (white-black, woman-man, heterosexual-homosexual) are formed/created through a game where we prescribe each other different identities. Identity is always created in relation to something (according to Butler 1990: 2f, 7).

(Lundahl 1996: 24, my translation)

An increasingly important focus within feminist and gender studies over the last decade is to see constructions of gender and sexuality as entwined processes: as categories that are actively produced and negotiated in relation to each other (I will come back to how later in this chapter). With the post-structuralist turn, the traditional fields of Women’s- and Feminist studies and Gay and Lesbian studies<sup>33</sup> have also drawn nearer and new ways of understanding gender as well as sexuality have been developed. Gender is interpreted as open categories and positions that intersect with other subject positions such as sexuality. As Margareta Lindholm summarizes (1996):

The theoretical point of departure becomes this open gender concept which is not dependent of society’s gender system and sexuality system, but that gets different consequences precisely in the contradictions between (that might be a break from) these. A gender concept where its content at the farthest end is determined by concrete social relations and connections and that must be studied contextually, because we are never everywhere but always somewhere

(Lindholm 1996, in Rosenberg 2002, my translation)

What does this imply? Gender and sexuality are ‘open and available’ positions for individuals to take, and their social meaning are further contextually situated. This does not, however, imply that we are not influenced by the norms of the society we live in. Dominant understandings about both gender and sexuality; hegemonic discourses (as well as subversive discourses), influence how we individually think about ourselves and how we act, making some interpretations and understandings more available than others. They are something that each and every one of us relates

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Rosenberg (2002) for an overview of the developments within in the fields and the increased interrelation between them.

to and are in dialogue with, as resources for interpreting ourselves, others and society. The outcome is unpredictable, as we can reproduce or challenge dominant understandings, and with different social effects. For instance, a biologically born male taking a position as woman, has a better chance of succeeding to pass at a party for transpersons than on a regular disco.

We build the personal narratives of our own experiences using the cultural resources at hand in a specific context, a certain time and place. As Anbjørg Ohnstad expresses it: '*Social identity becomes [...] a negotiation process between understandings of the self, other's understandings and society.*' (Ohnstad 2001: 221, my translation). Alongside new postmodern understandings of sexuality, essentializing understandings are still massively produced around us, as Lundahl points out. Understanding sexualities as stable core identities contributes to actively maintain the borders between heterosexual – homosexual, and to separate the normal from the deviant. The whole notion of 'the closet', for example, implies an essentialist understanding of sexual desire, as well as something that should or could (consciously or unconsciously) be hidden from other people (Sedgwick 1993). In Norway today, the use of this notion to understand sexual identity seems to differ noticeably dependent on generation and geography, according to Ohnstad's study of queer women in therapy (2001). She explains her findings with the fact that the discourses that one has at hand to make sense of identity have changed in relation to homosexual desire. However, it seems that postmodern understandings of identity are not integrated into our everyday language, as we continue to talk about sexual identity in essentialized terms; we 'have' a 'predilection', we 'come out of the closet', and describe identity in terms of stability and stages.

Different understandings of sexuality are thus competing with each other. Let me illustrate this using an example. When I started dating women, having lived heterosexually all my life, I learned many things about the importance of sexuality as a structuring category in processes of self-identification. Most importantly how self-identification is tightly connected to how sexuality, in line with other important organizing social categories, is interpreted and understood in society. Having a social constructionist view on identity – including gender as well as sexuality – it didn't feel like a problematic or 'unnatural' process as such. I view self-perceptions as changing throughout life, in contact with new experiences, knowledge and surroundings. However, other people around me responded somewhat differently. Even if I had lived happily with a man for many years, my surroundings now characterized me as having 'come out of the closet', (implying that I had lived 'unsatisfied' in my former relationships?). My former boyfriends were confused: had I been lying to them all along? After a while, I started using the term myself, even if it made me feel



uncomfortable, and started re-examining my constructions of what was *actually* the case here. Maybe I *had* been in denial all my life? When I after a while started dating men again, a couple of friends responded with worry. Now, what was this all about – couldn't I make up my mind? The taken-for-granted premises that I was met with around me was that sexuality is essential, stable and thus predictable. The need to define distinct borders of sexual identity categories is not only important within the larger society, but also within gay culture, something I will illustrate and come back to.

My point is that it is impossible to fully escape categories because they are made important in society, for how we interpret ourselves, other people and their actions- and strongly effected by how they interpret us. Their meaning and importance may, however, always be challenged and negotiated. Gender and sexuality are important in the study of Sapfo for two reasons: firstly, because its participants situate themselves as women having same-sex attractions when talking about their experiences, and make categories relevant in the discussions. Secondly, discourses of gender and sexuality and what they should mean, are explicitly negotiated as central topics in the debates that I picked out for analysis.

## **Gender, sexuality and the 'law of heteronormativity'**

Both gender and sexuality are understood as central parts of 'identity' that are created and made important on all levels – to individuals, in relations and on a structural and symbolic level. As Cameron and Kulick (2003) point out, discourses about sexuality (common understandings; what we are told is normal and right) and our social practices (what we make out of them) are connected:

"The language we have access to in a particular time and place for representing sex and sexuality exerts a significant influence on what we take to be possible, what we take to be 'normal' and what we take to be desirable. It follows that the study of language and sexuality encompasses not only questions about how people enact sexuality and perform sexual identity in their talk, but also questions about how sexuality and sexual identity are represented linguistically in a variety of discourse genres. [...] The two sets of questions, how sexuality is done and how it is represented, are connected, because representations are a resource people draw on – arguably, indeed, are

compelled to draw on – in constructing their own identities and ways of doing things’. (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 12)

Following a social constructionist view, I understand the content and meaning of gender and sexuality, along with other social phenomena, to be varying across time, place and situation. They are fluctuant, unstable and thus changeable. Because they are actively produced and negotiated by actors, through discourse and practice, their contents can be challenged. These processes involve the production of power. What should have the position as good or not, right or wrong, normal or abnormal, is negotiated with basis in a hierarchical and dichotomous system (Scott 1988). In general, traditional social categories are related to subject positions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class. Even if their content vary across time and place, they are all based on hierarchically organized linguistic dichotomies, where one is given the symbolic position of ‘default’ and the other as ‘deviant’: man-woman, white-black, heterosexual-homosexual, middle-class-working class.

### ***Heteronormativity***

Judith Butler has been an important contributor in showing how heterosexuality is produced as a normative structure in contemporary Western culture: through a naturalized co-constitution of gender and heterosexuality. The body and the self are both constituted through what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix. As Annfelt puts it: ‘The matrix draws a compelling line between identity, gender signifiers and desire directed towards the opposite sex’ (Annfelt 2002: 129, building on Lindholm 1996). Our understanding of the binary ‘male – female’ implies heterosexuality as a premise for the structuring of gender:

The law of normative heterosexuality is embedded in the process of making sexed subjects; failing to conform means to be abjected and culturally unreadable, culturally unintelligible. [...] It is the ritualized practice of repetition that makes sex emerge as natural.

(Butler 1993 : 10)

What does that mean? To be interpreted as credible women and men, we have to perform gender in culturally comprehensible ways. As Cameron and Kulick (2003) elaborate from Butler, if one ‘fails’ in the processes of ‘doing gender’ and performs gender *outside of* the culturally prescribed scheme of what kind of performances that are acceptable for men and women, one’s sexual orientation can be questioned:

’The conflation of gender deviance and homosexuality comes about because heterosexuality is in fact an indispensable element in the dominant ideology of gender. This ideology holds that real men axiomatically desire women, and that true women want men to desire them. Hence, if you are not heterosexual you cannot be a real man or a true woman; and if you are not a real man or a true woman you cannot be heterosexual. What this means is that sexuality and gender have a ‘special relationship’, a particular kind of mutual dependence which no analysis of either can overlook.

(Cameron and Kulick 2003: 6)

Just as we get disturbed by observing people that we cannot identify as male or female, looking desperately for signs that will confirm one or the other, the same mechanisms come into play when we meet someone who performs outside of the expected heterosexually-based gender scheme: ‘Hm. That guy over there, sitting with his legs crossed, wearing a scarf in a shiny material. Not to mention the well-known heavily built female director, with her short hair and assertive approach that we see on TV all the time.’ Just as we can’t see the body signs of the gender-unidentifiable person or know about the sexual practice of the guy with the crossed legs we try the cases against accessible signs of proof, leading us to conclude in one direction or the other. How a man and a woman look and act are culturally specific signifiers of gender and sexuality on a symbolic level. The gender-coded signifiers are further implicitly related to heterosexuality as norm. Deviance from gendered norms then, are often simultaneously interpreted as a sign that this person could be homosexual: Either through active performances giving off too many signs symbolically connected to the opposite gender, or by avoiding to perform according to the scheme (e.g., by not being involved in a relationship with a person of the opposite sex within a certain age category).

Annfelt exemplifies how the body has in itself become an important battlefield in today’s gender-equal Scandinavia, where an increasingly feminized body (e.g., through breast enlargement) seems to ‘compensate’ for women’s increased economic and symbolic power:

‘Women can resemble men as long as they convince us of their heterosexuality. They can resemble men as long as their bodies do not arouse suspicion or speak of prohibited and suppressed desire and thus threaten the version of womanliness policed by heterosexuality.’

(Annfelt 2002:135)

The 'law' of heteronormativity is produced (maintained and challenged) on all levels, through everyday interactions, in the legal system and in the media and 'implies that sex and heterosexuality emerge as natural through repetition' (Bolsø 2002: 17). As Agnes Bolsø points out, the recognition and increased acceptance of homosexuality in a country like Norway do not necessarily mean that heteronormativity has been severely challenged culturally:

[...] In a country like Norway one can obtain dispensation from 'the law' and, for instance exercise one's right to a domestic jural partnership for homosexuals. However, this does not necessarily change 'the law'.<sup>34</sup> (2002: 17)

Homosexual desire is represented to a higher degree than before in culture, as well as through increased legal rights. It is in many cases, though, still understood and treated as an 'exception to the rule' more than *an equal and as natural choice as* heterosexuality. Further, implementing a certain bisexual practice can for girls be interpreted as a part of hegemonic femininity amongst young people in Norway today, and to a certain degree for young men. The interviewed Norwegian youths make a clear border though, between having a few bisexual experiences and *identifying* as 'lesbian' or 'homosexual' (Pedersen and Kristiansen 2003).

Heteronormativity and the importance of maintaining a border between 'us' and 'them' is also demonstrated in relation to civil rights. Civil marriage for homosexuals has created massive symbolic and moral discussions in Western countries. It has its own name in Norway (partnership) and gives fewer rights than 'ordinary marriage' (heterosexual legal unions). Heterosexuals cannot commit partnerships, as little as homosexuals can marry, the rules explicitly state. However, during 2005, the structural discrimination of homosexuals in Norway has been challenged politically through a suggestion of gender-neutral legal unions. This suggestion proposed by some of the left-wing political parties created massive reactions, and it is still unclear whether they will gain enough political support to be carried through.<sup>35</sup> It is, hence, quite clear that the hierarchical borders between these different forms of desire are important to maintain for many people and societies: the border between 'us' and 'them'. Language is a central resource in these processes.

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<sup>34</sup> The 'law' is here used to refer to the production of heterosexuality as 'natural', and the symbolic heteronormative power. As Bolsø argues, increased 'tolerance for lesbianism [...] does not mean that heterosexuality is denaturalized' (2002: 17). See Bolsø 2002 for a more thorough discussion of the erotic and symbolic power.

<sup>35</sup> See Annfelt et al (2005) for a discussion of this debate.

## Language, sexuality and categories

[...] the 'reality of sex does not pre-exist the language in which it is expressed; rather, language produces the categories through which we organize our sexual desires, identities and practices.

(Cameron and Kulick 2003: 19)

How are categories of sexuality made relevant and produced discursively, through linguistic representation and practices? The media, for example, are an important arena where sexuality — as well as gender — are made relevant and important as categories that differentiate one group of people from another. A few years ago, one of the most popular handball players in Norway, Mia Hundvin, was constantly in the newspapers, being 'confronted' again and again in interviews not about her excellent sport skills, but her marriage to a Danish woman. From being 'elite handball player', she was turned into the 'Lesbian' handball player. (When she divorced and later married a man, the circus was on all over again, demanding answers: how could she just change her direction of desire like that?).

This example shows how sexuality as an identity category is produced and made important when describing the handball player (even if it has nothing to do with her sport skills) — whereas no one would talk about 'the heterosexual football player'. Similar to other social categories, sexual orientation is made relevant in producing difference and cultural hierarchies, for what gains positions as normal and what is seen as deviant. *Female* priest, *black* singer are other examples where categories of gender and ethnicity are made visible, produced in a binary opposition to their silent counterparts that make up the norms of the terms (male) doctor and (white) singer. This can also be called by the term 'markedness' (Cameron and Kulick 2003): Where one part of a linguistic binary is labelled explicitly, producing an image that it represents something different from what is normal. Even if we are hardly unfamiliar with female priests anymore, we keep on reproducing this deviance on a discursive level through how we talk about them in our everyday language. Productions of categories and normativity takes place in the media, in politics as well as in social interaction, and language is an important tool in these processes. What is spoken and how — and what remains unspoken — shapes reality, making important frames within which we interpret the world around us, other people and ourselves.

Sexual orientation understood as 'identity' is historically a new phenomenon, in the sense that non-heterosexuality is made relevant in interpreting a human being's personality. To the degree that, as Cameron and Kulick points out, everything that a person

does is understood through the frames of 'homosexual' in spite of the fact that sexual practice is only a small part of this person's life: 'A homosexual is not just homosexual while having sex, but remains a homosexual in the office, watching TV or playing with the children' (2003:20). As Michel Foucault writes in his *History of Sexuality* (1978), homosexuality as an identity category was 'invented' in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the strengthened position of medicine as an influential scientific institution in Western society. Before this, it was the church that had the power to decide what was accepted and not in relation to sexuality, based on what was seen as 'morally right or wrong'. Basically, it was sexual intercourse between a married man and woman, with reproductive intentions, that was seen as legal and morally right. Most other sexual actions were considered sinful and could be punished; from sex with animals, masturbation and sodomy. Sexual activity between two men was illegal. But compared to the recent view that homosexuality is a biological lasting condition connected to a personality, sodomy (anal penetration) was seen as an illegal sexual practice in line with other sinful pleasures — a temptation that anyone could give in to. Medical science gradually took over the regulation of deciding what should be understood as 'normal' and 'abnormal/sick' sexual behavior. As Cameron and Kulick summarize:

'Medicine and science, however, as bodies of knowledge whose aim was to uncover the laws governing the natural world, sought to regulate sex on the basis of a different distinction — not virtuous/sinful or lawful/unlawful but natural/unnatural or normal/abnormal. This shifted attention from the act to the actor, whose deviant behaviour was seen as manifesting his or her fundamentally abnormal nature.'

(Cameron and Kulick 2003: 20)

This understanding of sexuality: as a specific desire that is stuck in genes and hormones, given to us from birth, pure in its existence — although being shaped within cultural and social contexts — is an attitude that is quite common today in the Western world.<sup>36</sup> Helge Svare describes this understanding as 'life-style constructivism'; we are born with a certain sexual orientation, but the form our sexuality takes is dependent on the social and cultural context we grow up and live in:

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<sup>36</sup> Sexual desire and practice understood as 'an identity' is mostly a western phenomenon. See Hemmings 2002 for an interesting discussion of this in relation to bisexuality.

‘Most of us are – I think – used to think about our sexual experiences as pure and original, natural and spontaneous. According to Foucault this is not so. The influence of culture goes straight into our deepest sensations, desire, pleasures and sense impressions (Foucault 1995: 22/118). It is not only sexuality as an idea phenomenon that is culturally constructed. Our sexuality as sensation and experience is also influenced by culture.

(Svare 2001: 311, my translation)

What is experienced as desirable is situated. What is considered a sexually attractive body differs across cultures and history. As Svare points out: hardly any man would faint from arousal by seeing a women’s bare ankles today as compared to a hundred years ago.

### ***Language and sexuality: from expressions of pathological disease to identity studies***

Cameron and Kulick give an overview of research and theories about language and sexuality, and discuss them in relation to gender from a social constructivist perspective. Within the body of research about language and gender, there has been a considerable heteronormativity – taking heterosexuality for granted rather than researching heterosexuality explicitly as socially constructed. Research on homosexuality and language has grown as a specific field, within gay/lesbian studies. The field of gay and lesbian studies has largely been characterized by focusing on sexuality as social identity and to some extent on discursive constructions of sexuality, desire and sexual practice more broadly (see the overview in Bolsø 2002). Homosexual men’s language has been the main focus:

Homosexual men are thought to talk like women, and lesbians, to the extent that they are imagined to talk in a particular way at all, are believed to talk like men. [...] Just as heterosexual speech is often equated with gender-appropriate speech, so homosexual speech has often been equated with gender-inappropriate or gender-deviant speech. (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 74)

Research on homosexuality and language can be divided into four historical phases (Cameron and Kulick 2003). The first phase (1920–40) in studies of language and sexuality is marked by an understanding of homosexuality as a biologically determined disease, posing the claim that certain linguistic traits and expressions characterized homosexual men:

During the first phase, research on the 'language of homosexuality', as it was known – as though the condition of homosexuality manifested itself as a kind of package deal that came complete with a language – focused on vocabulary and on the use by openly homosexual males of female names and pronouns to designate themselves and other men (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 76).

In this period the research focus was to a large degree centered on so-called 'gayspeak'; lexical expressions used by gay men, in particular that of gender inversion: the use of female pronouns and feminine connotated lexica.<sup>37</sup> However, as the gay liberation movement started to take form from the 1950s, politically engaged gay and lesbian scholars criticized this kind of research for being both essentialist as well as uniforming and single-tracked. They worked at showing, through their research and otherwise, that homosexuals were a diverse group of people. They ridiculed the 'old-style' homosexuals practicing 'gayspeak'. Homosexuals, they argued, as other people, had diverse social backgrounds. They did not all relate to the codes in the small urban gay subcultures, where the studies of linguistic style had been carried out. Homosexuality was increasingly considered a social identity rather than a medical condition.

During the 1970s, the formation of new gay communities took place, as part of the process with forming a political minority movement, fighting for human rights in line with ethnic minority groups. During this process, creating a consciousness-raising social group identity and culture was important – focusing on what was in common rather than on diversity. Claims of the existence of a 'Gayspeak' again rose from the ashes, within the new political context – particularly focusing on gay male subcultural slang, as well as on linguistic gender-crossing. Studies of gay/lesbian subculture centered on the creation of social identity within the community and their 'linguistic expressions', often with some kind of community-strengthening motivation. This focus does, in line with studies of 'women's language' in the same period, start from some problematic assumptions:

Because research on gay or lesbian language was based on circular assumptions, it came to be circular: anything a gay or lesbian person said was taken to be characteristic of gay and lesbian language (2003: 93).

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<sup>37</sup> In this period, gay men were in fact understood as representing a third gender; as women in male bodies, whereas lesbian women were understood as males in female bodies. Lesbian women were however not a big issue – as women in general were not understood as sexual beings.



Arguments of the type 'She talks like a lesbian, ergo she's a lesbian' get into trouble for several reasons, because the argument: 1) Implies the existence of an authentic de-contextualized lesbian language, 2) Does not explain diversity outside of the minority group norms 3) Contributes to reproducing subcultural identity norms by making the linguistic norms themselves into a reflection of 'identity'.

Looking at the use of subcultural norms as a *reflection* of identity then, raises both political and theoretical difficulties, similar to claiming that 'women' speak in a particular way. This is also what introduced the fourth phase within the field of language and sexuality in the middle of the nineties, as part of the postmodern influence and the queer critique (both as political movement and in academia).

### ***Gender and sexuality as discursive productions***

From seeing language to be *reflecting* a specific sexual identity, queer approaches critically look at how norms are *created* by use of linguistic choices. The queer approach focuses on productions of heteronormativity, homo-normativity within the gay/lesbian community, and on subversive ways of using language that challenge norms:

'queer ways of using language; ways that disrupted normative conventions and expectations about who could talk about sexuality and how that talk should be structured and disseminated.'

(Cameron and Kulick 2003: 99)

This perspective moves the attention away from connections between the speaker's identity and an utterance: '*the crucial focus should be on the structure and productive effect of an utterance, not speaker intentions*' (2003: 99).

By viewing language, actions and practices as resources that in turn have certain symbolic connections to a particular gender, and/or sexual orientation, we can say that certain linguistic and social practices *index* gender (and sexuality) (Ochs 1992).<sup>38</sup> For example, taking too many social positions symbolically connotated

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<sup>38</sup> Elinor Ochs' model (1992) shows how social identity, such as gender, is constituted by using linguistic resources to take positions, doing specific activities and social practices that are connotated with a particular identity position (such as gender) within a certain cultural context. Her model does not focus on sexuality, but in my view, it fits well with analyzing the heteronormative co-constitutions of gender and sexuality as suggested in this chapter.

See Andenæs (1995) for an interesting analytical use of the model in relation to gender and ethnicity.

to the opposite gender is often interpreted as having a homosexual orientation. A giggling guy, using 'maybe' in every other word when discussing, biting his nails, apologizing for talking too long for instance (and here, you are probably thinking 'gay' already), are linguistic practices culturally connotated with femininity — even if they in themselves are not explicitly gendered linguistically. Or opposite, if I with my hands on my hips swear out aloud when talking about the trouble I had when repairing my motorcycle.

Anyone familiar with a certain language can potentially draw from all its resources when performing different social tasks: *'linguistic practices are inherently available to use for a wide variety of purposes and to a wide variety of social effects.'* (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 102). What social effects they have however, is related to how these resources are used, by whom, for what purpose and where. Talking about my partner as 'she', for instance, often has an unpredictable effect. Within the lesbian subculture, it gives credibility and legitimizes my existence in the group. Heterosexual people might respond to it (even if it is not introduced as a topic as such) and tell me explicitly that 'they don't mind' — or that 'it is great' — or that 'they didn't know'. If I used the 'she-word' about my partner when applying to adopt, it would automatically have a degrading consequence on the authorities' judgement of my own abilities to be a parent. When booking a hotel room on holidays in a non-gay-friendly country, I would probably exchange the word 'partner' with 'friend'.

The possible effects of our social practices (that are mostly unconscious processes) are crucial to what we actually choose to say and do in a specific situation, how we present ourselves. We adjust to and reproduce existing norms — or challenge them, according to the context and the potential social risks it implies to perform outside of the scheme. The cultural codes of what is seen as right and acceptable in production of gender vary not only between cultures, but also within. In Scandinavia today, the norms are more varied and post-traditional in relation to performing gender than before: women and men can draw upon a wider specter of the register of social practice — and combine them in different ways (Søndergaard 1996). However, as Søndergaard illustrates, there are specific limits and rules as to how they can be combined and used. It is important to come out with a balanced total in being interpreted as 'credible' heterosexual men and women: the performances must be culturally recognizable. To fail in producing a culturally acceptable impression of ourselves as heterosexual women and men, implies an imbalance in the sum-up of elements on the gendered-coded scheme in one way or another. Performing gender and sexuality within subversive contexts where opposing against the heteronormative gender-ideals is at center, e.g. a lesbian club or a feminist group, implies fulfilling and producing other cultural norms of gender. Of course failing to pass

social codes is a part of everyday life. 'Failing' to perform according to hegemonic ideals doesn't mean that one gets arrested (usually), but implies to be to be socially sanctioned in one way or another (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Being culturally competent users of language implies having (tacit) knowledge about these connections: how to say what where, as we move between different social settings, each with their finely tuned registers (Goffman 1959).

To apply this theoretical position in my study of Sapfo then, I do not see the presentations of self and discussions as a social *expression* of group identity as lesbian or bisexual women. Turning the focus to discursive practice, I am interested in how social identity is created through negotiating meaning. The participants use linguistic resources to perform a range of social practices, to position themselves and others in relation to specific topics. These topics are loaded with discursive meaning, visible through being actively produced, re-produced and questioned in the list context. Meaning is further produced as part of a longer historical negotiation of discursive normativity within lesbian subcultural contexts, which also constitutes an important frame for what takes place in the group. Looking at the effect that certain practices and discursive productions have, the focus is on what cultural codes and norms that through negotiation gain a hegemonic position within the group.

## **Lesbian subculture as situated practice: normativity revisited**

I always look for signs everywhere I go, trying to recognize a sister. Look for a thumb ring, a rough style of clothing, piercings. Look for same-sex couples holding hands. A specific way of attitude, gaze. Signs that are culturally specific codes, codes that are meaningful to me from Scandinavian lesbian subculture, which is how I recognize them and interpret them. When I travel, the codes vary, their contents are different. What I interpret as a meaningful sign of lesbian sexual orientation is often not what I think, since my frames are culturally dependent, focusing my gaze to look for particular features. (And even then of course, they are just *signs*, that I care to make relevant to myself because I identify as queer and seek subjective familiarity with others taking similar positions.)

Subcultural codes in lesbian communities are created through social practice and interaction, and gain meaning as situated cultural processes. What they have in common cross-culturally is

the importance of creating identity norms in relation to the heterosexual gender system, drawing borders towards what 'we' are not: most importantly heterosexual women.<sup>39</sup> The signifiers are no direct sign of sexual practice, they are hegemonic symbols, norms in specific lesbian subcultures for how to perform 'dykeness'<sup>40</sup> in the right way.

Norms in lesbian communities are created in explicit dialogue with and negotiating the idea of gender as symbolic and structural system in the heteronormative society because they oppose them. In these processes, traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity are used as resources. Creating social identity as 'lesbian', the meaning of gender is negotiated explicitly, using symbolic masculinity and femininity in new ways (Bolsø 2002). In lesbian subculture, the symbolically masculine is in general important to create a credible and desirable self: 'exposing masculinity contributes to their lesbianism' (Bolsø 2002: 100). Finding a place within a lesbian community is thus not a question of being freed from gender norms, as Judith Butler (1993) points out, but to relate to a new set of hierarchically based categories and positions of how to act and perform gender. The 'total sum' of gender-connotated components should be in balance also here when performing identity, but the sum should not equal heterosexual hegemonic femininity.

The queer turn has during the nineties in particular influenced normativity within lesbian communities, challenging the stricter social codes dominating lesbian subculture two decades ago (see chapter 5 for a discussion of this).<sup>41</sup> Traditional understandings of identity and norms for how to perform gender and sexuality have been explicitly criticized within gay subcultures in many parts of the world.<sup>42</sup> Understandings of identity and identity categories have been core topics in these debates. The queer influence has in particular resulted in a critique of essentialist understandings of sexuality dominating the subculture in the 1970s, in the sense that they work as restrictive and narrowing norms for individuals within the GLBTQ-community. Labelling oneself as 'queer', rather than

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<sup>39</sup> Boundary work processes also include other identity positions and phenomena of course, something that we will see examples of in the empirical analysis. For example, towards homosexual men.

<sup>40</sup> Dyke is U.S. slang for lesbian.

<sup>41</sup> The queer turn's influence on heteronormativity as taken for granted norm is not massive in the larger society though. In lesbian subculture however, where gender and sexuality are constantly an issue for discussion, the queer ideas have been highly influential.

<sup>42</sup> The queer critique is thus different dependent on cultural context it takes place within: in Hong Kong, for example, the queer movement has challenged the hierarchic gender-binary in the traditional lesbian movement (Nip 2004). In Scandinavia, queer has almost become the dominant identity category, and the gender-specific identification labels toned down. See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of this.

'gay' or lesbian' has become popular, signaling non-heterosexuality rather than a specific gendered sexual orientation. Attitudes towards bisexuality and transsexuality – positions that both challenge stable gender and/or sexuality performances – have also changed.

The queer critique promotes individuals' rights to perform and define selves independent of gender and sexuality norms. In spite of this, the concern with identity categories and a practice of constantly classifying and ranking the other through sexual orientation labels does not seem to have disappeared though. Rather than working as liberating breathing spaces then, queer subculture can thus have an opposite effect, as Anna Maria Sörberg (2003) writes in one of the new queer autobiographical anthologies in Sweden:

'But after having lived through quite restricted teenage years in the countryside, coming-out processes and parliamentary discussions of gay adoptions and partnership, I am so fed up with classifications, categories and my own paltriness and disability of orienting myself amongst the groups that I can throw up.' (2003: 106, my translation)

Identity management is hence a question of answering to a sexual minority position within heteronormative contexts on one hand, and on the other, relating to norms and identity hierarchies within subcultural contexts.

### ***Troubled subject positions: creating community on the basis of minority sexuality***

Identifying as lesbian, bisexual, queer or male-to-female woman does not mean that all women that identify with one of these labels have the same experiences living that subject position – even if they all are subordinate positions in society at large. Talking about 'living' a subject position as gay, instead of 'having' a sexual identity, puts the focus on that this is something that is actively done through practice. What this implies varies between situations and individuals – and always intersects with other social positions. Whereas some people experience difficulties and prejudice at work or in their families, others don't. Whereas some choose to solve this by not being open, others do the opposite. Whereas some chose to oppose against homophobic attitudes around them, other integrate homophobia and struggle with feelings of shame throughout their lives.

Social categories have had a tendency to be understood as master identities, making it difficult to capture variation within minority groups – something that Dorte Staunæs (2003) criticizes

from a post-structuralist position and asks: *'How can we take into account changes and ruptures and grasp the subversions of power, positions and categories that sometimes actually become possible?'* (2003:103). If and how a non-heterosexual position is made relevant vary between social contexts; and further, a sexual minority position always intersects with other social identity positions (class, ethnicity, gender, place, age, profession and so on) in unpredictable ways. The gay hairdresser playing with gayness while working has a different relation to sexuality at work than the builder who plays heterosexual at work and works the gay bars at night. At the same time, the hairdresser might experience to be marginalized in his hometown and with his family, while the builder is open and relaxed with his. Yet others do not find it difficult to treat their sexual preference as a private issue of concern to no-one else.

A more fruitful approach to understand variations of experiences and effects of living marginalized minority positions (without losing the power perspective) according to Staunæs (2003: 104), building on Wetherell (1998), is to view them as 'troubled subject positions': *'The concept covers positions that challenge the normativities at stake in certain everyday contexts of lived experience.'* The participants on Sapfo and similar groups create a common ground and subcultural community on the basis of non-heterosexual subject positions that are 'potentially troublesome' in the heteronormative society. This is to a large degree related to how taking these positions are perceived and responded to by others. There is a pattern of what causes the trouble in the first place: others' responses and interpretations of oneself as non-heterosexual. The processes of dealing with them can be summarized as: *'[...] the psychologies of interaction and negotiations of subject positions/identities when they become inappropriate, destabilized, difficult – when they are challenged and must be repaired.'* (Wetherell 1998 in Staunæs 2003:104). The challenges non-heterosexuals meet are often related to specific social situations in everyday life, for example coming-out processes and harassment. Groups like Sapfo, thus, often have a supportive function, through creating a space where amongst others 'reparations' of identity challenging social experiences can take place, but also as spaces where it is possible to escape feelings of otherness.

However, creating a sense of community on the basis of a specific position of otherness – whether the subcultural community is mediated or not – does not imply that minority communities are one happy big family without internal struggles of power. As Radhika Gajjala (2004) points out in relation to her study of a mediated network for South Asian women:

Because this is a 'community' (though in several ways different from a 'real-life' (RL) community, the 'virtual community' is embedded in real-life communities), I expected that there were/are several discourses being marginalized. Thus my project was also to study what kind of discourses/opinions were being marginalized or silenced in this Internet community. (Gajjala 2004: 19)

What is quoted above is also true when it comes to lesbian communities. On one level, hierarchies of 'normality' are on Sapfo turned upside down regarding sexuality, where 'non-heterosexuality', usually in a subordinate position in society, is in a superior position. Through the processes of drawing boundaries around the group, creating a 'we' in opposition to the heterosexual 'other', though, they also create and negotiate *internal hegemonies* of what should be considered right/wrong, good and bad. In doing this, participants also relate to other social arenas within the lesbian community within this Scandinavian country. What sense of community that is created amongst participants in queer online groups is to a high degree related to the cultural frames participants share and relate to (Nip 2004).

## **Connecting: Creating subculture in a bodiless mediated context**

In a text-mediated context like Sapfo, boundaries are constructed through the means of linguistic practice only. As opposed to other physical contexts, the resources at hand to present oneself and interpret others are reduced to representations through written text, excluding direct access to non-verbal cues as well as other visible features and practices with symbolic importance such as clothing, hair style and such. A basic question is how the mediated bodiless context influences the creation of community. A central feature that characterizes the online community as such is creating connectivity in different ways (Munt et al 2002). The individual postings relate to other postings about specific issues and thus create interactivity rather than being individual monologues (as described by Kolb 1996 and Herring 1996a). Communitality is further created by being personal, addressing particular participants by their first names, and for example by employing emoticons.

How is connectivity created as regards content; what characterizes the social identity processes that take place within these subcultural mediated contexts? Sexual practice is on Sapfo neither a practice nor a discussion topic — it is rather cultural and

societal aspects of living a sexual minority position that are the central topics. They create community and norms by relating to the dominant discourses about (homo)sexuality in mainstream culture in the Country – as well as to discourses within the subculture – through personal stories, politics and cultural events. The resources at hand in interaction processes are framed by certain cultural narratives on both levels, as Helge Svare points out:

[...] our private narratives will to a certain extent be restricted by which narratives culture offers us. [...] We use cultural narratives as frame narratives. Secondly, we are influenced by the narratives that others tell about us. (Svare 2001: 318)

What are the main narratives that contribute to structure the interactions within queer/lesbian communities? When I was questioning my own sexual identity, I thought I could characterize myself as bisexual. However, after socializing with new friends in the lesbian community, I was told that this was probably just a stage in my development towards the real end goal: lesbian. The essentialized linear narrative of the coming-out process as an identity journey is central in structuring understandings of sexuality in gay minority communities. As Sally Munt et al (2002) describes, the starting point is heterosexual, moving towards a questioning disequilibrium (often identifying as bisexual), until arriving safely through 'the creation of a stable, integrated lesbian identity. The concept of a journey is explicit in this narrative structure of selfhood and deployed as a shared cultural myth.' (Munt et al 2002). The alternative storyline is the one described earlier, the post-structuralist theories of identity that can be recognized as performance theories, where the 'identity role' to a certain extent can be removed from the person performing.<sup>43</sup> In Munt et al's study of the online lesbian forum Gaygirls.com, the authors found both the narrative and the performance to be ways to understand sexual identity when constituting community, which is also the case with Sapfo.

As several researchers of online interaction have showed and argued, the meaning of the material body does not disappear online (Sundén 2003, Danet 1998, Wakeford 1996). Gendered and sexualized bodies are created actively through text, to present selves, to interpret and imagine others, and to perform sexuality. In the absence of the physical co-presence, imagining the other as a localized and material person is central when interacting because we adjust our interactive practice according to the other's gender, age, sexuality, profession etc.

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<sup>43</sup> Munt et al draw on Judith Butler as well as Erving Goffman's theory of social frames, who both use dramaturgical metaphors in their concepts of explaining identity, to illustrate postmodern understandings of identity.



Sapfo is a text-based discussion forum, and as I have pointed out earlier, the sexualized body is not made explicitly relevant within this genre through describing bodily looks for example. What is made central in an introductory e-mail to the group, is location, age, profession and sexual orientation. Similar to Gaygirls.com, which is also a text-based discussion forum, there are in particular two signifiers that are used to textually structure the community, that are related to the sexualized body and to notions of locality. The first signifier is sexual identity, which is a central issue that structures the text-mediated environment. It works both as an explicit topic, and as a means to relate to lived experience. Participants situate themselves in relation to ways of identifying and experiences of living this subject position. The second signifier is the notion of an off-line lesbian community is important for constituting the mediated community. These two subjects; sexual identity and the notion of a subcultural community, was found by Munt et al (2002) to be the primary signifiers to structure the online group, through constructing boundaries: 'it constructs itself through spatial metaphors and lesbian signifiers' (2002:125). As in other subcultural contexts, showing 'cultural capital' through experience from or knowledge of subcultural community, both online and off-line, gives a certain status in the group, in contrast to the inexperienced 'novices'.

Individual participants' relations to an off-line lesbian community vary highly though, as some participants engage actively in it, while others have never been in touch with other queer women at all. As Nip found studying The Queer Sisters' online bulletin board in Hong Kong (2004), participating in the online forum increased a sense of belonging to the Hong Kong queer community — even for participants who had never engaged in it outside of the online group. That participants share a national cultural frame of reference is an important aspect in this process. As Munt et al argue, the online space can be understood in several ways, as related to its function to off-line lesbian communities. It can work as a backstage space that 'allows participants to prepare, discuss, and shape their material or lived identities in advance of off-line affiliation.' (Munt et al 2002:136). On the other hand, it can also be understood as a 'constrained environment, however, that produces socially intelligible identities through conformity to the coded ideologies of lesbian subculture.' The latter stands in sharp contrast to the idea the Internet as a liberating space to create selves in new ways, they conclude: 'these 'Other Spaces' [online, as opposed to the off-line subcultural spaces] can compact desire into identity categories that impose disciplinary formations antithetical to liberatory ideals. The virtual, then, appears to be inductably real.' (2002: 136).

What is understood as backstage and frontstage spaces of social performances, is to a large degree related to the focus of a

research project. As a social arena, Sapfo can be seen to work both as a backstage space for individuals that are new to the community; as a community in itself; or as a social space that is a *part of* a locally oriented lesbian community. The issues that are central in the discussions that I analyze were also discussed in the lesbian community at large in the Country. The online and off-line contexts influenced each other. These connections are highly relevant in my empirical study, particularly how the negotiations that take place within the group are affected by interaction in specific subcultural off-line contexts. Because many of the list members of Sapfo do not have access to these specific off-line social rooms, I position Sapfo as 'frontstage' more than 'backstage'.

My central focus, then, is not how the group works as an arena for *individual* identity processes. Rather, I search to interpret how conflicting ideas about identity, gender and sexuality are negotiated within *the group*, enlightening two aspect in particular: 1) their connections to off-line discussions as they are referred to in the group as well as by informants in interviews and 2) the outcomes of the negotiations and the effects they seem to have on the group as a social unit (see chapter 4 for a more thorough description of the research questions).

## **Chapter 3.**

# **Finding a research position in a mediated environment**

## **Stumbling into online ethnography**

During my education I was never trained in doing ethnography. As I did my master thesis though, or maybe more correctly, after doing it, I discovered that this was the name of the approach that came closest to what I had actually done in practice: Being present and observing the processes of group communication as situated cultural practice, trying to learn about the interactional codes and norms that were constructed over a longer stretch of time.

Building on my master thesis, I wanted to continue looking into how group culture and interaction norms was created in different e-mail mediated discussion group contexts. This can be described as 'cracking cultural codes': trying to figure out interaction patterns in relation to what kind of practices and opinions that are valued and not in a specific group. Studying what is and what is not accepted, which participants that gain the position of influencing what should count and not, and how, takes time. Ethnography was the perfect tool for my research questions since it enhances the importance of being present in the field for a longer period of time, which is exactly what internet-mediated groups make possible in a unique and particular way.

Many qualitative researchers have written about the particular possibilities studying cultural processes mediated through the Internet in conducting material in online contexts. Christine Hine, author of *Virtual Ethnography*,<sup>44</sup> talks about 'a re-birth of ethnography' following the rapidly growing field of studies of net culture. During the recent years, a few publications have addressed methodological issues in using qualitative approaches to online contexts as a result of the research experience doing internet studies (see Jones 1999, Mann and Stewart 2000, Hine 2000, Markham 2003a and b, Markham 2005). Although online contexts are quite diverse when it comes to what characterize

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<sup>44</sup> Using the dichotomy of 'virtual-real' to describe online space vs offline is problematic, as it implicitly implies that online interaction is less real than other social experiences. For this reason I prefer online/offline, or mediated/physical to differ between net-situated activity and face-to-face-contexts. See Sundén 2003 and for a critical and thorough discussion on the use of 'virtual' to describe online space, as well as Aarseth 1997.

them in form and purpose, they have some central important things in common, framing the interaction processes as well as the processes of doing research: the absence of the physical body and co-presence:

‘The question ethnographic work online has attempted to answer is how people deal with this very absence [of the body]; how very specific online modes of communication develop and how shared systems are created.’ (Sundén 2003: 49).

Additionally, a great deal of interaction online takes place through non-vocal modes, mainly through text, as opposed to face-to-face interaction. In the *synchronous* online environments, like chats and MUDs, this has created new forms of dialogue, or ‘textual talk’ as Sundén calls it in her study of an online community. These new kinds of social interaction have features from both oral communication and written texts. Mailing lists and news groups operate through *asynchronous* modes, even if the rhythm of the exchanges of posts can take place within minutes, getting a feeling of same-time presence.

That participants are not physically present at a common place, and that the communication is taking place in written texts influence the interaction. These two conditions for group interaction create specific frames for social processes - both for the people participating, as well as for the researcher studying online groups (Markham 2005). As Annette Markham points out, even if the Internet on the surface can seem like a more accessible and easy way to conduct studies of culture, the mediated setting adds quite a few challenges as well:

But in the virtual field, as one interacts with anonymous participants, tracks disjointed, non-linear, multiple participant conversations, and analyzes hundreds of screens worth of cultural texts, one can begin to feel like the Internet might cause more headaches than it cures. Deceptive in its apparent simplicity, qualitative inquiry in this environment requires careful attention to the tradition by which social life is interpreted and the adjustments that must be made to give value to the online experience and internal consistency to one’s methods (Markham 2005: 799)

In this chapter I will describe the ethnographic process, and some of the methodological challenges that I faced along the way in relation to it.

## **The different phases**

Using an ethnographic approach to study internet-mediated groups, can be roughly divided into two main phases (Kendall 2002). *The first phase* is related to 'casing the scene' as Sundén characterizes it; which in my case implied browsing around the Net to try to figure out what exactly existed of discussion group activity out from certain criteria, and by getting a picture of this, decide on which groups that potentially could be used for an in-depth study. *The second phase* is related to the process of the in-depth study itself consisting of many different stages; most importantly getting permission and then, the period I spent in the field collecting material. During the whole period I was careful to keep a research diary, consisting of 'field notes', where I wrote down thoughts and reflections of what I had observed on a certain day. I wanted to use them consciously as valuable information and material, to document the knowledge I gained and the choices I made in a systematic way throughout the whole process.

During the first pre-liminary phase of the study, observation and field notes were the primary tools that I made use of. In relation to the second phase, I used several additional tools to help me enlighten my research questions from different angles. First of all the exchange of e-mail messages themselves, of which I made a rough statistical overview of the quantitative participation from the time I became a member of the list until I finished my study. Qualitatively I chose two extended threads of discussion that I printed and used as a basis for in-depth analysis. I also printed and categorized several other discussions that in one way or another were characteristic for the interaction culture, or important episodes that affected the group in a particular way. During the formal period of doing research in the group, I was actively participating in the group myself, as well as having a few private exchanges of e-mails with some of the participants to enlighten particular issues. I also made interviews face to face with the Organisation that owned the list, as well as four of Sapfo's members, and conducted one extended e-mail interview with one of the participants.

## Looking wide: trying to define a research context

### *Preliminary observation, January 2001 – May 2002*

‘To have the option to pick a nice place, as opposed to picking a place out of necessity, might sound like an ethnographer’s dream.’

(Sundén 2003: 31)

During the first year of my study, I spent a lot of time browsing the net, trying to get a picture of what actually existed of discussion group activity in Scandinavian languages. My aim was not to get a ‘full picture’ in a quantitative sense. This is a difficult task, since there are few organized registers of what actually exists. However, I was curious to find out how discussion groups seemed to be organized technically, as well as if I could see a pattern of hegemonic discussion norms in the collection of discussion groups that I peeked into.

The great privilege of collecting material in an online context is that you have the possibility of looking around at different groups without actually travelling physically – further than to your own office (Rutter and Smith 2005, Sundén 2003: 31). Having too detailed criteria for what kind of groups I was looking for could end up in an endless search because they simply didn’t exist. Thus, I wanted to have an open approach towards what I learned and saw, letting the reflections and experience I gained influence what I decided to look deeper into. For me, this was also one of the great joys of doing online ethnography; making me able to go treasure hunting in the goldmine of the Internet and its never-ending caves. The dark side of an explorative approach is of course that you find little gold mines everywhere, never being able to decide which one you should start digging in because they all look interesting for different reasons.

The kind of groups was primarily interested in, helping me focus my gaze as I travelled around, were both connected to mediation form, size and the group of participants taking part. Originally I was seeking for *e-mail mediated discussion groups with regular activity*, and preferably *a mix of male and female participants or women-oriented groups*.

Like many other researchers studying mediated culture also have experienced, it is fairly easy to gain access to a diverse universe of groups as compared to doing field work on physically situated groups. However, the work of defining a research context is as Annette Markham (2003b) points out, not located within and limited by specific physical places, but defined by interaction: ‘The

ethnographer must read the texts and interactions of interest, much like trail signs, and make defensible decisions about which paths to follow, which paths to disregard, and thereby which boundaries to draw' (2003b: 53).

During the preliminary observation phase, I followed many paths. My main interest was to focus community building in non-commercial women-only spaces with some sorts of counter-discursive aim. Some of them became dead ends for different reasons, because they either made me bored having walked them too many times before, or because they were empty of people. Others lead me into new and exciting areas, teaching me important things that were useful, but forced me to turn back since they were too difficult to walk.

All in all, I read posts on around 30-40 groups, spending on an average one month in each. When I was a master student, I remember that my professor once in a lecture about ethnography and thick description as methodological approach warned us all: some people should not be doing ethnography because they simply cannot stop collecting material. My field diary had grown thick with all sorts of interesting observations after my pre-visit to the different groups. Not to mention the new ideas the observation generated, the continuous contact with material encouraging a hermeneutic circular process. In the end, I decided to focus on Nordic discussion groups for lesbian and bisexual women.<sup>45</sup> Both because of their women-only group of participants, and because of the ties to an established local lesbian subculture outside of its net-mediated context.

Picking the object and focus of any study is in many ways a political choice – which is no exception when using net-groups where the choice of selection is enormous (Markham 2005). Personally, I had experienced some of these groups as important arenas in my own sexual identity process, and since very few studies had been conducted on these groups, I was eager to do the job. I decided to do an in-depth study of Sapfo, that I had been a member of since 2001. That was, if they would let me.

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<sup>45</sup> During my search, I also did some observation in 3 Nordic online LGBT-communities, something that provided a useful broader context for my in-depth-study later on. See Bromseth 2003.

# Knocking

## ***Asking for permission, June 2002 – November 2002***

‘In a very real sense, every method decision is an ethics decision, in that these decisions have consequences for not just research design but also the identity of the participants, the outcomes of our studies, and the character of knowledge which inevitably grows from our work in the field.’ (Markham 2005: 797)

‘Who is the intended audience of an electronic communication – and does it include you as a researcher?’

(Ferri 1999, cited in Mann & Stewart 2000: 46)

The stage of getting permission to take part in the groups as a researcher is an important transition, where the control suddenly is not in your own hands anymore. Even if I at this point had chosen the group *I* wanted to look closer into, it all depended on if *they* wanted me to look at them.

The search process for in-depth material consisted of two important considerations along the way: on one hand, finding out what groups that actually existed, and on the other, if it was possible to do research there. The latter question is not so much about what is practically possible in itself, but on the grounds of certain conditions, related to the purpose of the study, and to research ethics; what are the restrictions of what I can do within the frames of informed consent as a ground principle for the study? In preparing my research design, I defined at least four possible effects to consider:

‘There are at least four obvious main issues in preparing a functional research design that will be affected by choosing to obtain informed consent or not: 1) How will the research purpose be affected in informing group members? 2) What research strategies would be possible? 3) How and can informants’ privacy be protected and 4) What effects on the group as a social unit can occur?’

(Bromseth 2002:53)

As opposed to many other social arenas, the ethical guidelines for research in humanities and social sciences could point in several directions with respect to what would be an ethically acceptable way to conduct studies in internet spaces. The most important ethical aspects in research on humans are to protect informants’ privacy, and to not cause harm. Two dimensions that separate which research that require consent from informants is to what



extent the research object can be considered 'public', and what methods that can be used without consent (The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Law and Humanities (NESH) 2001). Observation studies can normally be carried out if they take place within public areas, and if they are not recorded digitally. Many net-researchers have argued that net-mediated groups are 'like a public townsquare': Because they are situated in a half-public space, easily accessible for others, it should not be necessary to obtain consent to do research in them. Important debates the latest years have however nuanced this picture,<sup>46</sup> dividing different net-spaces based upon how accessible they are on one hand and the kind of social activity that takes place within them (King 1996).

I decided that no matter how accessible or open the groups I decided to use were, I would ask for consent. As pointed out in the NESH-document: 'researchers must give necessary attention to the fact that people's perceptions of what is public communication may vary' (NESH 2001:13). Even if online spaces are highly accessible, the purpose of communicating within them is often not speaking in public as a primary goal, but more a secondary consequence of the mediation form (Bromseth 2002: 38). The lack of visual and audible cues also lowers the awareness of having an audience (Sixsmith and Murray 2001). Since reading and writing takes place in isolation, it is easy to get a feeling of perceived privacy, not being conscious of the fact that the interaction is potentially accessible to a large silent audience. My argument was thus that as a researcher, I have the superior responsibility of taking this into consideration. Rather than defining a priori that a context is 'public' because of its mediation form, which could be said to be an 'outside-position' of defining the context, I would base my definition on an 'inside-position' and the type of social activity that took place in the group by asking the participants themselves. This choice was further related to my qualitative approach, that I wanted to take active part in the groups, that I intended to use an extensive amount of context information, and not least, to document my findings with verbatim quotes. Considering the topic of the group I wanted to study, sexuality is explicitly characterized as a sensitive issue by NESH; which always requires informed consent.<sup>47</sup>

I will claim that the researcher by not obtaining informed consent can cause more insecurity of potentially '[...] harming

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<sup>46</sup> The Ethical Board of the Association of Internet Researchers, under the leadership of Charles Ess, has systematically developed and updated specific ethical guidelines for Internet research with a cross-cultural perspective. See f ex Thorseth (ed) (2003).

<sup>47</sup> Particularly sensitive topics are defined by NESH as: 'questions concerning sickness and health, political and religious views and sexual orientation' (2001: 13)

individuals or groups *after* the study is done, in publishing the results from it. Deciding that obtaining informed consent *is* necessary, the implications are to a larger extent related to *the process of collecting the material.*' (Bromseth 2002: 53). The process of obtaining consent implied that the owners and members of Sapfo would agree to participate in my project.

### ***Asking for permission in a time of conflict: Whose consent? Now or later?***

1/10

*I am really worried now since I haven't heard anything from the list mistress yet. The last e-mail I sent was September 12th, 3 weeks ago. Now I have to send yet another reminder, and that sucks. This time I will try to call, it is obviously not committing enough with e-mails.. If I don't get permission, then what??? God forbid!!!!*

The first step in the process of approaching the group for permission was to contact Sapfo's web-master – or, 'list-mistress' as she was called, the person administratively in charge of the list. June 2002, I sent her a description of myself and the project, and what I intended to do in the period I would be present in the group. On the basis of this information, I was asking her if I could ask the participants on Sapfo themselves. When she finally replied, she said that she needed to discuss it with the board of the Organisation first. November 1<sup>st</sup>, I called the list-mistress to inform her that I would contact the board myself, if she had not heard anything yet, something that got the snowball rolling. I got hold of the chairperson of the Organisation. Talking to him made me believe that the project finally was about to come to live, as he was both positive and engaged (which is really important!). After one week the chairperson had discussed my request with the board, and November 8<sup>th</sup> I finally received green light to send my letter of introduction to Sapfo.

8/11

*What a weird day! Got an e-mail from the chairperson today, and finally permission to send the letter of introduction to Sapfo – under the condition that it is the board that makes the decision of if I can move forward with the project on the background of the reactions on the list. It was however obvious that they had discussed it thoroughly, and they expressed worries that the research can harm the list. Instead of jumping up and down with joy, I was caught with a horrible anxiety..and lots of 'what-if-fears'..*

The most important thing when asking for consent, is of course to ask in a way so that people say 'yes' and to make sure that they know what they say yes to. It is impossible to have control of all aspects influencing these decisions, but one good thing is always to be as clear as possible when describing the project; what will be done, why and how. I took a look at the letter of introduction that I had prepared for the list four months earlier. I thought of other aspects related to the self presentation, most importantly the tone of voice I chose to use and if it would appeal to the participants in the group. Even if the basic information that should be included in asking for consent, the 'wrapping' that will create credibility and good-will is dependent on the context and group of people. What will work well in one context will not necessarily work the same way in another one. At this point, I knew the context a lot better than when I started, after having followed the group closely while I waited for my permission to come through:

*What is it that sounds weird with the letter as it is now?*

*[...]*

*Because I know more about the group now I feel like looking at the letter critically again [...] Maybe in particular when it comes to the conflicts that have dominated recently – will it for example appeal more to one group of participants than another (the defined queer feminists vs the radical feminists)?*

While I was waiting for my permission, the group was having a big conflict about identity politics and understandings of gender, sexuality and feminism (see chapter 5): were male-to-female transsexuals to be accepted in the female-only community? The conflict that had been going in waves throughout the fall affected my slight over-preparing paranoia, also in relation to picking a good time to post the request to the group. Should I wait for less agitated times, or chance now? The board of the Organisation informed me that they were planning to exclude several members from the list because of this, and advised me to e-mail the group before they went through with it. Having a gender focus in the study, I worried that the way I presented my research aim and focus could be understood as supporting one view more than the other in the conflicting views on the list, and thereby influence how my project was perceived.

Since getting all of the participants to agree is close to impossible, I had decided that if no-one had difficulties with my presence and purpose, it would be ethically satisfying to interpret a 'silent agreement' as consent to be present in the group to do research. As for quoting directly, I promised to obtain permission directly from the participants that I wanted to quote, and to get back to them individually about this at a later point. Since the

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group had a practice of being able to work out solutions on their own, I felt satisfied with leaving it up to them, an interpretation list members also shared with me in the discussion that followed my request:

- >Personally I think that it would be really fun if we are used for
- >research purposes, in particular when it is as sympathetic as yours
- >seem to be \*s. I have difficulties of seeing any risks for our integrity.
- >The question is if we start to write more seriously
- >because what we write might be part of a dissertation \*s – no, I don't
- >think so!
  
- >So I don't mind – but then there are 349 more of us...You might ask
- >if there are
- >'anyone against it'..

Reply, me:

Good and important point. This is some of the challenge in research on Internet-mediated groups: who should one ask for permission? The owner, the list mistress or the group itself? And in that case, must every member of the list say yes? As I see it, it depends to a large degree on the group in question – and my impression as a member here is that you are quite good at reaching decisions through common discussion. So that's why I ask you as a group, hoping that if there are strong disagreements, it will show during the debate. This counts for the part that is about the observation and general descriptions of the group [...].

Reply, Lina:

Hi again, Janne,  
I think that what you think about the 'anchor' in the Sapfo-group [...] is totally fine! That is..if there are strong objections against the project, it will come through in the debate. I then withdraw the suggestion that you should ask if anyone is against..it wouldn't be so acceptable that one single person should be able to have veto right against the project..

Good luck!

Lina

## **Moving from the outside to the inside**

### ***Participant observation, November 2002 – July 2003***

‘[...] online, perception of another’s attention is only known by overt response [...] ‘I am responded to, therefore I am.’

(Markham 2005: 795)

One of the challenges of the next phase; well ‘inside’, was to try to establish an interactive dialogue with the group. I wanted to both encourage reflections about issues that I found interesting in the group itself, as well as through writing privately to specific participants. In all my posts, I tried to communicate that I wanted a two-way dialogue, and invited participants to write to me directly if they had questions or thoughts about anything that I wrote related to the project. As a participant in the group, I had previously only had a ‘lurking’ position; reading the posts, but I had never spoken myself. This was a choice I made out of ethical reasons. I wanted to have permission to do research before I started speaking in the group myself,<sup>48</sup> as I did not want to mix my roles of participant vs researcher. Of course, by this time then, I knew the group, but they did not know me.

Taking the step from looking from the outside to participating on the inside implies a shift in position. Observing interaction without speaking, my gaze was completely focussed on what happened in the group. Starting to participate, the point from where I observed shifted, and it also made me more self-conscious of my role as a researcher (as I now also was looked at). In sharing reflections aloud with participants in the group, they were able to join in, and contest my interpretations. The positive aspect of this, is that they made me aware of other perspectives that I had not thought of, something that I would not have achieved if I continued to let my own pair of eyes be the only ones filtering what I saw. The one-on-one interviews at a later point, and private e-

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<sup>48</sup> This choice was not based upon positivist reasons, but out of caution that it could have created more difficulties in getting permission if for example certain participants did not like my opinions, as I had experienced in my previous study of a political group that I was active in before doing research there. Nancy Baym (2000) experienced it as easier to communicate with the group when she announced her research project because she was already a participating member in the group. What is a wise approach is however dependent on the group’s purpose and your own relation to it, I would suggest. Radhika Gajjala (2004), who was also ‘an insider’ when asking for consent to study a South-Asian female network, SAW-net, experienced that her previous posts might have had the opposite effect when changing her position from participant to participant observer.

mails, further gave room to develop my interpretations through interaction. Getting to the point where I felt comfortable when interacting, and actually was responded to, took time, the text-mode posing specific frames in the process of finding my way in.

### ***Creating relations and a credible self in the mediated context***

Doing research in a text-based mailing list community like Sapfo, and the work of creating credibility and trust, allocates specific frames of communication and limitations when it comes to the actual tools you have at hand. As Kolko and Reid discuss (1998), the text mode seems to restrict flexibility in performing social relations: 'Online we are what we say in a far more intimate and inflexible way than we are ever purely or merely what we say face to face.' (1998: 220). This poses some very particular challenges in trying to create trust in building relations between researcher and informants, as compared to doing ethnographic studies in physical environments.<sup>49</sup> All that should be said and done must take the form of explicit text only.

During the different parts of the participant observation of the group, I appeared to most people as text and they to me. I found this fact challenging in many aspects; not being able to be silently present, but still visible as in a physical context, deprived of my smile, lacking the possibility of making encouraging nods to make people talk, to approach the silent observer in the group and invite her to talk to me. Not being able to read other participant's facial expressions to something I said or asked when trying to interpret lack of responses when initiating or inviting to reflections on an issue also created feelings of insecurity. The text-mode is clever, in the sense that it focuses on content and leaves out important self-presenting cues we give off in everyday face-to-face interaction (Goffman 1959) that might have helped humanize me and lower the threshold a little: That my outfit are jeans, my notebook is full of spots and that I twitch my curls when I am nervous. These little non-content-oriented actions are often unconscious and unintended, as compared to the well-planned posts that I sent to the list. I really twisted my brain as to how I could establish trust and create responses through the texts that I wrote, words carefully weighed in gold, something that is of course advantageous (avoiding embarrassing slips of the tongue), but also restricting. This does not mean that the text mode makes it impossible to show emotions and other sides of the self than the content-focussed researcher. In fact, the communication norms on the list were to a large degree informal. This included using

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<sup>49</sup> See Gajjala 2004: pp 29-40 for a discussion of these issues.

features from the synchronous chat modes; smileys and other emoticons (\*hug\* as a closing greeting to the group for instance), as well as situating oneself by relating to what was going on in the physical surroundings at the time of writing. In striving to find a position and a voice to speak with in the group, I adopted some of these informal ways of writing, as well as chose to share parts of my own private life to the group when participating. For instance as in this closing greeting:

Thank you so much for letting me be here – I learn so much from it!

(and so engaging that I now will be late for a trout-dinner that my 3 beloved flatmates have made...ha, who needs a girl-friend..)  
Have a continued good week-end!

Janne

### ***Identity norms and group requirements: researcher, woman, lesbian, feminist***

‘Our personal characteristics as individuals – our ethnic identity, class, sex, religion and family status – will determine how we interact with and report on the people we are studying.’

(Dewalt and Dewalt, 2001: 25)

All knowledge is situated, Donna Haraway argues (2004), and should be regarded as resources in critical inquiry:

‘Location is not a listing of adjectives or assigning of label such as race, sex and class.[...] Location is the always partial, always finite, always fraught play of foreground and background, text and context, that constitutes critical inquiry. Above all, location is not self-evident or transparent. Location is also partial in the sense of being *for* some worlds and not others. There is no way around this polluting criterion for strong objectivity.’ (2004: 237).

What kind of knowledge that is produced and how, depends on the pair of eyes that see and from where. Hence, the producers of knowledge, scientists, should always try to make clear from which positions they view the world they are trying to say something about, to make as objective and rational scientific claims as possible. To make visible the location from where their vision takes place as human beings.

Identifying as lesbian was an important part of filtering what I observed in the group, as well as a central resource in communicating with the list in the active part of the research (see

Bromseth 2006 for reflections about these issues). Using informal communication features to adjust to group norms also included sharing more personal sides of myself other than the 'researcher'. Being a group aiming at women, and a sexual minority-related community, my credibility as a 'researcher' was simultaneously dependent on creating a culturally appropriate image of myself through an intersection of subject positions as woman/lesbian/researcher, both initially when asking for consent, and afterwards, trying to 'get on the inside' and establish a dialogue. In short, I wanted to be perceived as a serious, 'well-intended' researcher, supportive towards the lists aims and its group of users. By doing so, I wanted in particular to avoid a potential scepticism of being interpreted as the heterosexual 'other', which in general can be a more difficult subject-position when establishing trust in research on sexual minority communities (Fitzgerald 1999).

In the absence of the physical body, embodiment is created actively in text-based online environments and is used as a resource for participants to interpret and make visualized images of the Other (Sundén 2003). How do you create a credible image of a gendered body with a same-sex orientation through textual means, in a discussion group environment where content-oriented discussions through asynchronous e-mail exchanges is the main activity? If I had met the group physically, I could have communicated my sexual orientation more implicitly, through subcultural signifiers telling a silent tale for themselves; through the way I dressed, my thumb-ring, or my body language. Instead, I had to make everything explicit in text. For instance, when I introduced myself to the group in my first post, motivating the project with basis in a shared subject position of being a non-heterosexual woman:

I am lesbian myself and I have because of this become particularly interested of the Net as arena for discussion and social meeting place for lesbian and bisexual women as a sexual minority in a heteronormative society, and in Scandinavian culture. In line with other international and Norwegian lesbian networks that I have been part of, I have been enthusiastic about Sapfo and the huge activity here on the list, as well as the broad range of the subjects discussed. I would very much like to use Sapfo as part of my project, and after having permission from the board of the Organisation I now write to you.

(From the introductory letter)

Or as later on, communicating it more implicitly in diverse ways; through telling stories of a lesbian holiday place I had been to,



mentioning girlfriends and discussing queer-related issues.<sup>50</sup> Using the lesbian identity actively as a resource also made it easier for me to engage in dialogues, by referring to a common ground and a shared frame of reference of living a sexual minority-position. Because of this 'insider' knowledge of the subculture, I was also able to recognize many of the issues discussed as well as to make use of my own experiences when I participated myself.

Speaking from an 'insider'-position, using personal experiences when discussing topics related to sexual identity as part of the research process was also challenging in different ways. On one hand, clarifying my role as a researcher in the group, and not an ordinary participant, was important. On the other, speaking in a tone of voice that was close to the cultural norms was important to be able to both build down the fear of the researcher that is often present, and to 'fit in'. What was 'too private' or 'too informal'? Being personal in the group was an act of balance, maybe in particular because of a fear of not fulfilling my researcher role in the 'right' way, and sometimes gave me the feeling of having to undress because of the research context:

*March 03*

*[...] since the norms on the list have been so informal and oriented towards private life, it has been impossible to both be able to keep a distance and at the same time get inside. I have had to make visible more sides of myself as a human being – in particular as a queer woman. It has been a balance project that has been very difficult, to judge where the line goes for informality. On one hand it is important for them to remember that I am a researcher in order to make them aware that what they say and do will be used in research. On the other I would never have been able to break the ice if I had continued to be 'too researchy'.*

*(From research diary)*

### **Acting as 'engaged insider' in a mediated context: a vulnerable position**

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<sup>50</sup> Gaining acceptance and credibility in subcultural environments is of course tightly connected to the hegemonic cultural norms for what is seen as 'right and relevant' ways of acting; experiences, opinions, positions etc, and is not always an easy task. As Chou reports from her ethnography of a lesbian community in Taiwan, with strict sexual roles and codes, getting inside was not a matter of 'saying' that she was a lesbian, but rather a process of 'proving' it by performing in accordance with one of the two strictly pre-scribed identity roles within the community (see Chou 1999).

During the process of starting to interact there were two aspects that I found particularly challenging, related to how I did participant observation. *How* and *how much* could I participate without dominating or intruding too much in the group in a negative way? When starting the active part of the research I wanted to participate in a manner that would create dialogue through reflexivity between me and the participants on the groups own premises. How could I make them want to share their reflections and reply to my invitations? There are no standard answers to these questions – they will always be connected to who the group is, who you are, and what approach you chose:

‘The degree of participation, the membership role and the amount of emotional involvement that ethnographers bring to the field will have an important impact on the kinds of data collected and the sort of analysis that is possible.’ (Dewalt and Dewalt 2001: 24).

Dewalt and Dewalt separate between degree of participation, membership role and emotional involvement in the group as a way of characterizing ways of participating as a researcher in a group. Even if I only participated moderately concerning my amount of writing, I identified strongly with the group, recognizing my own role as being a part of the group in line with the other participants, however with a special position.<sup>51</sup>

When I started, I didn’t want to intrude too much with the group and I was careful with which discussions I chose to participate in. I decided not to utter my opinions about controversial political issues. Usually, I participated by responding to someone elses initiative, and rarely initiated new topics myself, except for when I informed about my ongoing project once a month. If someone was talking about issues that I thought were particularly interesting as related to my research interests, I replied and added some follow-up questions, trying to encourage common reflections on the topic. Sometimes I did a follow-up e-mail directly to the participant who had written it, through a private e-mail. After a while, it was easier to know intuitively how I should interact; how much, when and how. Gaining more experience, my confidence in the research-situation also grew – something that more than anything was related to getting responses when participating interactively and writing messages to the list or to

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<sup>51</sup> This is however not the same as ‘going native’ according to Dewalt and Dewalt (2001). They describe going native as related to the period *after* the fieldwork, in the process of analyzing and writing, and the ability and desire to create a distance between oneself as a researcher and the group one has lived with and identified with during the field work. These are complex processes, and requires in all cases a reflexive attitude towards the research process and which position one take as a researcher in relation to the studied group.

participants privately. I stopped spending two days to double check my e-mails before I sent them, and that also made it more fluent. After all, the pace of the e-mail exchanges on Sapfo, and many mailing lists in general (Kolb 1996), require that you respond within a couple of days, as the topics discussed often change quickly. Contentwise, I wanted to encourage reflexive processes about the topics of discussion norms and mediated group culture, and in that sense I made my research interests explicit through participating. By being a participant I wanted to contribute to the group on the topics that I knew something about, as I also learned from the other participants.

Working ethnographically with a vulnerable group with whom I identified with, as well as doing participant observation in a mediated context, created specific frames for the knowledge making process. For what I saw, how I interacted and how I felt, interpreted and finally, what I chose to write about from what I experienced and learned while I was present in the group. Since interaction is such a central part of the empirical process, and the self is created through textual means only, these two elements combined made me reflect very actively along the way, of the situated self as producer of knowledge. A strong identification with the researched group, having a position as 'engaged insider' on the basis of sexual identity, also had its problematic sides, when trying to get an analytical distance to interpret events in the group. As Ruth Behar (1996:5) discusses, the positions of being both participant and observer at the same time implies a paradox. While the participant is engaged from the inside, the observer-position usually requires some sorts of distance. Letting 'the culture enmesh you', as Clifford Geertz (referred in Behar 1996: 5) puts it, is important in the process of trying to understand the culture one wishes to learn something about. Just how far one lets the culture enmesh you differs, Behar argues in her book 'The vulnerable observer – anthropology that breaks your heart' (1996). Taking an empathic stance when doing participant observation of human behavior involves observing not only with the head but also with the heart. It involves an emotional recognition or a strong identification with the people and culture one interacts with in a research project on a long-term basis.

In my case, experiencing some of the struggles living a sexual minority position implies, my sexual orientation is something that is a very vulnerable part of my identity. It makes me feel some kind of emotional bond to other queers in a very sensitive way – even if I like them and their opinions or not.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This does not mean that all queers are the same or experience their identity processes in the same way or that they are mostly negative. What I mean is that they are for most people an emotional process, for good and bad, and do for most people involve some struggles in everyday life in a heteronormative society

After finishing my fieldwork, it took some time before I was able to distance myself from some of the things that happened while I was present in the group, because I experienced them as emotionally upsetting as a participant, in line with other long-term participants. In this phase, I struggled with feelings of shame over having these emotions. Even if I knew better, the 'positivist ghost' whispered to me that being emotionally affected could be a sign that I was 'out of control', biased, and non-objective = non-scientific. Until I tried to use these emotions actively as resources in my writing, situating my researcher position and point of departure as 'engaged insider', as a wall to discuss the other participants' reflections against when doing my analysis.

## **Merging texts with faces: moving to the physical**

### ***Interviews, April 2003***

Sapfo as a social context is not floating in a disconnected vacuum, but was highly entwined with a range of other social rooms related to the queer subculture. These other arenas of 'The Community' were made relevant by the participants in the discussions on the list, and were in particular referred to by the women who were active in the lesbian community in the Capital, that most of these other social spaces where located or related to. For others, Sapfo was the only social space in their daily lives where they met other queer women. In any case, the mediated group was a social context in line with – not outside or on the side of – other daily life contexts that were important in participant's lives in one way or another. As Berry and Martin point out:

‘ [...] the net is neither a substitute for nor an escape from real life. Nor is it simply an extension of existing offline communities and identities. Instead, it is part of lived culture, informed by and informing other parts of user's lives.’ (Berry and Martin 2000: 80).

From the beginning I was curious and interested in how the mediated room intersected with other rooms, and the meaning it had in creating a sense of belonging to a local subcultural

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(varying between cultural contexts; from being severely oppressed and deprived from human rights in many countries to mainly consisting of cultural oppression in a few European countries).

community. Most of all I wanted to do a grande tour around the Country and make interviews with several participants in order to find out more about these intersections between the mediated interaction and peoples physically situated lives. However, because of time limits, I had to restrict myself, and decided to at least travel to the Capital and conduct interviews with participants living there, meet the organisation that owned the list, as well as to see some of the physical places that were often mentioned in the group interactions.

At this point, I had been a participating member on Sapfo for four months, and had started to see some patterns of who on the list that were most active, or 'core members' that they are often called (Gotved 1999); the most participating and influential members in the group. What I did then, was to contact a selection of these list members privately by e-mail. I asked them if they firstly lived in the Capital, and if they were interested to meet me, or if they did not live in the Capital, if they would consider contributing to the project by doing an e-mail interview. Out of 10 list members, four of them said that they lived in the Capital, and agreed to meet me. I gave several alternative dates so that they could chose an appropriate time, and this gave me a time frame for my stay in the Capital. I also wrote to the list as a whole, and asked if there were any of the other list members that would like to meet me in the period I would be in the Capital (see attachment 3). This request only resulted in one more positive reply, even if I posted two follow-ups at a later time, and I was quite disappointed about the lack of responses. All the list members that I contacted were however nice and positive towards the project, and gave their reasons for not being able to meet. Some of them did not live in the Capital, but agreed to answer questions via e-mail. Others did not wish to be part of the research project through being interviewed, or were not in town the days that I would be there.

The interviews were conducted over three days in a room at the Organisation's offices, and each of them lasted approximately one hour. I had prepared semi-structured interview-guides, slightly varied out from who I was speaking with (see attachments 4 and 5). I used the guides as check-lists shaping the conversations out from certain topics and as a resource to create follow-up questions, as I wanted the conversations to be as as relaxed as possible. I recorded them. After each interview I wrote down my immediate thoughts, and later in the day a more extended reflection in my diary. After returning, I transcribed the interviews myself using a rough transcription key and listened through them a repeated number of time making notes.

During the talks themselves, it was a great advantage that I had been participating and observing in the group over a period of time before doing the interviews with other participants. Even if we had never met each other before, it was not difficult to get

comfortable in the situation. More than anything, I think this was due to the fact that both they and I could relate to the list itself as participants and episodes that had taken place there. It provided us with a common platform of shared experiences to start out with, creating a common frame of reference for the conversations (Rommetveit 1974). I also consciously used a narrative strategy where I asked them to relate to specific incidents on the list to make them reflect about certain topics, and also tried to make use of concrete incidents myself to exemplify when I wanted to make them speak about a certain issue.

## **Methodological main tools**

### ***Doing thick description of an online-offline culture: tracing symbolic acts***

To make thick description possible, the challenge is to be able not to generalize *across* cases, but *within* them, social anthropologist Clifford Geertz holds in his classical 'Thick Description' (1973): 'In the study of culture the signifiers are not symptoms or clusters of symptoms, but symbolic acts or clusters of symbolic acts, and the aim is [...] the analysis of social discourse.' (1973 :26). To be able to see patterns of what it is that constitutes symbolic acts, and what it means, is an act of interpretation that requires time. Acts that in the group were meaningless to me at first, gained meaning when they were repeated or challenged. The complete access to Sapfo through its non-synchronous textual mediation gave me the advantage of studying everything that took place in the specific context, and to observe systematically. During the study, I soon became aware, though, of how important other social arenas were for the interactions on the list, with basis in offline queer community, the list postings providing me with trail signs to follow.

'Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.' (Geertz 1973:5) 'Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification [...] and determining their social ground and import.' (ibid:9)

To be able to interpret the meaning of what took place on the list, it was central to supply the material with other texts and sources of information, to be able to sort out the social ground for the structure of signification created through the list interactions. The

interviews with participants, the field trip to the Capital, studying other queer Scandinavian online groups and magazines and texts related to the local queer subculture were all important entrances. The knowledge I gained through these other sources appeared to be crucial to the interpretations of what took place in the list context, making signifiers that I had not considered significant suddenly meaningful, making me able to reach a deeper understanding of cultural codes on the list. Even if I consider my main material and center of gravity to be the postings to the list, connections from the online context to other important sites, made me see the online group as inseparably entwined with and part of a local lesbian community – and a notion of it – in particular. I considered doing a questionnaire early in the study, to trace these online-offline intersections more thoroughly, in particular when it came to the list member's relation to other subcultural arenas and practices, and contact with other list members as well as other lesbian/gays. However, because of time limits, I decided not to.

Radhika Gajjala (2004) asks if we can really compare online ethnography to ethnography at all, with only the one-medial text to lean upon as a source for interpretation, a reflection that I share. What makes an analysis of a community 'thick' is a question of what you are looking for. In my case, studying a mediated arena for creating local minority culture, using additional material to be able to understand the list community was unavoidable, as is also quite common in the methodology of other online ethnographers.

### ***Negotiating meaning through positions***

The study of Sapfo focuses upon linguistic meaning making processes in a mediated context. When approaching my list-material analytically, I have chosen to focus upon the interactive e-mail texts as negotiation processes, where the two selected threads of discussion are presented in a chronological order. Alternatively, I could have chosen to organize them thematically, something that in many ways is easier to follow for the reader, as it appears more structured. The most important reason for this, is that what I am interested in is the process in itself; trying to understand why a certain unit of interactive negotiation turns out in a specific way: how specific contributions seems to influence the meaning making process as well as the group as a social unit.

With the e-mail mediated communication form, it is possible to discuss several topics simultaneously that all participants can follow, and several persons can take initiatives and give responses at the same time. On an average, there was around three topics being discussed at the same time in the group. However, amongst several initiatives to different topics, some of these gain more interest and responses than others. The two discussion threads I

chose for in-depth analysis were both dominant topics when they were discussed. They further both contain aspects of conflict, where severe disagreements develop along the way. In the analysis, I search to understand how and why a certain consensus of meaning is reached and what it tells us something about in relation to the studied group. Which opinions and positions gain most support amongst alternative stances in the discussions, and what are the effects on the group and its members? Further, why do exactly *this* constellation of meaning gain support and not other alternative bids of reality? How are the negotiations related to hegemonic discourses, and how can they be understood as contributing to produce discourses?

A central term that I use throughout the analysis to help me interpret the negotiations of meaning, is 'stance' and 'position', inspired by an analytical approach developed by Ellen Andenæs (1995, 1998), based on Elinor Ochs (1988) and social interactionist perspectives.<sup>53</sup> On one level, we are as interacting human beings always pre-positioned to a certain degree, as well as the social phenomena we negotiate, through discourse (Andenæs 1995). Discourses of sexuality built upon heteronormativity for example, pre-position me in relation to who I am (deviant from the norm) and what I can/should (not) do (e.g. in relation to re-production). In lesbian subculture, there are established discourses of sexuality and identity, as described in chapter 2, that pre-position an actor entering a certain gay subcultural social context, positioning certain ways of identifying as potentially more credible than others. Hegemonic and subversive discourses might be seen as a point of departure for interaction, but certainly not as predictable outcomes. If and how these discourses are made relevant, and with what social effects, is a result of negotiating their meanings through interaction. What are the available positions in this interaction context to be interpreted as a credible list member?

On an interaction level, I use positioning to see how meaning and power is negotiated through describing oneself, others and the subjects under discussion. A position is a place to talk, experience and act from. In all social interaction, we communicate different kinds of positioning messages, in trying to sort out; 'who am I, who are you, what is this' – and the (often) hierarchical relation between them (Andenæs 1998). In the analysis I use positioning in relation to how the participants construct and negotiate different kinds of relational aspects: participants' identity (who are you/You/who am I?), their mutual relations (relational structures) and in sorting out social landscapes in general (positioning topics, events and persons as more or less important). In creating social

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<sup>53</sup> In my master theses I demonstrate this analytical approach in detail, by using a range of different analytical categories in detail (Bromseth 2000). Here, my analysis is not at the same explicitly detailed micro-analytical level.



identity, taking emotional and knowledge-based positions are central. When interacting we position ourselves through emotional stances; as upset, engaged, angry, amused, indifferent, sad etc. In relation to knowledge, we can take positions as 'experts', as ignorant or as questioning, for example. Different ways of positioning oneself and others in relation to these aspects have effects for how the interaction develops, which is something I try to comment on along the way where it is particularly relevant.

When discussion threads develop into sharp disagreements, like the two I have chosen here, the processes of creating boundaries through positioning becomes particularly explicit. Creating a common social identity, what 'we' (queer women) are in relation to 'others' (heterosexuals) develops into a re-definition where negotiating the boundaries of the 'we' is at center. In these negotiations, specific meanings and practices are questioned and challenged as not being credible to belong to the 'we', and simultaneously, the participants performing them positioned as not acceptable list members.

It is not only in the interactive discussion list material that I make use of positioning analysis in relation to negotiating meaning. We also negotiate meaning with ourselves, in dialogue with our surrounding discourses. In the interviews, I also look at how my informants relate to the events that took place on the list, and how they make sense of them in dialogue with me and themselves in reflecting aloud, producing and negotiating discursive meaning. In analyzing the interviews, I look in particular at how they relate their experiences in the group to discourses about identity, gender, sexuality on one hand- and to the Internet and internet-mediated communication on the other. Their stories are contradictory in many senses, as our constructions of reality usually are. By focussing on some of these contradictions, I search to problematize how different discourses collide with each other, and try to discuss what it is that is at center for the rupture (Baxter 2003).

## Material

The core material in the study of Sapfo is based upon:

- E-mail messages sent to the list from August 2002 until July 2003, which is the formal part of my study. In total, the number of e-mails in this period were approximately 3500 messages
- Field notes from my research diary, containing reflections around observations on Sapfo from January 2001 – July 2003
- Transcripts of five one-hour interviews with the chairperson of the Organisation who owns the list, as well as four of Sapfo's participants conducted in April 2003
- Private e-mail correspondence with several participants throughout the period, and one extended e-mail interview.
- In addition to this, I have made use of paper and web-based Nordic magazines and newspapers aiming at the queer subculture in Scandinavia.

All names of participants (also the anonymous nicknames) as well as the name of the list and the Organisation have been anonymized. I have also chosen to anonymize the country that Sapfo is related to. This is a decision that I made because of the small national cultural context, that in combination with the small subcultural context would have made it rather easy to recognize the specific group in focus. This was a difficult choice however. The ethical consideration of anonymizing the country to protect my informants posed a dilemma because it made it difficult to situate my analysis in relation to the specific national cultural context in detail (see Bromseth 2003). However, by focussing on common features and patterns of Scandinavian culture and subculture as a larger frame of interpretation, I hope that the analysis is still meaningful in this sense, and not too inaccurate.

## ***Fonts and citation key***

To differentiate between the assorted types of material in the text, I use a variation of fonts and print types:

- List messages and web-material are written in the standard e-mail font Arial.  
When there is a reply to a message, this is said explicitly, or marked in the text using

> arrows to mark the original message

With the reply following in the row under, without arrows

- When I use short quotes from several messages to illustrate a specific practice or opinion, I use two stars to separate between them, like this:

Welcome, Unna

\*\*

Yes welcome – hope you will like it here!

- ‘Interview quotes are cited in Times New Roman with quotation marks’
- *and quotes from my field diary are cited using cursivated Verdana*

In interview quotes, I use bold to mark emphasis: ‘I **think** so’. Interruptions are marked with [...], and other comments (breaks, level of voice) that I have interpreted as meaningful are commented in parentheses: ‘This is what I think (whispers).’ Shorter breaks are marked with three dotted lines: ... If I have removed parts of a quote, this is marked with [...] on a line of its own.

All quotes from list messages and interviews are referred to by name of the quoted informant, or more correctly the pseudonym that I have chosen to represent the informant. They can be traced back to transcripts of interviews and prints of the e-mail messages. Below I have listed an overview of the main actors, places and spaces that are relevant in the story of Sapfo (Figure 3.1) :

**Main actors, places and spaces in the story**  
**Central persons, organisations, events and social rooms**  
**playing parts in the story**

**The Internet** –communication technology and cultural artefact  
**Sapfo** - closed mailinglist for women, aiming at lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons in a Scandinavian country started in 1999.

**The Organisation for sexual minorities** – Identity political organisation for sexual minorities in the Country. Owns Sapfo and a number of other interactive net-mediated places for GLBT-people, including the bisexuality-list that also plays a part in the story.

**The chairperson of the Organisation** – non-active on the list, but had a central part in starting the Organisation's interactive Internet-mediated groups. Interviewed April 2003.

**Sara** – formal 'list mistress', taking care of the technical issues related to running the list.

**Malin** – informal, self-appointed 'ListBitch' since 1999.

**Helena** – controversial participant because of her political opinions of pedophilia and prostitution.

**Marple** – long-term participant on Sapfo and activist. Interviewed April 2003.

**Flisan** – long-term member and radical feminist

**Nina** – long-term participant and board-member of the Organisation. Interviewed April 2003.

**The Feminist House** – feminist house in the Capital of the Country, welcoming women only. No men over 1 year or post-operated transsexual male-to-females allowed.

**Dina Helle** – the chairperson of the Feminist House in the Capital.

**Pride** – the yearly festival for the GLBTQ-community in the Country taking place in the Capital

**Janne** – researcher and narrator

Figure 3.1: Overview of main actors

## Getting familiar with Sapfo

Being on the threshold of Sapfo as a newcomer had many similarities to entering a group primarily based on the oral mode of communication, as it had no message archive showing its previous history. On lists without message archives, the only way cultural history can be told and created is through the written words of

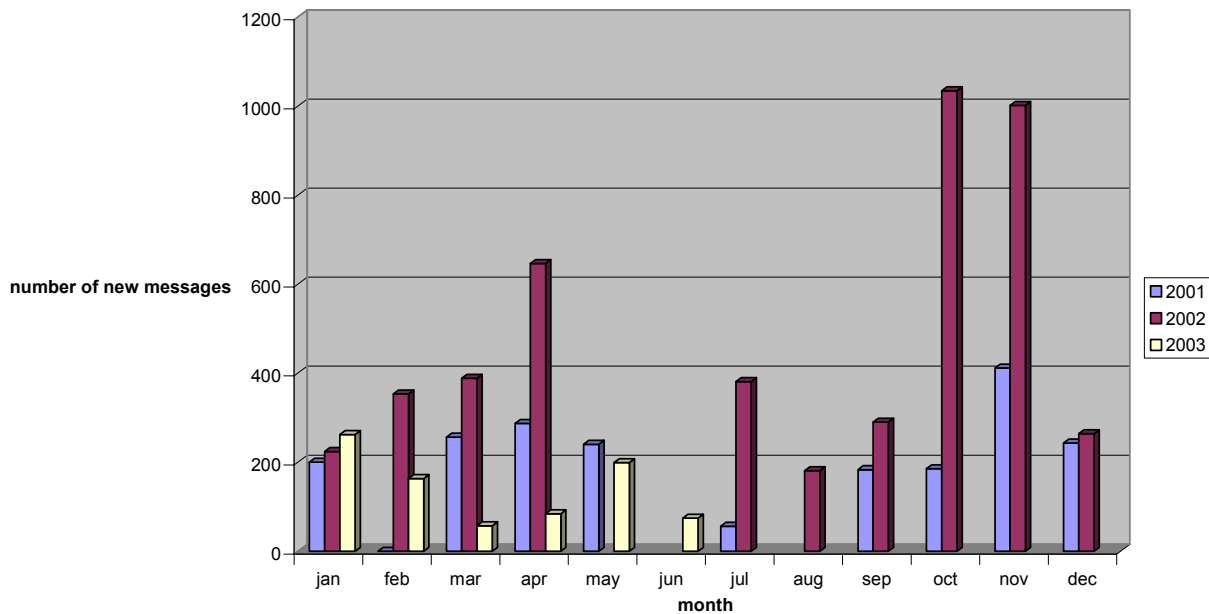
established members.<sup>54</sup> Coming in as a new member, this makes you dependent on learning the group's cultural norms and traditions from day to day, not being able to read previous postings and hence takes more time.

The activity on the list was itself made into an explicit subject in the interactions on Sapfo in diverse ways in different periods, and both in relation to the past and presence. At the point when I came into the group in 2001, the activity of the list seemed to be in particular subjected by the self appointed ListBitch Malin. On one hand in relation to the level of participation at the time being, through her monthly updates on the amount of messages written or in her repeated appeals to write if list list traffic was slow for some time. On the other, she often used to refer back to the first period of the list's existence, before an active group community had established yet, a story she often used to repeat when new members entered the group. Malin used to count all the messages of the month, evaluating the other members' amount of messages and reporting the topics that had been under discussion, and she also continuously encouraged them to write more if the number of messages had been low for a period of time. When fulfilling these tasks, she added the title of 'ListBitch' to her name, but stated repeatedly to new confused members who turned to her with general questions that she had no formal responsibility in the community apart from this self applied role as described. Keeping statistics like this, as well as initiating discussions in periods of low activity is a social responsibility on electronic mailing lists that is often taken by a formal administrator (Bromseth 2000). It provided me with a rough statistics when trying to see a quantitative pattern for the period I had been a list member, also before I started my formal research in the fall of 2002.

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<sup>54</sup> The access to previously sent e-mails and discussions on lists without archives will differ highly, dependent on each individual participant and how she chooses to store or delete old messages sent to the list. Regarding my own use of lists as an object for research, I have stored all e-mails sent to every list that I have subscribed to during my study in separate e-mail boxes. I have the impression though, that for most members of discussion groups, delete messages regularly. As opposed to me, using the university address and being able to store many bytes on the server without anyone threatening me with deleting them after a certain amount of time (even if there have been some polite hints from the sys ads), many people use a free e-mail client such as hotmail when signing up for lists, with a restricted space for storage. In any case, at lists without an archive, all new members start from scratch in the sense that they come into the group at a certain point of its history, without being able to 'catch up' on their own by reading the original e-mails from the time before they joined.

**Figure 3.2** number of messages posted



**Figure 3.3** number of active participants on the list (Dec-01 to June-03)

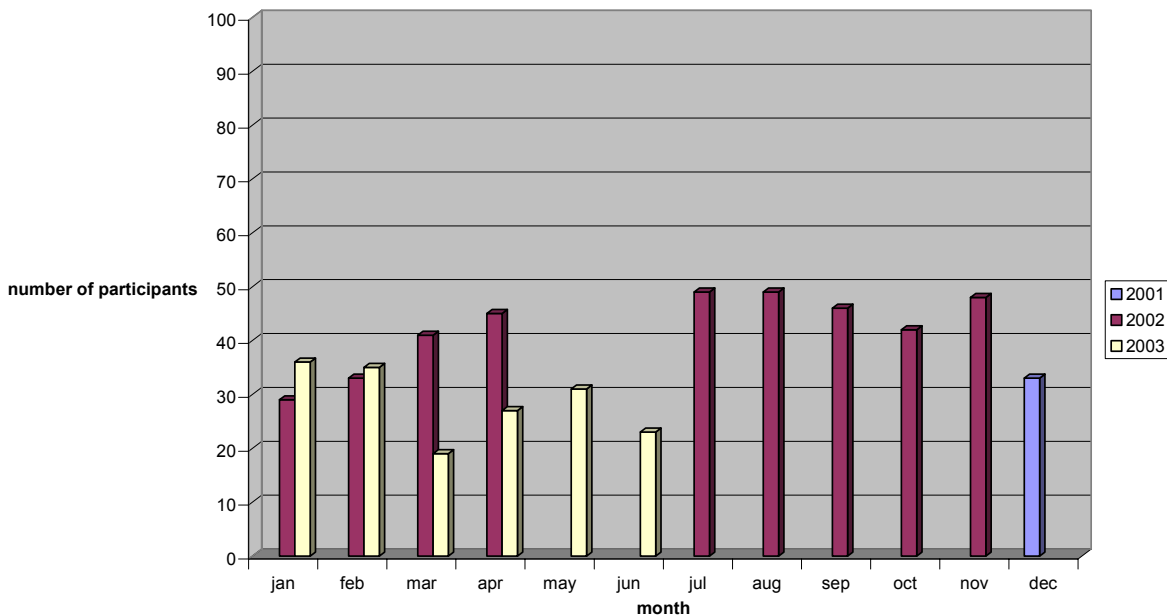
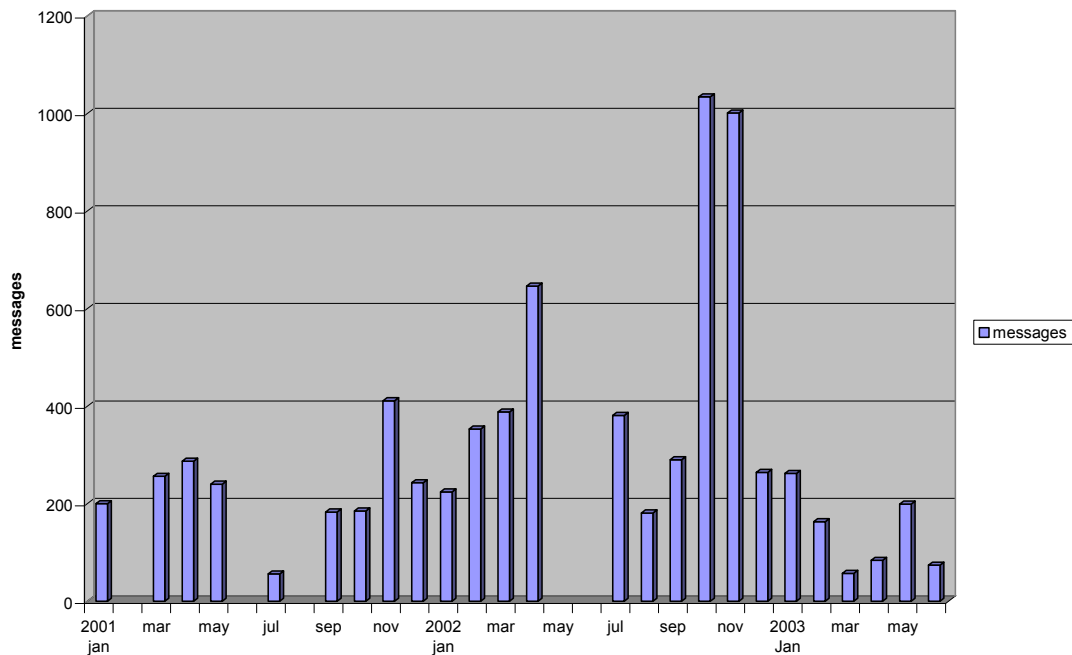


Figure 3.4

messages posted (jan 2001 to june 2003)



### Behind the numbers

For the years of 2001 and 2002, the curve of periods of high and low activity follows a similar pattern, with a slow period during summer as well as around Christmas and new year, which are holiday seasons for most people in Scandinavia. The difference is that for 2002, the amount of messages sent generally increases with 1700 messages. This is something that seems to be quite a frequent pattern on lists in the period when Internet use and access grew dramatically, because the number of subscribers sometimes doubled in a year, and the activity with it. On Sapfo, however, the number of subscribers hardly rose at all from 2001 to 2002. What happened in 2002, making the members write twice as much?

During spring 2003, a different curve is being drawn, with some important differences from the years before. Instead of a rising activity from January towards summer, it goes down, and the amount of messages decreases noticeably. The most dramatic drop is from November 2002 till December 2003. Numbers have no tales of their own. In the forthcoming chapters, we will look behind them.





## Chapter 4.

# Getting introduced to Sapfo

### Research questions

Online groups do not exist in a void. They are social arenas for interaction shaped by culturally situated users and vice versa. What we experience in the groups also influences our everyday lives. Writing the analytical narrative in the story of Sapfo I try to shed light on three main questions that focus on the list context as a community on its own and how it simultaneously is inseparably intertextually linked in different ways to other social rooms, concrete and imaginary, in a seamless weave.

*First*, in what ways and to what extent the microsocial life of a group as linked to other subcultures and networked communities differ. What is particular about Sapfo is its ties to lesbian subculture in a Scandinavian country, to the off-line lesbian community, and to the cultural notion of it, and this is important for structuring the mailing list environment (Munt, Basset and O'Riordan 2002). Further, as described in chapter 2, the content and meaning of hierarchically organized identity categories and norms in lesbian subculture change over time and vary between cultural contexts. How were gender, sexuality and identity created and negotiated in this mediated Scandinavian cultural context, explicitly and implicitly, and how were these phenomena part of the processes of creating a 'we', a hegemonic group identity within the group? How were the productions of group identity on Sapfo related to other social contexts in the lesbian local subculture in particular?

The *second* issue I want to shed light on, is the specific frames of interaction (and micro-social structure) created by the text-based mediated form of a mailing list, offering particular conditions for the formation of group community (Baym 2000, Gotved 1999). What was characteristic of Sapfo in relation to being organized as a non-regulated mediated e-mail-community based on anonymous self presentations? Further, characterizing the group as 'a situated community of practice', as Nancy Baym describes, what seems to be strategies of success and problems of conflict-solving in relation to a specific social structure within the mediated context? More specifically, what seemed to be the group's strength and resources in its 'Happy days' as compared to the following period of conflict, and what was particular about the group being mediated in these phases?

*Third*, what were the relations between this online context and other social rooms off-line for the specific events that took place in the group, and how did these relations influence the events taking place on the list? This is highly related to how a group is organized internally as well as existing connections to other institutionalized or informal meeting places and structures outside of the mailing list (Bromseth 2001). What position did Sapfo have in relation to a sexual minority subculture within a national cultural context, and to the Organisation for sexual minorities as list owners? How did the political issues debated within the community affect the interactions on Sapfo, and how were these online-offline intersections relevant regarding conflicts that developed on the mailing list?

I have chosen to divide the development of the list context into 4 'scenes', as I call them. The analytical basis that I used to capture the changes, is inspired by a social interactionist approach and Erving Goffman's theory of frame analysis (1974) in particular. To define a social interaction context, I asked two questions, as suggested by Dag Album's (1995) analytical operationalization of Goffman's theories: 'What is going on here?' and 'Who are these people to each other?'. Each of the scenes represent a developing stage of the community where its features change in different ways and degrees. The main analysis is centered around what happens in scene II and III. Moving from happy days to stormy days, days of thunder and days of silence, the focus of the social activity and the ways in which participants relate to each other change in different ways. My question is how and why.

Let's first meet Sapfo in its happy days: What were the social functions that it seemed to fulfill for different participants and what did they appreciate about the list?

## **Scene I : The Happy Days**

### ***Preface***

The mailing list community Sapfo aimed in particular at lesbian and bisexual women, but were generally welcoming all women independently of sexual orientation. They were owned by the Organisation for sexual minorities in a Scandinavian country, and had approximately 350 subscribing members, with a stable core of 15-20% of the subscribers as active members writing on a regular basis. The mailing list was organized as a restricted access group, partly because of previous experiences and problems with harassment from in particular heterosexual males on the Organisation's chat room for women. The Organisation wanted to

create a more comfortable and safer space for them to discuss and communicate with each other on their own terms. Since this list was restricted to women only, they needed a female administrator to take care of the daily technical and social routines so that the list would run smoothly. Sara was the only female volunteer in the internet editorial board of the Organisation, who had responsibility for all of the groups and chats that they owned. However, she did not wish to have a position as a social moderator, but just to be technically responsible. The result was that the list was left to sort out their disagreements and create community on their own. After a while, this was something that the group managed very well, and that they were very proud of too. As Nina put it:

And what happened on Sapfo was that one quickly established a good tone, and that we all the time negotiate common decisions, as to what is okay and what is not okay in a friendly tone, and this has shown that it is actually possible to do so on a list, and this is something..or this is something that I bring with me when I chat on other lists – not to be too provocative in my approach, to seek discussions about list ethics on the list in a good way. Yes, and things like that.

### ***A researcher finds Sapfo***

One day, I stumbled over the introductory page of Sapfo, in my search for Nordic women-oriented mailing lists communities. It was announced as part of the Organisation's web-pages and looked approximately like this:

#### **Sapfo**

Sapfo addresses issues that are of interest for homo- and bisexual women. **Only women can participate.** The list turns to lesbian and bisexual women in the Country, but even women outside the borders of the Country can participate. The language is primarily Scandinavian, but you may find list messages in English.

All women are welcome to subscribe to Sapfo. It is free. The register of subscribers is strictly confidential. Everyone who subscribes can post messages to other subscribers (the list is for discussions). You can unsubscribe at any time.

**To subscribe to Sapfo – send an empty message to: [sapfo-subscribe@maillist.Organisation.thecountry](mailto:sapfo-subscribe@maillist.Organisation.thecountry)**

I had been browsing the web for quite some time, signing up for the few female-oriented mailing list communities that I found, hoping to find an active group that I could look more closely into. I had previously been studying two male-dominated Norwegian groups, organized as open mailing lists with additional web-situated message archives. Eager to figure out what subjects and group culture that were created in female-oriented groups, I started to realize that these were often organized around subjects more closely related to private life, such as health and sexuality. These groups were often organized in the more private spheres of the net, often with the option of anonymous self presentations. After a while, I was beginning to be a little disillusioned, as many of the groups I signed up for were empty as a tomb, having no activity. I was happily surprised and quite fascinated when I started receiving message after message when signing up for Sapfo:

*18/1-01*

*Many of the participants seem to be regulars – and titulate each others as good friends – and support and give advice when someone asks for it. Several of them have expressed that they are not doing well these days – something that has caused comfort and support. The way they relate to each other can be really close, personal and warm – and at the same time the discussions can be really sharp.*

Many women spoke. They talked about their grieves and joys and supported each other. Since what they gathered around was identifying with a female sexual minority position, as lesbian or bisexual, this topic was often addressed in diverse ways in the discussions. Mia characterizes Sapfo as a liberating space because here, the normal is not to be a heterosexual, but a homosexual woman:

I don't know how open you are Agira, but if you live a little like me and my wife I guess that you also get tired of being lesbian in first hand and Agira in the second hand. To belong to a minority (which you do in several ways) is equal to being questioned and vulnerable and then I do not necessarily mean by the crazy people with shaved head, but rather the feeling of always always always being special.

That is why it is so liberating with a forum where you don't have to be The Lesbian Guru. I can write about recipes and tell about my coughing wife without getting fifty-two follow-up-questions about my existence, but I can also write about feminist work without having to defend men in every and every-other meaning (the ones who have discussed feminist strategies in a mixed group know exactly what I am talking about).

Sharing political news, both progress and annoyance, about the minority group's rights, was also important on Sapfo:

IT WORKED IT WORKED IT WORKED IT WORKED!!!

Well my sweet sisters, the Parliament has just said yes to adoption rights and the right to be tested for international adoptions.

Thank you so much all of you who have been working, lobbying, shared from their experiences from their lives, yes thanks to all of you.

This will be a day to remember and tell about to our children.

Lots of hugs  
Mia & Kaia

They also discussed politics, got aggressive – but always made up in the end. They entertained each other with stories or by making fun of themselves and each other:

I have a good advice about how to get your period going – take white underpants. And you'll see – schlofs, there it is. Works for me every time! If you'd like to scare your period away you can exercise instead

☺

Ina

Sometimes they even flirted with each other:

Lina Olsen!<sup>55</sup>

Do you want to marry me?

/JB – with water-combed hair and shaking underlip ;-)

Reply, Lina:

Help...what should one answer?

Yes please?

Lina

\*blushes\*

Reply, JB:

Wow...but..Good! If you say yes you don't risk missing out on something fun. Sooo... \*rubbing the feathers\* you seem to be such a goodie ;-) You're always so supportive and nice and real in a way – that is attractive in my eyes. [...]

---

<sup>55</sup> Lina has just given advice to JB about raising teenage children, something that JB really appreciates.

They warmly welcomed new members that came to join the group as they introduced themselves to the others, and told them about their list and its customs and story. This was very useful coming in as a new member, not knowing what had happened there before. Since the group had no message archive, tales from the past could only be known through the older members re-telling them:

People,

In every little cell of my seventeen-year-old body I'm looking forward to sharing thoughts and reflections around different topics. I hope that Sapfo will give me plenty.

Unna, who has been informed about the list by Fia, list member

\*\*

Welcome, Unna!

You will not be disappointed, Sapfo enriches your life!

Krista – who has a sore throat today

\*\*

Hi Unna

I hope so too. Welcome to us. Hope we get to see a lot of you in the time to come \*s\*

Jenny

\*\*

yes, welcome! always nice to see new people on the list!

even if your girlfriend is an experienced list member, you could get some advice from looking at:

<http://xxxxxx/sapfo.html>

hope you will like it here \*laughs\*

Karina, out of sugar

They sometimes wrote little poems or shared their best recipes with the rest of the group. And sometimes, they asked for the others' company and presence, if nobody had been around for a while.

By the way, where IS everyone? Yesterday it was the first time in ages that it was silent here for a whole day. Have you frozen to death? Here in the Capital it was around 13 degrees below zero this morning. When I went out the hall thermometer showed only 17 degrees inside. Is it as bad for you? Are you still here? Hoho?

Flisan

Even if they all took part in the work of developing and maintaining the community, I thought at first that they also had someone in the group that had a special social responsibility: Malin. Every month, she sent a statistical sum-up of the number of messages, the topics and the writers, that looked very similar to the ones that the list administrator used to make on one of the previous mailing lists I had studied.

X-Originating-IP:[xxxxxxxxxx]  
From:"Malin"<xxx@hotmail.com>  
To:[sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry](mailto:sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry)  
Subject:The emptiness of life

Hey

Life is empty! I have just deleted 848 kilobytes, meaning the total sum of the messages from last month on this list. It was altogether 256 – emails, each approximately on 3,3 Kb. I miss them all so much that I could dyyyyyye \*sniff\*

We had 41 discussants: except from my own drivel, these women contributed with messages [*all names of authors*]. I hope I didn't leave anyone out. Thanks everyone.

We had 41 subjects: except from 'unsubscribe' (unfortunately) it was Films, Silence, Scandinavian Women, Denmark, Critique against lesbians in Sweden, 'pride', Sunshine, 'Bitchbutch', Lesbian history, To hit someone on the mouth, Gazpacho, War against Malinarchy, Lesbian archives, The Women's day, Writing off emotions, Lectures and exhibitions, Voting over gay issues, Texas, Why the e-mails come mostly on Tuesdays, It is Wednesday today etc, Adoption, Music taste, Zapatists, Camille Paglia, In case the discussions reaches people outside of the list, If gay is the same as homosexual, Paris is run by a homosexual, Facts and considerations, If the Country is a country to be proud about, Lesbian mums, MusMix, Civil unions, Bi-party, Cosmic station Mir, Serbian lesbians, To be gay in other countries, Modem and broadband, Dykie testosteron music, Massage, Smoking, Tatoos, Reincarnation, Prostitution, Poems, Patti Smith and Nina Hagen, Volunteers for Pride, Nuns and sex. (Did I forget anything?)

It is the same every month when the mailbox suddenly is empty. My only hope is that April turns out as good as March. Thanks for existing, all wonderful girlies!

Malin  
ListBitch

Malin used to sign her statistic messages with 'Malin, ListBitch'. She also encouraged everyone else to keep on writing, and expressed gratitude for their writings. 'Thanks girls – you are wonderful, sweeties'. Sometimes, though, if there had been a very slow period, she could also be a little rough with them, however in a gentle manner. If people started to be too aggressive towards other participants, she could comment upon it: 'Please, lower the waves a little, will you?'

But Malin had no formal responsibility as I first had thought when I was new. After a while I got to know about the FAQ of the list, created by one of the other list members, Karina. Here I could read the story of the list's anarchic structure and Malin's position. Because Malin was often mistaken for being responsible for the list, she had a whole little paragraph in the FAQ, explaining that she just wanted to inspire the group to write:

Malin nags on all of us for not writing enough, and she also usually sums up all the messages of the month in a funny and readable way. She is however NOT list mistress and has no control of how the list is run or its register of participating members.

She had received her title because of her style when entering the group in its very early days: 'October 12<sup>th</sup> 1999 I started participating in Sapfo [...]. I started with a rough lesson about the inactivity on the list. That's when I got the title ListBitch.' She seemed to be quite popular though, even if some of the women thought she could be too pushy with focussing on the amount of writing. Or also maybe because of it? In many lesbian subcultures, and also here, an aggressive forthcoming style is often interpreted as something sexually attractive. This was something they could joke about in the group too. In spite of her rough appearance, she was also very helpful and friendly.

### ***Happy days***

When I found Sapfo, there were many happy days in the community. The list seemed to fulfill a range of social functions for different participants. For some, it was a personally supportive network, as Frida describes when trying to leave the list in a challenging part of her life:

I'm sitting here, having a hard time making my mind up. To just say it as it is or just silently sneak away or none of the two and stay. Yesterday I un-subscribed from another community, it hurt, but I did it anyway. My friends are there. I don't want to have contact right now. It just hurts anyway, I can't take that any longer.



Frida receives a lot of support from other list members, and writes a few weeks later:

So, the serial continues.

Now I have reached an insight about why I felt like I did a little while ago when I sent a pretty anxiety-mail to the list.

One thing that I have understood is that you people on the list actually are very important to me. I am glad I didn't follow my instinct. Thanks for existing, you are damned good you know. We are good for each other.

At a later point in the story, I talked to Lisa, one of the regular long-term members, who told me how much the list had meant to her in periods. In particular in its first year as she was just getting out of a long relationship with someone with serious personal problems:

Lisa: But in the beginning I wrote quite a lot, I had...a lot to talk about regarding relations and [xxx]. And I got a lot of good answers [...]. And I thought it was just great that people really wondered about how **they** should have [dealt with it]. I brought up different subjects; jealousy in relationships, how one reacted as a couple, and I got help to work through it.

J: Mmmm

Lisa: And I might have gotten the same if I had seen a therapist too, but (laughs) Sapfo was better – people replied spontaneously and they wrote about what **they** thought and some of them said: 'I would never want a girl who said so and did so – dump her' (laughs)

J: (laughs)

Lisa: and others said: 'Oh, but you must forgive'. Yes. I was very personal. [...]

J: But that meant... then you experienced getting a lot of support [...]

Lisa: Yes, it was great – I can really say now that I was lucky.

Because both she and her former partner were active in the lesbian community where she lived, she experienced it as a relief to be able to seek support and advice on the list. Since she could be anonymous, she was able to step out of her prescribed role of always being the 'calm and wise, the one who gives the answers – not the one with questions'. Even if there could be quarrels on the list, she experienced it as 'people really *tried* to listen to what the

other *meant'*. Later on, when summer got close in the year when I joined them, she was to be married to a new woman. From Sapfo, the couple received a tape in the regular mail, with lyrics and music recorded by an impressive number of the list members, and signed by 50 of them – half of whom Lisa had no idea who were in real life:

Lisa: [...] those who have been part of the list for a long time have followed the whole story. And – this made me very happy – we got married last year, last summer, on midsummer night – and from Sapfo we received a tape, with a song that they had written to us [...]

J: No!

Lisa: mmm..and recorded – they had been circulating this tape amongst each other. Recorded text and music [...] and it made me very impressed, because I have no idea who half of these people are, I have never met them, I think, and they had just signed with their e-mail addresses.

Other participants emphasized the function of Sapfo as an arena for political discussions, like Nina, who was also active in the board of the Organisation, and part of the list from the start too. She characterizes the first years on Sapfo as a fun place to discuss – and an important arena where different people from all over the Country could participate, independently of time and place:

Nina: That it has filled a function by being a list where both the whole country has the possibility of taking part, but also people with different perspectives. Researcher perspectives, organisation-perspectives, and just ordinary everyday-perspectives have been mixed and integrated [...]

That you don't have to order a train ticket and go to Pride to participate, but that you can turn on the computer at home and participate when you feel like it, it creates a spontaneity when writing that I think is really creative and good.

Marple, another long-term participant, also highlighted the aspect that the local lesbian communal network was extended through the mediation possibilities:

Marple: But I thought it was cool to be part of Sapfo to hear what people from the Country think and feel, - not only your friends at the club, but what everyone thinks and feels.

According to Nina, the list has worked because it has been:

[...] allowing a wide range of opinions, where you can discuss almost anything, but also when the discussions became too harsh, people have taken responsibility for their actions and lowered the waves.

In line with many of the participants, I fell in love with the list, and wanted to tell other people about it by using it as part of my research. Creating a lasting mailing list community, I had learned through my previous research, did not come by itself. It was in particular a challenging process in groups without a formal responsible moderator to take a main social responsibility, to keep a stable level of activity, and to solve disagreements. What made Sapfo successful as a community, and how were these processes interrelated with how the participants created and negotiated social identities as Scandinavian lesbian and bisexual women, were the questions setting me off.

### ***A helping hand***

Many days went by. I struggled with ethical dilemmas in my research, trying to find out how to approach my chosen groups by informing them that I wanted to do research.<sup>56</sup> I also had some difficulties trying to find out who I should ask for permission to use Sapfo – and how. I wrote an e-mail to the list mistress, but she did not respond. I then turned to Malin and Karina for help, since they seemed to take more responsibility than most members in diverse ways. I wrote to them privately and asked if they could read the letter of introduction I had written to the whole list, where I explained my purpose and what my presence would imply for the group, and if they would allow me to be in the group for 8 months to observe and participate as a researcher.

Malin replied after a couple of days, being very positive towards the project. She also expressed some quite clear opinions about how I should move on methodologically regarding permission, relating it to practices on mailing lists in general:

Is it possible to have the permission from all the members of the list to do research, you wonder? Should one have some sorts of vote to settle the case? I would answer no to all of that. I think that you simply should go ahead with your research if there are no strong objections

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<sup>56</sup> See Bromseth 2002

against the idea, but you shouldn't have the ambition to have a permission from every single debate participant.

[...]

Besides, I see no reason to ask for permission in the cases where you generally refer to the kinds of discussions that take place on a mailing list. It is first when you quote people directly that it seems necessary [to get individual permissions], then by turning directly to the girl who is quoted. It seems like a good idea to send the letter that you have written. Just send it to Sapfo's address.

[...]

But I think that it is a good idea to do research on women's discussions in cyberspace. I have tried to think about whether the project could have any negative consequences. The only thing that I can think of is if the participants could be scared to silence in the debates in case they feel 'supervised' or 'controlled' in any way. It is important that you always ask if you are allowed to quote or not. You should not ask questions about who the girls are in real life or so, but that doesn't seem to be your intention. Good luck with your project, interesting idea \*s\*

She advised me to contact the board of the Organisation to get further permission and suggestions on how to move on. She didn't respond to my interview request though. But that didn't worry me very much as there was plenty of time for that later on.

In the meantime, while I was waiting for the slow process of my final permission, something gradually changed on the list, related to a debate of identity and queer politics that had been going strong on the list from the day I joined it. This time, however, it took an increasingly aggressive form that I hadn't seen before.

# Chapter 5.

## What is a woman? What is a lesbian? What is a feminist?

### Introduction

‘Lesbian feminism is also often expressed through a policing of borders of the categories of women and lesbian. [...] As is also true of offline communities, gender segregation and transgender have also come into conflict in the policing of [online] community. [...]’

(O’Riordan 2005: 4)

Issues of identity politics, group norms and feminism have been hot potatoes in the lesbian and feminist movement the last decades, and online groups have also been important arenas for these negotiations (O’Riordan 2005, Nip 2004). Kira Hall suggest that the positions of ‘queer’ and ‘radical feminist’ have been used to create community online on opposed ideological grounds, characterizing them as ‘liberal cyberfeminism’ and ‘radical cyberfeminism’:

Liberal cyberfeminism, in short, is identified by an insistence on equality rather than oppression, plurality rather than binarism, fluidity rather than categorisation, unity rather than separatism – a vision inspired by the increasing sophistication of technology and the advent of body-free communication. (Hall 1996: 151)

Both of these positions were present on Sapfo. What is feminism, and who can be feminists? Is feminism only for women, and if so, can transsexual women be feminists? On Sapfo, social constructivist versus essentialist understandings of gender and their implications for feminism had in particular returned as a discussion topic, causing high engagement, and this time, as we will see, a sharp conflict.

Conflicts are a part of a discussion group’s life, as it is in all other everyday social interaction. They make visible active negotiations of the borders of social group identity, when certain values and opinions are questioned, as related to content as well as the form of interacting (Gotved 1999). The tolerance for the level of conflicts in mailing list environments differ, though, and the norms for how conflicts are dealt with, as well as who takes charge

when they arise, dependent on the context (Donath 1999). On the Doctor's List that I studied previously, aggressive behavior was perceived as unacceptable by most group members. A consensus-oriented practice was the preferred way of relating to each other when discussing. This was, as I interpreted it, highly related to the group's purpose and user's relation to each other; as a professional collegium of general practicing doctors in Norway. When the line for what was considered acceptable was overstepped, the list administrator usually wrote a private e-mail to the troublesome participant(s), to avoid getting a meta-discussion on the list (see Bromseth 2001).

On Sapfo, though, conflicts and disagreements were not rare, as related to political discussions or to social issues, but rather part of the interaction norms in the group. As one participant expressed it after a heated political discussion, using 'fights' as a positive metaphor to characterize the disagreements:

We have fought before, and hopefully we will do it again. We are good at it and even if the wars are not so nice and correct we have hopefully learned something from them, about how you fight and how you quick as hell withdraw, until next time.

Because Sapfo didn't have a list mistress with a formal responsibility for moderating the discussions, the conflicts were usually resolved as a result of a collaborative effort, where the regular list members took responsibility. In contrast to many of the earlier conflicts though, the one coming up in Scene II was of a more longlasting and intense character. Here, they discussed the same topic in an increasingly aggressive manner. The questions at stake centered around membership-criteria. Who should be considered legitimate members of the lesbian- and feminist community, specifically as related to political tensions in understandings of gender and sexuality: Can male-to-female transsexuals ever be considered as 'real women', and if not, can non-women be feminists? Should transsexuals be fully included in the lesbian community – and Sapfo as a list community?

### ***Community norms: From gay & lesbian to GLBTQ (Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer)***

As discussed in chapter 2, there's more to it than 'homo-hetero'. Defining the 'homosexual subject', theoretically as well as through identity politics in the gay/lesbian movements is not historically new. Who are considered 'good and rightful members' of sexual minority communities since its early rise in the 1930s, and the position of the subculture in relation to the public, has varied across time and place. In Western countries in particular, much has

happened from the illegal gay underground clubs to the institutionalizing of homosexuality through human rights organisations that we are familiar with today. Jens Rydström (1996) describes these changes in the gay movement in a historical perspective, and how what counted as legitimate and valid identity categories and practices within the subculture went through a major change during the 1970s. This was in particular related to the gay subculture and its position within society, and the formation of a visible and politically acting subcultural movement. Gaining human rights became an important part of political activism in the gay movement, in particular through fighting for institutionalized rights. In order to do this, an important strategy was to convince society that homosexuals were as 'normal' as heterosexual people, to be able to move away from being understood as 'abnormal and perverted criminals' so to say. Previously, being a subordinate subculture *on the margins of* society, there had been an opposition against and transgressions of hegemonic ideas of both sexuality and gender through a wide variety of gender 'deviant' performances of self. However, with the increasing political influence, there were suddenly '[...] no room for self presentations that were too deviant, like transsexuals, 'sissies' and butches (=homosexual stereotypes) [in the gay movement]' (Rydström 1996:3, my translation). Sexual minority identity politics were built upon essentialized understandings of sexual identity, (and the division of heterosexual – homosexual as a point of departure,) with 'gay' and 'lesbian' as the available male and female identity positions of the homosexual (Rydstrøm 1996, Cameron and Kulick 2003). 'Being gay' understood as something that you cannot help, since you are born that way, created an identity community with little room for fluctuant identity positions, even if it was also rethorically successful in arguing to gain human rights.<sup>57</sup>

Since the beginning of the nineties, sexual minority identity politics have moved in a direction towards including a wider representation of different non-heterosexual and gender-crossing identity positions that challenge heteronormativity. The influence of queer theory, postmodernity and liberalism as theoretical and political points of departure for understanding the body, sexuality, gender and the relation between them have been central in these processes: 'Heavily influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralism, queer theory challenges the notion that sexual identity is a unitary essence residing in the person irrespective of social location.' (Esterberg 1996 in Nip 2004). Queer theory and its

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<sup>57</sup> This rethoric is still dominating in sexual minority organisations' political work. This is the catch 22 in working for increased human rights for sexual minorities in countries where homosexuality is considered a sick sin: if sexuality is a 'free choice' and changeable, well, one can just send people in therapy?

implications for both identity politics and understandings of self in different ways have had a big impact on, and have been highly debated issues within, the gay minority communities (Bjørby 2001).

Some very direct consequences of the queer influence have been increased positive attitudes within sexual minority subcultures towards forms of gender and sexual attraction that challenge the stability of categories and norms for how to perform 'non-heterosexuality'. Diversity is again considered, as compared to the stricter norms dominating in the 70s, as a positive thing, at least on a discursive level. Attitudes towards transsexuality and bisexuality for instance, two identity categories that are not exclusively based upon same-sex attraction, have changed. In Scandinavia, transsexuality and bisexuality are increasingly on the agenda in sexual minority organisation's policies, and have they have also formed their own visible political movements. In a US context, where these discussions started, most former 'GL-communities' have also included the letters BT – GLBT (and sometimes even GLBTQ), meaning that they represent and work with issues that concern bisexuality as well as transsexuality in addition to gay and lesbian. Many queer activists oppose to the whole idea of dividing non-heterosexual identity definitions into pre-existing categories, and operate with the term of 'queer' exclusively. The use of 'queer' as a way of labelling oneself rather than using the more specified categories has become common in the States (Wakeford 1997). This is a pattern that is about to establish in the Scandinavian countries as well, both in relation to organisational work and to the use of queer as ways of labelling oneself rather than 'gay' or 'lesbian'.<sup>58</sup> Not necessarily as an explicit political choice based upon engagement and knowledge about its theoretical and ideological roots though, but in practice, as part of hegemonic practice in the gay subculture.

### ***The queer influence and feminism: a hot potato***

The change in the use of identity labels from gay/lesbian to queer, is that whereas the former implies a gendered homosexual, the

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<sup>58</sup> In Norway, the new youth organisation that started in 2004 is called 'Queer youth' as opposed to its mother-organisation LLH (the liberating organisation for lesbians and gays). In Sweden, the youth-group of the national organisation, (the national organisation for sexual equality) is called 'non-heteronormative youth', and the newer activist groups have names with 'queer' in them, for instance 'queerdykes', 'the queer feminists'. In Denmark, the national organisation do not describe themselves as 'queer', but there are other activist groups that do, for example Dunst, describing themselves as: 'A group, a sexual political, activist, art forum for all hemafrodites, transsexuals, transvestites, lesbians, gays and freaks who have something to say and fight for creating a powerful, colorful, noisy and exciting gay underground in Denmark.'



latter is ungendered, marking 'non-heterosexuality' solely.<sup>59</sup> Both in research and in the political movements, there have been discussions between feminists about the implications of removing the gendered categories, in relation to how it potentially will make gender-specific oppression more invisible.<sup>60</sup> There are specific tensions between radical feminism and queer theory, related to understandings of gender, sexuality and identity, (even if they share a lot) (Cameron and Kulick 2003, Laskar 1996, Hall 1996). As Cameron and Kulick point out:

'Whereas radical feminism continues to maintain that certain kinds of sexualities and identities – such as butch/femme lesbians, transsexuals, drag queens, and sex workers who enjoy what they do – conserve and perpetuate some of the most pernicious dimensions of heteropatriarchy, queer theory, in stark contrast, foregrounds those same sexualities and identities as threats to heterosexual hegemony, and as potentially agents of subversion and change' (2003: 55)

A central point of tension is also, according to Pia Laskar (1996), the liberalist ideology of certain forms of queer theory with its focus upon sexuality and the individual, in opposition to the structuralist and collectivist ideological basis for radical feminism:

Liberalism has as a point of departure that people know what they want, can express it and take what they want. This is the point where queer activism and theory separate from feminism that (very influenced by the socialist tradition) holds that individuals and groups are positioned on different levels in a societal hierarchy of power, something that even influences the social construction of desire and individual's mutual relations. (Laskar 1996:70, my translation).

In the Country, the ruptures in ideas of identity, gender and sexuality and their consequences for the Organisation's political profile and work have been highly debated within the Organisation and in the minority community in general. Who should be the ones to define sexual and gender identity; on what grounds? The individual herself, based on individual labelling, or by filling certain predefined criteria and with what kind of political consequences? If sexuality is merely an individual issue, what is the basis for a

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<sup>59</sup> It is also used as a way to oppose heteronormativity in general, to oppose against traditional gendered norms and expectations of how to live heterosexually. This is however a more rare use of the term in political practice as I see it.

<sup>60</sup> Teresa de Lauretis that initially introduced the label 'queer' in research later stopped using it because of such fears. As Rosenberg (2002) argues though, the connection between 'feminism' and 'gender' is not straightforward – as 'feminist' is a political position that anyone can take, man or woman.

collectivist policy in the Organisation? What is queer feminism versus radical feminism?

These discussions had also been coming and going on Sapfo in waves, as well taking place on physical meetings and in the monthly magazine published by the Organisation, according to board member Nina:

Since Pride<sup>61</sup> 98 there has been huge discussions about porn, prostitution and the trans question, partly within the Organisation, but also within different communities in the Capital, that have been quite infected, and people around the Country have been wondering about what has been going on and had their own opinions about it. And in this way the list has been extremely important I think. The trans-discussions have taught us a lot – I have gotten an understanding of why people get so upset, and it has been really important for me to understand [...]. And other people who have been negative to porn, prostitution or transsexuals have had a different opinion. The list has filled a function by being a list where the whole country has the possibility of taking part, but also people with different perspectives.

In the following part, understandings of gender and sexuality are made into 'boundary-objects' (Barth 1994), in negotiating group membership on Sapfo. Sapfo as a list community, having long traditions of solving conflicts by themselves, faced a new challenge this time, when the disagreements intensified over a long period. Who were responsible for actually making the decisions in relation to these issues when the conflicts remained unsolved, threatening the existence of the community as people started leaving the group?

## Scene II: Stormy Days

Fall 2002.

Fall came, it turned darker and colder. The list was more active than ever, but it wasn't a load of recipes or self-made rhymes that were flooding my mailbox. As I had seen on many other lists, the intense increase in activity was a sign that a conflict was building

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<sup>61</sup> Most Western countries arrange a yearly political and cultural festival for GLBTQ-people, that is usually called Pride, which is what I will call it here.

up. The disagreement was centered in particular around one of the list members, Helena, and her opinions. She had been a member of the group for quite some time, but she was not very popular.

The group often discussed sexual orientation as a topic, related to political and personal aspects. Helena positioned herself taking an extreme liberalist stance in her views on porn and prostitution, arguing that valuing prostitution was feminist:

Sex workers are mostly women. And supporting sex workers is thus the same as supporting women (not rarely the most exposed women).

What I am underlining, is that certain feminist groups make themselves guilty of discriminating other women. It is wrong to remove these women's right to be in control over their own lives referring to the 'patriarchy' etc. The first step to support the most exposed women is to stop actively discriminating them. This is what 'extreme feminists' do when they oppose to hookers building their own labor unions.

She also fronted an opinion that even people who had a sexual orientation towards children, as well as prostitutes, should be considered as sexual minorities, equal to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons: 'I am trying to better the situation for all genders, sexual orientations (inclusive of pedophiles and prostitutes).' Her opinions were perceived as very controversial and anti-feminist. Some of the list members had had the experience of being sexually abused as children themselves, and other participants in the group also got upset by reading her letters. Some of them started to question her 'real' gender. Could Helena be 'a real biological woman' when she uttered opinions like that? A few participants accused her of being a man, questioning her self-labelled gender by starting to refer to her as a 'he':

I'm sorry – but I can't take this discussion about Helena anymore. H. just wants to provoke with typical male babble, I think. It feels so hopeless to discuss with him, yes even ABOUT him. I know I shouldn't say so, but now I have anyway.

Lina

Helena on her side, said that she identified as a woman.

Some participants urged for Helena to be excluded from the list. However, since there were no one active in the group that had the responsibility of excluding her from the list, the conflict had previously ended with diminishing by itself, as Helena fell silent for a while and things got back to normal again.

Parallel to discussing Helena and her opinions, another discussion developed partly because of her presence. This was a political discussion that was also taking place in the lesbian and feminist movement and culture in particular, related to feminism

and the queer influence. It was rooted in different understandings of what gender and sexuality are, and political implications for GLBT- and feminist politics. One of the key issues discussed was if transsexuals, or 'non-biological women', being born and raised as males, could ever become 'real women' and 'real feminists'. If every person can define their gender identity based on how they feel and not from the body they were born in, could they ever be real feminists if they hadn't experienced female oppression in their upbringing? And should they be allowed into the feminist movement and on Sapfo? Flisan argued strongly against:

How you perceive yourself in feminist tradition is irrelevant, it is the WORLD'S perception that shape individual's life conditions. If we accept biologically born men to start acting as spokespersons for women, then the world will have an image that women present views that in reality are men's.

Flisan was a very politically engaged list member having a leading role in the discussions. Along with Agira, presenting herself as a muslim woman from an Arabic country, Jenny and a few others, she approached the issue in an increasingly aggressive manner. Flisan suggested that Helena was not a biological woman, but transsexual, and claimed that she could prove it. She referred to another mailing list for bisexuals that both Helena and Flisan had been members of, and that she had later seen her in the Capital, in the Organisation's house:

I know who Helena is because Helena once said to a group of people in the Pub close to the Organisations' House: "I am Helena on the bisexuality-list." The person who said this was dressed in women's clothing, but was obviously not a "biological" woman. I was sitting at an adjacent table and happened to hear that this was the Helena I knew from the bisexuality list.

A returning argument following this was that because Helena was born male, she could never be a 'real' woman and her controversial liberal opinions about prostitution was a proof of this. Transsexual male-to- females, Flisan argued, were a threat to the lesbian community and the feminist movement. She appealed to the Organisation that Helena should be excluded from the women-only list:

So who does the Organisation want on the list, a lesbian orthodox feminist or a transsexual pimp who is trying to make us think that women are products, that women's liberation is to be a whore, that pedophiles should be part of the Organisation's interest groups? This is a women's list, not a men's list.

Other participants argued that transsexual male-to-females *should* have a position in the feminist movement, that feminism is a political position, and not based on essentialized gender identities. In particular Marple, another long-term list member:

Transsexual Male-To-Females are women, and of course they should be allowed into both the separatist movement as well as the mixed feminist movement. [...]

And now you do exactly the same as 'the heterosexuals'. You push forward someone you suppose is transsexual and harass ALL transsexuals by pointing to this one person saying: look at that... we don't want PEOPLE LIKE THAT in our group. A typical trick amongst homophobics and racists too. (NOT that I claim that you are. Get me right this time. I just think that you use the same ruler strategies) And that is pretty interesting.

Marple

It was an obvious conflict between different ways of understanding what a 'woman' is, and what 'feminism' should be understood as, that were entwined with Helenas opinions, and her supposed gender. Most of the participants disliked her opinions, but as she presented herself as woman-identified, could she be excluded because she was supposed to be a transsexual woman?

Marple's opinion was supported by many others, but she was the most active in promoting it, in particular in opposing Flisan. It eventually developed into a trench fire, characterized by a sharpened disagreement with groups of participants taking sides with one or the other opinion as the conflict evolved. Flisan increasingly referred to herself and some of the other women who had the same opinion as herself, as 'we orthodox feminists' or 'radical feminists'. She also started calling Marple and others with similar opinions 'the queer buddies', suggesting that they were fronting an understanding of gender influenced by queer theory. While others referred to Flisan and her fellow opinions as 'Flisan & co', and 'the women from the Feminist House' - a term used also by Flisan & Co themselves. The Feminist House was a building in the Capital housing a separatist radical feminist organisation welcoming women only. No males over one year or post-operated transsexuals were allowed. Agira, Flisan and Jenny supported their feminist views, and suggested that these also should count on Sapfo, regarding list membership:

'The Feminist House at least has clear rules which are easy to understand. So in this case I think we should follow them, and expel 'Helena' immediately. How about the rest of you, what do you say?'

Agira

The essentialized view of gender that the Feminist House applied, as well as their separatist attitudes, were ridiculed and criticized by others. Flisan & co continued to criticize the Organisation, though, arguing that they turned the 'real' women down through their lack of will to exclude Helena from the list. She further argued that their attitudes were related to changes in the Organisation's new sexual minority policy:

Year 1999, since the old gay-Organisation was buried and become GLBT-Organisation instead, they even introduced a new definition of what the word 'woman' means: 'every human being has the right to define as woman, man or something else.' A definition that in practice implies that you and I are as much women as Arnold Schwarzenegger (in case he got the idea that he would call himself Arnoldina instead), neither more or less!

The harassing descriptions of transsexual people increased as the discussion moved forward:

Why do women here persist on trying to see a woman when it is a man in a dress that is standing in front of them? [...] This list is only for real women, as the girls' parties are.

### ***'Hear hear'. How should we discuss here?***

After a longlasting discussion a meta-discussion started to develop. It reminded me very much of how debates used to end up on one of the former lists that I studied; discussing the *form* of the debate as a result of an increased amount of harrassing behavior. The 'queer buddies' accused Flisan & co of verbal harassment towards transsexuals. Flisan & co accused the 'queer buddies' of trying to avoid the subject instead of giving convincing arguments. It started with some of the participants beginning to cheer others they agreed with instead of arguing explicitly, as when Marple supported a letter from Tyra with a short cheer:

hear hear!

>>If there is one single house in the large Capital where only  
>>biological women are allowed, can't it stay that way?

>If there is one list in the large Organisation where all women are  
>respected as women, can't it stay that way?

Reply Flisan:

One is not taken seriously as serious discussant if one doesn't reply to other messages properly. The girls on the list who like throwing digital

pies yelling 'bah humbug' and 'hear hear' might appreciate it. But not the girls who are members on the list to share logical thoughts.

In the message quote below, Tyra refuses to be positioned as a child by Flisan, though, who in contrast implicitly characterizes herself as adult:

>No-o?  
>I thought we had talked through this with arguing  
>like a five-year old. If you send letters to the list they should  
>at least contain some content. That's the way adults argue.

Ye-es.

For me, Marple's letter was a great support and a positive reinforcement. More arguments weren't necessary for me – and obviously not for her either as I understood her letter as an extra signature to mine.

Tyra  
- who has passed the stage of five with good margins

Most participants were now growing tired of the whole discussion, as well as the attitudes expressed by the 'Orthodox feminists', and personal attacks were used by both sides.

In the meantime, I was sitting in my office, growing worried, confused and a little sad. I had finally received the permission to ask the group to become part of my study by the board of the Organisation. They advised me to e-mail it soon, as they were planning some actions to try to solve the conflicts on the list, and thought it better if I sent my letter before they entered the scene, maybe stirring up water even more. List members were generally positive to my request, but mostly passive, and I was relieved to continue observing 'legally present'. But how would this conflict end up? Where was the well-functioning lesbian community that I had wanted to write about? As days had gone by during the fall, the Helena-transsexuals-feminism-discussion had become permanently dominant. And very intense. October counted over 1000 messages, Malin announced, which was almost five times as many as during a normal month. Even if other subjects were also issued in between, the group wasn't able to solve the conflict on their own as they used to. As Lisa said when I spoke to her retrospectively: 'I felt that the tone grew harder than before – and people were much more sensitive too.' Participants had been asking the Organisation to do something for quite a while, to throw out both Helena and others. Some threatened to leave the group if nothing was being done. No one had ever been thrown out before, and it was also rare that people left the group in protest. The lack

of someone formally responsible, and the self-government that used to be a pride and a resource on the list, was suddenly a problem, as nobody took action to help the group to sort things out. Until November 16<sup>th</sup>, two days after I received my permission.

### ***The list mistress and the Organisation have an important announcement to make***

November 16<sup>th</sup> 2002 many things happened within just a few hours. Sara, the administrative list mistress, had been called for by many participants to solve the intensified conflict that was threatening the list community. When she finally wrote to the list, it was to underline the limitations of her responsibility:

One has been asking for my opinion in many questions the latest period. The thing is that I will only be list mistress concerning technical issues. The list even has a debate mistress that will take care of everything concerning list etiquette.

The new debate hostess, who was anonymous, had two important decisions to announce, made by the board of the Organisation that owned the list. The first was a long letter that referred to a decision made by the work group in the Organisation's board meeting the previous day. It addressed on what grounds a participant could be excluded from the group. This was something that had never existed before. As in many other mailing list communities, Sapfo started out with a 'full freedom of speech-ideology', with few social rules. A common pattern on mailing lists is that following experiences with severe disagreements the groups are forced to work out and include social rules for what is considered acceptable behavior (Donath 1999). A discussion group's 'netiquette' includes mostly technical rules, but social rules are also often a part of the netiquette. The hegemonic discourse of 'free speech' discourages too many rules and regulation in online fora, though, and this seems to be highly influential on the administering policies that I have observed in the groups that I have done research on (Bromseth 2000, see also chapter 1, Gotved 1999 and Herring 1996b). In this case, it was in particular related to what one was allowed to say, and who was allowed to be member of Sapfo. The content of the board's letter was closely connected to the conflicts stirring up the list community over the latest months:

The working group of the Organisation's board made on the 15th of November 2002 the following decision:



Sapfo has so far not had any policy on exclusion of list members. The debate on the list should be as free as possible. In the Organisation's internet policy, the following is stated:

'Our point of departure is that the discussion should be as free as possible and that a maximum of freedom of speech should reign. For certain exceptions, we maintain the right to remove material.' [...]

It should therefore be allowed to express opinions on the list that are against the Organisation's principle program. For instance one can on the list question transsexualism as a practice, in line with questioning homosexuality or bisexuality as practices, as long as the discussions are objective. [...]

On the contrary, it is not allowed to express oneself in a way that can be considered harassing or humiliating. [...]

The Organisation works for all human beings right to define their own gender identity. To characterize the group of transpersons using unnecessary provoking labels or characteristics, 'guys in sequin dresses', can be considered insulting for the transpersons on the list. To address certain transpersons on the list as man, using male names or similar, can be considered insulting to specific list member's gender identity. [...]

The Organisation's general internet policy, valid for all the groups they owned, was based on the principle that content that was considered 'insulting or degrading' was not allowed. In relation to this group in particular, the letter specifically mentioned examples that could be perceived as insulting to women in general, children, and in particular transgendered persons. The examples were clearly pointing at Helena's opinions, as well as Flisan & Co's ways of characterizing transgendered persons. Additionally, the letter stated that there should be no doubts that transgendered persons of course were welcome as participants on Sapfo:

Further, transpersons with female gender identity are of course welcome on the list. The Organisation is an organisation that works to better the situation for homosexuals, bisexuals and transpersons. Sapfo can be seen as one way of working to achieve this, through providing a netbased forum where homosexuals, bisexuals and transpersons can discuss and seek support and advice from other participants. It is thus obvious that transpersons with female gender identity are welcome on the list, on the same premises as other list participants. Further discussions in this matter are not to take place on Sapfo. [...]

Participants breaking these rules, it was further explained, would get a warning, but if they continued breaking them they would be refused access to the list.

The second message that was sent by the new anonymous debate hostess, proclaimed that Helena was now taken off the list.

### ***Enough is enough***

Most people were very happy that Helena, the seed of the conflict from the beginning, was finally removed – in particular Flisan & Co. This was the strange thing through the whole difficult fall that I had followed closely. No one really disagreed that Helenas *opinions* were disturbing, but the reasons varied for not wanting her on the list. As Marple explained her stance: 'As I have said before, I think that Helena should be removed from the list. But not because H is a transperson, but because H is, as Flisan points out, women hostile.'

On the other hand, Helena was positioned by Flisan & Co as a kind of a representative symbol of *all* transsexual women, arguing that even if transsexuals identified as women, they could never be Real Feminists because they lacked the experiences of growing up as girls in a patriarchal society. Their stance implied that Feminism is equal to traditional radical structuralist feminism. The people who accepted transsexuals as real women and wanted them to be included in the feminist movement, were not real feminists either, but liberals or queers, they argued, concluding that combining feminism and queer was impossible.

The harsh tone between the members who had been central in the discussion continued in the following days, even if Helena had been removed from the list. Several people had threatened to leave the group at an earlier stage if nothing was done to stop the conflict. In a matter of a couple of days, two of the long-term members of the group made words into action. The first to leave was Marple. She had been defending her stance as a feminist defining herself in opposition to 'radical feminism', wanting the category of 'women' as well as 'feminist' to include all persons who themselves identified as women. Like the board, she expressed a concern for the TS-women who were members of Sapfo, and their emotional reactions to some of the participants' labellings of TS-women, such as 'men in sequin dresses' and similar. As Marple told me later on: 'I was just angry – I'm just angry when people have to get sad by reading Sapfo because there is an idiot who has stupid opinions.' At one point though, enough was enough.

Jenny could be very harassing in characterizing other list members in heated discussions. This particular time, she replied to Marple, arguing that feminism is per definition structuralist:

## **What is a woman? What is a lesbian? What is a feminist? 117**

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I'm sorry, but you ARE not feminist. You are a good democrat who believes in equal opportunities. Your opinion is worthy. But feminism is a structuralist theory [...] You ARE not a feminist, Marple. Just like Maja, you don't give a damn if feminism survives or not.

This was the drop for Marple: being defined by Jenny as a non-feminist was too much. One of the most important political agendas that she had fronted in the discussion, positioning herself as liberalist, was to resist against dividing other people into categories other than the ones they wanted to describe themselves with:

I'm not a feminist? So now you've decided what I am too..?! Nah..I'll end this discussion here. This is not fair. Coming here telling me what I am..!??!!!! [...] You won. I give in. But I really hope it gives you a bitter taste.

She ends the letter by thanking everyone nice on the list, explaining why she has to leave it:

Bye, everyone good and nice on the list (don't say that I cannot say goodbye or that it creates a bad mood on the list. I have to explain that I am leaving and why). My limits are overstepped when somebody else tells me what I am. I have wanted to discuss this subject because it interests me. But now I have had it with Jenny's attitude and way of treating me. I have stayed and believed that it some time could get better. But when she writes things like I am not a feminist because she thinks so...Well, then I cannot see what else I can do. To take the liberty of telling others what they are is one of the worst things that I know of. Where and how can a debate like that lead???????????????

A few days later, Kaia, another long term list member announces that she is leaving the group too. Her reasons for leaving the list are not primarily directed towards 'Flisan & Co', however, but towards the list owners, the Organisation and its board - for not dealing with the conflict at an earlier stage:

Paradoxically, its not Jenny, Agira, Flisan and Jay that has caused my decision not to participate on the list, but rather that the board [of the Organisation] is letting down its own members. In allowing the harrassing behavior with entertaining stories about 'Trannies' and other snacksy details towards one of the groups that one claims to represent can't be viewed differently than a betrayal. [...] Every individual may have their own opinion but one cannot make a fool of or degrade other people, or remove people's right to define themselves. [...] But what make me shake with anger and sorrow is that the board did not stop those who expressed contempt and evil against these

women. They should have been stopped immediately, and much would have been won, right? <sup>62</sup>

In her letter, Kaia says explicitly that she needs to explain to the others why she chooses to leave, even if it might break one of the silent norms of the list. This was a practice that was not spoken well of by some group members as I had observed on previous occasions. It was often expressed by Malin, the ListBitch, claiming that if members were to leave the list as a protest action in relation to a disagreement, it should not be announced to the other members, characterizing it 'as the same as leaving the room and banging the door', creating a bad mood on the list and damaging it:

However, continuing to say that 'you are stupid, think like me or else I'll jump off', that is the peak of all meaninglessness. It is the opposite to the heading 'seriousness'. Can't we TRY to discuss objectively?

Malin had in general many opinions of how one should behave on an e-mail list, and also this time. Having been unusually quiet during the TS-debate, she criticized Kaia for leaving. At the same time, she asked people to pull themselves together as the discussions on the list not only had an impact on the group, but also in the gay community in general, reminding people of the amount of subscribers that just listen and never speak, counting 350 people. She even indirectly addressed my own presence when asking the list members to smoothen the waves in the discussion, since 'a doctoral student has found the list worthy of research'. However, in several following messages, Kaia's stance gained support as other participants reacted to the two popular long-term member's defect in protest.

### ***Sapfo – 'cream cake-list for fragile females' or a place for 'serious tough political debates'?***

Many participants were very upset that Marple and Kaia had chosen to leave the group for different reasons. Most of them

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<sup>62</sup> One of the transsexual women wrote in an earlier debate where there had been a similar heated discussion that it was hard to stand up against the harassment all by herself: 'I feel humiliated by people who so strongly question my life situation and my identity. And should it in all situations be required by me and others in the same situation that we should answer to all different statements that are made on a mailing list. It should be obvious that people help each other through defending each other's rights. You others on the list, as both women, lesbians and bisexuals should know how it feels to be humiliated and questioned and negatively treated. Then it shouldn't be so hard to understand that I feel bad when reading statements that question my identity.'

## **What is a woman? What is a lesbian? What is a feminist? 119**

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supported Marple's reasons to leave, and were furious with Jenny. They claimed that she had crossed the invisible line of what should be acceptable behavior on the list:

Nooo Marple!!!!

\*waving frenetically with her arms\*

Do what I did with Helena instead – sort the crap directly into the trash-box instead!

Besides Jenny – You have no right to decide who is what. You can of course have your opinions about it but speaking about who is what is not a right of yours. If you take that right I will even sort your garbage in the trash-box.

Tyra.

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[...]

No-one, not you, not me and not Jenny have the right to tell a human being what this person IS. Jenny has sharpened her messages here for several weeks with lots and lots of poison, several persons have stopped subscribing to the list because of her (and other's) messages, stopped writing, and some have felt really bad because of her messages (poisoned?).

Brita

The meta-discussion addressed both what was acceptable ways of expressing oneself in relation to the others – and entwined with this, what subjects that should be considered more important than others. Jenny herself fell quiet for some days, but her fellow partisans, who increasingly labelled themselves as 'us from the Feminist House', defended Jenny's behavior. They argued that leaving the list was a sign of a lack of arguments and female weakness:

The case that two women cannot discuss an issue without one of them getting upset and leaving instead of finishing the debate, that is really sad. It makes me experience us women as somehow restricted, almost being ashamed that we cannot handle the same differences in opinion as the men can do when they discuss [...]

What happens the day when we have to discuss WITH men? Because that is what we have to do if we are to reach through in society. Should we say 'you are stupid, I don't want to talk to you' as soon as they don't agree with us? Where about does that lead us? To continued repression I would say.'

Characterizing resistance against the use of personal attacks as something typically female was a pattern that I had noticed on the political list that I studied before. If anyone said they were feeling hurt by another's expression in the discussion, it was interpreted as a sign of 'weakness' and often characterized as a typical feminine discussion style. Not getting affected on the other hand, was claimed to be a sign of 'strength and courage', implicitly representing the silent counterpart in the binary of female-male. However, the majority on Sapfo opposed to this view, and the suggested gendered connotations, and some even made fun of it. Like Annfrid in her reply to Flisan:

>The woman has to make the best for herself, and not drown in that  
>empathic poison that we all carry within ourselves'

Gosh, it must really hurt to walk around with (empathic) poison in your body. For myself I am proud of my high level of Emotional Intelligence and my ability to feel empathy. Good luck with your life, it seems tough.  
Annfrid

However, the disagreement did not only touch upon the issue of form, but were also highly related to the topics on the list. Many women expressed being sick and tired of the conflicting issue of TS/feminism, that to a large extent was very theoretical, and that they missed the variety of subjects that was normally represented. This was in particular issued by Lina, whose letter apparently had an important impact the following days.

### ***Trying to re-build***

Every storm passes after a shorter or longer period. Pieces of what it has destroyed and damaged are covering the ground, until someone hopefully begins to tidy up. Lina was one of the long-term members of the list, and often used to express how much the community meant to her, and her love for it. November 19<sup>th</sup>, she sent a long letter, expressing sorrow about the development of the group, and her fear of losing it because of what had happened. She described emotionally how she had loved the list and why, relating it to a sense of a community as well as feeling free to talk about almost anything:

[...] the amazing mix of subjects discussed [...] the dramatic changes from everything from mushroom recipes to extremely advanced and educating texts about everything, from religion and politics and philosophy and – you name it!

Moving on, she is reflecting around the changes that marked the list during the fall:

I don't know if I changed or if I was blind before – but it feels like most of this [mood] is gone and blown away now. I don't understand why. Helena doesn't exist anymore – here, I mean! – and I guess none of us others feels sorry about that. But the anger and attacks and the hateful tone remains, it seems like. One girl after the other leaves the list because they feel hurt or sorry or just tired of the whole mood. I understand them perfectly well and feel extremely sorry that it has turned out this way.

As opposed to many of the other participants expressing their feelings towards what happened on the list, Lina's emotional stance expresses sorrow and worry rather than anger, in addition to making explicit her deep love for the list community as such. Her appeal was directed towards all participants, asking them to calm down and stop the TS-discussion for the sake of the collective group. She is mentioning and criticizing one person by name, however in a highly face-saving manner, separating person from action:

You, Flisan, are really very smart, you write so well and you really are a great agitator for what you believe in – but why use all your powers to discuss this single issue? [...] Even if I think that you have all the rights in the world to have your opinions and spread them on eg Sapfo. But do you really think you are able to convince others about that issue right now...? And anyway...if the list means as much to you as it does to me, I will actually ask you to take a break from it for a while...please!

I was myself touched by Linas letter, maybe simultaneously crossing my fingers that her voice would reach through to the participants that had been most active in the heated TS-feminism-debate. And people actually started changing their behavior. As I wrote in my research diary at the time: *Lina's letter has really had an impact – the messages that I have read today are a sort of a 'becoming-friends-again-process [...] What can we talk about that doesn't create more conflicts/continue the old ones (and how)'*. This was first apparent in changes of subjects to non-controversial issues, such as pets, food-recipes, music and films. I was quite struck by the fact that former 'enemies' in the TS-debate, who even had been attacking each other in quite face-threatening manners, suddenly were able to advice one another on good vegetarian recipes when dieting. Agira and Lina were even having a little humorous flirt going on, also commented on by some of the other participants.

Snow had started falling in my town where I was situated as a reader, the soothing white hopefully being a symbol of days of peace on the list. After speaking directly to the list myself, it was as if the feeling of being part of the community, in spite of my particular aim of doing research there, had grown stronger too, merging my physical lived life with this mediated collection of e-mail messages. Christmas was getting close, also influencing the topics of the messages sent. The list gradually returned to its regular variety of issues. Even if some people continued the TS-feminism discussion, it was not dominating the list like before, and the number of participants that spoke rose noticeably. Some feared the upcoming holidays, travelling home to families to whom they were not open as lesbians, while others were preoccupied with creative suggestions for home-made presents and foods, and the joy of Christmas work-shops during the period of advent. I tried successfully a fudge recipe sent to the list in my kitchen. I also laughed out aloud when reading a story from one of the others about the Christmas that she and her feminist group had put a fire to the Christmas tree at the town square, protesting against the commercialization of the holidays.

The cease-fire was soon to end though.

## **Women only. Negotiating gender-borders as discursive processes**

What happened with the list community that makes me claim that it was different from the previous patterns in the interaction context? As I have touched upon earlier, conflicts and strong disagreements were a part of the pattern in the group, as political discussions were a central part of the social activity on the list. However, this implied that the participants taking different positions in relation to the issue of conflict at one point would change their behavior, something that did not happen this time.

Conflicts, as related to content or form, contribute to challenge the often taken-for-granted boundaries of a group, as what is silently understood as common norms, values and beliefs come into question in more explicit ways (Hall 1996). If they are not solved by a closure, though, conflicts will in the end threaten the community's existence, unless they – which is quite rare – are the core of a group.

In the discussions in scene II, the boundaries for group membership and group norms in the lesbian and feminist community are negotiated. This takes place through firstly competing understandings of gender and feminism, where



particular list members are questioned as legitimate members (as women and/or feminists) on the grounds of their opinions, and gender and/or sexual orientation. Secondly, when the discussion develops into a person-focussed meta-discussion about norms (what should we talk about and how?), they negotiate what should be worthy topics and form on the list. Below I will try to sum up and discuss how and why.

***Negotiating boundaries through entwined identity categories: What is a woman – and what is a feminist?***

When I joined the group, I noticed that there were in particular two issues that used to return on a regular basis as explicit negotiations of the categories of gender and sexuality and the relations between them. This was *first* the issue of different identity labels and categories within the group of sexual minorities. Sexual orientation categories are in non-heteronormative contexts made relevant and adressed in explicit ways, as what makes a common ground for creating community is exactly sharing a sexual minority position/ or a questioning of sexual identity in a heteronormative society (Munt et al 2002, Nip 2002, Hall 1996, Correll 1995). *Second*, understandings of gender and sexual identity were here related to the issue of feminism and feminist theory. What is a woman, and what is a feminist? These two discussions can both be seen as important topics that social identity and group membership were negotiated *through* in different ways, both explicitly on a discourse level and implicitly on a practice level. Categories of gender and sexual orientation are made relevant, filled with meaning and actively negotiated through competing definitions of 'woman', 'lesbian' and 'feminist'.

Historically, the lesbian political movement has been influential on producing norms for understandings of 'true lesbianity', as Judith Butler points out and criticizes (1993). The dominant understandings of gender making up the basis for the sisterhood have, as previously mentioned, been built upon rather essentialist conceptions of identity, including understanding gender and sexual orientation as rather stable phenomena (see chapter 2). Internal hierarchies and discourses of social identity dominating lesbian communities have previously not given much room to take positions that betray 'the authentic lesbian'. Both transsexual male-to-females and bisexual women have for different reasons been questioned as legitimate identity positions within these norms.<sup>63</sup> This can be explained by an *unstability* in gender and/or

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<sup>63</sup> See Klesse 2005 for a discussion of discourses of bisexuality, that are often produced in a cluster, intersecting a bisexual desire with non-monogamous

sexual orientation performances. Male-to-female transsexuals and bisexual women have also been understood as 'suspicious' in certain women-only feminist-devoted communities because they concern themselves with men (O'Riordan 2005). Either through being born as one, or, by being attracted to them.

Both 'bisexual' and 'transsexual' were reported as problematic positions on US-SAPPHO (Hall 1996: 163), also a women-only separatist mailing list. 'Queer' versus 'lesbian' and their meanings as identity labels were found as important in negotiating group identity on the Queer Sisters (Nip 2004). Munt et al (2002) also found negotiations of the meaning of different identity labels following a similar pattern, in their study of 'Gaygirls.com', and suggest that online lesbian communities reproduce: 'debates resonant in lesbian/feminist/gay subcultures for the past thirty years; implicit within them is a hierarchy of authenticity that privileges an aspirational idea of lesbian sexual purity.' (2002:130). These debates have thus colored both offline lesbian community as well as online groups, as Kate O'Riordan points out: 'As is also true of offline communities, gender segregation and transgender have also come into conflict in the policing of [online] community. [...] some groups have decided, after deliberation, to allow transwomen 'in' to the women only 'spaces''(2005: 2). Gender and sexual identity categories and labels, in particular transsexual male-to-female and bisexual, are hence made into boundary objects, working to separate legitimate from questionable identity positions within lesbian groups.

In the heated debate on Sappho there are competing discourses of what should count as the hegemonic image of 'the right female homosexual': 'the authentic lesbian' – or 'the queer person' representing the extreme positions. The general attitude in the discussions were usually not dominated by essentialized understandings of identity and 'celebrations of the authentic Female'. A few of the members still question the two 'traitor categories' in different ways though, (as shown in this chapter), and through this implicitly make them 'less legitimate' than the taken-for-granted Lesbian.<sup>64</sup> Presenting oneself as bisexual within many lesbian subcultural communities is not without taking a risk of being perceived as a possible heterosexual betrayer<sup>65</sup> (see

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behavior, that in turn means different things for men and women. See also Hemmings 2005 for a discussion of conceptions of bisexuality as 'identity' within the Western world, and its problematic position in both the heteronormative society as well as within the non-heterosexual subcultures.

<sup>64</sup> Nina Wakeford, who observed for a short period on US-Sappho, even registered that the discussions about bisexuals' position within the lesbian community and on the list was so recurring that it had received its own acronym amongst the participants: GBD: 'the Great Bisexual Debate' (1996:98).

<sup>65</sup> In several interviews with Finnish women with same-sex desires, Jenny Kangasvuo (2005) found that many of those who would characterize themselves

Kangasvuo forthcoming). One participant on Sapfo utters that she thinks it is scary to date bisexuals because they might leave her for a man, and that it is sexually unattractive that bi's are attracted to men. Opinions like these were, however, usually challenged by other list members on Sapfo, opposing the practice of dividing and grading people on the basis of identity categories:

I think that the bi-phobia is grounded in that we become stressed out by people who do not stick to their 'kind', that 'they' are not like 'we', explicit and Lesbian or Heterosexual or whatever.

To sum up, what we see on Sapfo is that off-line hegemonies of identity, gender and sexuality are also produced in online communities, and are negotiated on an explicit level. The negotiations are not that much about whether bisexuals and transsexuals can be part of Sapfo or not, as about which understanding of gender and sexuality that should prevail on the list. There are two contending understandings of identity, and thus gender/sexuality, where the authentic lesbian position is challenged by a queer-influenced understanding of identity. These two positions are also implicitly negotiated on Sapfo through the debate of who can rightfully call themselves feminist.

The discussion about transsexuals' position in both the lesbian and feminist community, and on Sapfo as a list community, is related to group membership on the basis of gender. Who can rightfully take the position as feminists in a lesbian, feminist-oriented collective? In the debate, a minority of the Sapfo-members position themselves actively as 'radical feminists', and 'orthodox feminists' and argue that being a true feminist is inseparably dependent on the embodied experiences of growing up as girls and women. Women's similar experiences of suppression should be the grounds the collective is built upon, they argue, to fight against patriarchal structures in society. The 'right woman' is the biologically born woman, and hence, since Sapfo is for women, transsexuals shouldn't be list members. The position of transsexuals within the female community then is clearly something that is considered a potential threat if gender is understood as based on the more essentialist definitions.<sup>66</sup> This

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as 'bisexual' chose to present themselves as 'lesbian' when they were in the lesbian bars, because they were afraid to not get accepted by the others. In the bars, it was important to draw a clear line between who was seen as part of the lesbian community, 'us', and who was considered the Other; the female heterosexual or bisexual 'tourists'. It was then easier to just identify publicly as a lesbian, in order to avoid the danger of not being accepted.

<sup>66</sup> Similar discussions in the feminist movement based on the same political controversies is related to if also men can be part of feminist groups if they want to.

stance is opposed by a majority of the list members, who argues from a more liberalist and social constructivist point of departure. Who you are and how you want to label yourself, as female, feminist etc, should be an individual right and is of no concern of any other to define. These two positions are, according to Pia Laskar (1996), a central point of tension between radical feminism and queer/liberal feminism. Thus, the opposition between 'authentic lesbianism' and a more queer understanding of gender, sexuality and identity is aligned with another binary: two differing feminist ideologies, where the former is negotiated through the latter.

The conflict on Sapfo related to Helena's opinions originally starts out with a central point of disagreement between liberalist/queer and radical/structuralist feminist ideologies: the issues of porn and prostitution as suppressing or liberating for women. In the Scandinavian cultural context, even liberal and queer identified feminists have been critical of porn and prostitution, focussing on the sexual exploitation of women from poor countries, as well as on sexualized violence.<sup>67</sup> When Helena then argues that porn and prostitution are women-liberating it is perceived as a contra-feminist opinion by most list members. She is, however, accused only by Flisan & co for not being a 'real woman' because of her opinions. Because Helena's opinions are 'male', Flisan argues, this signals that the body typing can not be a biological woman. When Flisan claims that Helena is transsexual, she argues that this information 'proves' that Helena is really a man. This circle-rethoric ('x thinks like this because she is transsexual – because she is transsexual she thinks like this') is not supported by most list members though. The growing harassing tone used to characterize transsexuals, is also provoking to many list members, who argue that transsexuals are both legitimate group members and particularly vulnerable.

Helena was the only one in the group taking a pro-prostitution stance in the discussion, but more controversially, she also provoked the others uttering the opinion that pedophilia should be an accepted sexual attraction. In spite of a generally wide acceptance of different kinds of sexual attractions, understood as something 'personal', this form of sexual attraction is clearly defined as 'deviant', 'sick' and 'abnormal'. What seems to be included in a hegemonic position as a feminist on the list, is a social constructionist and liberalist attitude towards identity and ways to perform identity, socially and sexually, but drawing a clear line towards pedophilia, as well as a critical attitude towards porn and prostitution.

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<sup>67</sup> This is different from the liberalist queer groups in the US, Don Kulick points out (2005).

The boundaries of the female list community are explicitly negotiated, partly as a consequence of Helena's utterances, that many members actively express that they dislike and are upset by. But the arguments to have her excluded were different, and were increasingly entwined with contesting views on gender and feminism. When Helena was not excluded, the discussion further develops into a meta-debate. It starts when Flisan, Jenny and Agira characterize Helena and her opinions for being representative for *all* transsexuals and a threat to the feminist movement.

### ***Discussion norms and gender: legitimate style and topics***

The harassment and questioning of transsexuals as list members furthers the discussion on a meta-level, where the norms on the list are addressed explicitly. Who should be considered members, what are legitimate topics and what form should our discussions have?

The disagreements are so severe that none of the active discussants withdraws, rather it is the opposite that happens: the disagreement is sharpened through taking hostile positions, by using ridiculing, irony, sarcasm and other 'ad hominem' (person-directed) attacks. When the board sends their letter the conflict diminishes a little, as someone formally responsible draws a line for what should be accepted behavior and not. Following this, there is an explicit negotiation of the form of the discussions on Sapfo, and of its content. The criticized participants harassing transgendered people defend their behavior by relating it explicitly to gender, arguing that 'women in general are too sensitive and should manage to deal with tough political discussions', characterizing resistance towards adversarial behavior as something 'typically female'. Additionally, they also suggest that addressing the form of the discussion is a strategy to avoid talking about 'the subject' in the discussion. This is a position that has been characterized as 'cyber-masculinist' by central North American researchers on gender and the internet, because there is in general a more positive attitude towards the use of adversarial behavior in male-dominated groups (Hall 1996, Herring 1996b, see chapter 1). The claim that resistance towards harassment is something 'negatively female' is however rejected in most messages on Sapfo. They argue that in spite of the freedom of speech that should rule in the group, there goes a line when someone gets offended and hurt by someone else's utterances.

The issue of flaming and harassing behavior is a classical one in norm-discussions in net-debate, and it is also common that different values and preferences are positioned in relation to gender (see Herring 1995, 1996b, 2000, Bromseth 2000, 2001). In

groups with large accept for personal attacks as part of the norms, opposition towards the norms is often met with arguments using gendered terms. This is what I found in the radical political group that I studied previously. Participants who opposed to the use of adversarial behavior were characterized as either strict old spinsters, or, as here, women who are too fragile too handle tough discussions: 'who have to have things wrapped in silk paper, soft female silk paper, who prefer a therapeutic style rather than the truth' <sup>68</sup> (from Bromseth 2000). In this case, style is even connected to feminist strategies, as Flisan formulates it; 'what will happen the day we have to discuss with men?'. Further, the topics that are discussed in the group, are also questioned and to a certain extent labeled using a gendered binary, with 'us who wants tough political discussions' on one hand, and 'those who want recipes and other social issues' on the other.

In the period that follows, in trying to re-build the context after the conflict, the participants manage to reach a common understanding that the list should have both room for social issues and politics. Several list members express the opinion that it will be a bad thing if there was no room for political disagreement and tough debate on Sapfo. Quarrels with a peaceful outcome was a common practice on the list that they expressed being proud of, and had thus high status.

### ***Creating gender and lesbian subcultural norms in women-only contexts online: discursive femininity as culturally situated practice***

Fulfilling group membership based on gender and sexual orientation in a mediated context, to be accepted as a worthy list member and 'sister' are processes where 'gender is not erased [...] but intensified discursively' (Hall 1996:148). In the text-based bodiless context, norms for presenting selves and interacting in the community are created through linguistic practice, through interaction style as well as opinions. The norms that become valid is tightly connected to the socio-cultural context that the group is situated within. Separatist feminist spaces online are in general characterized by having less acceptance for adversarial behavior, valuing a more supportive interaction style (Herring 2000, Hall 1996, Blair and Takayoshi 1999 cited in Gajjala 2004). Most of the referred research is to a large degree North American though. Whereas some researchers have enlightened the positive value of such 'safe-spaces' for women online, others are more critical and enhance the problematic side of creating community on the

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<sup>68</sup> Quote from the list administrator on Radical Forum.

grounds of often essentialized gender-binaries (or other identity categories). As Gajjala (2004: 31) points out: 'the creation of supposedly safe space for specific groups of women lead to exclusionary, homogenizing identification practices that are oppressive to certain members of the group.'

In Hall's study of SAPPHO, the North American sister list of Sapfo, the women-only collective was constructed through producing a discursive style connotated to femininity, where characteristic elements were:

'[...] an expectation of name conformity, an aggressive 'anti-flaming' policy, a demand for conversational support and respect, a 'politically correct' politeness strategy rarely found elsewhere on the net, repeated discussions of overtly 'female' topics, a pro-separatist and pro-woman attitude, and the employment of feminist signatures.' (Hall 1996: 159)

The participants on SAPPHO actively positioned their group as contributing with something different from the gender-mixed cyberspaces, the women-only-space offering a more friendly and less hostile atmosphere than the groups where men participated. Participants hence built on specific female-connotated traits in characterizing women and their online discourse. In doing so, they created a strict discursive femininity as norm for how to participate and interact on the list, as more 'caring, supportive, compassionate' etc. List members who chose to oppose to the norms, either through choosing a male name, or not conforming to hegemonic opinions or interaction style, were quickly put under suspicion for being cross-dressing men (as we also see an example of in the referred discussion on Sapfo).

The discursive hegemonic femininity on Sapfo differs from its North American ancestor in particular when it comes to 'celebrating the Woman and Her qualities' as opposed to men, that Hall found on SAPPHO. This can partly be explained as related to cultural context, and differing contents in hegemonic discursive femininity, both in the heteronormative society as well as in lesbian subculture.<sup>69</sup> Even if the *practice* on Sapfo was both supportive and friendly (usually), in line with SAPPHO, it is on a *discourse level* not put forward as representing something 'particularly female' to the same extent. The dominating ideals in the local cultural lesbian community value social behavior and looks that are symbolically more connotated to masculinity or androgynity, marking distance to heterosexual femininity. Symbolically, practices and values connotated to traditional femininity have a subordinate position (Dahl 2003). In the text-based community, these hierarchical

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<sup>69</sup> In Scandinavia, the discourse and politics of gender equality has had a big impact on perceptions of gender, and decreased differences in what practices men and women take part in.

relations between the symbolically masculine and feminine, can also be said to be at work, negotiated through discussion topics and interaction style. The basis for a unified collective identity is not on the whole created on a ground claiming that 'women are essentially similar and better than men'. The discursive norms for performing gender that are produced, do not, as I interpret it, imply a strict discursive femininity in the same sense as those described by Hall on SAPPHO, suggesting that women think, feel and act in a specific way because they are women. On the other hand, one might say that the symbolically feminine is degraded as compared to SAPPHO, and for example wanting more 'recipes and social issues' represents something negative, as opposed to 'tough political discussions'.

Also, those who *did* produce essentialized, pro-woman attitudes in the discussions on Sapfo did not combine it with valuing a non-aggressive, supportive interaction style as part of the 'female' package. Rather than actively fronting an anti-flaming policy as a ground rule and norm, sharp disagreements are positioned as a positive and important part of the group practice. Participants actively embrace the discourse about the net as a free space that should not be regulated (Bromseth 2001). On the other hand, the collective informal regulation of the debates poses a practical problem before the board takes charge to end the conflict, when there is no person formally responsible for solving it.

### ***Who is in charge when conflicts did not 'solve themselves'?***

Conflicts are not solved by themselves, of course, but require active efforts from involved participants. As compared to previous list history, the strategies in the group for ending a conflict were not successful this time. Why? Firstly, Malin used to take a special responsibility to ask people to pull themselves together if the tone grew too aggressive over a long period. On the one hand she used to explicitly support the right to free speech on ideological grounds, including aggressive discussions. At the same time, however, she would also stress the importance of maintaining a friendly tone between participants. Both in order to create a social room that people should not be afraid to speak in, and because of the publicity of the forum reaching a subscribing mass of 350 people. During this fall, however, she was unusually quiet in relation to taking social responsibilities, except for counting the messages of the month as she used to. Secondly, even if several participants asked the most active discussants in the TS-feminism-debate to leave the subject and/or to stop attacking participants in an aggressive mode, people did not change their behavior.



Since many participants expressed the opinion that the root of the conflict was related to a particular group member's presence, namely Helena, quite a few suggested that the conflict could be solved by excluding her from the list. Excluding list members had not been an issue to the same extent previously. When the requests for exclusion were put forward this time, addressed to the board of the Organisation, the lack of someone taking formal responsibility in the group became quite visible. After repeated requests specifically addressed to both the list mistress Sara, and to the board of the Organisation, no direct replies were given to the list by either of them. It was quite apparent that who was formally in charge was both unclear and confusing.

The participants on Sapfo often created a social image of the group metaphorically similar to a solid ship, sailing into rough storms, but always able to manage themselves through by taking collective collaborative responsibility. Could they manage to unite again when the battles over who should be part of the female crew had created such severe feelings of anger, hurt and frustration?



## Chapter 6.

# Something fishy

‘When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspiration and evaluation of others, uninhabited by other’s voices. No, he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permuted with the interpretation of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited.’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 201)<sup>70</sup>

What is really the information one has access to when reading e-mail interaction in an anonymous online space? Mailing list-communities that are tightly entwined with an off-line community, through sharing some sort of common cultural and/or sub-cultural frame, gain meaning for participants by being intertextually linked to other important social arenas and texts. This is the case for gay-oriented groups, in particular when they are situated within a specific national-cultural context. The relations to ‘the Community’ amongst participants vary in terms of knowledge, access to people and places outside of the list, active involvement in politics and culture. These relations create specific frames for participation and the social functions the list has for each individual member. A classic division in social positions in the group found on ‘Gaygirls.com’ was related to experience (Munt et al 2002). The positions were, according to Munt et al, ranged in relation to a temporal script of the coming out-process; from ‘questioning identity and preparing to enter the gay community’ to ‘coming out and actively taking part in the gay community’ as a final goal of the identity formation process. This narrative worked as a metaphoric structure for the interactions in the group, but in practice, individual relations to identity processes and subcultural communities vary a lot. The notion of the Community works as a cultural myth, representing an end-goal for the identity journey (see chapter 2).

On Gaygirls.com, ‘experienced insiders’ shared knowledge of the subculture (and simultaneously produced it too), of places and personal experience to curious ‘novices’ unfamiliar with the Community, thus working as ‘a forum for the transfer of (sub)cultural capital’ (Munt et al 2002, with reference to Bourdieu 1999). The access to (sub)cultural capital and the process of understanding the meaning and system of cultural codes, and

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Allen (2000)

gradually 'appropriating them into yours' (Allen 2000), is highly dependent on time and on the availability of other 'texts', and the knowledge produced within them.<sup>71</sup> As in the introductory quote from Bakhtin, the 'novice' meeting these inhabited terminologies in an unfamiliar context can only gradually make them 'hers' through learning about their situated meaning in several texts.

Coming into the Doctors' List, for example, a professional culture of general practitioners, I soon discovered that I lacked important keys to understand fully what was going on. Half of the words, names of places and organisations, political documents, and people who were referred to, were not familiar to me. Because I lacked knowledge, they simply were not meaningful as cultural signifiers to me. After six months, and working hard with achieving knowledge about the debate by reading their national magazine, dictionary and interviewing participants, I was able to decode most of the content of the debate I wanted to analyze. I could gradually see nuances between participant's positions and have thoughts about what they were all about. The new insight made small details meaningful that I previously had interpreted as non-important. My knowledge was not based on 'experienced knowledge' and an insider position, though, as for the other participants. The people I studied the interactions of, however, shared professional everyday experiences, participated in national congresses, and met each other regularly through different occasions. On the political list, on the other hand, it was the contrary. People I discussed with on the list I later met at my political party's meeting the next day, and on other occasions. I could easily separate between different opinions that were expressed, and read them in light of knowledge of classical controversies I had learned about, through meetings, events and reading the radical news-paper over a long period of time. The list was even itself a subject that was referred to in other social contexts with political comrades. Texts, people, material place and mediated space merged and became meaningful in the many overlaps of the online and offline contexts.

On Sapfo, the meaning of the interactions for different participants varied on the basis of their individual relations to and positions within the off-line community, as well as their knowledge of people and networks. Some were quite unfamiliar with other subcultural arenas than the list, as myself in the first period of doing observation. Many of the most active participants on the other hand, seemed to have several overlaps, and were even curious of knowing more about these connections.

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<sup>71</sup> With 'texts' I here refer to both oral and written linguistic productions of meaning.

## Connecting texts, people, places and spaces

Maybe it was the enormous amount of postings during the heated meta-debate that made me overlook some peculiarities in some of the messages that were sent when discussions were heated. Or maybe I simply didn't know how to make sense of them at the time, lacking some important information that I was provided with at a later point in the story. When I followed the discussions from day to day, the group itself was the only source of information I had, before talking to list members, being situated well outside the GLBT-community of the Capital. The contact with other subcultural contexts seemed to vary highly between list members in general. Most group members shared national identity, but there were also quite a few that were living in other countries, being spread over at least four continents. Others again lived in the Country, but miles away from the pulsating Capital and the gay community. And yet others lived in the Capital, but did not take part in the gay community at all. Also, if and how people had contact with other list members varied, but at the time I didn't have any overview of these connections. Nor for what kind of social purpose that would be. However, the few that I spoke to later on, who were all living in the Capital, gave me a peek into some of the connections of different social meeting points that they themselves had with other members, and why. It seemed in particular that participants who were also politically active in the Organisation both met other list members occasionally on different political events, as well as had social relations to them as friends, girlfriends and ex-girlfriends. Like Nina, who knew of quite a few of the people from other parts of social and political life:

Some of the people on the list are familiar to me from real life. Some of the people on the list I know exist in real life, I have been looking for them because I would like to meet them and talk to them in real life, but haven't had the possibility.

Occasionally she would write e-mails to other participants she hadn't met, just to acknowledge them for writing something that she liked or even to recruit them to write for the Organisation's monthly newspaper. But also, Sapfo as a social room itself, Nina told me, could be a topic that was discussed when politically engaged women that she knew of met at national events and conferences that the Organisation arranged: 'We don't really have much contact usually, but when we met, we started to talk about Sapfo [...].'

## Suspicious: do the texts have a matching material body?

There is a need for situating the other in online fora, just like in everyday off-line social interaction. A common question when entering a chat space, is to ask for S/A/L (sex/age/location), trying to make a connection between the online textual self and the image of an offline person (Bassett 1997),<sup>72</sup> and this is also common in discussion groups (Donath 1999). This interest of trying to make intertextual connections do also, however, seem to work the other way around: Using a mediated context related to an off-line local culture as a common frame of reference in socializing, knitting different subcultural arenas together. Both as to what happens 'there', and who the other is online. A common phrase I noticed in the lesbian community in Norway for example, was the question 'are you on Radiator?'<sup>73</sup> What is your nick?'

Nina and her friends weren't only curious of *who* the other could be on Sapfo, but also *if* the other existed. Since Sapfo has the possibility of anonymous self presentations, one of the topics they used to gossip about was if certain participants on Sapfo were 'real' or not. They had all noticed that some of the regular long-term members seemed almost too good to be true, in the ways they presented and situated themselves:

[...] on different occasions we have met on the Organisation's conferences and such, and then it is 'hi, how are you' and 'are you a member of Sapfo too?' and then the three of us have immediately been turned on by that question, and have eagerly started to discuss if they exist or not, and 'can it be true or not'?

Nina and her friends had all been list members since Sapfo started in 1999, but it wasn't until the summer of 2001 that she started thinking that some of the members might be pure fiction. The suspicion was at first rooted in some of the written self presentations and life stories, in the sense that they were 'too fantastic':

This Nicole for instance, walking with a stick, having a grey sling in her hair, and her husband who used to be a war hero who was impotent and stuff like that. It was so dramatic that it was almost funny [...] And then me and some other girls on the list, we

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<sup>72</sup> Referred in O'Riordan 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Radiator used to be one of the largest Norwegian online queer communities.

started [...] who are also a little conspiracy- oriented, and we said that these are probably not people who exist in real life.

Later, one of Nina's friends began to investigate it more thoroughly, trying to find some kind of proof that certain list characters could be connected to existing personae: 'So Mia started that year to call France to figure out if this Nicole (laughs) was employed at the university that she claimed she was a researcher at or something.'

There were also some other things that didn't quite make sense, according to another active long-term member. This was related to the possibility of combining text with embodied persons. Or rather, the lack of proof that there actually was a connection between the two. Lisa, another list member that also had been active for many years in the Organisation, told me that through both her own and her former girlfriend's activity in the GLBT-community in the Capital, they had quite an overview of who different people were, because they had met them on different occasions elsewhere:

And that's why I knew of many of the people who were list members of Sapfo. They might not know me as a person, but I knew that 'ok, that's her, the one who studies sociology in [name of city] – I recognize her e-mail address [...]. And then I knew it was a person.

In spite of the possibility of participating with a nickname, an option used by quite a few of the list, many didn't make the effort of creating an anonymous e-mail address. As a result, it was possible to recognize the person through an address related to an organisation or work place. And yet, '[...] there were certain people that *nobody* knew of,' Lisa said.

That mediated group-communities arrange to meet physically, is a fairly common phenomena in national groups (Correll 1995, Rutter and Smith 2005). Lisa told me that during the summer of 2001, she took an initiative on the list to try to gather some of its members in relation to the Pride festival, which is a yearly event that queer people travel from all over the country to participate in. Pride is the most important political and social subcultural event in the Country, creating a temporarily common space to meet, as well as to relate to as a phenomena throughout the rest of the year. Both before and after the Pride festival, activity was usually more intense on the list, creating a lot of engagement, disagreement and enthusiasm – both regarding its content and organisational issues. Lisa's initiative was met with

enthusiasm, and quite a few met up at the appointed place, connecting texts to faces for the first time:

J: Were there any of these members that you hadn't met before?

L: yes, there was

J: How was that?

L: mmmm [...] it was double-edged. Because... when a person writes, you get an impression of this person. But when you meet the person then it is... well...it's both good and bad, actually.

J: What is good and what is bad?

L: eh..Well it can, it can be both positive and negative, because there are people who express themselves very well verbally, and then when you meet them , they are very quiet and shy. Or people who **can't** write, but when you meet them in real life they are... yes... open, nice, verbal.<sup>74</sup>

According to Lisa there had been some initiatives to meet also before this year's Pride on different occasions, but it usually had not resulted in actual meetings like this time. After the Pride festival – the participants on Sapfo discussed and talked about everything that had happened throughout the week on the list. Some specific connections increased Lisa's suspicions towards certain central long-term participants of not existing:

But **none** of [them] were there [at the Sapfo-meeting], but they still wrote e-mails about it on the list later, talking about the Pride festival, and talked about being there..[...] and they weren't there on that meeting, and they were not at the girl's party..

In opposition to Nina and her friends, though, Lisa wasn't particularly interested in finding out whether this was actually the case or not. As she also was around and about in the lesbian community in the Capital, she told me that rumours had been going around about the suspicions, at 'other places':

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<sup>74</sup> The experience of different impressions of the online-personae and the off-line personae was also found in Correll's study of an online lesbian café (1995). People that were communicating freely and openly in the online group were suddenly shy and uncomfortable when the group met physically.



I mean, there has been private gossip, and in other places and such, that these weren't real persons. But from my perspective, it wasn't that important to find out if it was [...] I would never have bothered to make reflections about it.

Lisa had had positive experiences of writing anonymously about her own private life, and this was therefore an option she had appreciated highly for herself: 'To me it was enough with people's e-mail addresses – I didn't need to know very much about them. I rather thought that it was a good thing that you didn't always know more about a person.' In spite of the option of participating anonymously, Sapfo was something different than being anonymous in a chat room on one of the larger online-situated gay communities, according to Lisa: 'In one sense I think that people have felt safe and secure [on Sapfo]. I mean, if you're out and about chatting on other web-sites, you always have an idea that it *could* be someone else, it *could* be fake.'

## In the meantime

However, all these connections and knowledge of the relations between mediated and physical social rooms were not familiar to me the fall of 2002, watching it all from a distance, physically as well as socially. Even if I had just started to get in touch with a few list members privately for interviews, this was still a part of the study that belonged to the future. After all, I had just begun to feel my way into the list community, trying to choose an appropriate form of communicating with these people.

During the intense fall when I started following the discussions more closely, I remember having a vague feeling that there was something fishy too, in more than one sense, but it wasn't so easy to pinpoint exactly where it originated from. On the one hand there were many similar features between this group and the other mailing list communities that I had followed previously, related in particular to social and technical issues in the mediated context of mailing lists. I was of course aware that the option of participating anonymously offered some other possibilities for self presentations, like in other CMC-genres such as the chat. Yet, Sapfo wasn't a fluctuant social space. The group had a stable core of participants whose self presentations over time gave the impression of recognizable women, living their everyday lives, discussing stories from the media, eating lunch at work while writing the list a message, falling in and out of love, and expressing

frustrations about not being formally allowed to adopt children. Being a credible member of the group was further highly related to participating in the group over time, slowly building an impression of a recognizable social personae with a situated life, through negotiations of meaning, as lesbian/bisexual/transsexual Scandinavian women, within the list's contextual frames.

The resources used in these processes had a broader register in form and content than I had seen on the lists in my former study though, the context being more personal in its focus. Features from synchronous modes of CMC such as using emoticons to situate a participant's emotional state or an act was common (e.g. 'Oda, happy today' as a signature, or \*laughs\*), as well as using each others first names, which are strategies that reinforce shared interest and communality (Munt et al 2002). In terms of content, group members tended to make use of personal experiences from everyday life, the personal and political being entwined with each other. Also, similar to online-situated spaces, that actually do have a kind of a virtual 'there' in form of a web-page, sense of community was also strengthened through referring to the list as a space of its own.

Even if I noticed some rather exotic self presentations in between, slightly doubting it could all be true, I was convinced that I was all in all researching a mediated realization of Scandinavian lesbian subculture. I had just recently become familiar with the lesbian subculture myself, its central discourses within it in the Scandinavian countries as well as from the US. I recognized many of the classical issues that were debated, while others were new to me. And yet I was approaching the interactions with an open mind, humble towards the fact that I did not take part in many subcultural arenas on an everyday basis. Still I had the impression that feminist discourse itself had moved away from pure structuralist feminism in Scandinavia, also within the lesbian subculture, inspired by postmodernity and the ideas of queer theory. In this sense, I thought the whole TS-feminism -discussion was somehow out of proportion, in particular in its volume, vocabulary and active use of positions such as 'orthodox feminists' as a way of labelling oneself. I could certainly recognize some of the opinions from parts of the radical feminist movement. The more extreme feminist groups that I knew of rarely made use of such descriptions to categorize themselves, though, as its negative and stereotypical connotations would contribute to marginalize them even more. But maybe that was different in relation to this group in the Capital?

## There's something about the women from the Feminist House

The first thing that was odd, I discovered when re-reading the messages from this period, was actually surfacing already in the middle of October. Some of the members suggested in more or less implicit ways that there was something with the participants presenting themselves as 'representatives from the Feminist House' that wasn't right in some way. It seemed to be related to a woman called Dina Helle, who appeared to be the leader of the Feminist House – and quite a controversial one, according to how she was described, even if she was usually mentioned in quite subtle and indirect ways in the discussions. The participants claiming to represent the Feminist House themselves occasionally mentioned its leader in an admiring tone, making the others 'shake their heads' in disgust of the cult-like expressions. Like Flisan's description of the Feminist House and its leader's importance for women who had worked within the institution – herself included:

Girls who have been related to the Feminist House later bring their proud intellectual heritage out into the world. Dina is a wonderful inspiration. You continue to think about the Feminist House almost every day, even if you don't live in the Country like me. Some say that the Feminist House is just a handful women. But then they forget about all the girls around the world who had their world image shaped by Dina and have become true orthodox feminists. I wish that all feminists could enjoy that pleasure.

Flisan.

Nina, who actually used to be in touch with this organisation and its work now and then, thought this admiration was both out of proportion and somehow peculiar. She replied to Flisan:

This, directly spoken, hmm, star-eyed person cult around Dina (this 'wonderful inspiration' and 'devoted feminist'), the convinced attitude that the Dina-admiration now has become global; all these women 'around the world', who once upon a time had their 'world image formed by Dina' and who now everyday out on the streets in Bombay, on Bali, in Canada or South-Africa (inspired by Dina and the Feminist House in the Capital), spread the true knowledge ('the proud intellectual heritage from Dina') as 'true orthodox feminists'...

But seriously (about the Feminist House): I DON'T think the quote above is representative for the members of the Feminist House. I know a lot of people at the Feminist House, and really – everyone who are engaged there are NOT like, hmm, the quote above. The Feminist

House does a lot of really good things, and there are a lot of smart people who work there.

Now I'm on my way home to make dinner.

Nina

Kaia suggested that there was a very close connection between Flisan and the leader of the Feminist House, in a quite direct manner:

I think you should read a little more closely, Marple had good and lots of good argumentation, understand that you don't think so since she didn't agree with Dina = You

Brita made a suggestion the following day that Flisan was not a representative from the Feminist House as she claimed she was:

Flisan, you involve Dina Helle and the Feminist House in a LOT of what you say. I wonder silently if you have Dina's permission to speak about her on this list and if you really are a spokesperson for the Feminist House???

I think it is pretty nasty to pretend to represent an organisation/house without being asked about it. The same goes for Dina, should she not speak for herself?

Could it really be that Dina Helle was actually the person writing under the pseudonym of Flisan on the list, the participant that had been the most active in the long-lasting discussions about feminism over the last years? Or if the women from the Feminist House were not from the Feminist House, why did they pretend to be?

## **'There will soon be a revelation...'**

In the following days, something else happened too, that was surrounded by a certain mysticism: a foreshadowing that something was about to take place on the list in a near future. This was suggested by a new member that had joined Sapfo, almost simultaneously with Marple leaving Sapfo, that immediately took active part in the group. She soon got the nickname 'New-Marple' amongst the other group members since she had the same name as her. This woman was not at all like Marple though, who usually talked about political issues in a very particular kind of style, using lots of irony and rarely emoticons such as smileys. New-Marple, on the other hand, was one single big smile, said she was living in the

countryside taking care of her animals on her farm. She mostly talked about her animals, films and music that she liked and in general positioned herself as having little knowledge related to the ongoing discussion of feminism, that during the latest days seemed to have cooled down. In between other messages though, she carefully suggested that something was about to happen, causing curious responses from many of the other members...

Subject: There will soon be a revelation..

curious?

Wait and see...

New-Marple

Reply, Lina:

Yes I am curious...waiting ...and waiting...

Lina

Reply, New-Marple:

Mmm you just wait for an answer..it will come..to someones annoyance  
Somebody else and I are on the track..

Exactly what it was that New-Marple was about to reveal wasn't mentioned though. As there were many other discussions going on at the same time, I didn't even take this observation down in my research diary at the time. Even if I was slightly curious too, (I remember thinking at first that it might be a smart and catchy way of announcing an upcoming event or something, similar to the advertising of products, making everyone curious before revealing the product), there were other issues that attracted my full attention, as the group just started the process of re-establishing a more peaceful atmosphere. The issue of feminism was still debated, but alongside other subjects. Participants who had had a quite hostile tone towards each other during the meta-discussion, made efforts to approach each other in a friendly manner, through discussing non-controversial issues, such as recipes, films and Christmas. The mysterious messages from New-Marple represented three out of over fifty in the days they were sent to the list; they were drops in the sea of postings.

Oda tried to make a guess of what it could all be about, by indirectly relating it to a former episode of 'cross-dressing' that she

herself had used as an experiment earlier that fall. Signing up as a new list member with a different e-mail address and a clearly male nick name, 'Uncle Sam', she had pretended to be a new participant, and fooled everyone until she was removed from the list by the list administrator after a few days. Afterwards she revealed the experiment and joke to everyone on the list, and told us that she had been removed – something that caused a discussion of gender and the use of male-related nicknames. This had also previously resulted in participants being removed from the list by the technically responsible list mistress and some of the long-term list members had even been in touch with her to explain that they were women, but wanted to use their chosen male pseudonyms anyway.

>That was damned.. And I thought I had taken all security checks. Put  
>out traps and everything.. But it doesn't seem like you're easily  
>fooled?

Oda

\*\*

Reply, New-Marple:

:-)

No I'm not..  
But it's not you this time

JB asked explicitly:

On the track of what??  
JB

What had New-Marple been tracing the last days? What or who was to be revealed? We were all soon about to find out...

## Chapter 7.

# Scene III: Days of Thunder. Who is on the other side of the screen (and why does it matter)?

New Marple disappeared from Sapfo after these mysterious announcements, and never came back with a revelation or any other contributions for that matter. However, another participant joined the list shortly after, Ingse. And her first message to the group was nothing like the normal introductory self presentation that new participants used to make. As a matter of fact, it eventually turned everything 'normal' on the list upside down. I had been out of town myself for a couple of days. Coming home I sat down by the computer with a cup of tea, starting to go through e-mails for the latest days: *'After a few days of a very quiet mood on the list and few messages, there are suddenly lots and lots of e-mails in my mail box. I think: 'What's going on now?'* Reading message after message, I slowly realized that the storm over the last months was nothing compared to what was brought to the surface now: *'Tonight I almost fainted with shock, excitement, disbelief and hysterical laughing after reading list messages from the last two days – I just can't BELIEVE that I am going to use the material I've got now.'*

## Claims: Are 4->1?

One of the participants over many years on Sapfo called herself Nicole, and presented herself as French, middle-aged and working at a university in France. I was often impressed by her scholarly knowledge, and she usually took a theoretical point of departure when participating in the discussions. In the closing waves of the feminism/TS-debate that had gone into a less intensive and face-threatening period, I had particularly noticed a long message from Nicole, asking if it is possible to unite queer theory and feminism. At that point, I didn't know very much about queer theory I must admit, but was, according to my diary, quite impressed by her knowledge in arguing that it was not possible:

30/11

*She reasons that she has chosen not to participate in the discussions before because it has been more similar to 'throwing pies' than to objective discussions, but now that the tone is different she wants to join in. Her message is a long presentation of feminist theory and its historical outgrowth and relations to structuralism/post-structuralism/psychology – it was really a level where I had to pull myself together to be able to follow (I really learned a lot!) – and concluded that on this background it is impossible to unite 'feminism' and 'queer theory' – the two different positions the participants have taken in the discussion that she defines as the core disagreement, and that if each and every single one should fill the term of feminism with their own content independent of the theoretical background for the term it will be empty of content in the end.*

There were several responses to Nicole's message. However, the new participant, Ingse, focused on something quite different than the discussion itself, questioning Nicole's credibility by implicitly suggesting that Nicole, Flisan, Malin and Anna were actually written by the same person:

So what 'Nicole' writes is true?

\*s\*

Or should I write 'Nicole/Flisan/Malin/Anna', or whatever her name is..

Ingse's message caused a few curious responses. What exactly was it that Ingse was suggesting? Oda immediately related it to the previous announcement of a revelation made by New-Marple the week before:

Is this the announced revelation or is it just a...revelation?

This seems to become an exciting Monday...

However, since no hard proof was put on the table, JB interpreted the accusations as unserious gossip:

Eh, it's just women's gossip, words and nothing to pay attention to. I was afraid that it was me who was going to be revealed ☺

Was it just gossip? Or could it be true that four of the long-term list members over the last four years were performed by the same person, and who could it be? How could she know that it was true when none of us could see the body typing the written texts? However, in Ingse's response to JB a few days later, her claims were spelled out in detail, as well as her reasons for them. After reading the following message, it wasn't only me who was glued to



the computer screen and the e-mail box with an open mouth over the next December days, with a thousand questions on my mind and an intense need to find an answer to them.

## **...and proof: Who are you 'really'? Credibility at stake.**

### ***Tales of IP-addresses***

Is it possible to connect the written text representing a persona on the list to the typist as a physical living person, and should this connection be important and relevant in an e-mail group build upon anonymity anyway? Was it a problem that one person would write through four pseudonyms, and why? And should individual list members be allowed to take the position of making personal information public in the anonymous list context? December 2<sup>nd</sup>, Ingse's claims and the meaning of them was intensely debated and negotiated between Sapfo's participants, counting 52 messages, the issue of IP-addresses representing a main topic. Providing us with more detailed information about the online-offline relations between the texts of Flisan, Malin, Nicole and Anna and their corporeal typist, Ingse took for granted that having more than one user name was a problem, and thus relevant information that concerned the whole group:

Date: Sat, 30 Nov 2002 13:08  
From: Ingse [ingse@yahoo.com](mailto:ingse@yahoo.com)  
Subject: Re: [Sapfo] About feminism and queer-theory

I wish!

Flisan, Nicole, Anna and Malin always write from the same ip-adress, it's the same user who produce all their e-mails. The alternative is that there are different people who fight to use the same computer regularly.

The person who writes is neither situated in France, the Pyrenees or Denmark, but in the Country. During day time all e-mails come from an ip-adress that leads to a company, I won't say which one. And in the evenings the surfing takes place from a national internet provider, a quite familiar one.

The thing with IP-addresses should Flisan/Nicole/Anna/Malin thought of before she pretended to be four (!) personalities on Sapfo.

Sad but true. (what are the 350 listeners (that she has made us all aware of through all her users) supposed to believe NOW?)

I had heard about IP-addresses before, but didn't know exactly what it referred to. Ingse's e-mail made it clearer though. It is an identification number that identifies the specific computer that for instance an e-mail is sent from,<sup>75</sup> that is always visible when using some e-mail providers (e.g. hotmail). The thing was that the four participants she mentioned by name had all situated themselves as living in different countries than the Country. And if what Ingse explained about IP-addresses was correct, it certainly sounded convincing that they could not be living where they said they were. Reading on, I started to reflect upon what it really meant if the claims were true, slowly re-constructing the meaning of my former interpretations of the recent feminism-discussion and its participants:

*What is TOTALLY unbelievable is that one of these [accused participants] is the one who has been 'ListBitch' and had an important position on the list – and who has been one of my key informants!! The other one has been extremely active in the feminism debate and partly harassing other participants too. The third one is the one who has joined the discussion in a very academic voice towards the end. The fourth is more invisible. All of them has supported the same conclusion though, but by using totally different approaches. 'Gosh', I think – no wonder I never got a response to my request for an interview with the ListBitch!! I think so hard that I can hear my brain crack while I read on... What kind of responses will come as a result of this?*

The claims were actively met by two of the 'accused'; Flisan and Malin. Flisan didn't respond to their truthfulness, but started to question Ingse's identity herself as well as what motives she had for putting the suspicions on the table. In other words trying to re-direct Ingse's claims and focus, which is a common strategy when negotiating the premises for interaction:

Hi

I have heard similar claims before. The summer of 2001 someone claimed that I was identical with someone who wrote emails on a site where there had been some political 'weird' opinions. It was just bullshit, but how do you prove it? Faced with it you can just say that

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<sup>75</sup> Unless it is an internal network of computers, where it is possible to have several computers using the same IP-address.

you've got a problem with proving that you're innocent to the rest of the list.

On the other hand I could claim that you are identical to 'new' Marple, and that she in turn is identical with 'old' Marple (that is Marple Christensen). So all this seems most of all to take the attention away from the real question in matter: why don't you just ANSWER if combining feminism and queer theory is possible?

To jump off the list and later (hidden under other mail-identities) try to suspect persons who have asked political questions is not really an argument? Just answer the question. Isn't it discussion that the list is meant for? I have never seen a childish behavior like this.

Flisan

However, Ingse met the boomerang-accusations from Flisan concerning her own identity, and the implicit suggestion that Ingse was really Marple, by defining them as irrelevant. She ignored the accusations that she had a hidden political agenda, to avoid discussing the issue of the relations between feminism and queer-theory, in trying to get rid of a troublesome discussant. Continuing to address Flisan together with the three other user identities, she upheld her claims implicitly as well as explicitly:

Hi Flisan/Nicole/Anna/Malin.

I'm not the same, but you can just think whatever you want. I can tell you that I am together with New-Marple, but that's not what we are talking about.

YOU have got the same ip-adress as all the others. There is nothing else to say than that you are the same as the above nicknames.

You can decide to just deny it, but you and me know the truth, right? I must admit that I am impressed that you've got TIME for all this. But thank God that I am not your boss.

LOL<sup>76</sup>

Ingse

Malin wrote a long letter to Sapfo an hour later. Positioning herself as speaking 'on behalf of' the list as a group, she argued that she was making her statements not primarily to save her own 'life', but for the sake of the future of the whole group as such. She painted

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<sup>76</sup> Short for 'Laughing out loud', a common abbreviation usually used in chatting.

the future as everything but bright, creating a threatening image of what could happen as a result of posing such claims:

Hi, 'Ingse'

What 350 listeners think is something I can only speculate about. They probably think that your claims are quite unpleasant. You make claims about four discussants that have existed on Sapfo in more or less 'all times'. What we think about it I will leave, it's more important how the list in large will respond to it.

Firstly, this forum is built upon anonymity. It is also a very lively forum, with a unique pleasure for discussion. That is valuable. It hasn't been like this all the time. Once, Sapfo was an extremely quiet list. That's how it can become again, in case it doesn't feel like a place where one can exchange opinions anonymously.

If the girls here get the idea that the Organisation sit and check out e-mail-addresses there would be a lot fewer that would speak than the roughly 40 monthly discussants that we usually have here. Think about that before you start spreading weird rumours [...]

Similar to Flisan, she also questioned Ingse's own identity (and like Ingse, by writing her name in quotation marks ''), asking directly if it was Marple or the Organisation that was writing as the new participant Ingse – and if so, to come forward with her 'real' identity:

It is even more unpleasant that this task is not performed by the Organisation officially. So I think we should ask you who YOU really are. Are you Marple? In that case, why do you use an anonymous address, and a name that we have never seen before? I think you should explain that, so that people here don't think you are a Christian Democrat or something.

Why don't you simply present YOURSELF so that your identity is visible? You obviously want that others' original identity should appear, so why don't you yourself go forward with a good example?

But whether the content in your message is just bullshit or not, that is not what's important really. What is important is that you create an unpleasant, unsafe mood on a lively discussion forum. Things like that can easily 'kill' a lively forum. There are enough self-dead e-mailing lists on the net, and Sapfo could easily join that category. Sapfo was dead as a 'kenotaf' (empty coughin) the first year after it was started.

It could easily end up like that again, if people think that the Christian democrats sit and check up on IP-addresses. If you represent the Organisation or something, explain who you are. Or stop spreading weird rumours. This might be the most important discussion list for

lesbians, take care of the free and active discussion climate that we have managed to build here over the years.

If it is right that you are Marple, please return to Sapfo under your real name and stop this strange behavior. You can do a lot more damage than you have thought of.

Malin

Different from Flisan, Malin came with threats as to how the claims and the way they were posed by this new anonymous participant would affect the group as a whole. She was arguing strongly that the option of maintaining anonymity in self presentations without being forced to reveal your 'real-life identity' was crucial to the list and its future. At the same time she required Ingse to come forward with her own identity to be interpreted as credible, by challenging her right to make accusations from an anonymous position, suggesting that Ingse was the same person as Marple. Or the Organisation. Of course, if the claims were interpreted as credible and true by the other participants on Sapfo, much could be at stake for Flisan and Malin now. Or, whoever who was writing using these pseudonyms. The three (or two?) of them continued to argue in several e-mails: Malin and Flisan repeatedly questioning Ingse's anonymous identity, and thus her critique for not being credible, and the claims just lose rumours that would ruin the list. Ingse by ignoring her own identity as relevant for the credibility of the information she presented, and by ridiculing and judging Malin's/Flisan's actions as unacceptable. She simultaneously demonstrated her technical expertise in different ways, showing that she had knowledge about the IP-address and who provided it:

I am Ingse. I don't have the same IP-number as Marple. But you, Malin, have got the same IP-address as Flisan, who just wrote another message. It must be tiresome to log in and out again so many times.  
\*LOL\*

It's stupid of you to deny it. It's like making a joke phone call without having a secret number to someone with a caller-ID.

\*\*\*

I am me. Ingse H (even my real name starts like that). You are one and the same. Or are you sitting at the library? Is that what you mean? But the last time I saw this IP-address it came from a company that is not into library services.

How did the other participants relate to and participate in these negotiations? Would they agree with Ingse that the information was relevant and important, or with Flisan/Malin that as the list was anonymous, the identity of the typist should be irrelevant? Or

that information like that should not be given out by anonymous list members?

## **Negotiating the unspoken rules of cyberselves: Should the body typing be important?**

More list members started to take part in addition to Ingse, Flisan and Malin, negotiating: a) Were the claims trustworthy and true? b) And should writer's real identity be considered relevant when list members had the option of participating anonymously? Like myself, most of the others didn't know much about IP-addresses either. Many participants were quite impressed by Ingse's knowledge, and what she had been able to find out by using her technical expertise, like Mona who immediately supported Ingse's actions in a reply to Flisan:

Subject: Re: IP-addresses (was: About queer theory and feminism)

Hi!

I think that this is a lot more serious than what you try to make of it. I want that our new list mistress (has the Organisation appointed someone yet?) takes care of this.

The thing is that Flisan or what your name is (Dina or Iris or what certain evil tongues whisper off-list) that an IP-address never lies, and it is interesting that this IP-address at day time comes from a certain company in the Country and in the evenings and the week-ends from the same private IP-address. IP-addresses are, from what I know, the equivalent to postal addresses in the internet world.

Mona was quite active during these first intense hours of December 2<sup>nd</sup>, and also replied to Malin's letter, strongly disagreeing that trying to find out if one person had written under several user identities should be irrelevant. Not necessarily in principle, but as seen in relation to the recent TS-feminism-discussion in particular, and that had been really destructive to Sapfo. If the rumours were true, a lot of the intense discussion was most likely produced by one person through 4 fictional personae:

Hi Malin!

I think you try to minimize what is important in Flisan and co's actions. To mail-bomb this list from the same IP-address using four or more identities so that we the last weeks have had around one hundred e-

mails a day, where a large amount comes from exactly this address must if anything be to kill the list!

Jay, on the other hand, who had also supported Flisan in the TS-feminism discussion, supported Malin's criticism of Ingse's anonymous claims. Who was Ingse really, and how could it be that her name was new on the list, while she still seemed to be very familiar with the discussions that had taken part, and the participants? And how was it possible to track an IP-address? In her reply to Jay, Ingse both gave a more thorough personal description of herself, as well as a detailed explanation of what IP-addresses were. Towards the end, she offered to give Jay further information and proof by contacting her privately:

I know, for instance, that you study. It is not interesting where you study, but if you want to know and through this know that this with Flisan, Nicole, Malin, Anna is true, you are welcome to send me an e-mail.

JB also expressed severe criticisms towards Ingse's actions, using many of the same arguments as Malin. JB, who had chosen an anonymous nickname herself, questioned the relevance of knowing who was 'really' behind the different nick names on the list. Wasn't it part of the rules on the Net, and on Sapfo, that each participant should be free to perform identity based on their anonymous nicknames? And shouldn't it be the Organisation that should handle issues like this, not individual participants?

Hi Ingse and Sapfo!

I wonder what your issue on Sapfo is, Ingse? [...] If anyone use several nicks on Sapfo or anyplace else, does it really matter? Is it forbidden or even blameworthy? Sapfo is a free arena and you can be anonymous and even perform different net identities on a mailing list. That is part of the game with net communication, something you and others don't seem to have understood! You are totally far off from the subjects that should be discussed on Sapfo.

If you, Ingse want to play cool lesbian girl and Sapfo-police you should have contacted the Organisation and asked them if they were interested in your speculations. If you think it is important, my god...this is a mailing list, not the most serious thing in the world!

Since Sapfo is an Internet-mediated communication forum, being anonymous and using more than one nick name should be part of the unspoken rules in the interaction according to JB's interpretations. Playing with identity through anonymous textual talk without being related to a physically living body has been proposed and constructed as the unique and dominating feature of

computer-mediated communication. This understanding has its roots in the synchronous roleplaying communication genres characteristic for MUDs and chat lines. In practice though, identity play is not the primary social activity for many virtual interactive spaces like discussion groups (Donath 1999).

Unlike the informal and more fluctuant chat spaces, and similar to other discussion groups, playing with identity *openly* (as in changing user identities or self presentations from day to day) was not a part of the social activities on Sapfo. On the contrary, to be able to achieve credibility and status on the mailing list, it was important to build a credible self presentation in exchanges of meaning over time, requiring consistency in meanings and writing style to be recognized in the crowd of writers (also pointed out by Donath 1999 and Gotved 1999). Re-thinking my own taken-for-granted perceptions of the social frames of Sapfo and the discussion list genre, I reflected at the time that JB's interpretation of the rules did not fit my own, and what I understood the option of participating anonymously as:

*Do the participants expect that 'identity play' like this should be a natural part of a serious discussion forum like this? I notice that my own reactions prove that it certainly doesn't fit with my expectations of what should be 'accepted behavior' in this type of context. I think I have thought of the possibilities of being anonymous not as an opening for 'let's play and experiment with identity' – but more in a direction of a possibility for participants who are not publicly open as lesbians to participate in the community without using their full name.*

How you interpret the other then, as a performed character understood as dislocated from the typist – or, as a written presentation of a 'real self', creates different expectations of the other and her intentions of participating, representing what Jodi O'Brien calls:

*'[...] a strain between those users who conceive of cyberspace as a realm in which one is invited to 'perform' a variety of alternative realities and those for whom the advantage of electronic communications is the transcendence of time/physical space as a barrier to a range of personal networks. For the latter, one's intent is to remain 'intact' as a 'real person'. (1999: 93)*

In Ingse's response to JB, she is trying to make explicit how she interprets the option of being anonymous; what should be accepted and not, and why she considers that the unspoken rules of self presentations in the interactions have been broken. The problem is



not being anonymous and multiple in itself, she explains, but *what* the options of communicating anonymously are used for, and to what extent:

To: Sapfo  
Subject: re: Rumours and discussion

I told the list about it because I think that if you have four different personalities on the list, at least they don't have to talk with each other on the list. [...]

People may call themselves what they want and how they want and for my part have several personalities. But this started to go way over the top.

If you look at it very pessimistically there might be just 17 members on Sapfo, and the rest just made-up nick names...

On the other hand, in a reply to Malin Ingse states explicitly that for her, it *does* matter for the interpretation of the Other if the textual self has a living physical equivalent or not:

It matters when you talk from 4 different e-mail addresses. It is more fun to talk and e-mail with real people and not people like you.

In the middle of the discussion of whether 'the gang of four', as they were called by some participants, were written by one person, and what the consequences of this should be for the convicted four as well as for the list, Malin even sent her regular monthly message statistics – as enthusiastic as ever:

To: Sapfo  
Subject: [Sapfo] Empty again

Hey, girlies!  
Yup, still going strong! In November we had 1001 e-mails on this list! It is somewhat under the results of last month, when we had 1034 letters. But it is way over what I once counted as 'average' activity, 274 e-mails a month. This activity is probably record amongst the mailing lists on the Internet..

[...]  
Keep up your way to the stars. Write about whatever you want, how long or short you want. But write freely. You are the ones giving the list its life. Thanks, sweeties!

She didn't mention anything about the ongoing identity discussions. I was confused and hopeful. Maybe Malin was really Malin? Maybe Ingse was wrong after all? (And why did I hope that they were real?)

## More information on the table and pieces to the puzzle

The above negotiations of whether the claims were true, relevant, who Ingse was – and if it was a legitimate action to make for a regular list member – took place within just a few hours. Even if Ingse argued and came with convincing arguments, it wasn't until early afternoon the same day that most participants seemed to be truly convinced that the claims were both relevant and legitimate. This was because of some new information from Karina, active list member for a long time and also the author of Sapfo's FAQ, changed the dominant attitudes. This time, she presented herself as a computer enthusiast, a 'nerd': 'hmm...I guess it is time to out myself as a computer nerd \*laughs\*.'

Using her computer knowledge as a background, she confirmed that the possibility of the four *not* being the same person was close to nothing. Giving detailed technical explanations of the mystery of IP-addresses in general, the different types of IP-addresses and their connections to servers and computers, she finally described the specific IP-address that identified the e-mails that was used by 'the four':

[...]

But this specific address doesn't seem to be internal, because it shows up in statistics for several sites, most of them related to the Country. It even shows up in several personal guest books, all of them related to the Country.

[...]

All in all I partly support Ingse in her analysis, even if the results not at all match how I experience these persons on Sapfo. If this is not so, it must be the greatest coincidence in the Universe, and I can't help hoping that it is so.

The facts I have presented here are not a secret of any kind, just public information that most people are not aware of. I have never met any of the above persons in real life and have no opinion of whether they are the same or not. My aim with this e-mail is just to inform.

Karina, surprised

The specific user-names and e-mail-addresses that she had found connected to the same IP-number were also listed:

A quick research of these person's latest e-mails shows correctly that they at least have a common regular address, which is xxx.xxx.xxx.xxx. A search in my archive, which contains all e-mails on

this list since 3/9 2001, shows that five persons in total contain this address:

Flisan Sannerman  
Malin Helle  
Hans Andersen  
Nicole Prieur  
Anna Nilsen

The four women were all well-known user names on Sapfo. But who was Hans Andersen? Nina responded quickly and gave us additional information:

Well...

The only one of these net-personalities that I know exist in real life (since I have met him) is Hans. It sounds too unlikely that several persons should use only one IP-address, in particular when the language of these net-personalities is so similar...

Should it be that over several years one single guy got Sapfo up and going ( 'the most important discussion forum for lesbians', according to Flisan/Hans her/himself), under the names of Anna, Malin, Flisan, Nicole, (Agira? Jenny?) \*lol\*

Well, what can you say? 'Out with the men', as Flisan used to say? ;-)

Nina

This new information; that the multi-identity participant writing under at least four pseudonyms was not only one person, but also most likely male, changed the general attitude amongst participants noticeably in different ways. Also the few that had been sceptical towards Ingse's actions as legitimate, like JB. Writing under four pseudonyms might have been defensible, but not being situated in 'the wrong material body' – a male one:

Well, on the other side....if it is like that, Nina, then I take back the mail I just sent and think I will reward myself with a Dyke-laugh \*s\*

Who the hell is Hans Andersen? Maybe he should be introduced a little more thoroughly?

[...]

I apologize for my grumpy reaction earlier, Ingse. I have, as many others, understood that some of the personalities on Sapfo not were totally up and going. But I really think that it should be allowed to be a made-up personality here. Even I and many others are anonymous, but I am still very much myself, to put it that way. But I have to admit

that I am really surprised that it was a guy that faked it so good. Because he really has, you cannot say anything else.

[...]

The question is if Sapfo is going into an identity crisis now?

JB

More pieces of proof and indicators were put on the table by an increasing amount of list members during the afternoon and evening in a collaborative effort to settle on a common understanding of whether Hans was the physical human being from whose fingers Malin, Anna, Flisan and Nicole had been born and created over the years. Some participants reported how they had noticed an overlap in the use of words and expressions between the four, and how this now suddenly made sense:

Go, Ingse, go! ☺ Ha ha, very interesting...! Explains why all four uses the same expressions all the time.

Lin

Oda connected Hans to yet another social room; another mediated context, a discussion forum for bisexuals that she had been a member of, and described how certain ways of his behavior on this list was suspiciously similar to central characters on Sapfo:

I was a member of the bisexuality-list for a short period of time the fall of -99. At that time there was an active discussant that used to sign his messages with HA. He introduced himself as Hans Andersen, xx years old [*detailed personal information*]. He liked to make statistics of the subjects of the month. Sometimes he apologized for his long messages..

Worlds were colliding, or rather merging, as the social room of Sapfo was related to other social contexts in the subcultural GLBT-community in the Country, physical as well as mediated, in hunting for the truth about the material reality of the four. A picture started to take shape from the combined individual pieces in the puzzle. By connecting the technical information to a specific name and person who had been observed in real life, to observations of linguistic similarities between the four, and similarities in ways of writing between the four female characters and Hans Andersen in another mediated list context. The claims started to sound convincing to many of us.

### ***Exit Malin***

The new personal information about the multiple personae's gender didn't only have an effect on participants' responses to the events, but also on the 'gang of four'. Or at least Malin, who was the only one of them who spoke. From having argued hard that the claims were untrue and irrelevant, she suddenly took a new position. Still not admitting that the claims were relevant, she decides though that maybe leaving Sapfo is for 'the best of the list' as a community:

Hi, girlies

The discussion that is led now is difficult to join in unless you have a lot more knowledge about IP-addresses than what I have. It's not enough to claim that I know that something is not right, I also have to motivate what I say technically. I don't even know what knowledge the other ones have, I can't judge the thing with speculations and likeliness at all. I can even less argue against the technical stuff.

On the other hand, the question is if I should do it. If it is better for the list that I leave it (which seems to be the case with the mood that is about to spread now), I will act in accordance to the best of the list. I have previously simply never got any signals from the Organisation that I am unpleasant. Neither I nor anyone else who are suddenly pointed out like this will probably stay. Anyway, I hope that the identity crisis that JB mentioned won't come. But I don't think so, on the other hand. All good, everyone!

Malin's last goodbye was interpreted as being very discrediting for her credibility by the other participants, and the reactions were emotionally upset. As ListBitch she had always uttered strong resistance towards list members leaving the list because of severe disagreements instead of trying to solve them:

Oh, Malin, my idol – you who always jump on everyone who leaves the list – the only valid reason for leaving the list is to die, in principle, wasn't it so? And you just lie down flat? As said, this was walkover...

Lin  
\*\*\*

[...]

Malin/Hans even writes using some kind of threat that it is time to leave the list!!!! HOW many times haven't we heard MALIN say that exactly this is totally unacceptable. NOBODY has been allowed to leave the list and mention it to the others without being accused for destroying the mood etc. The only thing I can say to Malin is that

if/now that you have been revealed as male you are no longer welcome here, you can pack up and go to H...!

Brita

Mia gives Malin a last benefit of the doubt, even if she interprets her last message as being very discrediting for her credibility, because of her changed attitude towards leaving the list as a solution to the accusations:

But this makes me very, very doubtful, Malin

If anyone had questioned my identity you can be sure that I would have exploded, even if I had been anonymous as any. You, who from what I know never have been afraid to put your foot down suddenly lie down flat. Why on earth? Because of a 'mood' that has been there for, what is it – one day? I am sorry to write the end of this opinion, but right now I am actually wondering about this with the experiment again.

Trying to make sense of it all, she offers two scenarios for what could be the case:

Can someone please explain to me what is really going on?

I can see two possible alternatives: a) someone is completely out of their minds and have had seventy-eight aliases over years (frightening, but it happens) b) someone are consciously trying to discredit someone else (frightening, but also happens sometimes in angry discussions). Which of these are true, really?

If it *was* true, Mia interprets the acts of the multiple identity cross-dresser as 'insane'. This is an understanding that fits well with the dominating understandings of the self in Western culture according to A.R.Stone: 'multiple personalities are a disorder in our culture; we rely on the foundational principle of single selves grounded in single bodies as the source and site of authenticity.' (1992, in O'Brien, 1999). In a while, we'll take a closer look at more of the emotional responses that 'the revelation' caused, and the effects it had on the group as such in the following period. First some reflections to help us move on: what do the negotiations that we have seen here tell us about the taken-for-granted assumptions about what a credible self should be, and how is it inseparably related to gender and to the mediated context?

## Thinking twice: What does it *really* mean...? Gender makes a difference

Many researchers have since the middle of the nineties written about self presentations and identity in online-contexts (Stone 1996, Kolko and Reid 1998, Turkle 1995), and why cross-dressing online is often interpreted as a 'deceit' when it is discovered. Jodi O'Brien characterizes such events as 'boundary events', as:

[...] occasions in which the stimulus that we encounter does not match our default categorical expectations. We are thus compelled to pay close attention, to 'think twice' before arriving at a general assessment of who/what the other is' (1999: 84)

In my first years of doing internet studies, I remember reading Sherry Turkle's 'Life on the Screen', thinking that the subject of identity play online was way beyond my research object of down-to-earth, slightly boring discussion lists. This was also the first time I was introduced to a famous internet-legend; the revelation of another cross-dresser that took place in a North American online-group in the early days of the Internet: the story of the male psychologist who over time pretended to be a handicapped woman called Joan. In all the versions of the story, according to Turkle, a male psychiatrist usually called Alex becomes an active member of a CompuServe group using the name of a woman (usually Joan) establishing intimate relations with many other women. In most versions, Joan's handicap plays an important role, and it was also a practical excuse for Alex to avoid meeting online friends in real life. After a while, it gets out of control for Alex, as Joan became very popular, and he decides that Joan has to die. Joan's husband tells the group that she is in hospital, seriously ill. Turkle writes:

'but the virtual bled into the real. Joan's 'husband' had been pressed for the name of the hospital where Joan was staying so that cards and flowers could be sent. Alex gave the name of the hospital where he worked as a psychiatrist. One member of the bulletin board called the hospital to confirm its address and discovered that Joan was not there as a patient. The ruse began to unravel. All the versions have one more thing in common: The discovery of Alex's deception led to shock and outrage. In some versions of the story, the anger erupts because of the initial deception – that a man had posed as a woman, that a man had won confidences as a woman.' (Turkle 1995: 229)

The Joan story was the first thing that fell into my mind when Hans was 'revealed', both because of the similarities in reactions

amongst participants and because the connections between the online context and the off-line world were important in 'revealing' a mismatch between the body typing and the character's self presentation online.

Exactly what is at stake? The reactions to what happens, both in the Joan-story and on Sapfo, visualize some taken-for-granted perceptions of what a 'self' is, and should be, when their boundaries are challenged; when one character in the group is not equal to one embodied self, and do not have the expected gender. The rules for what a self 'should be' are broken on two important points; multiplicity and gender. These expectations can be related to Western modernist understanding of what a 'self' is. Also, it can be related to the importance of gender as a central resource for how we make sense of reality; how we interpret and relate to other people. Gender, along with other social categories (age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, location and social background/class) are all important tools in choosing a culturally appropriate interactional approach within a situated social setting (see chapter 2). In physical contexts, the body is used as a central resource in this interpretative interactional work:

'the social significance of gender rests in the way in which we experience and understand our 'selves' in relation to communication with other human beings. This experience is an act of subjective interpretation using available cultural scripts. *The modern cultural script treats the self as being located in a single, fixed point of physicality, the body.*

(O'Brien 1999, 78, my emphasis)

One of the biggest hypes of the Internet, however, has been based on hopes for the total separation of body and mind, with historical roots in the Cartesian duality of body and mind: the freedom to create a self without the bandwagon of a troublesome gendered, raced or aged body.<sup>77</sup> In practice though, body and mind are not so easy to separate online either, because images of bodies are always present and created in our minds. Marked bodies continue to work as important resources for us to be able to navigate in and create social landscapes, for our own textual performances, and for how we imagine our communication partners (Sundén 2003).

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<sup>77</sup> See for instance Sundén 2003, Nakamura 2002, Hayles 1999 for discussions on the topic in relation to CMC. Jenny Sundén, building on Hayles, situates the discussion of the discourse of the 'disembodied Internet' in relation to gender. Male theorist's have reproduced traditional understandings of gender since the Enlightenment, of 'man as associated with mind and culture' vs women as associated with body and nature – and thus the obvious connection between Man and technology (2003: 5).



Online, we are faced with what Stone (1992)<sup>78</sup> calls 'narrow bandwidth': in presenting our selves and interpreting others we are deprived from aural cues. The visual cues at hand are often limited to textual cues. What net-researchers have found when doing empirical studies is that 1) the focus upon social categories are in general intensified instead of removed (Hall 1996). In the absence of bodily cues, ASL (age, sex, location) is one of the first things that chatters ask each other, for example.<sup>79</sup> 2) Majority categories achieve a 'default status' as normative in online interaction and 3) the total vacation from the body lasts only as long as it doesn't have to answer to (information of ) a physically based reality at one point (Nakamura 2002). Anything does certainly not go. If your performance is not recognized and interpreted as correct by others according to the situation, well, then you're in trouble. Even in online spaces designated to fictional play as an important part of the social activity, it is difficult to be *accepted* as something else than man/woman. It is often interpreted as decept if a participant over time establishes more personal relations 'as' something else than her 'true' gender, as Jenny Sundén found (2003). The power to define what gender should mean then, is quite limited: 'The act of textual passing might be subversive for the individual typist, but it will have very limited power over the demand for gender realism and heterotextuality in the MOO.' (2003: 137).

In cyberspace, as in other social contexts, recognition by others is at the basis of 'existence'. In the narrow bandwidth of the net, this recognition usually have to take place through active textual responses (Markham 2005). Giving a coherent gendered self presentation is an important part of this picture.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Typist, text and gender: Convincing materiality through text***

The rules of social interaction, online as offline, are based on culturally dependent social scripts (O'Brien 1999). To be able to communicate efficiently with other human beings, we need some premises for how to interpret others and behave on the basis of certain collective understandings and 'categories of representation'. Participants in a particular social activity have to agree upon and

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<sup>78</sup> Discussed in O'Brien 1999

<sup>79</sup> See Bassett (1997) and Danet (1998)

<sup>80</sup> That the performance is coherent in a specific context online is more central than that if it corresponds with a physical materiality, Sundén (2003) argues. In the context of Sapfo, however, where online and offline overlap to a larger extent than in an international online group, what seems to be important is that the image of the body typing is not challenged with a different image contesting the rule of 'one gendered body.'

know about what O'Brien (1999) calls 'a social grammar that enables generative interaction'. One of the important aspect of the frames making the grounds for interaction on Sapfo, is that it is limited to female participants. Like many other restricted access discussion groups online for women, an important issue then is; how do the members deal with a gender participant criteria, in a context without bodily cues as a basis for interpretation?

As Hall (1996) found on SAPPHO, the name one subscribe with, is the entrance ticket. All participants with a gender ambivalent name, were immediately questioned because it triggers the image of a possible male body behind the typing board. This was also a recurring issue on Sapfo. However, just as putting on a dress makes no woman in physical life (to the surroundings), gender has to be actively and convincingly done through linguistic interaction in online environments to be recognized as a 'correct gender performance' (Donath 1999). What is interpreted as correct behavior in order to pass and not, is however culturally dependent. As pointed out in Hall's study of SAPPHO, both opinions, values and discursive style were used as central sources amongst members to evaluate the probability that certain list members were the women they said they were. Instead of disappearing, 'gender is in the text-based context, intensified discursively', Kira Hall concludes (1996: 148). If list members in this US-context did not reproduce what was considered politically correct femininity through their discursive practices, and hereby not acting in accordance to the valid cultural script, they were put under suspicion of being a cross-dresser. If no-one could confirm the participant's identity as female from other social contexts either, the practiced rule was as one participant put it; 'if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, well, then it's a duck' (quoted in Hall 1996: 159).

On Sapfo, performing outside of the hegemonic interaction norms rarely ended up in accusations of 'not being female (enough)', as essentialized understandings of gender were not dominating in the sense that it was actively used as a filter to evaluate the other's actions. The register for how to perform correctly as lesbian/bisexual women was hence quite broad, and the hegemonic norms did not build upon an idealized and narrow understanding of how Real Women should talk or feel about something. Even if issues of identity, gender and sexuality often were negotiated discursively (as chapter 5 shows), participants rarely questioned the connection between a certain behavior or opinion and the gendered body typing them.

The revelation and the negotiations that we have just witnessed in scene III, however, makes visible some central default, taken-for-granted rules for social behavior in the online cultural context of Sapfo in particular, because they are considered broken by one of the list members, Ingse. By framing the information she has discovered as a 'revelation', she takes for

granted that what she has discovered is something that is not known, that *should* be known and taken action upon. The first rule that is contested, is the aspect of writing through several user identities, particularly as related to the recent political discussion, where one person writes through four different characters to support the same argument. The claim that being multiple is wrong is mostly supported by the others. Some participants also argue that having more than one identity should be considered 'part of the rules in net-communication', and that the connection between the typist and the online character should not be important. Identity play as an important part of the discourse of what net-communication is and should be has a strong position (Elvebakk 2002), something that can also be seen in these negotiations. Still, the main attitude in the group is that the option of participating anonymously should have basis in some sort of lived experience.

In contrast to a slight insecurity of whether one should be allowed to have more than one voice in the group, the responses to the second rule that is broken are clearer. Gender is an explicit participant criteria for the list community: that it is for women only. The general attitude and responses to the 'revelation' also changes noticeably when the four fictional characters are connected to the name of a male person, and the 'betrayal' is a fact: someone has played outside of the rules in the group.

In the feminism-TS-discussion in scene II, the borders of group membership were negotiated discursively in relation to the content of categories of gender and sexuality (and entwined with this, 'feminist') as to what effects these understandings should have on accepted membership criteria on Sapfo. In that discussion, transsexual male-to-females were actively used to negotiate borders for who should be considered 'in and out' in the community. The focus was upon what should count as pre-defined legitimate understandings of what the 'we/us' consist of, versus 'they/the other', as a mediated lesbian community in the Country. Here, however, it is the supposed connections between the materiality of the body writing and the textual presentations of selves that are made central, and causes negotiations of rules for group membership. Whereas multiplicity and using a certain amount of fictional features when creating a self is considered acceptable by several participants, a male body producing female characters seems to be taken-for-granted as an unacceptable connection.

## Participant researcher reflecting in a scene of chaos...

*Is it really a man who has continuously written 'undercover' of four women – as aggressive ListBitch, angry radical feminist with strong opinions and as 'smart academic feminist' with great knowledge to feminist theory? It's almost too good to be true!!! This is the 'Joan-story' from Stone!! In my material!!*

After reading my way through all the 52 e-mails that had fallen into my Sapfo-mailbox on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, I must admit I had a hard time sleeping afterwards. Many thoughts and emotions ran through my head, related to different aspects and parts of me. In many ways, I had engaged my in-depth study in relation to Sapfo for different reasons, related to both research interests in net-mediated communities and my own personal interests as I had quite recently started questioning my own sexual identity. Because of this, my object of study felt much closer to me than the lists I had worked with before; because the topics touched upon aspects of facing specific challenges of seeing the world from a sexual minority position in a hetero-normative society. As my own town was too small to have any stable lesbian community, I both identified with and related to the minority community on Sapfo through reading about familiar experiences and challenges in everyday life, a social room that was not available to me in my physical environment. In line with many other participants, I had built mental images of the long-term list members, their looks, their lives through their stories. Of course, the researcher was kind of thrilled about what had come up because it made my material quite unique and offered some very interesting opportunities of ways of moving forward in the research process, and topics to study. While the engaged participant was shocked, excited, sad and angry at the same time. We were both worried though. Would my object of study die, as Malin predicted? And in that case, why?

## **Chapter 8.**

# **Betrayed. When truth becomes fiction, nothing is for real.**

‘Only when the contradictions between the troll’s<sup>81</sup> actions and the expectations raised by the category assessment strongly conflict does the deception begin to unravel; when in Goffman’s (1959) performance metaphor, the troll speaks out of character. Still, many readers attempt to reinterpret the actions rather than disbelieve the identification. The decisive moment in the group’s realization that the postings are coming from a troll is when someone offers evidence that the real person behind the virtual identity is at odds with the one presented.’

(Donath 1999:49)

Both A.R. Stone (1996) and Sherry Turkle (1995) suggest that the strong reactions in the Joan-story were closely related to the fact that it took place in an early phase of using the Internet for communication. Now that these stories are known and made important subjects of in the media, people will be more aware that it is always a possibility that people are not always who they say they are. Also, as Stone optimistically suggests, practices with gender-play online will have an impact on how we perceive and perform gender in general, building down the traditional walls of categories. This did not seem to be the case on Sapfo, however (or in other empirical studies; Sunden 2003), considering the emotional responses that followed the revelation.

For many participants the information of the probable multiple-identity cross-dresser was perceived as very upsetting. As days passed by, more and more list members came with their thoughts and reactions, and emotions ran high when commenting on different aspects of what had happened. Many had themselves shared personal and intimate stories from their own lived lives, some of them even through communicating privately with one of Hans’ characters. The thought that what was presented as authentic experiences, making a mutual ground for dialogues, was most probably good fiction, was difficult to deal with. Mona even made an excuse to the ‘formerly suspected’, the leader of the Feminist House:

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<sup>81</sup> A ‘troll’ is a name for a person consciously committing identity deception on news-groups.

Finally, as dyke and feminist of the more radical kind, I'd like to apologize to Dina and her girlfriend for being the target point and suspected of being the persons behind Malin/Flisan ++. If you're on the list feel free to e-mail me in private.

The focus in the messages gradually changed from figuring out 'if it was true and if the information was relevant' to how they felt about it, trying to seek answers to many questions: What was the truth really? Who was Hans, and what were his motives? And who were all the other list members? What effects would this have on Sapfo as an anonymous forum in the time to come?

JB, who at first had thought the whole thing was quite funny, had some afterthoughts a few hours later, describing the actions of Hans as 'not normal':

I have biked home and had dinner and wondered a little more about this with the 'female' profiles on Sapfo. It is hysterically funny, I think. But it sure is something that stiffens and fastens when you think a little more about it – this seems manic and quite disturbed, in particular if you think about the amount of writing that we are talking about. Then it feels a little unpleasant.

What characterized many of the first immediate responses was shock, disbelief, hurt and anger, using strong verbal expressions and images, like Lise:

Can anyone say that this is not true? Tell me that I'm dreaming and feel free to hit my head or pinch my arm or so!!!  
Where are these 'girls' that should answer to all this? Have they disappeared?

I think I'm gonna faint!

Lise – who won't believe that these things happen – naive and stupid?  
Probably! \*SIGH\*

Kine and Mona explicitly point to feeling used by someone with exploiting intentions, who have consiously 'played games' with them':

I am totally chocked...can someone really entertain themselves with this over years? Does people like this exist?  
Don't know what I am supposed to believe  
Kine

\*\*

many of us feel exploited by a sick person who has only played lots of games  
Mona

The strong reactions indicated that most participants had not expected a relation between the texts that they read and the image of the body typing them that differed this much from each other. The case of gender deception is in general less common on discussion groups than on MUDS and chats (Donath 1999). The reactions tell a tale of how presentations of selves on the mailing list were interpreted by many of the participants, and what the option of participating anonymously was expected to imply in this context.

The discrepancy between the taken-for-granted expectations and the awareness of the multiple-identity cross-dresser can be related to what Jodi O'Brien(1999:94) formulates as two different points of departure for participating in an online group: Is it a matter of 'authentic fantasy', where participants have an awareness that an important aspect of the communication is to create fiction?<sup>82</sup> Or is it a matter of 'real authenticity', where the frames of the interaction are based on authentic experiences, but are used by someone to create fiction within? The option of participating anonymously on Sapfo was by most participants not understood as equal to making self presentations based on pure fiction.

The image of a male body or a female body creating fictional characters also makes a difference for how it is interpreted. As Mia says, an important problem with the fictional characters is a lack of embodied experience of living as woman and lesbian. If it was a man writing about living lesbian lives, it could barely be based on a bodily situated experience? The aspect of authentic (embodied) experience was enhanced by several participants, the gendered body making a central place of situatedness for differing between real experience vs fiction:

Personally, I am part of this list because there are dykes here – as a matter of fact I am not interested in discussing with a fake one, in particular when 'she' is a man.

[...]

I chose to write about my life for a bunch of more or less anonymous women that in one way or another **share my life conditions**. If it later appears that these women in reality are someone else, I at least feel like I have been exposed for a sick experiment.

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<sup>82</sup> I will formulate these two interpretations as 'true fiction' and 'fictional truth' when I refer to this contradiction in the following pages, which is how I also interpret O'Briens formulations 'authentic fanatsy' and 'real authenticity'.

### ***Gendering cross-dressing motives: mentally disturbed or sexual harassment?***

A returning question throughout the immediate discussion following the revelation was that if the stories were made up, why did he do it? Many participants interpreted the actions as both being mentally disturbed, as well as an expression of hatred against women. As JB formulates it:

I am also a little split and thoughtful about the motives of the Gang of Four (probably more than four). Why? And during so many years? Is it an experiment? (that is to be researched.. by a researcher?) Is it about someone who really lost the perspectives a little and dived into Sapfo with skin and hair, someone who got obsessed with Sapfo? Or is it someone who is driven by an enormous hatred against women? The thought has struck me sometimes that that is the way it could be too \*shivers\*

Writing from more than one user-identity and another gender wasn't necessarily interpreted as being wrong *separately*, or in principle by most participants. What is enhanced is the combination of several factors, related to how the characters have acted within the situated context, and to Sapfo as a mailing list restricted to queer women: the multiple personalities, the wrong gender, the amount and style of participation as combined with the purpose of the list. The roles that Hans' characters had performed in the feminist-TS-discussion that had dominated the list the last year was perceived as particularly upsetting:

I think that you to a certain degree should have aliases on the Internet – that is almost what it is there for. But I do NOT think it is OK that a GUY pretends to be four or five different women on a lesbian list and writes to and from to himself and in between totally bombards the list with e-mails.

If, that someone else wrote, it had been a little dyke in a small town that daydreamt and pretended to be different personas with an exciting life, I could in one way accept it more. But – and here I wonder if you don't agree with me? – it feels in some ways disgusting to me that this person (who additionally have used a pretty unpleasant tone on the list), who has been a part of it for three years (isn't it?) is a man. Because, what is his motive for being part of a lesbian list? This is important to discuss I think.

In the quote above, Lin points towards the combination of all the features that she considers being 'not accepted behavior' on the list, and states explicitly that gender makes a difference for how she feels about what has happened. It is 'disgusting', as opposed



to if it had been a girl who had done the same thing, and their motives are understood as potentially different. A girl could have 'daydreamt of having an exciting life' – but what is different imagining a man doing the same thing? This might be interpreted as an implicit interpretation of Hans's actions as sexually motivated. Many participants suggested that the obvious reason for men to join in and cross-dress on lesbian groups is sexual. A few of them had experienced sexual harassment in online groups themselves. It has been found in several studies as a problem in both women-only and lesbian groups online (see chapter 1). The feeling of being (sexually) harassed by a man seems to be threatening in a very different way than if it had been a girl. It emphasizes the image of the material body as important for the interpretations of the texts. Understood from a feminist perspective, ascribing different meanings to the two gendered bodies can be related to a power perspective: one (sexually) threatening and the other not. This is interesting considering that lesbians are actually sexually attracted to other women, but in spite of this, the image of a female body is not experienced as a sexually threatening one, on a symbolic level, in the same way as a male.

Men's and women's motivations for cross-dressing in Internet-mediated communication differ, and are also interpreted differently in non-fictional online environments. Women report that they cross-dress to avoid harassment, and their actions are rarely interpreted as being sexually threatening or irresponsible, whereas men's cross-dressing are perceived acceptable if they express an interest in exploring their identity in other ways ('understanding the position of women better through performing a female character') (O'Brien 1999: 89). Men's actions of cross-dressing are often met with suspicion amongst women, however, something that can be related to the fact that many women have felt sexually exploited by men who pretend to be women.

Since Hans or his women never spoke on the list again, none of us knew for sure, though, and the questions remained unanswered. However, *reflections* about it was a returning issue.

### ***Before and after: Raising the awareness about the body behind the screen***

A popular sport in many chat spaces, is to reveal gender performances as 'inauthentic' when they are not convincing. In these spaces, there is often an awareness that there is a certain discrepancy in gender performance and the body typing. A particular kind of identity deception or manipulations in newsgroups goes under the name of 'trolling', characterized by a specific feature: 'Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit

one that is played without the consent of most players.’ (Donath 1999:45). A key issue in interpreting the reactions to the revelation, is not only about ‘wrong number and wrong gender’, but is connected to the fact that the cross-dresser has not been *open* about his actions to the rest of the participants.

A central effect following the sudden awareness of what Hans Andersen had been up to the last years didn’t only cause reflections about *his* existence and motives. If Malin and a hard core feminist like Flisan could be written by a guy, then who could the other list members be? Did they ‘exist’ in real life, as in having their names in the phone book? And how was it possible to really know who existed and not? Existence and identifying the Other as ‘fake’ or ‘real’ became a central issue. It was addressed in many different ways and through a diversity of practices.

Before the revelation, a participant’s identity was rarely questioned or examined by the others. After, it became increasingly important to prove that the writer somehow had a ‘real life’, as well as a female body, trying to make connections between the list room and other social contexts. There were many ways of trying to ‘prove’ that they really existed. Some list members referred to their e-mail-addresses, claiming that their address was an identifiable work-address or a known organisation, whereas others referred to home pages that included pictures of themselves. Couples where both women were list members confirmed each other, like Vera:

Hi list and my woman –

Oh yes, you exist – I should know who live with you \*laughs softly\*

One participant who worked as a journalist, referred to an upcoming article in the paper, that connected her name to her profession. Yet others listed people that they had met physically that were list members and asked others to confirm them again:

When it comes to myself, I hope that I have met many enough of you IRL so that you can confirm that I actually exist.

But then again, others pointed to the fact that it was difficult to know for sure, and that evidence could easily be made up:

Prove that you exist for real? And how should you do that? Oh well....I have nothing to prove myself with..you just have to believe in me...or?

I mean, home pages and other things can anyone make, right? I mean anyone could be anyone, or?

Lise – who exists, or not?

Existence was also made subject of in signatures and was also as a source to humorous comments:

Jen, who exists

Lise, who exists (at least a little, \*giggle\*)

Vera – who won't give up hope that certain persons actually are who they say they are!

Hugs to everyone left on the list from Lina (I am still me)

Someone started a round of presentations, to make participants situate themselves more thoroughly, trying to re-create a sense of trust in the group:

Hi Jay!

I guess we could do what we usually do on my favourite list Euro-Sappho of which I have been a part for 5-6- years – that we present ourselves. And then anyone can present themselves if they want to. I am curious of who Jay is and who 'Henckel' is in your address.

For myself I am Mona [last name] (no, not the one from [place]) and I am married to Grete [last name] (who can introduce herself). 'Themissisolsens' are our common e-mail address. We live in the Capital where I work as a [profession].

I also joined in, a little worried that list members wouldn't trust that I was really a researcher. Creating trust and credibility was in itself challenging in a text mediated environment like this, and the situation hadn't made it any easier in the process of trying to establish a dialogue with the list:

I hope you still think that I am a serious researcher in light of what has happened the last days – many have talked about credibility here, and how you should 'prove' your identity. This was something I thought of when I wrote to the list the first time too – how can I prove that I am the one I say I am so that you could know that my purpose with doing research on the list was serious? Regarding myself, my e-mail-address is a university-address with my full name in it. Additionally I had a link to my project home page, with information about my professional self, including a photo.

Non-commercial e-mail addresses to institutions and real-life confirming information, as the examples above, are normal ways to prove identity in newsgroups and mailing lists, in particular in groups where anonymity is not allowed. However, when these identity markers are not present or believed to be false, credibility is additionally built over time through the actual postings in a particular group, through writing style and knowledge according to Judith Donath (1999):

‘Writing style can identify the author of a posting. A known and notorious net personality hoping to appear online under a fresh name may have an easier time disguising his or her header ID than the identity revealed in the text. [...] Where the usual assessment signal – the name in the header – is believed to be false, language is used as a more reliable signal of individual identity.’ (Donath 1999: 39).

Groups that have had the experience of identity deceit can be severely harmed, making it difficult to create trust within the group again. The effects can be several, but in particular it makes it difficult to accept newcomers or others that cannot confirm their real life identity. This was exactly what happened on Sapfo.

## **Shaking the grounds of trust**

In chapter 5, we could witness heated negotiations of who should be regarded as members of the lesbian community, as well as in the community of Sapfo, with basis in understandings of gender and sexual orientation. The main issue that was addressed after the revelation was who is considered ‘acceptable members’ related to the connection between text and typist. Should it be required that the typist is an existing les/bi/trans- woman? Even if many members expressed that ‘it didn’t matter so much who was actually behind the nick-names’, it seemed to be quite important looking into what took place in practice. Both in attitudes towards old members, new members who joined the list and former list members that were produced by the cross-dresser, like Malin.

### ***Where is..? Is she also...? Suspecting old members who disappeared***

The occupation of who everyone else were in their everyday lives, and attempts to confirm oneself and others as ‘real’, also took other not so friendly forms. In particular in relation to certain long-term participants that so far had not commented the latest incidents on the list. What if ‘the gang of four’ were really a bigger crowd? These four characters had by now fallen silent, after Malin’s last message to the list and none of the other three had spoken either. Some participants started questioning the existence of other regular participants who hadn’t participated actively after the revelation. Maybe Hans was behind more than these four, but using another IP-address? Or maybe there were other men cross-dressing too, as Mona suggested:

A rumour says that Hans is not the only man from the bisexuality-list that rides around on Sapfo under a false female identity, and that there is at least one more.

Name-given list members where specifically mentioned and called for:

Brita:

And where did Lina and Agira go? Hooooooooooooooooo...[...]

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Oda:

Is it more than me who wonders where Agira and Jenny went?

Oda came with very direct suspicions, convinced that Lina was also produced by Hans:

Just thought of...Hans hasn't taken your innocent personality, Lina..Let her go at once, Hansie, are you listening..?

Oda, who is starting to feel weird...

Eh, forget me, what do I know...

Now I will go and have a soda...Strange thought...me, who always have gin for breakfast..

In a later message, Oda, who was one of the participants that was most upset, blames herself for not having seen what she thought were similarities between certain list characters' ways of writing before:

Lina!!

Come here immediately and explain that you were laughing aloud when you wrote this. It's just so thick and transparent at the same time [*quoting from an old mail by Lina*]...

Why do I always read my e-mails without taking my glasses on?

Lina Olsen..well, not as funny name as Nicole Prieur, but as a contrast it should work

Have you checked out Lina, Ingse?

Is there no-one left to trust?

Ingse checks up on Lina, but doesn't find any connections between Lina's and Hans' IP-addresses. Lina returns however, explaining her absence as a result of moving and being without internet connection, very hurt by having been suspected as 'fake'. In a dialogue between the two of them, Oda reflects upon her suspicious reactions at the time, relating them to her previous images of the 'fake' women:

I feel very disillusioned these days... Malin was real to me...And Nicole's knowledge I admired. Lina was to me like a young girl, enthusiastic and innocent in some ways. I don't know why I started being suspicious about Lina not being Lina. I might have figured that the style of writing reminded me of Malin's and Anna's ways of writing. And everything they wrote was just made up. I felt betrayed and then I aimed at what I thought was Hans, but it seems like I missed badly. [...]

I was at the 'Internet level', which is a completely different thing than the real life. To me there was nothing 'real' left on the list just then. The real life was far away. [...]

The Internet is here associated with something else than 'real life', which represents a classical division in discourses about the Internet as a social medium: the virtual world versus the real world. However, Oda has been thinking about the mediated list as real. When she finds out that the characters that she has imagined as four different embodied women are fictional writings, with no equivalent embodied persons, the perception of the whole list context changes. She suddenly relates the list to 'the internet level' as something 'completely different from real life.' In practice though, it seems to be more a question of a mismatch of the expectations of social interactional frames of the list related to genre: when what has been interpreted as 'truth' becomes 'fiction'. The broken illusion, Oda writes, results in a changed feeling for the list as a social room, where the sense of reality that was present before is replaced with a feeling of unreality, betrayal and disillusionment.

### ***Reading the other with different eyes: suspecting new members***

Not only old members that didn't have an identifiable e-mail address were put under suspicion. Increasingly, new members entering the group after the revelation, who presented themselves without identity-confirming information, was met with a reserved attitude. It was obvious that a new awareness had developed, that who was behind the screen could be anyone, and this influenced the way that we read and responded to the other. I noticed myself how I read the messages sent to the list differently, filtering every participant through a check-list of identity-confirming signs. I wasn't the only one. As Mette put it:

I don't think that I am the only one getting more and more suspicious for every new name that I see. Just because the gang of four have stopped writing, I doubt that Hans has disappeared? I hope it will pass. And I hope that no-one new feels innocently accused.

Good continuation!

The regular practice on Sapfo that new members were welcomed warmly, changed to a more restricted and suspicious way of approaching the new list member. The change in attitude became quite apparent in an episode occurring shortly after the gang of four disappeared. A new participant enters the list, Milla, asking questions about what is going on and why in several lengthy messages.<sup>83</sup> I noticed myself that I immediately read it with a critical eye:

*A new participant suddenly appears, well not new, but who hasn't participated actively before. Interesting: she is instantly suspected on the grounds that she uses some of the same linguistic expressions as the 'gang of four.' Is this Him in yet another costume?*

The new participant Milla was met with a mix of half-suspicious, restricted responses. Oda was directly indicating that there was a clear similarity between Milla's and some of Hans' characters linguistic expressions:

Hi ME! And the List!

I only see Malin everywhere. Or was it Anna that used to write 'but my god, what do I know?' The writing errors that are starting to show up, are they real...Malin could at least spell. He should have credit for that...

Now I only see a collection of words in front of me, without meaning, made by a word machine, a non-human, insensitive creature. A writer on his way to create a new part in 'the theater of life'

Others tried to welcome the new member though, and simultaneously encouraged other list members to give new participants benefit of the doubt and confidence, asking what the consequence would be if every new member was met with suspicions. What would happen to Sapfo eventually if this continued to be a common interpretation of the Other? Vera warmly welcomed Milla and encouraged her to continue to write to the list. She implicitly protested against the suspicious attitude in her signature:

Hi Milla!

I just want to say welcome to the crowd of writers! Dear kind, sweet you, don't get tired but lean towards us who exist for real as well as on the list and let us together make it meaningful – for us! \*laughs\* [...]

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<sup>83</sup> New members asking naïve questions joining newsgroups that have been victims of 'trolling' are immediately suspected of being 'a troll' according to Donath (1999).

Vera – who won't give up hope that certain people really are who they say they are!

Milla replies to Oda, explaining the reasons for her writing errors:

I suffer from dyslexia and it means that I have certain difficulties with text, I can't really see..it is quite hard actually. But how could you know.. About Hans I only know 'Hans-Pans?' but it is unlikely that it is him that is around and about here, he has other issues I guess.

JB, on the other hand, was quite sure that dyslexia was definitely not the reason for Milla's spelling errors:

Hi, Oda and the list.

Well, many people have dyslexia, but that's not the case when it comes to little Milla Edberg. That's for sure \*s\* (hi Hans-Pans!!)

See you later alligator//

JB, cyber-graphologist and dyslectic therapist

### ***Fictionists not welcome. Malin: loved, missed or didn't exist?***

There was no doubt as time went by, that fictional characters had nothing to do on Sapfo. Anonymity did not equal fiction. This also included the old list members created by Hans. An episode that illustrates this is a negotiation where Karina asks whether Malin should still be mentioned as part of Sapfo's FAQ or not, now that 'she' does not really exist. The question is part of a poem describing her feelings of sorrow towards the fact that the four long-term members did not exist and are gone, something that is difficult to relate to.<sup>84</sup>

Yes...

Maybe it is so that I exist...

Maybe it is so that four disappeared philosophical girls exist...

Maybe it is so that one needs to decide whether Malin should still be in our FAQ...

Maybe it is so that Girl Interrupted cut out a big piece of my heart...

Maybe it is so that it is lying there naked on a tray...

Maybe it is so that I don't know what I should replace it with...

Karina, or maybe at least

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<sup>84</sup> This was also described by participants after the revelation of Joan according to Turkle 1995.



Karina was responsible for the FAQ, being one of two members taking a particular responsibility amongst the regular participants. The other was Malin, acting as 'ListBitch', counting of the messages of the month. Lina replies supportively to Karina's poem:

Read your e-mail here...

Don't have a lot to say...except

HUG

Karina replies back, explicitly inviting the other list members to express their opinions about whether the former ListBitch should still be in the FAQ or not:

well, there isn't much to say to stupid things like that \*laughs\*  
but regarding Malin's be or not to be in the FAQ everyone are welcome to have an opinion about it.  
Karina, crazy

The replies that follow clearly show that it should be taken for granted that a fictional character has no rights to exist on the list – or to be represented in the FAQ of Sapfo. They severely question Karina's suggestion that this could be possible. For Lina, it is obvious that fictional characters created by a man have nothing to do on Sapfo:

But, Karina (and others),

There is something I don't understand here, I think..because I thought that everyone now were certain that Malin (and the other three) in reality were fantasy figures, created by a mentally sick man ('Hans'). Isn't it so?

Because if we decide that we know that it is so, then they can't stay on the list?? And even less, as 'Malin', represent Sapfo as list mistress? But clearly isn't it obvious?

Please explain, dear...

Others agreed with Lina. Malin shouldn't exist on Sapfo anymore and should be removed from the FAQ:

Mona:  
To be or not to be...I vote for not to be..

\*\*

Marple:

That shouldn't be so difficult..  
She had the same IP as Hansie... :/

Remove her...

Karina isn't too sure though, in responding to Lina, mourning the former ListBitch' and her disappearance:

Malin was never list mistress, but ListBitch, and I liked her.  
So forgive me if I want to be very sure before I say that she never existed.

Karina, ambivalent

## All the world's a stage? Hidden theater off-stage and the issue of deception

'Morality in interpersonal relations is based on the premise that persons can trust one another, that they can depend on one another to be who and what they say they are. [...] A sustainable moral order is anchored in the ability to imbue collective encounters with shared social meaning. Trust is predicated in stability. [...] This can be disconcerting if one is trying to establish a long-term relationship of certain knowable, predictable properties.'

(O'Brien 1999: 92, based on Goffman 1959)

Even if the participants express an awareness and an interpretation of the Internet as a social arena where anonymous identity play takes place, this does not appear to be what they have interpreted the social room of Sapfo as. When a feeling of a trustful environment disappears as a consequence of the revelation, the frame of the interaction context is re-interpreted. This can according to Erving Goffman be described as a 'negative experience'— negative in the sense that the frame takes its character from what is *not*:

'Expecting to take up a position in a well-framed realm, he finds that no particular frame is immediately applicable, or the frame that he thought was applicable no longer seems to be, or he cannot bind himself within the frame that does apparently apply.'

(Goffman 1974: 379)

The reactions and reflections about identity, gender and existence caused by the revelation are based on a change of images of who the Other is, with the body as location for identity being the point of departure. The cues that are given, textual self presentations as women, within a social frame of interaction that do not signal 'theater', create an expectation of the other to be 'who they say they are'. In the meta-reflections about the list as a social room, participants make visible that this is what they want the list to be, but that they increasingly question as possible. As Vera reflects:

What does the Internet really mean for human beings' interpersonal relations? How do the Internet affect us in real life? Do we get less 'real' contacts or vice versa? I think that for us the key word is honesty and truthfulness. We are honest about who we are and we expect that others are too. But it is of course a stupid expectation. The Net's dark side is exactly the possibility for cheating. But we who want to enrichen our worlds with contacts with other lesbian/bisexual women and who do not live in a big city, we hope of course to meet honest and up-right women here! We know you exist but maybe it is all those who do not write who represent these women?

Vera

Multiple-identity cross-dressing is clearly colliding with taken-for-granted frames of interaction and expectations of the others.<sup>85</sup> What are these collisions all about?

A main problem as I see it, is related to the social purpose of Sapfo as a *support group*, in particular for participants for whom the list has been important as a social network in relation to (queer) identity issues. Sharing intimate thoughts and experiences from their own lives with fictional characters creates feelings of betrayal, when it appears that the other is not a 'sister' sharing of her life too. Subjective experience is always situated within one particular body. Because a troubled minority position is more than anything related to how other people interpret this body, for better or worse, creating a sense of community with fictional imagined characters who do not have to answer to the world's interpretation is contradictory. Another aspect related to the group's minority supportive function is the fact that the revelation implied that someone suddenly lost their anonymity in public (Hans). This might have been particularly difficult for people who are not open about their sexuality where they live, as Lisa suggests in the interview:

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<sup>85</sup> This does not, however, necessarily imply a view of identity as essential or static. As Kolko and Reid argue, 'embodiment does not equal modernism – and accountability does not negate the idea of play.' (1998: 224)

I know **one** girl, who's called Gry, that I have been in touch with personally, because she e-mailed me personally, and she lives in xxx [small place]. [...]. And she has not said a **word** on the list after this, and I think that ...for her, who thought she was the only person in the whole [name of place] (laughs) who was homosexual – the only contact that she had had, with any other [homosexual] people, was through this list.

There is additionally a basic democratic problem with multiplicity in relation to the list's function as an arena for discussing political issues in the subcultural community (an issue I will return to in chapter 9): what happens when the principle of 'one woman -one voice' in issues of disagreement if anyone can just create another character to support a certain political opinion? Finally, a major problem emerges from the fact that the aspect of gender is important in relation to Sapfo being a list restricted to women. This is made visible through the interpretations of his possible motives for cross-dressing, that are perceived as both mentally disturbed as well as an expression of hatred towards women.

Trust is, as Goffman (1974) puts it, to believe that some things actually are what they appear to be (and a necessary belief to avoid paranoia). Feeling deceived implies that trust is broken. If building confidence involves vulnerable positions and relations, as support group environments do, deception is for many people difficult to deal with.<sup>86</sup>

As a comparison, I thought of an episode in the book and movie 'About a boy' by Nick Hornby. The male main character in the book pretends to be a single dad in order to join a support group for single parents, with the intentions of meeting women. As he signs up, there are no-one who asks him to 'prove' that he really has a son, but the participants in the group take for granted that everyone in the group do have children. They chose to trust that the others are who they say they are, similar to many other social situations that do not give us reason to believe otherwise. Of course, when it eventually turns out that this is not the case, this creates shock and anger, and he is interpreted as a liar with malicious and sexual intentions, taking advantage of the real single moms that have opened up to him on the grounds that they have believed that 'he is like them'. As a comparison, as some of the participants on Sapfo suggest, the image of a male body trying to disguise himself in order to be with women, obviously is a (sexually) threatening one.

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<sup>86</sup> This is not the case for *all* participants on Sapfo, or in *all* support groups. However, for the ones who have the mediated group as their only social network where they talk about their sexual orientation, or have difficulties with living a lesbian/bisexual subject position, it might cost more to open up within the group.

The participants are not in general against that he could have been allowed to participate with his characters or as himself (as he could also be a women-identified man, as someone suggests). The crucial issue that seems to create feelings of betrayal at this point, is that he has participated as four women *without being open about it to the list*, something that in this context signals that he has something to hide. It works as a form of 'hidden theater', where a group or a person perform(s) a fictional situation off-stage without announcing it 'as theater', in an everyday (public) social setting; a group of white teenagers harassing a black person on the subway for instance. The point is that the performance is not supposed to be suspected of being a performance, but a provoking social situation, often in order to make the people around react and reflect around what happens.

Most of all, it is the massiveness in the deceit that creates harm, hurt and shock: the amount of participation, the degree of fiction and the length of time it has been going on. A friend of mine likes to spice up his stories with amazing details to entertain me, but we both know that it was maybe not quite like that. Since I love him though, and we silently agree that it is ok because he makes me laugh by doing it, it doesn't really matter that much. In this case, however, it is not a participant that have been 'slightly decorating the truth' in his /their stories, but someone who has consciously taken advantage of the mediated possibilities to manipulate the whole group over a period of three to four years. Since most of the participants do not interpret the list as a theater stage, there is an obvious discrepancy between the social rules and Hans' practice, and of course this evokes emotional responses and shakes the grounds of trust. At the same time, it is the *knowledge* about it that create the feelings of deception more than anything. Like when the child reveals that the emperor's new clothes are just an illusion, Hans' characters are suddenly undressed and naked when they are revealed as fictional, and we read Malin and Flisan's texts with different eyes.

## **Trying to re-establish frames**

### ***Many questions***

The distrustful mood and insecurity that followed in the days after the revelation were most of all rooted in a lack of answers, from Hans as well as the Organisation. Many questions were asked, both addressed to Hans and his characters as well as to the Organisation throughout the revelation process and afterwards. First as related

to Ingse's claims towards Malin & co. If the claims were right, shouldn't the new list mistress be the one to check it out further?

Hi!

I think that this is a lot more serious than what you try to make it. I want that our new list mistress (has the Organisation appointed someone yet?) takes care of this.

Mona

How had Hans been accepted as list member when he was male, and had his characters now been removed from the list or were they still lurking around, reading but not participating actively? Was anything done by the Organisation to prevent something like this to happen again? Mona had heard a rumour that someone would take charge of the list in the future:

Besides, if what I heard Saturday is true, that the Organisation has decided to take charge of the list and employ a list mistress/lisbitch – I am one of those who bend my knees in grace. I and many others have been asking for this for a long time.

Mona

Oda supported Mona in her reply, and asked for a stricter check-up of new list members:

I applaud this...if it is a decision. Please double check all identities before they are allowed on the list...!

JB stated that the list mistress should be the one to take charge of checking up on 'suspicious' memers, and not private list members:

Unfortunately I think it is true that there is one or a few persons that have played theater and lived a pseudo life on Sapfo. Yes, it is a creepy thought. But what the heck...a little trauma it is, but we should live with it. And besides it is an open list.

But I feel split. Partly in relation to how the revelation happened – it is not fair really that some people sit around hacking and reveal list members on a list owned by the Organisation (it would hardly happen on a different Organisation's forum ?). But at the same time I am very relieved that this puzzle is solved – there are many of us who have felt a little puzzled by some of these former personalities. But I wish for future revelations that one turns to the list mistress or the Organisation when one suspect something.

Others raised the issue of future organizing and if anonymous self presentation as a practice should be changed as a result of what had happened. Mia suggested two possible choices:

The snag is that if we start requiring openness on an anonymous list then everyone or no-one have to be open. I want all women to think about their own security in the first hand. I don't need anyone's home address to feel that it is a person that I believe in, in particular when maybe there's a complete crazy fool on the list that definitely should not have anyone's private information. Please, girls, we have to try and find a balance in this – for our own sake. If we don't there are actually only two choices, either to let Sapfo be an anonymous list or maybe also start a new one, closed, for those who want better control. The one option doesn't necessarily have to exclude the other.

### ***Dilemmas of organizing forms: open and 'unsafe' – or closed and 'safe'?***

The way that Sapfo is organized, as an easy-access mailing list without public archives with no requirements of being a member of the Organisation, has a major advantage: For all those women who question their sexual identity, or live closeted, it is a fairly easy way to get in touch with a social network without revealing any personal information through a personal name, or even, a physical image of the participant. At the same time, as we have seen, the easy access is also what made it possible for Hans to use a number of characters. The question that needs to be considered when starting a social network in general, is what is seen as the most functional solution in trying to fulfill the social purposes for a majority of the potential participants:

‘New ways of establishing and of hiding identity are evolving in the virtual world. There is no formula that works best in all forums: balancing privacy and accountability, reliability and self-expression, security and accessibility requires a series of compromises and trade-offs whose value is very dependent on the goals of the group and of the individuals that comprise it.’ (Donath 1999: 56).

In today's virtual landscape, multi-functional online communities (to a large degree run by commercial actors) have more or less taken over and replaced what once was a text-only space, also regarding queer communities (O'Riordan 2005). In these spaces, where flirting and making sexual contacts are central parts of the social functions, identification through a photo enhances the status of a community member. This is something that also Sommer has found in her research of net-dating communities in Norway (Sommer 2003). In this case, a mailing list network for queer women where the primary social purpose is not to meet for romantic or sexual purposes, the mailing list is in many ways a simple and effective way of organizing.

A core question is, as Donath points out, not so much if it is *possible* to have requirements of identity confirmation in one way or another in order to make identity deception more difficult. The question is: what is more important? Keeping anonymity an option, and the freedom of not being connected to an identifiable person, but risking identity deception? Or, not allowing anonymous self presentations, making it more difficult for queer people who are not open about their sexuality to participate, and thereby shutting out an important target group? As Lisa reflects:

Sapfo is an open list, something that means that anyone CAN join it, using whatever mail address. Some other lists require that you are recommended by someone that is already a member. Sapfo does not have any such restriction. I think, but I am not sure, that one of the reasons that the Organisation wants their lists to be open is exactly that those who do not know anybody in the GLBT-world can have an opportunity to access some sort of community and discussion group. Like, I am not lonely in the world even though I don't know a gay person within 50 kilometers.

But it also implies that anyone can claim to be anyone. This seems to represent a certain safety for people if you judge after how many who actually use 'weird' e-mail addresses.

But it also implies that we can NEVER have any guarantees that John Doe does NOT join the list. On the contrary I think spontaneously that John Doe would soon get tired and leave the list since it probably has nothing to give him. If anyone stays on the list one should suppose that the discussions have something to give him/her.

List members had different opinions about the future organizing of the list. After a while, the subject died out however, something that to a large degree can be related to the lack of a responsible actor to communicate with.

### ***Few answers***

No opinions or reflections regarding these issues came from the Organisation in the period following the revelation though. If there really was a new list mistress she was completely silent, and no-one knew if there had been any changes in subscription practices, or what the Organisation thought about changing the structure of the list.

I had many questions myself as to how the revelation would affect the group in the future. Would Malin/Hans be right in her/his predictions about Sapfo dying? Was breaking illusions of the list as a safe space and who the Other potentially could be too much? Were the feelings of betrayal and deception too heavy a burden to



bear? And what did list members think about the things that had happened, about identity, credibility, the Internet, and Sapfo as a community? In the process of engaging in a more active dialogue with the list, I also slowly realized that my project was about to change in its focus too, following my rapidly developing research context.



## **Interlude. What is it that I am researching, really?**

Doing ethnography is always risky business – something which is also the great pleasure and thrill of doing it: you simply never know what is going to happen. This wasn't only exciting. I – in line with the other participants – literally felt that we were participating in a mix of a soap opera and a thriller at the same time.

Both in relation to my previous study, as well as other research of online contexts, I knew that studying group culture in online environments was challenging in a particular way. Especially in groups where its members and what binds them together is nothing else than the list community itself, and the benefit they get from participating in it is tied to the group interaction as such. As in my case, if one is after catching participation patterns in the group as a social unit in itself, there is one important thing that is crucial to be able to carry out the research: activity. And that the group doesn't dissolve and stop existing during the way – because one is simply dependent on time to be able to see patterns and interpret cultural codes that are created in the interactions. This fact was an important reason for choosing the form of e-mail mediated discussion lists as my site when I started out, because they, when they are successful, have a stable core of participants and activity over time. Of course I was hoping that this would continue throughout my observation period:

8/12

*I haven't written for a long time now, even if a lot has happened. Think I used the whole of last week to just take in and reflect upon what the incident actually means, and how it affects my project – in every way. I have all the time been conscious that what I get access to through the debate messages are discursive constructions, that what I can actually say something about is this level and not what the one who writes thinks and feels in relation to who this 'is'. But I had not thought that the list can actually be used 'to play theater' – this was a total genre crash regarding what the list represents. And this is the same for the participants according to the debate that has followed the event: most of them regard the list as a serious discussion forum where the aim should be to share thoughts and meanings related to their own lived lives. Even if you write anonymously. But it is exactly the mediation form and the existing norms, that is, the possibility of writing anonymously, that makes it possible*

*for certain people to use the group for other purposes, and to create characters that differ distinctively from who they are in real life. And then it is something with how on earth I can use the discussions analytically, what it is that they are expressions and representations of, when there are several ways to realise the genre, or that someone takes advantage of the anonymous option in order to play theater?*

Of course I expected that they would have conflicts and arguments that could at worst eventually lead to the group dissolving, but I hadn't reflected too much around the possibility of the list being used as an arena to play 'hidden theater'.

Following the events, my research focus was about to change with the context: from wanting to look for patterns and cultural codes in a relatively stable group community – to looking at the meaning and importance of one particular event, and its impact and meaning for the group:

*What is it that my eyes see and don't, and what do participants that are 'on the inside' see? As compared to the Doctor's List where I had a similar position: where exactly the participants' responses through questionnaires and interviews were very useful as perspectivizing material, exactly to get their view upon DL as related to other collegial contexts and also other mediated discussion lists)*

*Let's say that I had used the feminism- discussion as an illustration; then I would have claimed that there was a connection between what was written there and attitudes to feminism in Scandinavian lesbian subculture (as performed on the list). In a negotiation perspective..And before the revelation there were real negotiations, but on what grounds? That discussion contained firstly quite few participants in the last part of it, but who wrote quite a lot – and Hans Andersen's characters wrote many of these messages. Many of the other participants remained passive in this period, and some of them also knew that there was something fishy with some of the participants (who knew what and why??) and maybe didn't take part because of that. Because of that, a lot of that discussion becomes meaningless as an expression for a real thematic negotiation because it moves from the genre 'serious discussion' to 'theater performance'. Or...?*

To get a broader perspective of what had actually been going on behind the curtains, I decided to go to the Capital and speak to some of the participants myself.

## Chapter 9.

# Behind the curtains

2/4-03

*Two interviews today. Was extremely excited – now I would finally be able to connect texts and names with the actual places and people. I came early to my appointment with the chairperson to take a look at the Organisation's House first. And it was big! Not necessarily physically – but in relation to many office doors, bar/café in the ground floor and a flow of people. Today it was the men's senior meeting and an eager senior entertained me and told about their group while I waited for the chairperson to show up.*

I packed my bags and went to the Capital. Coming to the Capital didn't only give me the opportunity of meeting people face to face that I previously only had gotten familiar with through their texts. It was also a chance to connect names of physical places that I had read about to concrete material places. To pick up the often mentioned gay community newspapers and walk in the locations of houses and bars, taking in and feeling the pulse of ongoing activities in the minority subculture. Getting acquainted with these other social rooms made it easier to see how they were connected to Sapfo in a different way. Rooms that usually were closed to me, as they were for many other list members living outside of the Capital and the activist gay community too. It was obvious that there had been a lot more going on in other social arenas in the off-list gay community in the Capital. These rooms were connected though, also in relation to the revelation of Hans I was about to discover. Having a peak into them made me see the events in a different light, getting the privilege of a guided tour behind the curtain. What effect did these connections, and the way the list community was organized, seem to have in relation to the group dynamics of Sapfo in light of the recent conflicts on the list?

### ***Reconstructing events: what happened behind closed doors?***

Going to the Capital, I specifically wanted to try to find some answers to the questions that had been raised by many participants in the weeks following the revelation, that were left unanswered. Who was the anonymous revealer Ingse, and why did

she do it? Was the Organisation and the new anonymous list mistress involved in this process in any way, or were they as surprised as the rest of us by what came to the surface? Did Flisan & co disappear when they went silent, or were they still lurking around without speaking? Was something being done in relation to checking IP-addresses more thoroughly? And what were their reflections around these issues as list owners?

What is understood as a good way to organize net-discussion technically and socially vary. This also includes the issue of *who are understood as responsible* in relation to conflict solving amongst list owners and community members, and additionally, *how responsibility is enacted*. How did central actors relate to and negotiate the discourse of netiquette in reconstructing events, and how did they reflect around their choices and experiences when trying to solve the conflicts in practice?

## **The Organisation's board: careless owners or invisible involved actors?**

During the first day, I had scheduled talks with two members of the Organisation's board; its male chairperson and one of its female members who had been an active member on Sapfo for many years. Several things were quite unclear to me as to how the responsibility for the list was handled within the board. Was there a particular board member responsible for the list? Who was the new anonymous list mistress and how did these two instances communicate with each other? In my previous study, the list administrators had taken care of the technical and social sides of running the lists, as well as being active participants in the discussions themselves. In that sense, it was quite clear who list members should turn to in matters of conflict. Sapfo was organized differently from the start, where the list mistress solely took care of subscriptions and other technical issues. If there were conflicts that remained unsolved for a longer period of time, she would contact the board, who would then discuss the situation and decide what actions to take. Usually this had led to that the group worked themselves out of conflicts, but there had been few episodes where excluding members was necessary.

Following the conflict with the TS-feminism-discussion though, the policy and practice seemed to be in the process of changing. When Helena was thrown out of Sapfo, a letter was sent to the list by a new anonymous list mistress, including a more specific statement of social rules about what was seen as accepted behavior on Sapfo and not. It was further announced on the list

that for the future, the new list mistress would be responsible for the social issues in the group in particular, to see to that the outlined rules for behavior as stated in the letter were followed. What was confusing to me, as well as to other members who kept posting questions to the Organisation on Sapfo after the revelation, was that neither the new list mistress nor the Organisation spoke on the list again. Was the group still expected to sort out conflicts by themselves as previously, or was it the case that the new list mistress would be more actively involved as a link between the group and the Organisation? What was it that the new list mistress would do that was different from previous practice, and why hadn't she or the Organisation spoken on the list during the months after the revelation? Was something done behind the curtains that list members couldn't see?

### ***Keeping hats apart: Conflicting roles in times of conflict***

Nina was both an active list member as well as a board member in the Organisation. I was hoping that she could give me more information about what the Organisation had been doing during the long period with the two related conflicts. Nina did not wish to be seen as a representative for the Organisation on the list though, she told me. She had made it clear several times on the list that she was a member of Sapfo as a private person, not as a representative for the Organisation:

Nina: I have been very explicit with stating that I am there as a private person, because I feel that I cannot be polemic all the time – if people feel that every time they are angry at the Organisation, Nina will reply, then I will take that function too, and I don't feel like it. [...]

On the other hand, she and another female board member had taken special responsibilities behind the curtains, 'off-list', if there were conflicts on the list:

N: But at the same time I feel as a member of the Organisation's board that I have a responsibility for the list to work in line with the Organisation's policy. I and the other board member who is active on the list have been in touch during this whole period, in particular when Helena was active, but also when Flisan was harassing transpersons at her worst.

Finding a way out of the conflicts became a particular challenge when the political disagreements on Sapfo hardened and remained unsolved for longer than usual in the self-governed community. Where should the line be drawn for what was considered acceptable and not? This was a returning topic in the Organisation's board meetings according to Nina, when the harassment of transsexuals increasingly became a problem:

N: Then we were in touch to see if there were possibilities for throwing either of those out. But then it would (think) then we were forced to find some sort of policy that we could support ourselves with – it was difficult to find that policy – we had no clear policy in that question. So we both raised this issue on the Organisation's board meeting many times and discussed what happened on Sapfo. There were several transpersons that were extremely hurt by the hateful mood related to if transpersons should be part of the list and that turned to the board asking if we were doing something about it, so we were [really uncertain]; how much can one accept and not accept.

What could be done and how? Since nobody else had a specific responsibility as a social moderator on the list, Nina and the other board member acted on behalf of the board. They took charge of writing a letter in order to put an end to the TS-feminism discussion, but without signing with their own names, or as the board. The letter was instead signed with the nick-name of 'the new anonymous list mistress'. It stated in detail what would be considered acceptable behavior for the future, announcing that continuing the discussion of transsexualism would not be accepted and would result in being excluded from Sapfo. It further announced that a list member, Helena, was taken off the list because of expressing controversial opinions in relation to pedophilia. Drawing the lines for 'acceptable' vs 'not acceptable' behavior was however not an easy task, Nina says, and to decide if the participants harassing transpersons should be excluded or not:

N: Because people must be able to express critical opinions about trans-questions on a list owned by the Organisation – one cannot just allow opinions that unite with our principle program... But at the same time, how far can it go? So in the end we succeeded in working out this policy, that you can question transsexualism in the same way that you can question bisexuality or lesbianism; does it exist or is it a disease, but you are not allowed to attack specific persons on the list and say that 'you are not a lesbian' or 'all transsexuals are prostitutes' or whatever. Those kinds of



attacks are not allowed. *So at the same time that I was a private person on the list, I was actually taking action in the board, it was difficult not to.*

The topic of how to create borders for what should be accepted behavior and not, both as related to content as well as form, is a classical issue on mediated discussion groups (Gotved 1999, Munch 1997). To actively moderate a discussion group in term of its content, is often understood as a questionable practice. The interpretation of acting against the free-speech principles of the Net is easy at hand, even if the *practice* of regulation differ widely between mediated discussion groups (Donath 1999).

When I interviewed the list owners of the lists in my former study, this was also a central and returning issue in relation how they performed their roles as list administrators (Bromseth 2000). What should be accepted behavior, who were responsible for making that decision and how should it be dealt with? On these two lists, drawing the line for 'accepted' vs 'not accepted behavior' were always carried out by the list administrators. Compared to Sapfo, they had both initiated the lists themselves, and were both technically and socially responsible for the groups.<sup>87</sup> In line with Nina, they were both active participants in their own groups and struggled sometimes to keep their different roles as 'participant' and 'administrator' apart, mostly by switching hats by signing administrative messages adding 'list administrator' to their names. There was, however, no doubt for participants who they 'were', since they participated with their full names, anonymous self presentations not being allowed for any list member.

Through the anonymous status of the new list mistress, Nina was acting formally on behalf of the Organisation's board. Instead of taking the position of list mistress officially, she considered the anonymous self presentation as a practical solution to be able to continue to be a regular list member and parallel to this take charge, using different pseudonyms. To separate different functions and roles through dividing them in two personae like this, is an option made possible by the mediated technology which is not possible in most other social life contexts. By separating them, Nina was able to be an ordinary participant in the mediated group, and at least tone down the board member function that she has off-line.

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<sup>87</sup> How they performed these tasks within the respective groups was however quite different, as well as the degree and forms of the conflicts, an issue I will return to towards the end of the chapter. See also Bromseth 2001.

### ***Revealing the cross-dresser: blurry connections***

In the TS-feminism conflict, the Organisation took formal responsibility through an anonymous list mistress. But what was the Organisation's part in relation to the revelation process, if any? On the surface, officially on the list, they had no visible part in the process. Nina could fill me in, though, when she continued to explain what had happened afterwards, following the TS-feminism-discussion and before the revelation was made public:

N: And then, when Kaia became upset – partly on Helena and Flisan and partly on the Organisation, in relation to this question, and when also Marple became angry about this, then they jumped off the list. And then after a while they contacted me, and it appeared that they tried to trace who Flisan and Malin and their crowd was. So me and the other board member, along with Kaia and Marple, we actually worked together, on how we were to trace IP-numbers and such.

Nina and the other board member chose to be part of the secret tracing process that some of the other members had started, in trying to find out who the aggressive discussants from the Feminist House were, seeing it as a way out of the conflict situation. She questions, however, if her own position of being a board member and being involved in tracing several participants on one of the Organisation's e-mail lists was legitimate, since Sapfo builds upon the principle of anonymity:

N: It might not have been [...] I ought to think a little bit about how correct it is (laughs) to be in the Organisation's board and to trace IP-numbers really (laughs). But we didn't really see any other way to act..Are you with me – do you understand what I am saying?

J: Well, because it is sort of, seen from the outside then [...]

N: yes

J: when you don't know who are who and everything [...]

N: No

J: Then it looked like there was an anonymous person who reveals [...]

N: No

J: I can also imagine that it wasn't just anyone, really, but [...]

N: No

J: But it must have happened a lot behind the curtains then, that you don't have access to as a regular list member

N: Exactly, one could say that Flisan was harassing transpersons for such a long time – people were so tired of it, when Helena came into the list Flisan went berserk – she just went berserk – she started harassing so extremely that the transpersons that were there as list members jumped off the list, and that in turn led to that they [Kaia and Marple] felt that we can't take this, we'll try to trace them and then we revealed the whole gang.

As compared to the formal letter sent to the list by the anonymous list mistress, it is not so clear what 'hat' Nina is wearing when tracing IP-numbers with her friends, something that she also expresses discomfort in relation to.

### ***Making connections between Sapfo, other mediated spaces and material places***

Nina told me that finding Hans Andersen behind the users actually was a coincidence, and was related to his participation in another discussion group owned by the Organisation where Nina had been a central part through her activist work:

N: But I think it was a pure coincidence that we found out that it was Hans Andersen – it was because we could compare IP-numbers. Hans Andersen is not a member of Sapfo – are you with me? He is not a member of Sapfo, he is a member of the bisexuality-list.

J: Mmmm

N: So in reality we could just compare Flisan, Malin, Nicole and Anna and Agira's IP-numbers. They were the same. But that didn't really tell us anything. But by pure coincidence, it happened that once when Sapfo's server was down, and the bisexuality-list's server also was down, we were a few people who e-mailed each other about this, amongst others Hans Andersen then, and then his address was saved in one of the girl's address book

J: aha

N: So when she compared the IP-numbers, Hans Andersen appeared. And then I understood – then I was able to link them, then I understood; yes, but it is him.

Nina had met Hans Andersen in person several times through working with bisexuality-issues, and they had also both been active on the bisexuality-list that she started a year before Sapfo was started:

J: One of the things I got a little curious about, is that it is a person that you... that one of the things that led to the revelation in the end was that someone had met this person in person, but none of the other women?

N: mmm (thinks). I think it is... I think it is a little creepy actually (break)

When participating on the bisexuality-list Hans expressed admiration for Nina and her political work on several occasions. Nina felt retrospectively quite uncomfortable about on one hand having met him occasionally as Hans - and at the same time - being harassed by one of his characters on Sapfo in the TS-feminism debate. She suggested that the harassment could be rooted in a conflict that took place on the bisexuality-list, that similar to Sapfo involved both Helena and her controversial opinions of pedophilia:

N: He became disappointed with the bisexuality-list, he became disappointed with ... he became extremely disappointed with the Organisation, he became disappointed even with me ... And then Malin and the crowd came into Sapfo, where in particular Flisan has had a pretty nasty campaign towards the Organisation then

J: mmm

N: And I have been called organisation top brass and lots of other names

J: mmm

N: mmm. Parallel to this I have run into Hans Andersen here on the house, because he is here

N: It is unpleasant that it is a person that I know IRL

J: mmm

N: So... So that (break) Yes, I think it is unpleasant. Really unpleasant (whispers)

Nina's story made some important pieces fall into place. The Organisation's board, which in the list room of Sapfo itself seemed

to be completely inactive as list owners and actors, had in fact been highly involved, through its female members, in trying to solve the conflicts on the list. Since they additionally were acting non-officially by using anonymous voices instead of as the Organisation, though, it was difficult for other list members to know who it was that actually took action and why. This choice might be understood in relation to the fact that as a visible and active person in the gay movement, there is a constant issue that Nina not only meets list members on the list, but also outside of it, in other places and mediated spaces. The online-offline connections she describes seems to be a resource as well as a challenge, in relation to what happened. In trying to figure out what actions to take, discussing backstage with friends and organisation colleagues is valuable. Discovering that the multiple-identity cross-dresser on Sapfo is a familiar person in the off-line subculture is an upsetting experience.

### ***Off-list or on-list strategies for conflict solving on mailing lists***

What did really happen to Hans and his characters after the revelation? The chairperson of the board could additionally inform me that also the removal Hans' characters was done by the Organisation:

J: I don't know what it was...because what puzzles me is that there never was any formal announcement from the list mistress – those persons just **disappeared**

Chairperson: mmm

J: so if it was Hans who didn't...who took them away, or who it was that removed them, that...I don't know [...]

Chairperson: He had help in disappearing [...]

J: Exactly [...]

Chairperson:...from the list. We were contacted by members that felt humiliated and betrayed – it was a **man** on the list

J:mmm... okay – so they turned to the anonymous list mistress?

Chairperson: mmm

J: and then you got to know about it

Trying to solve conflicts privately was a strategy that I recognized from the Doctor's List as well, where its list administrator often

chose to write privately to people who overstepped the line of accepted behavior. This was an approach that could potentially save the list itself from getting too far into destructive meta-discussions, he explained, taking the focus away from the actual discussions the list was meant for. The list administrator of the Radical Forum, on the other hand, was strongly against off-list strategies, being preoccupied with having an openness with the list in relation to all decisions concerning it: 'I always write to the list that now I will take this or that action. And then I am quite safe, right, because since there is no big prestige in the decision, I can just reverse it, and that has happened on the grounds of reactions from the others on the list.' (interview quote, from Bromseth 2000:58).

Reflecting after the interview with the chairperson and Nina, it puzzled me why they chose to act using pseudonyms instead of as the Organisation:

*In light of the conversations I am happy that I had a chance to get a peek backstage. The intentions of Nina and her gang were after all good. It was an action to try to make a change. But why did they choose to do it in this way? Why didn't they only take charge as the Organisation formally??*

The answer to this question had several aspects. One of them seemed to be related to what I learned from speaking to Marple; who presented the revelation process from a slightly different position, as the initiating hacker who started the tracing process herself, inviting others – including the board – to join her on the way.

## **Bumping into the initiating hacker: Marple takes action**

Marple was one of the most active participants on Sapfo since I joined it, as well as being an activist in the gay community in the Capital, and I was quite curious of what she had to tell me. As a matter of fact, it turned out that it was Marple that had initiated the whole tracing process, provoked by the identity political discussion and the form it took. It was related to the heated discussion about transsexuality and feminism. Marple got upset both because she herself was questioned by Flisan & co as a feminist, and because of the harassment towards transsexual members of Sapfo:

Marple: No, I just became angry...these people questioned me and said that I was not a feminist because I didn't have the same opinions as them, and that's exactly what I hate the most, when other people try to label what other people are, like 'you're not lesbian, you're bisexual cause you've been with a guy', I mean you just don't do that – people should make up their own status, right. And then I got angry and jumped off the list.

Something wasn't right, and Marple decided to check it out further.

### ***Suspicious taking form: this must be the women from the Feminist House***

The characters defining themselves as 'orthodox feminists' presented themselves as part of a small feminist group in the Capital. From her activist experiences, Marple was familiar with the feminists from the Feminist House and was able to identify the opinions on the list as similar because of this knowledge. However, Marple wondered how there could be so many of them, referring to their opinions as being quite marginal in the queer/lesbian and feminist community:

J: But what did you think about the persons fronting the 'orthodox feminist movement' (laughs) so overwhelmingly – what did you think about them?

M: Ok, well, first I thought 'my god, do people like this really exist? Do there really exist people who think like that?' And it does – that's the thing – it does – there are people at the Feminist House who think like that.

Marple had over the years had a lot of contact with other list members in the Country, both in the Capital and outside of it. She told me that they have speculated for years about some of the users on the list in relation to if they existed or not:

M: Because there are not so many girls who actually do something in the Capital, even if it looks like that sometimes (laughs), it's just that we who do something do a lot

[...]

So there were a few of us that spoke with each other, thinking 'it must be the ones from the Feminist House'. But then I thought

that... But they were so many, sort of, and I thought that that was a little frightening.

[...]

Marple was convinced that she knew who she would find behind one of the nicknames in her trace, relating it in particular to certain opinions that she recognized from other occasions and discussions in the feminist environments. She suggests that communicating through the Internet contributes to cultivating certain aspects of selves:

M: I don't think that the Internet **creates** personalities, I think that the Internet makes the personalities that can't be shown in daylight among other people when you can be identified. So that's why I thought a little – 'this is Dina from the Feminist House', you know, 'this is what she means and the way she thinks – this is **her**'.

The target of the suspicions was Dina Helle, the chairperson of the Feminist House. Was she the one harassing transsexuals through the anonymous character of Flisan, or some of the others who positioned themselves as representing the Feminist House? Marple had to check it out. Having computer skills, she decided to use them to find out who was behind the 'women from the Feminist House':

M: And then I sat there for a couple of days in my chamber and thought about it and then I thought that 'hell no', this must be one and the same and then I started checking my old e-mails – because I save a selection and had almost a year of old mails in my e-mail box. And then when I check through the e-mails it's the same IP-address that comes up everywhere in relation to these people.

During the trace, there were also linguistic overlaps that made Marple suspect that several participants could be produced by the same person:

M: Because it was then when I started to, when they in the end all went on about these 350 participants who just listened – you know like 'but there are 350 subscribers to the list, what should they think' that described all these users in the end, and it was then that I thought that 'but this is really, this must be one and the same'.



When she had made links between some of the users and their IP-address from her stored archive, she wanted to check out some of the other participants that she also suspected, by going in as a different user. Talking about specific issues, she was hoping that some of them would reply to so that she could see what IP-address they were writing from:

M: And then I went in as another user, to try to make some of them write. Because I was a little uncertain of a couple, if they were the same person.

J: aaa..It was you that was New-Marple?

M: Mmm, New Marple, yes (laughs)

J: (laughs)

After jumping off the list, Marple decided to involve some of her friends in the process of trying to trace who 'the gang of four' could be, creating a small private e-mail list so that they could be in touch during the process:

J: and then you got support from Nina?

[...]

M: Yes that's it.. Eh... No, how was that again? (thinks) Yes, but it was like this that when I jumped off the list we started our own little list so that we e-mailed to... five-ten I think it was in the end, that we picked people that we liked for this loop, and then we talked a lot about that this probably was the same person, and so I informed everyone all the time of what I found out, and told them too about the two other men that I found. And then I also told the others when I started looking for these people and started searching the net on their IP-addresses, and all the time I informed them of how it all developed and so.

[...]

The revelation itself was also performed by Marple, by using a third pseudonym 'Ingse':

M: And then I revealed everything as a third person [...] I didn't want to be connected to it at all, so that's why I went in as a third participant when I revealed. And later I became a list member again (laughs)

Both Marple and Nina were quite surprised by who they actually found in their trace:

M: I thought it was really weird that these people lived like – one of them lived in the Pyrenees (laughs) and one lived in France and had lived in a convent – it was so dramatic everything. So I thought that maybe it all wasn't true, but I didn't know for sure if was or not [...] But I never thought that they were one and the same – I never thought that.

Both the fact that the person writing was not only multiple, but also male, came as a surprise to the revealers as much as to the regular list members. Marple said that she doesn't expect people to be 'who they say they are', or even consider it relevant for what is communicated:

M: What is interesting is what people think and feel, because that is something that you cannot really hide, that is what I thought. But obviously you can (laughs), or what should I say, I don't know – if a man can express things like that so...

In the quote, Marple took as a point of departure for her interpretations that what is expressed and communicated on a mailing list is a form of a written variant of a 'true self', and not 'fictional writing'. Her suspicions were based on the recognition of certain political opinions that had been expressed by an organisation in off-line feminist environments. They were clearly connected to Marple's and the others' experience and knowledge from subcultural activities in the Capital, and specific political discussions about feminism that had taken place. At first, the tracing was motivated by finding out *who* was behind certain characters, if it was a political enemy who was creating a bad mood on the list. Accidentally, though, they discovered that the participants that they traced were in fact written by the same person, who additionally was male, and this was what was foregrounded while the political aspect was toned down.

### ***Using technical skills for a good purpose***

Like Nina, Marple was upset about the form the discussion took out of concern for transsexual members on Sapfo, and how it affected them emotionally. As I experienced Nina being slightly uncomfortable with talking about what happened, and her own part in it, Marple seemed to be proud of taking action in the middle of a

situation that upset her deeply, using her technical skills for a good purpose:

M: It was then I decided that, because I thought, I know a lot, I have been a computer technician before, so I know a lot of technical stuff. And I felt that I don't want to use it against people – because I can really trace anyone. To what computer company they use, to what town they are situated in. And if I wanted to, I could go even further so that I in the end would know who it was. But I am not interested in doing that because it is an anonymous forum and I respect that. But that's when I decided that I have to check this out.

Marple made tracing people through their IP-adresses an ethical issue that she considers not defensible in all cases, in order to respect the right to be anonymous. What made the action of tracing legitimate in this case was the purpose of trying to protect the list's transsexual members:

M: The most important part in that discussion was exactly the trans-question. [...] And then when these persons on the list started to trigger this discussion so much I got extremely irritated, because there are transsexuals that are members of the list, but who don't dare to say that they are transsexual and who have been applauded by these persons [Flisan & co] earlier because they don't know that it is a transsexual. So I was just angry – it makes me angry that people have to get upset just because they read Sapfo and there is an idiot that is saying stupid things.

[...]

As other participants had mentioned both in the list messages, as well as in my interviews, Marple had for a long time suspected that some of Hans' characters were not living persons. But it wasn't until the ongoing conflicts during the fall that she thought it was a problem that they could be non-existing. However, this was not related to gender. The problem with using four or five characters on the list, according to Marple, was that a certain opinion seemed to be supported by more people than what was actually the case, and hence, it was a democratic problem:

J: But nothing happened before this fall. Was it because it became a problem that these persons weren't real, that you decided to do something?

M: Well, the thing is... The reason that I... It was a problem. The most important reason was probably that these people behaved on the list like they didn't know each other, and it became like 'we are so and so many in our crowd' and 'we are this many that think like this and you are this many who think like that' and I knew that most of us – I can't speak for all transsexuals, but the ones who discuss most often on the list were real people.

The motives for revealing, then, were related both to a political disagreement and an emotional reaction on behalf of an offended group who didn't speak up for themselves, and who were affected because of the aggressive style in the discussion. There is, according to Marple, a basic problem with using several voices in the group when it is related to participating in a political discussion. This can be related to the principle of 'one man, one vote' where measuring the amount of support of an argument became difficult, as one man suddenly had four voices – and votes. In a context with political discussions as part of the social aims in the group, speaking through multiple characters was problematic because it would threaten the democratic premises for the system.

Marple draws the picture of a locked situation, describing a conflict that the group wasn't able to get out of by themselves, and legitimizes her actions on this background. On one hand she, as a technically skilled computer user, expresses resistance towards tracing list members in the anonymous forum even if she knows how to do it. On the other, it can be legitimized when it is for 'the betterment of humanity'. This argumentation follows a virtue of ethics that can be recognized from the 'hacker culture', where using technological expertise to commit illegal actions is defensible to 'fight the evil', roughly said (Levy 1984). In addition to this, there also seems to be a playful aspect in relation to the revelation process. During our talk, Marple gave the impression that she was having fun when playing around with using new user names and pretending to be different personas in tracing and revealing the multiple-identity cross-dresser on the list.

When performing the revelation on the list, she considered using her real name, but she didn't feel comfortable with the idea. This was more than anything related to Sapfo's relation to off-line subcultural places in the Capital, where things that take place on the list can have consequences for the social life off-line:

M: So if I had gone in and revealed everything under my real name in front of everyone, I don't know – it didn't feel good in a way. Then anyone could come up to me in the bar and say something or you know, so... I don't want that

J: Did you think it felt a little frightening in a way [...]?

M: yes

Similar to Nina then, she chose to split the performance of different actions on the list into different characters, where the 'real Marple', who was participating on the list with her real name, is protected from being publicly responsible for questionable actions.

## Conflict solving, ownership and responsibility: what is 'the best' for a list?

Marple enhanced that it is important in general that a list community is able to solve their own conflicts, something that also the members of Sapfo often talked of with pride and as a resource in their community:

Marple: The last time we discussed transsexualism, then we solved it ourselves, and then... I think that you should await the situation too, to see if it solves itself, because that is the best for a list.

When I asked her what she thought of how the transsexualism conflict was handled during the fall, though, she said that as opposed to earlier discussions, the conflict had become destructive to Sapfo this time. Something should have been done by the Organisation on an earlier stage to stop it from developing because of the form that it took. In particular since the Organisation represents the group of transsexuals, who were emotionally affected by it:

M: The Organisation then, who is supposed to be an organisation for transsexuals, gays and bisexuals... Then you can't have a list where one allows that people are ridiculed and where you again and again discuss part of its members and a part of its own members. Eh.. it's like if they had allowed the Christian Democrats or something to sit there and ridicule homosexuals

[...]

And I think that **then** the Organisation should have gone in and said that 'okay, now we put an end to this discussion, you can

think whatever you want, it's a free country, **but** we don't lead that discussion here'. Because it's not about wanting to stop a discussion, but it's partly about where the discussion takes place and partly about how it takes place. Because if it had been led on a normal level then it would have worked a little better.

[...]

M: But then, as I said, it is actually a list owned by the Organisation. So that it's their responsibility to see to that everyone inside of their target group are comfortable on the list. And they didn't... And that was kind of stupid (break)

In Marple's opinion, having an active list mistress taking responsibility would have been a better alternative to the flat structure in the long run:

M: So that's what the Organisation should have done and they did it too late. One should have had a list mistress long time ago – I don't understand why one didn't have a list mistress who was active, in a way... who writes a message now and then. It's not **that** difficult.

As the group didn't have a formally responsible list mistress, or was more visibly regulated by the Organisation, opportunities also opened up for others to take this position informally:

J: Do you think that Malin became a little...that she took some of those functions?

M: mm..Since there was nobody else having that role, she jumped into it quite fast [...]

But since there was nobody there, the floor was free.

All things considered, an alternative and better way of solving the conflict, according to Marple, would have been if the Organisation themselves had taken care of the situation, as opposed to doing it informally herself:

M: Because it had been simpler and easier if they had gone in and removed these people... and then it had all been good there. But they didn't so that... Because it had been better for the list I think, that the Organisation tells that it is the same person (break). That's what I think. Yes.

Lisa, another regular long-term participant that I spoke to, said something similar as Marple, about the problems of the flat structure on Sapfo in the period of conflicts:

J: How did you think that this conflict was handled?

Lisa: Mmm... I have thought of that sometimes that now... but there is one problem; that Sapfo has never had an active list mistress, someone who has taken care of the discussions, it has been a free forum. And that's the difference. Because on other [discussion] lists, where people join it because you have the same profession or an interest or so, there is often someone who regulate the discussions a little. Who e-mails a warning; 'let's lower the waves, no personal attacks', things like that. And we have never had that on Sapfo, it has been self censored or what I should call it. **But now** we could have needed someone, who took some responsibility. I think that it will have a hard time in getting going again spontaneously, and become so active

J: Mmm

Lisa: Actually (break). That's what I think. And I don't know how one... I don't know if there has been a discussion within the Organisation either actually, if one should do something, or if one should just wait and see what happens... I haven't heard anything

However, she thought that the anonymous revelation the way it happened was no good solution either. Unlike the other two, she was not a part of the secret 'revelation gang':

J: What did you think about the whole revelation process and the way it was done?

L: Oh yes, I thought that was a little odd too. Because there has been some **talking** privately, and on other places and such, **that** these weren't real persons... But from my perspective, it wasn't so important to find out if they were. So I wondered about that too – because I don't know who she was, the one who revealed – and why really bother so much to find out if they were fake persons

J: mmm (break)

L: I don't know....Because I didn't think that was so normal... Too wonder so much. Or I don't know – maybe that is what other people do? For me it was enough with people's e-mail address – I didn't have to know so much. I thought rather that it was an advantage that you don't always know so much about this person

J: mmm (break)

L: I would never have bothered to **do** that reflection

[...]

L: And I also wondered about who this person was [the revealer], and what the motives were. Sometimes I have thought that maybe it was himself that **wanted** to be revealed.

L: And I thought it was a little **wrong** to reveal it on the list. If I had another function on the list than being just a regular list member, I hadn't thought that one should send it out to the whole list [...]

J: mmm.. If you had had an organisational part in it?

L: ...to keep the list. And at the same time I know that Sapfo haven't had a controlling function like that. So that there is no such person that could have done that

Both Marple and Lisa pointed out that not having a responsible list mistress in the period of conflicts was a problem, because of the growing harassing tone that the discussions were characterized by, affecting individual participants. Whereas Marple took action to solve the situation by finding out who was behind the nicknames, in the lack of action from the board of the Organisation, Lisa did not see the connection between text and typist as relevant for what took place on the list. This was also an opinion that she fronted in the discussions after the revelation: if participants behave properly and find value in participating on Sapfo, that should be qualifying to be accepted as a list member.

## **Conflicts, regulation and responsibility in the anonymous subcultural on-line/off-line mailing list**

How can we understand the stories in this chapter and the reflections when the participants are re-constructing the conflicts that took place on Sapfo as well as the process of trying to solve them?

First of all, they reconstruct the events and their part in them on the basis of some changes in the interaction context: how the flat structure and organizing of the list that worked previously became a problem during a period with severe conflicts without a



closure. More specifically, they are stories of two conflicts on a mailing list that are related to each other, in the sense that the political conflict make the grounds for and motivates the revelation following it. In relation to their contents, they are both negotiations of the boundaries for what should be accepted behavior and not in the group: the interaction norms and membership criteria. They differ, though, as to *what* exactly is seen as problematic and further, how they are dealt with and the actors that deal with them: 1) In the first case, the focus is on how to regulate personal attacks and harassing behavior, which is dealt with formally and visibly by the anonymous list mistress, whereas 2) the claims put forward saying that four participants are written by one person are dealt with anonymously and informally, involving the Organisation, but in practice on the initiative of a regular long-term participant.

The cultural/subcultural context and the mediated context are both particularly relevant in these re-constructions: The stories about the conflicts and the ways they are dealt with show that the subcultural context is important; that it is a restricted subculture in the capital of a small country. Several other social rooms apart from the list context itself, and the humans that act in them, are connected. Secondly, the mediated context – that the group is a text- and internet-mediated community is relevant. Both as an interactional frame creating premises for modes of communication, but also on a discursive level, where discourses about 'how we should do group discussion (and not) on the Net' are central resources of interpretation that my informants relate to and negotiate with when they tell their stories.

### ***Hegemonic discourses about netiquette: non-regulation and free speech as democratic ideal***

The first conflict represents a common issue on mediated discussion groups (as well as in politics in general): where the form of the discussion is perceived as offensive by some of the participants in the group when having a political disagreement. This, in turn, leads to a 'meta-debate' about discussion norms as such: how to draw the lines for what should be seen as acceptable behavior – and what should not be accepted.

Who is responsible for making the decision of where 'the line' should be drawn, when participants are not able to reach a solution within the group, and when the group has no practice of having an actively responsible list mistress? This is a central question in the stories and is obviously an issue of confusion, both from the side of the list owners as well as the participants, in different ways. When it comes to how Sapfo is organized on a scale ranging from 'strictly regulated' on one side to 'anarchic/non-regulated' on the other, it

is clearly situated on the latter end of the scale – also as a net-mediated group.

Nina, Marple and Lisa emphasize that 'the best for a list' is that it is able to solve its own conflicts collectively. At the same time, they point to the problematic sides of not having an active moderator. The first conflict became destructive for the list community because it was unclear who was responsible for making decisions and because no one took charge before it had gone too far. It was not until long-term participants threatened to leave the group that the board members decided that something had to be done actively to prevent the group to dissolve. Resistance against regulation of discussions can be characterized as hegemonic values in the discourse of 'netiquette' within the genre of mediated discussion groups, often related to the principle of freedom of speech and democracy (Haug et al 1999, Bromseth 2001). In general, the libertarian ideology of the net as a more democratic arena with non-regulation and 'free speech' for everyone is one important hegemonic ideal in the discourse of organizing net-discussion and netiquette (Herring 1996b, Haug et al 1999). It is a dominating discourse in the sense that it is something that participants and list owners negotiate with when they reflect around alternative ways to solve the conflicts:

"The hegemonic values within this discourse can be seen to have an influence on which interactional frames are chosen and produced in a specific group [...] where certain values are ascribed high status and others low status in the discourse of what Net discussion 'is' and 'should be', and can thereby be seen as more accessible and chooseable than others (Bromseth 2001: 84).

The discourse of 'freedom of speech' has a built-in understanding that to regulate discussions actively could lead to the misuse of power by the person in charge, and thereby threaten democratic principles. The aspect of power rarely disappears within unregulated discourses, though, but rather takes other forms, being negotiated informally instead of formally (Munch 1997, Bromseth 2000). In practice, e-mail discussion groups are often organized with a formal administrator who takes charge to some point when there are conflicts, and both Marple and Lisa compare Sapfo to experiences from more regulated mailing lists that they take part in. But still *the ideal* of self-regulation as a more democratic way of organizing the group interaction seem to be reproduced in their negotiations, in spite of the experiences they refer to.

The ideal of self-regulation is in particular produced by the members I spoke to from the Organisation and put forward as the main reason that they did not formally take charge to solve the

conflict at an earlier stage. Nina expressed insecurity in relation to the rules that should count in the mediated context as well as on the issue of how to enact responsibility. On one hand they did not wish to 'violate the freedom of speech' and the previously successful anarchic structure. On the other, she described the dilemma of allowing unregulated freedom of speech because it affected a group of the Organisation's own members, transsexuals. However, the Organisation's choice of not taking action before they did was perceived as irresponsible and provoking by several long-term members, criticizing them for letting transsexuals down by allowing the harassing behavior to continue. As Kaia wrote before she jumped off the list:

People [transsexuals] who in some way or another who maybe always have existed within and worked for the Organisation, just to be attacked by a crowd of hooligans who constantly dictate the premises for how the list should be, what is allowed to be written and who should be allowed to take part.

But what make me shake with anger and sorrow is that the board didn't stop the ones who expressed their contempt and evil towards these women.

It is partly this that motivated Marple to start her trace to find out if several of the TS-harassing members were the same, and to take action when the Organisation didn't. Who was understood as 'responsible' then, in the situation, according to Kaia and Marple, was the owner of the list through its board. The understanding of what it implies to take charge is related to acting *visibly* on the list. In relation to both conflicts, the board is not passive or ignorant towards what is happening. However, this is the impression that list members are left with, as I experienced myself before I got access to the closed rooms, simply because what is done is not communicated to the group itself. The invisible actions are even more obvious in relation to the revelation, when there is no active communication between the list and its owners at all, where everything takes place behind the curtain. This shows that it is not solely a matter of whether something is being done or not, but also a matter of *how*.

### ***Self-regulation as democratic ideal and the aspect of power: liberalist or collectivist?***

The mediated context allows several choices of how to solve conflicts, as it can be done more or less visible or private/public. How do the mediated context of Sapfo and the mentioned discourses play a part in the process of dealing with the conflict?

Let's say that the discussions on Sapfo took place in a different social arena than the net. What would the situation be if the same thing happened on e.g. a meeting arranged by the Organisation? First of all, it would be likely that such a meeting had a responsible person to lead the discussions. Scandinavian culture have long traditions of regulating social events, also political meetings. It is a rare experience that one comes to a meeting and the ones who invited people to come do not take charge in one way or another. If some of the participants had started harassing transsexuals in a physical setting, they would most likely have been told to stop doing it at an early point, and if it continued, be asked to leave the meeting. In this sense, the mediated context and its discourses of 'non-regulation as a more democratic and good way of doing net-discussion' seems to be influential with respect to firstly, *what* is interpreted as acceptable behavior. Secondly, in relation to *when* to take actively charge in the conflict. But also, as Nina's story shows; the mediated context and the chosen anarchic structure makes it more difficult to 'know' how it should be dealt with, and what Sapfo's relation to the Organisation should be. On one hand, the female board members feel particularly responsible of doing something. On the other, they are hesitant as to when and how, and wearing which hat; as board members or as private persons.

There are also some other important aspects related to the micro-social list context as well as the sub-cultural context that seem important to fully understand the complete picture concerning the choices that are made. Firstly, Sapfo is collectivist-oriented in its flat structure, as opposed to liberalist, similar to other women-oriented fora and groups. Flat structure and shared social responsibility within the group unit is not an unusual way of organizing feminist/female oriented political communities in general, and is also seen on other feminist and lesbian lists (Hall 1996). Secondly, the importance of not having an active and influential list administrator was in particular enhanced by Malin, who at the same time gained a position as some kind of informal list mistress in her functions, but without having or wanting to have any formal responsibility. By arguing that being non-regulated as a group is a more democratic way of organizing net-discussion, she repeatedly made the hegemonic 'netiquette-discourse' relevant and simultaneously created a position for herself to take those functions, so to say. She several times related the background for her stances to a conflict on the bisexuality-list, that had an active list mistress that according to Malin had 'misused her power' in one specific case.<sup>88</sup> Thirdly, another dimension that could explain the

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<sup>88</sup> This specific case involved the same discussion about pedophilia as described in chapter 5, where Helena was harassed by other participants. The administrator chose to exclude Helena's harassers, and this was perceived as very upsetting by Hans, and expressed by two of his characters on Sapfo.

hesitation from the Organisation to act more visibly and earlier could be that the anarchic and self-regulating structure has been enhanced by the list itself as a positive thing and an empowering element in the group.

### ***Responsibility and group regulation: the Net makes a difference***

Even if the TS-conflict was 'officially' solved, the dialogue between the list and its owners stops here and leaves questions of future organizing in the air after the unofficial revelation. This is, according to the chairperson, not accidental, but a choice, built upon the opinion that the group should take responsibility and sort out these issues among themselves. When I asked him if something was being done by the Organisation to create a safer list environment, and that several list members had asked specific questions about this on the list, he seemed slightly provoked by the question:

Chairperson: Maybe also the list mistress is checking [who signs up], because the list mistress is very in favour of **processes**... and maybe then it's better to leave things, for the sake of the list, instead of sending out an explanatory e-mail from **mummy** [...] Isn't that it – that one wants to be calmed by the big grown up person so that you can move on calm and safe and feel protected instead of going with your back straight yourself

The individual should not expect safety, but should adjust to the fact that anyone can be fooled on the net, he argues. It is the individual's expectations about safety that are too high, not the Organisation's responsibility to create safety:

C: [the members on Sapfo] had expected more safety than they could get [...] One hasn't understood that you can be fooled, and now when heaven has fallen down one feels hurt and betrayed

According to the chairperson then, the group alone should take full responsibility for the social aspects on the list. The Organisation did not have, or should not have, a responsibility in relation to the list other than providing the technical support:

C: Because I also think that this is something that should be discussed on the list – 'fine, we were fooled – but it was also **we** who discovered it' , meaning; 'we take care of our own list here'

(short break). Because that's the way it is. It's their list. The Organisation is responsible for the ground service

Nina also enhanced the individual's responsibility for expecting that 'anyone could be anyone' in net-mediated groups and that identity play is part of the rules and 'the mission of' the Net:

Nina: It's the same thing [as being on the theater] on a mailing list. I considered it as acting and that someone actually performed it. (short break). Yeah...Yes.

J: That it was okay as long as it wasn't a problem?

Nina: Yes, something like that [...]

Nina: No, but really, when I chat, I can play a person that perform some parts of my identity, but not all. And that's fun. [...] That's one of the missions with the Net, that you can be different than your real self, to be anonymous, to explore new sides of yourself, new ways of being.. And if you can't follow this, then you should learn to understand it, because it is extremely naïve to think that everyone are who they say they are

On the other hand, she pointed to the contradiction of the different social purposes of participating on a mailing list. Because the group fulfilled an identity supportive function for many of the list members it collided with frames allowing identity play:

N: Eh..But at the same time there is a conflict, because many people on the list **are** there as private persons and tell about their own lives, and also perceive the replies they get as true and such. And then, it's obvious that one feels offended and betrayed and angry when you discover that one has told confidential details about oneself, while another has just played games or something. Well, I mean, I do want the List to be identity supportive, and in particular to people who don't have access to gay communities, IRL or online. I want that, and I want to believe that that's the way it is

According to the members of the Organisation's board then, creating safety and trust on the mailing list should not be the Organisation's responsibility. This can to a large extent be related to the fact that the group interaction takes place online, something that seems to pose particularly different frames than other social contexts. We can see traces of the discourse of the net as a 'free speech, non-regulated arena' as well as the metaphoric

understanding of the net as a theater stage; an arena devoted to 'anonymous identity play' as a default communication activity. These understandings are in contrast to both Marple's and Lisa's views, as well as many of the other member's on Sapfo, as the discussions and reflections in chapter 7 and 8 show.

What creates confusion is on one hand the combination of the genre of the mailing list and the option of participating using pseudonyms. On the other, there is the issue of the different social purposes that Sapfo fulfills for different people. Multiple and fictional characters are problematic both in relation to the group as an arena for political discussions, as well as in relation to the social function of being a identity supportive group for people in a vulnerable position.





## Interlude. Re-reading

Coming home from the Capital, I had to re-read the fall's discussion in a different light for the second time with yet another pair of eyes, now knowing that the revelation was a staged performance, where a little group of the regular participants were informed when it actually took place – and the others not. By this time I was starting to feel slightly paranoid. What had looked like spontaneous supporting responses to Ingse's claims in negotiating if it could all be true or not, suddenly looked..eh, staged..

So, there's a discussion list with an enthusiastic informal list mistress, a feminism discussion with a few aggressive radical feminists. These characters are mostly produced by a guy. There's a secret revelation gang who plan and carry out the revelation using different names than they usually do – to some extent involving members of the Organisations' board. And there's an identity based community about to fall apart because of what happened on the list. But why? Shouldn't it, as Nina says, be expected that things like this happen on the Internet, when anyone can perform the identities that they want in the absence of the body – at least in a context built upon anonymity? Isn't it so that when we communicate through the Internet, we sharpen our little red warning lights when interpreting other people's self presentations when we meet them in anonymous contexts, at least in text-based communities, not having any other kind of supportive information about the writer than what she says herself? Were the members of Sapfo, including myself, particularly naïve? Or is it something with this type of social context in particular that didn't make the warning bells ring for some reason?

As in any other context, we have to be able to create and perform social identities in ways that make the people around us accept what we're trying to communicate about ourselves. In this process we often have 'things' to help us in addition to language; like clothes, formal positions, body language and other things that situate ourselves in a social landscape. In some ways, one should believe that creating credibility 'as' something should be easier in a bodiless and anonymous context like Sapfo, liberated from physical looks and other recognizable features. This could be easy up to a point. It is easy for me to dress up like an air hostess, walk around on an airport and be accepted by the travellers around me as an air hostess on my way to work. If I however, were to proceed into an air plane and start serving people, it would be more of a challenge, and I would soon be thrown out by the people who actually work there, as they would know that the position I was trying to take is not legitimate in the sense that I don't have their skills and is not

employed in the company. Another important dimension is how fun this would be in the long run to walk around on air ports but never make it to the plane...

In which sense can this be compared to performing different identities online? When I started using the net in the middle of the nineties, I had a lot of fun trying to experiment with performing different characters on a number of chats, and to cross-dress using male nick names. This was also very interesting, because it made me think very explicitly about what would be required of me when I tried to be 'male truckdriver' vs 'female diva' for instance. After talking to another person that I started to like though, the dilemma always came up if I wanted to continue the contact through private e-mail if I had chosen a self presentation that was far from my situated everyday personae. What I have experienced, as well as found in a number of studies (Kolko and Reid 1998, Kendall 2002, O'Brien 1999) is that there is a limit to how far it is perceived as 'acceptable' to play with identity categories that are considered important ways of labelling ourselves and others: in which social situations it is acceptable, and for what purpose. If the interaction takes place within a role playing environment for instance, 'playing' is one of the main social purposes of being there in the first place. Participants have an awareness and an expectation that the textually performed identities not necessarily correspond with the person writing. In spite of this it is often experienced as a betrayal if participants continue cross-dressing after a certain period of time also in these environments (Kolko and Reid 1998). But what if it is not even part of the 'rules' or implicit expectations, something that was obviously the case on Sapfo, looking at the strong reactions that came after the revelation? And why was it not expected?

### ***Anonymity, context and genre: passing on mailing lists***

On the Internet – as with other kinds of social arenas – there is not *one* type of social purpose for communicating with other people, as little as there is one form of mediation. Even if there is not a one to one connection between social purpose and mediation form, some mediation forms have come to be used for and related to certain kinds of communication purposes more than others. Whereas the play oriented online spaces are usually based upon synchronous modes of communication, the e-mailing lists tend to be an efficient way to organize more content oriented group communication, like discussion groups. The space in which you participate, and the genre, the frame of the interaction, as Goffman calls it (1974), influence and shape our expectations as well as the way we choose to present ourselves. Through specifying the social activity and the relations between the people that take part in it, we get a sense of

the frame of the situation (Album 1995). Even if the synchronous chats in practice are used for many social purposes, as well as the mailing lists, the dominant understandings of them as genres, seem to be related to different types of social activity. Whereas the chats and synchronous online spaces often are more playful contexts in their form, the discussion groups do not have 'identity play' as their main social purpose (Donath 1999). This influences expectations of how you interpret the other as related to performing characters far from your own situated life, according to Lisa:

L: Because it has been.. In one way I think that people have felt safe and secure. I mean if you are out chatting other places or so, you always have a thought that it **could** be someone else, or it **can** be fake [...] But here you thought in a way that you could be secure

[...]

J: Do you think that the consciousness that on this list it couldn't happen what we might experience on a chat, where you have a greater consciousness [that people could make up things] ?

L: Yes, I think that that was the difference

What is it more specifically with these different genres and contexts that make us interpret the frames of interaction in different ways, influencing our expectations of what can happen and who the 'other' is or could be? An important part of experimenting with different subject positions and self presentations in the interaction taking place in more socially oriented and synchronous online environments, is flirting and sexuality (Sundén 2003). The synchronous group interaction further makes it possible to co-construct imagined scenarios, often with the help of graphic tools as well as performing emotes.<sup>89</sup> Self presentations are often explicit textual descriptions of each participant, gender, looks etc. These genres are highly represented in studies of identity constructions online, and often the taken for granted norm when talking about self presentations, passing and embodiment on the Internet in general (Elvebakk 2002):<sup>90</sup> that what we do online, is primarily identity play in synchronous environments, assuming the *fictional aspect* to be a central part of what is going on. This is to a

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<sup>89</sup> Emotes are often built into the software, making it possible to 'do' things

<sup>90</sup> See for instance Wiley (1999) describing a discussion list as 'everyday life is transformed into a virtual reality. [...] Multiple identities easily co-exist with the flick of a finger. Fantasy is freed.' (1999: 135)

lesser degree a main activity in a purely text based, content oriented discussion group.

In a group created for content focussed debate, flirt and sexuality can of course be part of the dialogues, but not the main purpose for why people are there in the first place, as in many of the synchronous social chats. Making credible self presentations in a discussion group are in many ways related to having specific knowledge of the subject discussed. This requires being familiar with the local cultural codes of context the interaction takes part and is created within. The task of being interpreted as credible over time in a context where the required knowledge is unfamiliar can be hard work. To pass as a credible doctor on the Doctor's list for example, would for me both be difficult, boring and extremely time consuming, having to study heaps of medical literature to contribute to the discussions. Additionally I would have to situate myself as a doctor somewhere, making sure that nobody lived around and would question if it was actually true. It is not an impossible task, because nobody would see me writing. But how *likely* is it that this would be something that I would spend all the time it would require to do it?

### ***Risk calculation and likeliness***

The challenge is to create credibility and 'pass' within certain discursive norms, here as female/lesbian/bisexual within Scandinavian lesbian subculture, using text as the only tool. The discursive norms are created in the group, influenced by the cultural and sub-cultural context. In comparison to groups with a more specialized topic, there are a range of ways to build credibility on Sapfo, since it has both a political and social aims. For instance through demonstrating knowledge about gay politics, referring to places and events in the gay community, as well as through telling about personal experiences. These textual self presentations make up the basis for how the Other is interpreted, and as more or less 'right' or likely 'female/lesbian/bisexual'.

Even if the idea of trying to pretend to be a doctor on a medical discussion group if one is not, is quite unlikely, it is however not uncommon that both feminist and lesbian oriented discussion groups attract males (Hall 1996, Correll 1995, Nip 2004), who often have sexual or harassing intentions. Both these kinds of behavior would soon evoke suspicions amongst members though, that the writer is not female: usually not because they are *identified* as males, but because the participant oppose to the hegemonic norms in such a way that they evoke suspicions that it *could* be a male typing.

This turns the focus to a central issue: what is required to fit into the discursive femininity over time on Sapfo? Or more

specifically, what was it with Hans' actions and characters that did *not* evoke 'cross-dressing suspicions' on Sapfo? Maybe it could all be connected to 'likeliness': How *likely* is the combination of the features of what he did? Of a) having deep insights into feminist theories and lesbian lives and through this being able to produce credible characters? And b) spending hours and hours of doing it over 3-4 years? With c) apparently no obvious sexual contact seeking motivations for doing it (the usual motivation for men who cross-dress)? Creating temporary characters using cultural stereotypes of minority subject positions is not difficult. This form of 'identity tourism' in majority online contexts, playing with gendered and racial stereotypes, often with sexual motivations, is quite common. It is another matter, though, to pass *within* the minority contexts, though, and over time, because it requires a deeper and more detailed knowledge of minority subcultural codes (see Nakamura 2002). Maybe it all boils down to trying to provide the answer to one question: what is the motivation for spending all these hours of creating fictional characters on a mailing list? On the surface, the actions seem not understandable within a frame of what would be socially 'normal' to do, which is something that many list members pointed to when trying to make sense of what happened. As Nina put it:

N: I also think about all the energy that he has put into creating these persons on the list during 3 years – it must be something that drives you. Me and the other board member sat one day and looked at all that his characters have written, it was some thousand messages. To write it must take hours really.

N: And he has done it at work, for years, and it makes me..scared.. I think it is unpleasant (whispers)

We don't go around *expecting* that air hostesses on airports are not actually working as air hostesses when they are dressed up like one (grown ups are not expected to role play like that). Or, that men have deep insights into feminist theory, and have pleasure from discussing feminism and identity politics by making up four fictional characters without having sexual motives. Not because it couldn't happen or is undoable, but simply because it seems very unlikely. As one participant reflected:

Hi,  
I sat here and thought about the 'Hans'es' today (I must have a boring life!). Anyways, I just thought about how UNLOGIC the whole thing was. I'm sure that everyone else have already thought about this, it's probably just me who get so excited that I just suddenly put two and two together and figured out something really smart: isn't it

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cool/funny/interesting that it was a guy who was behind the world's most lesbian-separatist postings and thought that transsexual women should not be welcome in separatist gatherings etc? I mean, isn't it ironic that a man made up postings like that? Isn't it really weird?

In my own research project of the list, I was starting to feel that I had most pieces that I needed to be able to solve the puzzle of what had happened, and why. Still I couldn't help wondering about the same thing as many of the other members did. What were Hans' motives for devoting so much time to create his fictional characters over such a long period? How did he manage to pass? And why was what he did interpreted as wrong? I had some suggestions through the voices of people who had met him in the Capital's gay community, but what was the story he would tell himself?

I decided to write him a letter.

## **Chapter 10.**

# **The missing piece: The missionary man**

‘[...] a definition of the situation is almost always to be found. But those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly.’ (Goffman 1974:2)

June 2003.

Sitting down to write an e-mail to Hans, I struggled to decide who I should address it to. Should I use the male name that the others had come up with, and implicitly show that I too accepted the truth of the rumors going around? Or should I address all four of the women, showing that I had chosen to accept their existence on their own terms, disconnected from the body writing, using the plural You in asking questions? As Malin was the only one I had actually been in touch with before, I first decided to titulate the letter to her in approaching her/him/them. But then I changed my mind. After all he might have stopped using Malin’s account, and if I wrote to his address, it would look slightly weird to address it to Malin. Besides, I had a feeling that ‘being’ any of the characters outside of the list context was not really his motivation. I decided upon an open and honest approach:

Hi Hans Andersen –

I have thought about contacting you for a long time after the revelations on Sapfo. I am now about to end my field work, and there is in particular one voice that is missing in the story, more specifically yours. I presume that it is right that it was you who were behind Malin, Flisan, Nicole and Anna (and Agira?). It is not my purpose for contacting you, however, to ‘prove whether this is right or not’. I am just sincerely interested in and curious of what the background and the driving force for creating these characters were. And how did you manage to make them so credible? That is quite impressive. As I have understood it, you used to be very actively involved on the bisexuality-list previously, but that this list community dissolved because of a bad administrator there? Was this the background for your participation on Sapfo?

The way I read the messages and the different character’s engagement they were a big driving force on the list (and behind the

curtains) – in particular Malin. I am myself very grateful for the help and support that I received from Malin when I was to ask the list for permission to do research on the list. It meant a lot to me at the time.

If you feel like writing a little about how you experienced the revelation process, I would appreciate it a lot. It will be an important piece in my story to have your perspective on these things, and in particular related to your driving force and motivation in having several female user identities on Sapfo, and how such discussion groups create the possibility of creating characters that have other genders and traits than the 'real' person. As Malin said before she disappeared: 'have I broken the rules in any way?' Was it breaking the rules to create a user identity as Malin because yours and her gender do not match – and would you say that she represented ways of being and opinions that you also have? Was some of the motivation in creating Flisan to stimulate to discussion on the list, and was it because of Helena that Flisan and Agira became so aggressive this fall?

I will also be coming to the Capital for Pride, so if you want to meet, I could also meet IRL too.

I received a long reply a few days later :

Dear Janne Bromseth:

You have written an electronic letter to the address [hans@hotmail.com](mailto:hans@hotmail.com). This mailbox used to be used by the pseudonym Hans Andersen, a name I used when I once participated on the bisexuality-list. [...]

I thank you for Your letter. You ask me a range of questions, that I will try to answer as You think that they can be of any use for Your research.

My e-mail was rather short, but contained quite a few questions. In Hans' reply, he had taken the effort to pick out all my questions as well as bolding them, writing his answers to them below, organizing the text as an interview. I sat down to read the answers that all others had wondered about, but never got.

### ***Mailing lists and democracy: new possibilities of reaching through***

The main function of the mailing lists for Hans was directly related to political aims and the possibility of influencing the local political discussions taking place within the gay community. He described the mediated form, where everyone has access to contributing and the option of doing it anonymously, as a means to increase democracy:



...the main function that the list (or rather, the lists of the Organisation, not only Sapfo) have had to me is precisely the 'democratization' of the gay community's internal discussion about the superior politics.

Another important function that he emphasized was using writing as an emotional tool:

In addition to this, there are also other things. I am a person who writes easily. I like to formulate thoughts, sometimes 'write off emotions'. To be able to do this within an anonymous forum and have quick responses from others has been valuable.

Hans wrote that he has been critical of the Organisation and its organizational practices for a long time. However, when the Organisation started their mailing lists, the new technology offered new possibilities of democratically reaching through, according to Hans. His experiences are in accordance with a widespread understanding of the Net as a more democratic means of communication:

The creation of electronic mail and other digital communication fora turns all hierarchies on the head. Suddenly, anyone can reach the people in power and be part of the discussions and influence them. What the philosopher Michel Foucault calls 'the right to speech' suddenly becomes a public property within the decision making units.

I was immediately fascinated, since this technique forces even the most totalitarian organisations to a totally new openness and audibility for the single individual's voice. When the Organisation's mailing lists were made in 1999 I became a member of several of them (like the bisexuality-list and Sapfo) because I experienced them as something radically new in the Organisation's history. Before this, I had been in doubt for a long time because I view the Organisation as an intolerant organisation where deviant opinions have small possibilities of reaching through.

[...]

He described his previous experience with the Organisation in negative terms, in particular for being hierarchical and power-centralized. However, participating on the mailing lists owned by the Organisation changed the possibilities of influencing their policies. Compared to face-to-face communication with the Organisation, the option to participate anonymously made a difference according to Hans. He claims that speaking through pseudonyms contributed to being interpreted differently, because he was not associated to his embodied person, but with basis in his textually presented opinions:

Since I became a member of the Organisation, I got my prejudices confirmed rather quickly. Until I started communicating my thoughts through these lists. On the mailing lists, the Organisation's top brasses were suddenly forced to both listen and reply, even if they did so with a badly hidden annoyance. To make the Organisation's little self-rulers meet my arguments in public (that not least could be communicated anonymously, so that the members of the board didn't get the chance of using their usual tactics to suspect the person that speaks instead of focusing on what is spoken), that was really an experience.

For Hans then, the option of 'separating body and mind', was not primarily about actively wanting to create a different image of a body, but more importantly to make the typing body invisible, disguising the connections between embodied writer and text. He had experienced that the Organisation had not responded to him positively in face-to-face contexts, and described their attitudes towards his opinions being different in the anonymous online context. In 'leaving the body behind' then, he experienced to be interpreted not as a troublemaker in the physical local subculture, but on the basis of his opinions. His arguments and view on what a mailing list should be build upon the widespread belief and utopia of the net as a more democratic and free means of communication. By using several philosophers to position himself, he constructed the Net as a tool and an arena where power is challenged through the right to free speech and political influence through anonymity.

### ***Credibility: learning the discursive code to create fictional characters***

As I have discussed in previous chapters, what is crucial on women-only restricted mailing lists to be accepted as a legitimate participant, is the issue of passing as a credible woman; to be interpreted by the outside world as a 'credible woman' (see chapter 5). The process of creating credibility is actively performed and negotiated within a specific context, where the discursive code that has a hegemonic position varies across contexts and culture. These codes are something that we learn. Usually, the process of being interpreted as a legitimate man or woman includes several tools of social practice to make a culturally valid balanced presentation of ourselves. Online, the 'tools' at hand to create a presentation of self are restricted:

'In online spaces where language literally substitutes for the 'real', the notion of cross-dressing is intimately connected to not only the way bodies *become* text. 'Passing' is further turned into a textual practice, a matter of being able to uphold, textually, the illusion of stable gender identities.' (Sundén 2003: 129)

Passing as a woman then, is in a text-based environment a matter of performing gender discursively, as the means to create gender is restricted to language. What did Hans do in order to pass as lesbian/bisexual women on Sapfo? He said that since he had been politically active in the gay/bisexual community, he was familiar with some of the subcultural codes in the lesbian community. He further decided to pay special attention to the different opinions that were uttered when he was around and about, in order to make his characters credible:

If they are credible it is most likely because I succeeded in catching the discourse within the gay community in the Country. I often memorized a conversation where a certain thought was expressed, and later I let one of my 'characters' perform these collective thoughts on the list.  
[...]

He had acquired most of his knowledge by participating in political discussions and groups in the gay community in the Capital:

That's why I have knowledge about the gay community, which made it possible for me to perform identities that *could* have been real, who represent existing 'types' within the subculture. I know more or less how lesbians (some of them) think.

Bakhtin (1984) describes texts and utterances as always inhabited by others' voices, and further, that language and meaning always are socially situated rather than pure expression of an internal state of mind (even if that is how it often feels). In everyday social interaction we most often do not go around thinking consciously about where our opinions and expressions 'come from'. Working with literary and fictional texts, however, it is common that authors do research in relation to specific environments in order to create credible characters in their writing of a story. What is interesting here is that Hans described his actions in 'an author's words'; as a writer creating fiction as a conscious process using stories and meanings he has picked up in the lesbian subculture rather than characterizing them as textual descriptions of his own individual life experiences. He was producing a kind of 'fictional truth' (Jodi O'Brien 1999): making fiction to be interpreted as true. He had learned and picked elements from other people's stories and meanings in the local subcultural lesbian community, and 'performs them' on the list.

Hans' interpretation of the social rules was clearly different from the majority on the list. As we saw in chapters 7 and 8, most of the participants interpreted the frames of the context as non-fictional. Hans' conscious actions of creating fiction on the discussion list take a different social frame following other rules. It

is common that participants have differing views of what it is that should define a social situation, and that they are aware of this. As Erving Goffman puts it: 'in many cases some of those who are committed to differing points of view and focus may still be willing to acknowledge that theirs is not the official or 'real' one' (Goffman 1974: 8). Hans reflected around the issue of creating fictional characters on Sapfo as being controversial, expressing an awareness that not everybody on the list interprets the option of anonymous self presentations in the social context in the same way as he does:

Some negative things have also followed the good. Mostly the fact that not all interpret the list in the same way as me: as a forum for discussion of issues between anonymous voices.

If we compare this statement to the reactions in chapter 8, the problem is not that most participants disagree that the forum should be a place for 'anonymous voices', but rather, the question is what anonymity should imply. Should it include the possibility of creating fiction, or is it a possibility of communicating real life experiences without revealing your real name? In relation to the issue of anonymity, Hans claimed however, that the representatives from the Organisation disliked that Sapfo was an anonymous forum, in the sense that the embodied typist was not treated as irrelevant:

The organisation's top brasses would rather remake the rules so that you cannot say anything unless you present yourself. To have a debate message met with the comment 'who are you?' was very frustrating.

Another aspect that made it difficult to maintain full anonymity was private invitations to meet from the other participants:

The worst thing was when some of the girls started to write in private and for example wanted to go out and have coffee with Malin. I did everything that I could to avoid this, but it was sometimes difficult.

As opposed to an international list, the local context makes it more difficult to get away with identity deception because it is likely that someone will eventually live in the neighbourhood wanting to meet. By situating his characters as living in different countries than the Country, Hans made it easier to avoid being confronted with list members who wanted to meet one of his characters. This is somewhat similar to what Alex in the story of Joan did; presenting her as being severely handicapped and hence unable to meet physically with the other participants (Turkle 1995). Hans' frustrations were mostly related to his efforts to try to keep the two

worlds apart; the anonymous list life and the physical life staying unconnected. For participants with 'nothing to hide', making connections between an anonymous self on the list, and simultaneously, making connections with list members outside of the list is not problematic to the same degree. For Hans, it was the opposite, he had everything to lose if these connections were made. Or, his list life, that is.

### ***Playing Gepetto: Advantages with plural user identities***

Why did he create multiple user identities instead of just one? Hans gives several reasons. The most important is that he wanted to create activity on the list, because it was quite inactive in the beginning:

From the beginning it was because the list was so extremely quiet, almost dead. Even the Organisation's top brasses agreed once that inactivity was the biggest problem on Sapfo, and that more disagreements were needed to make the list interesting.

To make it easier to create discussions, he sometimes let his different characters disagree about the topics discussed:

Because it was difficult to create discussions, I once in a while used the trick of speaking from several different names. For instance, I let Malin claim that the poet Alfonsina Storni was lesbian, while Anna denied this. I let Nicole claim that you cannot be lesbian and Christian at the same time, while Anna said the opposite. I let Anna support the claim that 'transsexual women' should be accepted at the Dyke Club, while Flisan did not think so and Malin stayed neutral.

Hans said his motivation for staging discussions was to stimulate to a plurality of meanings, and contrasted his own actions as an act of democracy as compared to the Organisation's:

These artificial discussions (where I proposed different ideas that I knew circulated in the gay community) sometimes led to *real* debate messages from other list members. This was my purpose. I hoped in this way to build a tradition of debate and respect for others' opinions, as a contrast to the Organisation's traditional mainstreaming that only lead to quietness on the list. [...]

Speaking with more than one voice had several advantages, first because it made him 'less visible':

By using several different identities I was also less visible on the list. This, I thought, decreased the risk that someone would start contacting me privately outside of the list. I wanted to avoid that.

Second, it was easier to avoid what he characterized as a risk to be thrown out by the Organisation if he stepped over the line with one of his characters:

Another reason that I had several user identities was that I previously had had bad experiences with the Organisation's intolerance against the deviant. On the bi-list, a girl was thrown out from the list without the members of the list even knowing it. My knowledge of how it all takes place within the Organisation made me suspect that something similar could happen to me. Many different identities was a way to avoid authoritarian silencing.

Hans positioned himself as concerned with creating a democratic and free-speech forum, as a 'fighter for democratic forms', in contrast to the Organisation that he characterized as the opposite; a totalitarian and dictatorial organisation that really doesn't want to be challenged politically. He thus legitimized creating fictional characters through an intention of wanting to inspire to a plurality of meanings in the discussions, implicitly suggesting that the list needed active help to accomplish this.

### ***For a good cause: Creating fiction with a political mission***

Hans wanted to influence the discussions not only on the gender-mixed mailing lists that the Organisation owns. Creating female identities was thus a necessity in order to reach out to a female audience:

[If I had only used the bisexuality-list] I would have had to restrict myself to reaching out to the readers of the bisexuality-list with my opinions, and missed out on a large part of the Organisation's group of members, or being forced to use female identities.

He compared creating the different female characters to literary work, explicitly stressing the aspect of being 'someone else'. This was in great contrast with most other list members:

Another point with giving the list personalities *other features than your own* is of literary matters. [...]. To 'be someone else' sometimes gives a deeper perspective on life and on fellow human beings.

As opposed to other stories of men's cross-dressing on women-only lists and in other net-spaces (Hall 1996, O'Brien 1999, Correll 1995, Nakamura 2002), where a common motivation for men to participate on online lesbian groups is sexual, he underlines that his motives were not to seek contact with lesbians. This is even a central aspect in the Joan-story, where Alex both has net-sex as Joan – and also uses Joan to introduce women to himself as Alex, and met them in person for sexual purposes. On the contrary, Hans said that he did what he could to avoid personal contacts:

Some male surfers on the net pretend to be women because they want personal contacts with for instance lesbians. This was not the way it was with me, as I have already mentioned. I did everything I could to avoid that someone started writing privately to Malin & co outside of the list. I consciously made the characters 'non-approachable', amongst others by letting them live in other countries. Their e-mails were always written in a way so that they would encourage the whole list to discuss, but also to prevent individual Sapfo-girls from taking contact privately.

All the female characters he created were meant to influence the Organisation's policy in specific ways, through fulfilling different functions on the list. Firstly, he wanted to contribute to create an open discussion climate:

The function that Malin filled on the list was to encourage a free exchange of expressions within the Organisation, whatever the board thought about the issues that were discussed. This was my central driving force to participate on the Organisation's mailing lists.

Malin, who took a voluntary list mistress position, influenced the netiquette norms on Sapfo to a large degree, in particular through arguing that the best for Sapfo was that the list should not have a responsible person actively moderating the discussions. This was also Hans' intentions with creating Malin; to keep the Organisation away from moderating the discussions on Sapfo (and hence, he also created space for himself to enact control of the discussion norms through Malin).

Secondly, his aim was to influence the political discussions. The fictional characters then, were not meant to only 'represent the grassroots level in lesbian subculture'; he described that he did have a political mission 'of his own'. In the e-mail interview, Hans quoted the different characters that he agreed and disagreed with, and made explicit what was similar to his own way of thinking. In relation to identity politics, Flisan, her political opinions and the criticisms she uttered explicitly against the Organisation's identity politics seemed to match quite well with Hans' own. Quoting Flisan,

he commented that what she expressed here, was also his own opinion:

Flisan: 'I think that we in the gay movement most of all should show that we are normal people. We are not some sort of silly circus clowns. We are not sex fixated.'

This is what I think the gay movement in the Country most of all should signalize: that its members are ordinary respected citizens, not some weird ufo's from mars.

This stance is quite typical for the identity politics of the 70s, characterized by 'gaining rights through normalization' (and thus marginalizing deviant gender presentations as the transperson) as a central strategy and attitude (Rydström 1996).

Hans described that in the beginning, he tried to stimulate the discussion by letting his characters utter a range of different opinions in relation to an issue, in the spirit of democracy:

Before, I had let *one* of the characters perform an opinion, while someone *else* of my pseudonyms in the interest of balancing had an opposite opinion. The most important thing then was not to let any way of thought 'win' the discussion, but to show how different opinions co-existed within the gay world [...]

However, the practice of letting his characters contribute in a manifold and constructive way was put aside when his own opinions were severely challenged. When Helena, the supposed transsexual woman who argued that pedophiles should be part of the Organisation, joined the discussions on Sapfo, the good democratic intentions changed:

When Helena joined the list I let many of these principles go. The only important thing for me was then to state one principle: the gay movement and the Organisation must distance themselves from severe crimes, a pimp and a preacher for pedophilia has nothing to do there.

The strong reactions towards Helena was related to Hans' acquaintances with her in other mediated and physical discussion groups. He wrote that Helena had previously been 'a problem' on the bisexuality-list, as well as a member of a discussion group in the Capital that he took part in and that all this: '[...] became too much for me.'

All in all, since the Organisation didn't do anything to exclude Helena from Sapfo, he focused on creating 'a massive opinion against Helena's participation'(as chapter 5 illustrates):



Nothing of this [Helena's opinions] was protested against from the Organisation. So then I didn't think I had to be so considerate myself. Maybe I sometimes lost my judgment and went a little too far in my attempts to create a massive opinion against Helena's participation on Sapfo and other places.

In sum, it was a wish to influence the identity politics in the gay subculture in the Country that motivated Hans to cross-dress as several characters on Sapfo, and to actively work against a mainstreaming of opinions through 'reproducing representative discourses in the lesbian community' on the list. However, because of a person he had been disagreeing with on several other occasions, he let go of his well-intended democratic principles of creating a good mood and discussion climate on the list, letting the political goal justify the means.

### ***Was cross-dressing against the rules? Well, it depends on the definition of 'woman'...***

Obviously, most members of Sapfo, as well as the Organisation, interpreted cross-dressing on the women-only list as not acceptable. In my e-mail, I asked him: *'Did you think it was against the rules to create a user identity as Malin when hers and your gender do not match?'* In his answer to my question, he problematized the definition of the word woman, relating it to the discussions on Sapfo about what identifying as 'woman' should imply:

There is only one rule on the list: 'Only women can participate'. So the question is what the word 'woman' really means, according to the Organisation's definition. This has, as You know, been thoroughly discussed in the debates between Flisan and Mona. Does the word mean that you must have been born and raised as a woman? No. Does it mean – if you're not born a woman – that one must have gone through surgery and have proof that you have changed gender? No, it is enough that you define yourself as female, and your own definition should not be questioned. So if someone presents herself as Malin or Flisan, then this *is* exactly a definition that should be respected?

He questioned the built-in understanding of 'identity' in my question, and related it rethorically to what he perceives as the Organisations' identity policy, that he himself disagreed with: if it is up to each individual to define their own gender and sexual identity, then he hasn't broken any rules?

Are You in other words correct when you say that mine and Malin's gender do not match? Maybe according to Your own definition of the

word 'woman', but the Organisation's definition is so empty of content that in principle everyone could pass as women.

This was his political criticism of how he interprets the Organisation's definition of gender, and its consequences for feminism:

And this was one of my points in the discussions about gender definitions that I started: feminism is built upon a conception of gender identity as something that has to do with the surrounding world's view about who you are [...] *And if the Organisation wants to be feminist then the transgender-thinking within the Organisation must be given up, is my opinion.* (my emphasis)

Understanding gender as 'individually self-defined' also implies that it will be highly problematic to make a discussion group that does not allow biological males to participate, Hans argued, since they in principle can identify as female. In that case, the Organisation did not have any good arguments for excluding him either, in Hans' opinion. Arguing that there should be a common biological definition of gender categories, as he had repeatedly claimed in the discussions on Sapfo, the Organisation on the other hand was acting against their own policy if they restricted membership on Sapfo out from the writer's biological body according to Hans. Even if he did not agree with this definition, or even admitted to identifying as female himself, he had not broken any rules, was his conclusion.

### ***Being revealed: why didn't it happen formally?***

When the revelation took place, Hans was silently taken off the list by the Organisation. For a person devoting so much time to write on the list for so many years, I thought that the revelation must have been quite an upsetting experience. When I asked him about how he experienced the revelation process himself, he wrote exclusively about his criticisms towards the way it happened and not about how it felt. He was in particular critical of the informal character of the process and claimed that it was the end to participating anonymously on the list:

It was hardly a 'process'. What happened was that an anonymous person called Ingse started to talk about IP-addresses, as a reply to a long mail by Nicole where she claimed that feminism and queer theory are not unifiable: [quote]. Thereby the principle of being allowed to have opinions anonymously on the list stopped; a forum where the list mistress so far hardly had disturbed was suddenly 'regulated' in a totally different way.

Hans compared the revelation process to the exclusion of Helena, and characterized the two episodes as opposites in the ways they were dealt with, wondering why the revelation took the informal turn it did:

The only thing I have to say about this is that I was somehow surprised about how the case was introduced. What happened when it was decided to exclude Helena in the end? In that case, the list mistress informed that this was decided by the Organisation, and made clear the reasons why. This is the way an exclusion should happen, I think. It happens officially and openly and it is explained why it happens.

He was sure that it was the Organisation that carried out the revelation, and suggested that they did it informally because they had difficulties with defending their decision:

When the revelation of Malin & co took place, it happened in a totally different way. Hanky-panky, speculations, unclarities. Why, one can ask. If someone has done something that is not allowed then one can just say so, and carry through the exclusion. It was obvious that it was the Organisation's people that were behind the revelation, so why hide behind an anonymous voice? In this sense it gave the impression that the Organisation didn't really stand behind the decision.

Hans further suggested that he was revealed because his opinions were not tolerated by the Organisation, and hence, by excluding him they would avoid his differing opinions about identity politics. He believed that the list members had similar feelings as himself towards the Organisation's behavior, and that it would have fatal consequences for the list:

I fear that many Sapfo members experienced that they belonged to a list run by the Gestapo [...] and thereby fell silent in the discussion. I hope that my fears did not turn real after December 2<sup>nd</sup>.

## The political activist: An undercover Habermasian missionary?

As compared to other cross-dressers in women-only-groups, Hans' primary aims were neither to 'experiment with identity', nor to take sexual advantage of women. Believing in the net as a mean to use the new technology to create more democratic and open dialogues. as a motivation for participating on Sapfo, he might instead be characterized as a kind of a Habermasian missionary. Many early argued that the Net can be a form of public sphere that enhances the possibilities to reach what Habermas describes as criteria for communicative action to create equal dialogues in public debate (see Poster 1995 for a discussion of Habermas' theories in relation to the Internet). What is uttered should be in the center, and not the person who utters it. This view builds on the premise for dialogue that all voices should come through and that everyone listen with respect for each other, to push it to the extremes.

Hans saw the separation between text and body as central for these processes, and draws on the discursive (masculinist) utopia of the anonymous arena of Net where there are no marked bodies, only equal voices in an open and democratic dialogue (Sundén 2003). He seems to believe, though, that all these voices needed a little assistance to be heard on Sapfo. He decided to be the one medium bringing the grassroot opinions of lesbian subculture to the public, in order to challenge the regime of the powerful Organisation who so far had had the position of dictating all opinions of gay identity politics. However, when there was a development of political opinions on the list that he strongly disagreed with, the *democratic missionary* was replaced by the *political missionary*. Until his 'cover' was blown and he was silenced, and every free voice with him. In his answers to me, he positioned himself as a kind of martyr of the free-speech democracy: if the body typing is questioned in an anonymous forum, he sees it as equal to destroying the right to anonymous free speech.

For Hans though, the separation of body and mind was here not only an ideal in theory. It must also be understood as a necessary premise for him to carry out his missions. He needed to go 'undercover' for two reasons: Firstly, he had had bad experiences of criticizing the Organisation's politics as 'himself', and needed to get rid of his primary material signifier in order to be taken seriously. Secondly, and most important, Sapfo was restricted to women. He needed to cross-dress in order to avoid

being denied access to the group in the first place, to be able to reach through with his political message to the large group of female members of the GLBT-community. Alternatively, he would need to present himself as a woman-identified man, something that, as I understand it, he does not do.

There are several interesting contradictions between the understandings of gender, identity and the body produced on the list: as an explicit topic and in the revelation process and the interpretations of it.

On the one hand, Hans promoted the postmodern view that text and embodied typist should be separated in online communication, leaning on an understanding of the 'ideal cybersubject' as described by Kate O'Riordan (2005) (that is also similar to understandings of the 'ideal queer subject') where body and gender performance should be perceived as separate. On the other hand, he presented a quite modernist view of gender and identity regarding his political opinions, where the gendered body makes an unquestionable ground for identity. According to his own understanding of gender, he would be denied access to the group. In spite of this, he argued that the Organisation's postmodern understandings of gender and identity opens up for anyone to take the position as woman, and this legitimized his actions.

Interestingly, there is an opposite contrast at work when it comes to many of the participants that were active in the revelation on Sapfo. They argued first in the political discussion about transsexuals (chapter 5) that gender (and sexual) identity are self-defined labels independent of the biological body. However, they implicitly took a modernist stance when the connection between Hans' characters and their embodied author was revealed (chapter 7 and 8). That he is embodied as a man was the central argument for removing him from the list, even without knowing if he identifies as a woman or not.

### ***Online texts: Authors creating fiction – or documentaries of real life experience?***

What is most striking in the way that Hans writes about his characters and their part on Sapfo, is the obvious discrepancy between how Hans and most other participants interpret the social frames for Sapfo as an interaction context. It makes visible a genre collision with what most other participants interpret the list as. Taking a position as an 'author writing fiction' rather than 'participant talking about her/his own life', he has consciously staged specific discussions through letting 'his characters' speak different opinions. He expressed an awareness that for the most part is not characteristic of the way we think about everyday social interaction, describing the characters by creating a distance

between himself and the personas he has written as on the list: the writer-‘I’ and the written ‘I’s’ are described as separate subjects.

Hans’ definition includes text production as fictional writing, whereas most of the other participants in contrast view themselves more as ‘documentary writers’. The result might be characterized as a form of ‘docu-soap’: a mix of fiction and reality that is highly problematic to relate to when this information comes to the surface in the group. The dichotomy and blurry boundaries between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ have been addressed by many net researchers throughout the years and partly quarrelled about, depending on academic tradition, approach and field of study.<sup>91</sup> What should online textual selves be interpreted ‘as’? Literary texts or representations of existing selves? Whereas researchers within the field of art- and literary studies tend to be concerned with the texts ‘as texts’ on their own terms, communication scholars and social scientists have tended to be more interested in the texts as part of users’ social reality. There are however not necessarily a contradiction between these two perspectives. As Jenny Sundén demonstrates, material bodies are created textually, by embodied situated users. Describing her researcher-self online in third person, as ‘she’, she underlines that the written representation in the MUD-environment has an existence on its own. On the other hand, however, she points to the fact that online-Jenny will always be dependent on the embodied typist Jenny to stay alive.

As Jodi O’Brien problematizes (1999, see chapter 7), the issue that is more relevant here, is not what textual presentations represent in themselves, but to a larger degree what social frame a specific interaction activity takes place within. There is a major difference between a role play environment and a political discussion group. A strong interrelation between the online group and offline environments also creates particular conditions different from an international group. The focus that I have tried to shed light on is: How do the participants themselves interpret the social activity they are taking part in, and the social rules that are associated with it?

It is obvious that there is an existing divide in how Sapfo as a social context is interpreted by most participants and Hans’ creative writing, which is quite apparent when looking at the

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<sup>91</sup> Amongst others, this has been a debated issue in relation to research ethics. Dependent on what online texts represent for the writer, this is also something that affects what kind of material they represent. Working with online texts as art, anonymizing the author would be highly inappropriate, as the point is to achieve publicity, many literature researchers have argued. On the other hand, if they are written with the intention of communicating with other people as a primary intent, they should be anonymized (see an anthology edited by Thorseth 2003). There is a diversity in how to approach online texts, as art or social reality, as there is a diversity of genres and social purposes in the production of text and interaction online.

participants' interpretations of the revelation described in chapter 7 and 8. This divide is something that also Hans himself addresses, however, expressing an awareness that most people do not see Sapfo as an arena for fictional writing, in spite of the option of participating anonymously. It seems, however, that he chooses to ignore this, for the 'sake of the good'; to be able to express his political views on Sapfo. He also has joy in creating literature, he explicitly states. This was quite striking to me looking at the collection of his 'authorship' that I found attached to his reply to the e-mail he sent me, which contains 99 A4 pages of his characters' writings from the period before I joined the list myself.





# **Interlude.**

## **Scene IV: Days of Silence**

‘When people become intimate, they are particularly vulnerable; it is easy to get hurt in online relationships. But since the rules of conduct are unclear, it is also too easy to believe that one does not have the right to feel wounded. For what can we hold ourselves and others accountable?’ (Turkle 1995: 228)

### ***Survival strategies***

Spring 2003.

The discussions on Sapfo continued during spring, but as compared to previous years – where the activity increased at this time of year – the amount of both messages and active participants decreased noticeably. For many participants, the events had raised an awareness that the mailing list community was not the safe space that they had imagined. Nor a secure one, where their real identity was protected by an anonymous mail address and nick name. There wasn’t even, as most group members had assumed, necessarily a connection between the participants introducing themselves in the group and an existing person off-line.

In between the regular discussion topics, there were occasional reflections on the cross-dressing-event on the list. Long-term participants made important efforts of trying to keep the list going, fighting for the list that they loved. After all, this was not the first crisis on the list – why shouldn’t we survive this one too? The collaborative spirit that used to characterize the list in its happy days was re-created in the efforts of re-building the grounds for the group; working through feelings of deception, disillusion, and creating hope and enthusiasm for continuing to write and keep the list going. One way of re-establishing the community was by gathering around a common ‘enemy’, defining an ‘us’ through creating a border against ‘an other’: The real lesbian-bi-trans-women vs the life and actions of Hans Andersen and his characters, a mentally sick and pathetic person. The image of Hans and his characters continued to live a life on Sapfo, in relation to many issues, being a point of reference to reflect around a range of issues. What kind of life could he have anyway when he devoted all his time to write hundreds of messages on a mail list every month? Ridiculing was a common practice, like in the message below:

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In general, I don't give a damn if there are men on the list, it's an anonymous list and none of us can prevent it anyway. I just feel genuinely sorry for the guy that thinks that his life is improved by looking into what dykes are up to. Says a lot about how fun his own life must be – not at all. There is always something pathetic with people like that.

The acknowledgment that 'we were all fooled' was at center, but parallel to this, there were also common efforts to encourage each other to move on through producing a positive spirit of 'we will survive'. In the process of unification, humour was an important tool. The use of humour had always characterized the interaction culture on Sapfo, giving participants status and fulfilling many different social functions in the group. Both for entertaining and flirting, but also as a strategy to solve conflicts and disagreements and be able to move on afterwards (also found by Baym 2000). The dialogue between Lina and JB is a good example of this, entitled 'Surviving the trauma' in the subject field:

Hi JB,  
I think you are absolutely wonderful when you write like that. 'To hell with them!' I agree with you 100%. I want to think and feel like that. And maybe I will eventually. But just now it is hard like hell to have been fooled for so long...And do I want to take the risk in case it happens again? And again...? Or should I decide that it is not going to matter if the girl I am talking to in reality is a sick man, since everything is just unreal anyway?  
I try, but it is NOT easy...Not for me, anyway. Not right now anyway. How do you do it, JB? Others?  
Lina

Reply, JB:

Thanks, Lina,  
tssss-tssss...'absolutely wonderful'  
\*ruffles up the feathers and smiles\* You are a really a little roedeer, you are ;-)

How do I do to survive the trauma? Snuff, pussy and whiskey!!! It works perfect!  
JB

Reply, Lina:

\*laughs long\*  
I have difficulties when it comes to snuff, but the I'm doing my best with the other stuff, so we'll see where it leads to...

Lina ;o)

### ***Trust and the anonymous other: a recurring problem***

In spite of the attempts to move on, though, the previous experiences had sharpened everyone's noses and eyes, judging new participants from what Myers calls participant trademarks; 'distinctive individual smells by which a group's users are recognized as either friends or enemies in an otherwise vague and anonymous BBS<sup>92</sup> communication environment.' (1987:240). When quite a few new anonymous list members stepped forward and presented themselves in relation to discussions during spring, this was interpreted as suspicious in itself. Who were they? From warm, enthusiastic greetings, new members who could not identify themselves were met with a reserved suspicious tone. Gradually, a divide grew between participants who were accepted as trustworthy and those who were considered questionable. The list members considered 'reliable' had either built a reputation over time of being 'real' or trustworthy, or were able to prove their real-life identity through their e-mail-address or other identity confirming-signs. Some of the anonymous list members that were new to the list or had been previously inactive who did not put forward evidence that they existed for real were explicitly confronted and questioned:

Sorry for asking directly:  
are you sure that you're not a relative of Hans?  
You haven't convinced me so far. The similarities are  
too many.  
But if you're innocent – I'm sorry.

I don't want to be the one who throws dirt on others,  
but the revelation of the four  
'Hanses' turned everything upside down when it comes  
to trust on this list, didn't it?  
I am still suspicious of all and everyone and I don't feel  
like being personal at all anymore. Or more correctly said,  
I wish it was possible. But maybe I am too naïve.  
Mette

Mette 'smells' an enemy behind the text, through a similar writing style as Hans. As Mette says, she doesn't feel like being personal anymore, which also characterized the messages that were sent after the revelation, containing fewer personal stories than before. The amount of postings to the list and also the amount of active participants decreased considerably, that in the end limited itself to a small core of long-term list members of whom many participated with their real names.

<sup>92</sup> BBS is a US abbreviation for Bulletin Board System, which refers to an online discussion group ('discussion board' is another common term).

The risk that the list would die hung as a dark cloud over the list community when activity started to drop, and was addressed by many participants in waves throughout the spring. Even if there also had been slow periods before, it seemed like we were all holding our breath this time, interpreting the sound of silence as a fatal step on the road towards the unavoidable discussion-list death: inactivity. For some people, for whom Sapfo was socially important, coming home to an empty Sapfo-e-mail-box was a sad experience, triggering fears that one day, the social network would disappear completely:

I am, in spite of other friends, a little dependent of Sapfo. In the periods when there were '17' or '29' messages every time you turned on the computer, it might not have been so good either, since you didn't really have time to do anything else in life other than reading and writing here + a little work in between.

It's not like that anymore, it was, crazily enough, Flisan & co who kept us going.

But a little time with you in the evenings, well I don't want to be without it! Most of all I get really melancholic when it says '0' messages on the screen. It is a question of safety.

I guess it is immature of me, to be dependent on an internet list..yes, I know...

### ***Days of silence***

June 2003.

I inform the list that my field work is now formally over and thank everyone contributing to it. The room I speak into gives echoes of my own voice, in its emptiness and the lack of other voices. A few old regulars drop a message every now and then, supplemented by occasional passers-by. Summer comes, a crucial time for mailing list communities in general, maintaining activity being harder than usual. For a list on the edge of dying, surviving the summer is simply utopian.

# **Chapter 11.**

## **Genre trouble**

### **and the body that mattered**

‘The researcher is filled with tales of mask for age and race, gender and class; masks for almost all aspects of identity. These are tales that do not always have happy endings. The stories of on-line cross-dressing that abound, for example, often culminate in narratives of betrayal.’ (Kolko and Reid 1998: 218)

When I discovered Sapfo, I was enthusiastic about the group, academically as well as personally. It was one of the few well-working Scandinavian discussion groups for women that I had come across during my search for material. I was eager to tell its stories, and to show that there actually were successful women-oriented discussion communities, where women discussed politics and disagreed without having problems with disagreeing (like in many other women-only contexts). The story I experienced and wrote turned out to be different from what originally caught me. This is not unusual in long-term ethnographic research about online groups. In particular, it is to be expected when researching online communities, since many of them have problems with keeping it going for several years. Many of the former long-term members of Sapfo miss the list, they have told me. There have been regular attempts to try to get the list going again, but without any lasting success so far.

There were many occasions when I didn't feel like telling the story about what happened with Sapfo, because also I had grown fond of the group and felt sorry it died. The metaphoric narrative changed from a story of life to a story of death, where trust, enthusiasm and pride in the group slowly turned into its opposites; betrayal, distrust and disillusion. However, here death is, all in all, just a metaphor. Even if the community dissolved along with its characters, its writers and contributors (hopefully) continue living their lives, off- and online, carrying not only the bad experiences from Sapfo with them, but also the good. Below, I will first collate some threads of the story of Sapfo and then discuss some aspects that I consider important to understand what happened. What was it that changed Sapfo from a story of success to a story of death, and what does it tell us about the processes of creating stable and democratic mailing list environments? What is specific with the mediated context for these processes – and what impact do the specific subcultural frames have?

## Creating mediated discussion list community: Complex social processes

There has been a widespread understanding that the Internet makes it easier to create active and democratic communities, because 'you just have to turn on the computer'. This study, as well as many others, clearly shows the opposite: just as any other social arena, creating well-working community in a mediated group involves complex social processes, requiring great efforts by actively involved participants and list owners. The narrow bandwidth of communicating through text poses particular challenges for the interaction processes, in order to create trust and to find functional ways to structure and administer the conversation room. Further, the list is additionally even integrated and made important on other social arenas in the subcultural community. 'Creating community on Sapfo', acquires meaning as related to an established local subcultural context and history.

The social unit which is the point of departure here – Sapfo – is an *anonymous internet-mediated mailing list community for lesbian and bisexual women, owned by the Organisation situated in the Country*. All the terms in italics are important elements when trying to make sense of what happened on the list, my informants' stories of how they related to the conflicts, how they chose to deal with them and why. The events take place in a micro-social unit of interaction with situated actors, a group that is primarily based on self-regulation as an organizing form, and with the option of participating anonymously. At a micro-level, every online group is unique and situated practices. However, there are a number of elements that can be identified as common influential aspects of the processes of creating mediated community. As Nancy Baym (1998) summarizes:

'There are at least five sources of impact on CMC, each of which affects a given group's communication. Each of those sources – external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participants' characteristics – is itself comprised of variables.' (1998: 49)

She underlines that the way that community is created is influenced by a number of structural and cultural factors, and yet, how they work as frames for cultural processes is not predictable.

Two contexts are particularly relevant for the interaction processes that I have analyzed: the subcultural context on the one hand – and the mediated context on the other, each with sets of discourses related to them. An additional dimension that cuts

across and glues these two together is the relation between the activities and actors on Sapfo and other social arenas. As my knowledge about these connections increased, my interest and my gaze shifted and came to see Sapfo as part of situated subcultural practices. The making of meaning in other subcultural mediated spaces and physical places became important to what happened with regard to Sapfo. Mediated space and physical place are entwined in the processes of creating community online, rather than representing two ends of a dichotomy. As Slack and Williams argue:

‘We conceive of community as a thoroughly practical achievement, a lived reality that is realized (i.e. *made real*) by society members. *Community* trades *reflexively* on discourses of place and ties these to particular spaces (*and times*). This is the basis for both inclusion and exclusion and a resource for disputation as to where the community is and who should be regarded as member.’

(Slack and Williams 2000: 314)

This is particularly relevant when studying already established subcultures like the GLBTQ-community. On the one hand, the community is established as both a cultural notion, as well as through concrete culturally situated social practice of community in physical environments. On the other hand, the notion of an off-line lesbian community is also used to structure the *online* environment: ‘it is imagined as a combination of people, groups, places and literature that are perceived as ‘gay friendly’ as well as exclusively lesbian.’ (Munt et al 2002: 133). In this case, the local and political aspect of ‘the community’ is very central and must be understood in light of the fact that Sapfo is a national list, not international (or regional). Among other features, this includes a political organisation as a central point of reference and actor as list owners and as producers of political opinions about sexuality in the Country. The local aspect also implies that participant hierarchies within the group and access to information is connected to the positions that certain list members have within the off-line subculture in the larger cities, and the relations between other activists in these places.

The narrative of the Net understood as a separate space, a ‘virtual’ world as opposed to the ‘real’, has also contributed to creating an image of computer-mediated communication as something completely different than face-to-face sociality. Even if our experiences of using the net are differentiated and nuanced, internet communication is still on a discursive level being produced as having its own social rules because of its bodiless mediated form. With regard to what happened on Sapfo, there are in particular two discourses of net-communication that different

actors relate to and reproduce when negotiating their interpretations of the interaction context. The first I will refer to as 'the net as a more democratic means of communication', associated with non-regulation and the right to free speech. The other is the metaphoric narrative of the Internet 'as theater'; a stage for anonymous identity play. Whereas the first discourse is central in relation to the conflicts and discussion of group norms where self-regulation did not succeed as before, the theater metaphor is used as a point of departure in relation to the revelation. Parallel to pointing to the problems of conflict resolution on the list and explicitly appealing to the responsible list owners to actively moderate the discussion, participants produced an understanding that 'the best for a list is that it is unregulated'. A quote as 'playing theater is what the Net is there for', or referring to 'the Internet level as unreal', is produced alongside stories and descriptions of Sapfo as a meaningful everyday social network by participants, where intimate real life problems are shared and local identity politics discussed.

These discourses seem to be powerful when the involved actors make sense of what took place and interpret the revelation of the multiple identity cross-dresser. This is in particular visible in the lack of dialogue between the Organisation as list owners, following the revelation, when insecurity and distrust develops in the group. If the Net is an unregulated theater, participants' expectations of the social rules of the group as a 'real life context' are wrong and 'must be adjusted', as the chairperson of the Organisation says. A net-mediated group is not regulated socially, and shouldn't be. Protecting oneself against being fooled is an individual responsibility. The questions and appeals to the Organisation were not replied to. Even if there are reflections and discussions on the list regarding whether Sapfo should be re-organized or not, the group was not able to reach decisions about this on its own. None of the participants took a leading position in these processes.

## **From happy to silent days: Changing social frames of interaction**

The events that take place in the different analytical periods have consequences for the interaction context, changing the social frames that define the situation. This is most obvious when comparing scene I and IV; where the practice of interaction on the list, as well as the stories that participants create about their community as such, go through a major change from the happy



days to the days of silence. The conflicts that take place make the participants *re-negotiate* the definition of the situation, as Goffman (1974) calls it. The way that they used to refer to the list is not the same as before, and creates meta-reflections about what it is that characterizes the changes. In our common reflection about the changes that took part, Lisa locates the changes to the two conflicts described in scene II and scene III (chapters 5 to 8):

J: It was really two conflicts in the fall in many ways; first you had the conflict in relation to the transsexualism-discussion that ended up with Helena being thrown out of the list [...]

L: mmm

J: mmm..and then there was the revelation of Hans [...]

L: I think that it was those two things that changed the mood [on the list]

J: yes

I have chosen to analytically separate the two conflicts that took place because they differ with respect to the core change, and because they had different kinds of effects on the list. This may be observed from:

- the activity on the list, the number of messages, participants and topics;
- in what ways the list members describe and refer to the list socially, which is for instance visible in their presentations of what the list 'is' as opposed to what it 'has been'.

The respective developments are related to the specific topics of conflict in the two discussion threads, the connections between them, but also finally, how they are dealt with by the list owners.

The first conflict is in its content related to negotiating borders about who should be considered legitimate members of the subcultural community and the discussion list. It culminates in a discussion about norm conflicts, which is a common problem on mailing lists. During this period, participants' positions towards each other are characterized by an increasing hostility, since the conflict does not result in a closure like on previous occasions. One of the most visible consequences is that central participants start to leave the list as an explicit protest against the development, as an act of frustration and anger that is partly directed towards specific list members and partly towards the Organisation for not getting involved to help solve the situation.

The second conflict is to a large degree related to the internet as a social arena and reactions towards the experience of identity deception in a group not intended for identity play. The revelation influences the frames of interaction at a deeper level, because it challenges the participants' relation to the rest of the group and by disturbing a notion of trust that had previously been present. The resulting feelings of insecurity are related to broken illusions with regard to who the other is, if the other exists and which gendered body that is typing. As a consequence, it creates an uncertainty about who the others could be during the following period.

What becomes difficult is to retain what Luhmann describes as the basis of trust: to have 'confidence in one's own expectations, [...] enabling a capacity to behave as if the future was in fact certain' (Luhmann 1979: 4, in Bødker and Christensen 2003). It has severe effects on the extent of participation and the number of contributing participants. The emotional reactions are to a larger extent related to sorrow and hurt rather than to anger, and it becomes difficult to re-establish trust and to feel comfortable with being personally intimate as before. Rather than leaving the group in anger, participants disappear silently, gradually stopping to write to the list. From being a 'culture of trust' as Bødker and Christensen describe, where trust 'functions as a catalyst for interaction' (2003:3), the new interaction frames are colored by a consciousness of the social risks of deception in the mediated group and constitutes a culture of mistrust.

The discrepancy between expectations of interaction rules of a certain social situation, and what actually takes place, is connected to the social frame. The main confusion on Sapfo seems to be produced by 'expecting truth and getting fiction.'

## **Trust, social frames and genre: Reality or fiction?**

*Welcome to Sapfo – the virtual world where anything can happen. Please create your gender and character: who do you want to be today? Have fun!*

Would the participants on Sapfo have experienced the cross-dressing event as a deceit if this was the introductory text welcoming new members, as we can find in many MUD-environments? As I have discussed in chapters 7 and 8, what seems to be of crucial importance for how the situation is interpreted is the discrepancy between the definition of the social situation, and the expectation of what kind of social practice that

takes place, and the use of Sapfo to create fiction. What we expect is related to what we read out of certain 'trust cues':

'Even so there are profound differences [between face-to-face interaction and online interaction] in the way we acquire our grounds for trust, our trust cues. And, as trust is intimately linked to the concept of risk, there are profound differences in the kinds of risk an agent is involved in, whether the search for trust cues is played out in face-to-face interactions or in face-to-interface interactions.'

(Bødker and Christensen 2003: 2)

How are trust cues related to genre online? On Sapfo, there are no cues, neither in the introductory e-mail, the FAQ of the list nor in the discussions, that playing theater is a part of the interaction context. It is not explicated as 'forbidden' either, but, there are certainly not any invitations or encourages to identity play. The 'frame' of the interaction context plays a major importance for how we interpret and define a situation, as Goffman illustrates in *Frame Analysis* (1974). All participants do not experience Sapfo in the same ways, or from the same participant positions. Still, the main superior culturally dependent rules for behavior are characterized by certain recognizable ways of understanding, triggering a specific scheme that O'Brien (1999) describes:

'[T]he (re)-production of cultural forms of interaction will be shaped by who is doing the interacting. Or more specifically, by the intersection of the interests among users and the content of the cognitive-emotive maps that shape their world views.'

(O'Brien 1999: 98)

Since a queer understanding of identity is not dominating our culture, our minds are equally not set to think that gender performance and gendered bodies can be mixed in a range of ways. Even if there are tendencies that some participants on Sapfo support a way of thinking about identity that is in opposition to an authentic single (and one-gendered) self, inspired by post-structuralist and queer theoretical separation of the self as tied to one embodied actor, it is obviously not what is expected as the default rules in this context. As the negotiations following the revelation show, participants expect the other to have one material body, and one material body to produce one character on the list. This is related to a perception of the context as 'real', and the social rules of 'reality', that are generally not consistent with multiple identities, for instance:

“The potential for altered forms of interaction lies with those whose own modes of communication breaks radically with one or more aspects of the conceptual cluster. The most radical of these possibilities would be: disembodied/multiplicity/reality.[...] How and among who would this occur?” (O’Brien 1999: 98)

The answer to O’Brien’s question is in my opinion most of all an issue of explicit common interpretations of social rules of a certain situation. In a subversive environment or subculture (as in certain queer subcultures as O’Brien exemplifies) where it is an explicit goal to perform identity without the single gendered self as a taken-for-granted norm, different possibilities of creating other norms for performing the self are present. However, as norm-challenging practices, it is crucial that alternative social norms are made explicit to a certain extent, to be able to re-work and establish new patterns of social interaction. Opposing norms requires meta-reflection and consciousness-raising in order to change taken-for-granted expectations, something that was not the case in relation to the *practice* of interaction on Sapfo before the revelation.

## **Gender trouble or genre trouble?**

There is trouble, but what exactly seems to be causing it? Is it just a matter of gender trouble, as it might look like on the surface; that the deception with respect to gender is too much, leading to a conclusion that the members on Sapfo have traditional ways of understanding identity and gender, in spite of their assumingly queer political opinions? Or is it a question of genre trouble, where expectations of social rules for the discussion list do not match with practice, making the re-interpretations difficult to handle? How is this related to the situated group and their purposes on one hand, and discourses of the net-communication on the other?

The answer I would propose is that both aspects of gender and genre are important and that they are entwined. However, as our expectations of presentations of selves, including the gendered self, are related to context, the social frames within which one interprets social interaction are crucial to what we expect the other to be. The situated *social purposes* of Sapfo are central here. They are mixed, since Sapfo is on the one hand, a political discussion forum, and on the other, a social identity support group with regard to lesbian, bisexual and transsexual minority positions. As Nina Wakeford (1996) describes US-Sappho, this mix contributes to a unique intimate and multi-functional list character: ‘One Sapphite described the list as ‘like a family’ [...] that is very

different to a list which is focussed on one particular topic, such as the one described in Baym's study of soap-opera fans' (1996: 100). For some list members, Sapfo too filled a collective and corrective function of being a network that positively confirms a non-heteronormative identity, and a force to 'repair troubled subject positions'. This means that a subject position that can be potentially experienced as questionable elsewhere, is acknowledged here, and similar experiences reflected upon.<sup>93</sup>

The basis of group membership is identifying as lesbian/bi/transsexual women and the recognition of a same-sex desire between women. Hence, the body represent a central symbolic anchor for the sense of community. The gendered and sexualized body, then, is relevant in quite a different way than for example a group for stamp collectors or soap opera fans for that matter. Here, the meaning of the body is explicitly discussed and negotiated both in relation to who should be defined as part of the community, and it is made central when making sense of the cross-dressing event.

I am sure that the disclosure of a multiple identity, cross-dressing, stamp collector could also potentially destroy a mailing list. However, the mix of social genres that we find on Sapfo and similar groups, created on the basis of intimate and vulnerable experiences where people share partly troublesome parts of their lives, would make it particularly difficult to mix truth and fiction in a successful way. Like what Lisa Nakamura (2002) points out in relation to playing racial stereotypes online, there is a difference between those who can logg off their Asian geisha character and enter real life as white, and those who have to relate to expressions of racism in their everyday lives. As the gendered, raced and sexualized body is an important signifier that forms a point of departure of how others relate to and interpret us, including harassment, marked bodies are also symbolically important as the basis of creating an identity-based community (however never the only one).

What is problematic is not that a non-woman, non-lesbian contributes to the sharing of thoughts and emotions in the identity-based group in itself, without sharing an embodied common ground as 'queer woman'. It is rather that the participation of the multiple identity cross-dresser is not discussed and agreed upon as an explicit issue within the group, on the basis of an open presentation. Hence, it is not a 'gender problem' in itself, but a question of presenting fiction as truth within frames that do not

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<sup>93</sup> As stated in chapter 5, there are also questioned positions within a minority culture as such, which might be perceived equally normatively repressing or choking. Still, I interpreted Sapfo as both open and welcoming in its atmosphere, and before the revelation, towards new members in particular.

indicate that this is an expected social activity among group members.

## **Trust and 'safe spaces' in a disembodied context: The problem of fragmentation and social responsibility**

When I was two years old, I had an invisible friend. His name was Ygoron, and the most important function he had in my life was to take responsibility for everything that I did that my parents didn't approve of. Ygoron spilt my glass of milk and he was horrible at tipping over the potted plants. Of course, I did not get away with blaming Ygoron for my little crimes, since it was quite obvious for my parents that we were one and the same.

The possibility of cross-dressing and performing multiple identities online has mostly been celebrated as a positive potential of creating identity in new and varying ways, without being interpreted on the basis of a bodily signifier, thus allowing the exploration of other expressions of selves (Turkle 1995, Stone 1996). These discussions, hopes and hypes must be seen in light of postmodern theories of selves, gender and sexuality. Focussing on the more problematic aspects of multiple identities in the disembodied online realm has easily been interpreted as being stuck in modernist and essentialized ways of understanding identity (Kolko and Reid 1998). However, as Kolko and Reid discuss in their article, to problematize the narrative of the fragmented self in mediated communities and the importance of the body, is not in opposition to having a social constructivist view of identity: 'Perhaps we might draw on the works of Donna Haraway (1991, 1997) and other postmodern feminists to explain how embodiment does not equal modernism, and how accountability does not negate the idea of play' (1998: 224). As social embodied individuals in face-to-face settings, we are never one and the same in our human everyday relations, but act according to the social situation, and in contradictory ways. According to postmodern theories of identity, diversity exists within the self, and we change over time, across situations and within long-term relations. Our body anchors our performances though, and maybe, as Kolko and Reid suggest, allows us to be flexible because we are still recognizable. At the same time, our bodies hold us accountable for our actions, in the sense that they are our physical representations of selves.

What is interesting in their discussion and highly relevant for my empirical analysis of Sapfo, is the focus upon fragmentation in relation to a specific social purpose of computer-mediated

communication; the possibility to create *stable and democratic online communities over time*. It is crucial to understand this issue as *something else* than participating accidentally on a chat one night. I will argue that in order to move on in the discussions and get beyond the post-structuralist theoretical reflections on the positive potential of the bodiless state *in itself*, it is necessary to separate between different CMC-spaces and their social functions and purposes.

All social networks and groups that meet regularly for a specific purpose need to establish and develop ways to interact that meet basic criteria that strengthen their purpose. The development of trust and predictability through social responsibility are central for these processes, as communities are collective, not individual entities. What is easy, is freedom without, rather than under, responsibility. But it does not make solid grounds for developing community. This is more than anything related to the fact that situated long-term relationships also require an ability to handle conflicts during the way. As Kolko and Reid put it:

‘The fragmentation of the individual hinders the formations of flexible and resilient on-line personae. Interpersonal problems require flexibility and resolution. Compromise, change, empathy and negotiability are qualities vital to the continuance of relationships. Without these qualities, all relationships are at risk.’

(Kolko and Reid 1998: 219)

This ability was also an important characteristic of Sapfo in the years when the community was successful. Even if the participants chose to use a pseudonym when communicating, they were still building recognizable images of themselves in the group, which is also crucial to be recognized and to achieve participant status in the group (Donath 1999). There was also a pattern that many of the members took social responsibility by welcoming new members, but also through a will to change their behavior if there was a conflict, as well as by developing their views during a discussion – and thus act in ‘flexible ways’. There was in this sense a will and an ability to act empathically, and to integrate individual aims with enacting a responsibility for the group as such.

It is our very plurality, our multiple moods and changing opinions, that allows the creation of a vibrant and vital culture. It is the

singularity of online personae that can be the greatest threat to on-line communities. It has been all too easy for virtual communities to encourage multiplicity but not coherence, with each individual personae having a limited, undiversified social range. [...] but if virtual communities are to be sustainable as communities they must allow and encourage a holistic projection of the self into the virtual landscape. (Kolko and Reid 1998: 227)

There are not many of the members on Sapfo who argue in favour of allowing multiple presentations of self. The only one who does so retrospectively, is Hans, and to a certain extent Nina. Hans uses the narrative and discourse of the net as more democratic because of the possibility to separate the responsible typist and the textual participant. For him, the net is a unique possibility to carry out his political missions without being connected to his embodied self. When one of his characters gets into trouble, well, he can just pull out one of his other and start all over again. On the other hand, also Marple and Nina use the possibility of separating their embodied selves and the actions that they carry out when the group is unable to solve the conflicts on the list, but for slightly different reasons. They choose to use the possibility to disguise themselves in order to avoid getting into trouble on the list as well as off-list. Nina, acting as 'anonymous list-mistress', wants to avoid being publically responsible, believing that it is difficult to both be in charge socially and to participate as an ordinary list member in the discussions. She partly argues that multiplicity is 'what the net is there for', and hence legitimizes fragmenting her two functions in two selves. Marple, however, is arguing explicitly that it is problematic to act as multiple personas on Sapfo, in particular related to the purpose of political discussions. Even if she chooses to carry out the revelation using other names than her ordinary user name, she is doubtful about the morality of this retrospectively, as she thinks it would have been better if the responsible owners took charge instead of a private person. A part of her reason to act anonymously is related to the possibility that she cannot be held responsible on Sapfo only, but also in other off-line contexts, something that feels unpleasant.

On Sapfo, the disguised embodied typist is still made *accountable* for the anonymous online character, when forbidden connections between them are revealed. It is Hans who is asked to account for *his* productions of 'the gang of four', and also to a certain degree the anonymous revealer Ingse. In the case of questionable actions then, the real embodied writer is expected to answer for what the list character does.



## Worlds colliding: Social constructionist views of identity and gender meet the wall @ genre

There are no material bodies visible on Sapfo. Still, *the image* of the material body as a fixed point of reference for the self, created by textual performances is crucial for interpreting the other. This is visible when the illusion that everyone is who they describe themselves to be through interaction is broken. It is also obvious that many participants have taken for granted that the connections between text and typist are more or less truthful according to numbers of selves presented and their gender. Flisan, Nicole, Anna and Malin are considered as having no right to exist independent of Hans. Why?

Social rules of interaction are tightly connected to social purpose. A central characteristic dividing the frames of different social genres is the interpretation of them as 'truth' or 'fiction'. When we go to the theater, for example, we know that the characters in the play are fictive, they do not exist as in having their names in the phone book, but live through the lives of others in a temporarily situated reality on the stage, as well as in our minds. If we see the actor playing Nora in 'a Doll's House' on the street, we don't call her by her character's name and ask her if she's returned to Helmer yet. Or, in the opposite, in everyday social interaction we don't anticipate that our colleague at work doesn't have the husband she had yesterday, but relate to her as a coherent person with a background and life situation that does not change from moment to moment. These frames are also important in computer-mediated communication. The basic difference between the more playful genres and the discussion list genre in computer-mediated communication, is most importantly the social purpose for the activities taking place. The discussion lists represent realisations of a non-fictional genre where the primary aim for the texts produced is to negotiate meaning in relation to specific topics.<sup>94</sup> Multiple selves, then, do have problems of being accepted as correct ways of performing identity within online genres that are not associated with 'fiction', because the most common frames for the genre are based on a traditional identity concept of 'one body-one voice':

“The physical anonymity of electronic interactions allows for the possibility that persons will present themselves as the opposite gender

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<sup>94</sup> This is not to say that discussion doesn't take place within playful genres – or that fiction, play or humour is not used on discussion lists.

from their corporeal form. Precisely because this can occur, regulation is likely to emerge, not because of gender crossing *per se* is problematic, but because multiplicity is. The existing cultural scripts that provide a repertoire for handling multiplicity render it either as pathological disorder or allowable as fiction.’ (O’Brien 1999: 96)

This *one body* is further unseparably tied to gender:

‘[W]e have only one body, therefore we have only one ‘true’ gendered self of which we can be ‘honestly’ aware. To represent this self as something other than that which is consistent with physical form is acceptable only if the performance conforms to mutually understood rules of ‘fiction’. Ultimately, one has either a vagina or a penis, and the presence of one or the other of these physical attributes marks an ‘authentic’ immutable presence in time and space. Or so we will continue to believe. ‘ (ibid : 96).

As O’Brien points out, the possibilities of being accepted as multiple is usually in cases of exceptions to the rule: when the social frames signal ‘fiction’ explicitly, as when playing theater, going to a carnival – or role-playing in everyday life.

## **Making the fingers type**

Creating community, online as well as off-line, is the ongoing collaborative effort by many involved participants. There has been an outspread belief that the net in itself makes it easier to connect people because time and place are no longer a hindrance. Many empty mailing lists created by optimistic organizers prove that it takes more than the technical option to create a social room that people want to spend their time participating in.

There must be a social motivation driving the initiations, a few enthusiasts taking initiatives to start discussions and dialogues, and a growing feeling of group identity and belonging amongst participants through reading and actively contributing to the group. There must be a will and empathy to get through conflicts and disagreements, and to learn from them in the process of developing the community.

The story of Sapfo more than anything shows the massive work that different participants put into creating, defining and negotiating the list community, and their struggles to handle conflicting situations on-stage and off. It shows the complex relations that exists between the list room itself and other social rooms, a seamless weave of off-line and online queer subculture,

and the people taking part in them. Together they have created a unique social space that is important in a period of their lives, with different motivations and functions for individual group members.

An important social arena is lost when the smell of distrust and deceit infects the room of Sapfo, making the fingers stop typing. The bodiless and anonymous context ends up not to be liberating, but scary and frustrating, a continuous reminder of the body behind the screen, the body that it is not present and more present than ever before. The room might be re-defined, though, by people who want to do the job. In the process of doing this, the previous experiences can be useful tools, to reflect around some central questions in moving on: how do we want this room to be, what are the rules to participate? Should anonymity continue or stop being a participant criteria, and how about multiple self presentations – is fiction allowed here? How should we regulate the room in times of conflict? There are no standard recipes of how to successfully create a community because such processes are always contextualized and unpredictable. Re-building trust is not a question of rules in themselves, but of a creating a certain social predictability and a common understanding of the situation. In these processes, open dialogues between participants and list owners about the frame of the mediated room are central, for creating grounds that fit the purpose – without drowning in the voices of naturalized pre-scriptive discourses of what net-communication 'is' or 'should be'.



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# **Appendix 1.**

## **Guidelines for the Organisation's websites**

A lot of the material on the Organisation's web-pages are created by the readers themselves. Our point of departure is that the discussions should be as free as possible and that a maximum of freedom of speech should be the norm. For certain exceptions we keep the right to remove material though.

The Organisation is an organisation for homo- bisexual and transpersons. The space on our server is restricted. Because of that, published material should be related to homo- and bisexuality and transquestions and/or homo-, bisexual or transpersons' lives. Material that is illegal according to the Country's laws is not permitted on the Organisation's web-pages. For example should the web-pages not be used for spreading slander, harrasing groups of people, child pornography or forbidden descriptions of violence.

It is not allowed to use the web-pages to do or convey illegal actions. For example it is not allowed to use the web-pages to convey contacts for prostitution. The pages should neither be used to seek sexual or other contacts that are forbidden by the Country's law.

The Organisation also keeps the right to remove other material that because of its content can be considered as harrasing or humiliating. For example, we do not accept harrassment towards homosexuals on our web-pages, even if the law of harrassment of groups of people do not protect homosexuals.

Sex with animals, so-called animal sex, has nothing to do with homo- or bisexuality. Because of this we do not permit publishing of animal sex in our chat.

[If you see anyone trespassing against the rules, you are welcome to report it here.](#)





## Appendix 2.

# Sapfo FAQ

Welcome to Sapfo's first , unofficial FAQ. Here you find the answer to the most common questions about the list that are not counted as ordinary netiquette. To read more about more common rules you should go to a more proper [netiquette page](#).

### 1. In general

#### 1.1 What is Sapfo?

### 2. Subscribing

#### 2.1 How do I join Sapfo?

#### 2.2 How to I leave Sapfo?

#### 2.3 How do send an e-mail to everyone on Sapfo?

#### 2.4 Do I need to be a member of the Organisation to join Sapfo?

#### 2.5 How do I make my e-mail program to sort all Sapfo-mails in a separate folder?

#### 2.6 Sometimes, parts of my e-mails disappear. Why does this happen?

### 3. Persons

#### 3.1 Do we really have to write at least 274 e-mails every month?

#### 3.2 But who is the list mistress really?

#### 3.3 I saw an e-mail from one of the girls in the Organisation. Was it her or the Organisation's opinions that she wrote about?

### 4. Rules

#### 4.1 What is meant when saying that the list has a 'sex-prohibition'?

#### 4.2 Are there subjects that I can't discuss on the list?

#### 4.3 What am I supposed to do if someone on the list attacks me?

#### 4.4 Can I quote messages on the list and send them to people who are not on the list themselves?

#### 4.5 Can I reply to persons on the list in private e-mails?

#### 4.6 Nobody replied to my message. Did I say something wrong?

## 1. **General**

### 1.1 **What is Sapfo?**

Sapfo is supposed to treat issues that are of interest for lesbian and bisexual women. Only women can participate. In the first degree the list turns to lesbian and bisexual women in the Country, but even women outside of these borders can participate.

The language that is used is mainly Countryisk, but messages written in other Nordic languages are also present. These writers usually understand

Countrysk real well, so if you are not one of those, we prefer that you reply to them in Countrysk.

All women are welcome to subscribe to Sapfo. It is totally free. The register of subscribers is strictly confidential. Everyone who subscribe can also post messages to other subscribers (which means that it actually is discussion on the list). You can stop your subscription at any time.

(adjusted from [Sapfo on the Organisation's web-site](#))

## **2. Subscription**

### **2.1 How do I join Sapfo?**

To join Sapfo you can either visit [our website](#) under the Organisation's [website](#), or e-mail to [requests@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry](mailto:requests@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry), with subscribe sapfo in the message body.

### **2.2 How do I leave Sapfo?**

If you want to leave Sapfo, so please please, PLEASE don't send an e-mail to the whole list and ask how you do it. This only creates a bad mood, and on this list in particular, it is a taboo.

If you just want to say goodbye in a polite way, or motivate you reasons for leaving, it's probably ok.

### **2.3 How do I send an e-mail to everyone on Sapfo?**

To send an e-mail to the whole list you just send it to [sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry](mailto:sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry). To be able to do this you have to be a member of the list first, use this link to see how you join.

Please note that you can only send to the list from the address that you subscribed with.

### **2.4 Do I need to be a member in the Organisation to join Sapfo?**

No, you don't have to be a member of the Organisation to participate on the list. All women are warmly welcome, even if the list turns to lesbian and bisexual women in the first hand.

But if you want to join the Organisation, you can do it [here](#).

## **2.5 How do I get my mail program to sort all Sapfo-mails in a separate folder?**

The safest and simplest way to sort out Sapfo-mail is by choosing 'all mails that have the to-field marked as [sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry](mailto:sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.thecountry)'. There are other possible criteria, but none of them works on all mails.

## **2.6 Sometimes, parts of my e-mails disappear. Why does this happen?**

It seems like Sapfo cannot handle lines that are longer than 1000 signs. Somewhere between you and us others the line is simply shortened. The solution is then not to write such long lines but to use row break instead. It seems like this problem does not include the length of the e-mail as such, just on single lines of the text.

## **3. Persons**

### **3.1 Malin calls herself 'ListBitch'. Is she list mistress?**

No, she is ListBitch. To let her own words explain:

'October 12<sup>th</sup> 1999 I joined Sapfo. But it wasn't the first, but the third time. I had then jumped off the list two times before because it didn't seem like a good idea, because the list was totally silent. I introduced myself with a real lesson about the inactivity. That's when I got the title 'ListBitch'.

Malin nags on all of us for not writing enough, and she also usually does a sum up of all the messages of the month in a fun and easily read way. She is however NOT list mistress, and has no control of how the list is run or its register of members.

### **3.2 Do we really have to write at least 274 e-mails every month?**

Well, I guess it's not a criteria. But if we don't, Malin gets really sad, and several of the girls are struck with severe breathing problems. So if you don't want to feel guilty, keep writing!

### **3.3 But who is the real list mistress really?**

The list mistress at the moment is Sara, and she can be reached with questions about Sapfo on [Sapfo@theorganisation.thecountry](mailto:Sapfo@theorganisation.thecountry)

### **3.4 I saw an e-mail from one of the girls in the Organisation. Was it her or the Organisation's opinions that she wrote about?**

If she didn't explicitly say so, or it was obvious in the discussion, it was with greatest certainty her own opinions that she expressed. On the list, everyone are there as private persons, and speaks on behalf of themselves unless otherwise is stated.

If you are still uncertain of who it was, send an e-mail to the list and ask her.

#### **4. Rules**

##### **4.1 What is meant when saying that the list has a 'sex-prohibition'?**

Yeah, you wonder about that too? Maybe we should have a (another) discussion about that issue.

##### **4.2 Are there subjects that I can't discuss on the list?**

There are no rules for what we can discuss on the list, but the thumb rule is that it should have some sort of relevance for us who participate on the list. But if you have a somewhat unusual discussion subject that you would like to raise, so please do so, and await the responses to it. The last thing that anyone wants is the list to stagnate. However, consider that this is an open discussion group, and that there are many sharp debaters on the list.

##### **4.3 What am I supposed to do if someone on the list attacks me?**

The best thing that you can do is to explain how you experience it, and ask her to stop. It could be that it was only a question of misunderstanding, or even a misspelling. The Internet can be such a restricted communication tool, and sometimes it just turns out wrong.

If it really is someone who attacks you you can be sure that the list will react upon it. Personal attacks are usually not tolerated over too long a period. Consider however, that the Organisation has not yet decided if or how someone should be closed off from the list, so you shouldn't expect any actions from the list mistress.

Apart from that, it's always possible to throw e-mails from the bothersome person in the trash. But if you do, it's not necessary to tell the whole list about it.

##### **4.4 Can I cite from messages on the list to people who are not on the list themselves?**

No, not if you haven't gained permission to do so explicitly. Many Sapfo-members feel that they can say things that they cannot without this rule, and the relative anonymity of the Internet. The same goes for material from other mailing lists; do not cite e-mails from these lists if you are not permitted to.

##### **4.5 Can I reply to persons on the list in private e-mails?**

If you do not know her, either in real life or via this list, it could be a good idea to ask her on the list if it is ok. Some people feel that it is uncomfortable to receive e-mails from people that they do not know.

**4.6 Nobody replied to my message. Did I say something wrong?**

No, I am sure you didn't! It's just that sometimes no one has time to reply to just your posting. That does not mean that you have said anything wrong, or that people are angry with you. I'm sure you don't reply to every e-mail either.

Additionally, 'to say something wrong' doesn't really exist on Sapfo, everyone is allowed to have their opinions, but of course it happens that we discuss or even challenge someone's opinions in between. That's the whole point with a discussion forum. And if people are angry at you, you're guaranteed lots of letters 😊

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## **Appendix 3.**

# **Request for interview**

X-Sender: jannebro@pop.hf.ntnu.no  
X-Mailer: QUALCOMM Windows Eudora Version 4.3.1  
Date: Fri, 28 Mar 2003 19:42:13 +0100  
To: sapfo@maillist.theorganisation.country  
From: Janne Bromseth <janne.bromseth@hf.ntnu.no>  
Subject: [Sapfo] Want to participate in interview in the Capital?

Hi everyone –

I am coming to the Capital next week (2. – 6. of April), amongst others to talk to the Organisation as list owners in relation to my project.

On that occasion it would be very interesting to meet more of you Sapfo-members who live in the Capital, to talk about what Sapfo means/have meant to you, what you like and don't like about it, how it has changed along the way, what other net spaces you participate in/and what they mean to you – and other things that engage you!

Dependent of how many who would like to participate in an interview, I have thought that it could be a good idea to meet several of you for a group conversation. How active you are on the list – if you participate actively and write yourself – or if you just read what other people write – is not important. What I am curious of, is your thoughts about participating on Sapfo, so if you feel like contributing to the project and share your thoughts and opinions, you might as well be 'one of the 350 listeners' ☺

### **Time and place:**

The alternatives are:

Thursday April 3<sup>rd</sup> (daytime or evening)

Friday April 4<sup>th</sup> (daytime or afternoon)

Saturday April 5<sup>th</sup> (the whole day)

Sunday April 6<sup>th</sup> (daytime)

I am not completely sure of where we will be meeting, but it will either be in the Organisation's premises or somewhere else!

If you have the time and feel like participating, please write me an e-mail, and feel free to tell me if you prefer to participate in a group conversation or just meet me alone, and what day and time that is most suitable for you.

I am sorry that it is a little hasty, but because of specific conditions, it has taken some time to get the travel plans in the box. I hope that in spite of this, some of you have the opportunity to meet me. I cannot offer anything to

compensate for your time unfortunately, so I am very grateful to those of you who want to meet me in spite of this.  
Your names will be anonymized.

I would have preferred to take the train throughout the Country to talk to those of you who live at other places, but there is unfortunately too short of a time of the project period to be able to do so. However, if any of you want to share of your thoughts and experiences by e-mail, I am of course very grateful for that too!

Thank you so much, so far 😊

Best regards  
Janne



## **Appendix 4.**

# **Interview guide, participants**

### **Information before the interview starts:**

If there is anything that you don't want to answer to, it is no problem. You can stop the interview at any time. All citations will be anonymized.

### **Introduction**

**Personalia:** Name, age, profession and internet experience

- Do you remember when you joined Sapfo? How did you join, where had you heard about the list? Are you a member of other similar internet mediated groups?

### **Issue 1: Your own participation on Sapfo**

- How will you describe your own activity throughout the period you have been a member?
  - o have you been a list member all the time? What do you read of others' messages – is there a reason why you read particular messages/writers and not? Is this something that has changed along the way, and in that case why?
  - o Did you read the messages for a longer period before you started writing yourself?
- Do you remember the first time you sent a message to the list yourself?
- How many messages per month do you write approximately?
- Are there certain periods when you have written less than others – and in that case why?
- Anonymity: are you signed up with an e-mail address that reveals your real name?
  - o Do you use a nick name when you participate (one or several)? Is it important to you to be anonymous?

## **Issue 2: Motivation and the group's importance as a social room**

- What does Sapfo mean to you?
- If you compare the list to other social communities you participate in, which social function does it fill?

## **Issue 3: Group norms and discussion culture**

- What do you think about the discussion culture on Sapfo?
  - o In relation to the topics discussed? What do you like/not like?
  - o What do you think are 'appropriate topics'?
  - o In relation to the form?
  - o Where does the line go for unacceptable behavior in your opinion?
  - o Has there been any changes of discussion culture during the period when you have been a list member?

## **Issue 4: Relations – the relations to other list members**

- Do you know any of the others that are list members on Sapfo, or know who they are from real life?
- Have you had more contact with list members after you joined the list, and how?

(Have you met in real life, or had private contact on e-mail for example?)

## **Issue 5: The episode with the cross-dresser Hans**

- Can you describe how you experienced to be a member of Sapfo this fall, and what happened in relation to the revelation of 'Hans'?
- Was it surprising to you?
- How has this episode influenced your relation to Sapfo compared to before this was known?
  - a) ...for how you relate to other participants
  - b) ...for your own activity and participation (is there a difference in how you think about the list before and now in relation to what kind of social room it represents for you? Have you

thought of Sapfo as a kind of a 'private room' or more as a 'public room' and have this changed?

- c) ..who do you imagine when reading other's messages and when you write yourself for example – and have this changed as a result of what happened?

### **Issue 6: The organisation and administering of the list**

- What do you think about how the conflict was handled by the list owners/list mistress?
- Is there anything you wish was handled in a different way, why and how?
- What do you think about the way that the group is organized (with an anonymous list mistress and much responsibility on the list itself)?
  - o What are you satisfied with/what are you not satisfied with?
  - o Has it changed a lot along the way in your opinion or has it been more or less the same along the way?
  - o Do you think that the list mistress has interfered too much when it has been conflicts, too little or adequately? What are the limits for what is 'acceptable behavior' – what is 'the limit' for you? Do you have any examples of when someone crossed 'the line' and how did you relate to it?

### **Issue 7: Sapfo and other lists**

- Can you describe which other mailing lists you are a part of? Are they similar to or different from Sapfo? What makes them similar/different?

### **Finally:**

Is it anything that you would like to add?



## **Appendix 5.**

# **Interview guide, the Organisation**

### **Issue 1: The Organisation's relation to Sapfo**

- Can you describe the relation between Sapfo as a group and the board of the Organisation, regarding how it is run on a daily basis?
- Does it take a lot of time to run your web-site and internet services?

### **Issue 2: Background and history**

- What other discussion groups and interactive communication channels is the Organisation responsible for?
- When did the Organisation create a web-site, and what were the first groups that were started? What was the background for this?
- Can you describe how and when Sapfo was started? What were the functions it was meant to fulfill? (purpose, target group)
- Who took the initiative to create Sapfo?

### **Issue 3: Organizing and choices**

- How did you reflect around the practical organizing of the list when it was created?  
(why –email distributed list? Closed and not open, anonymous vs full names)
- If you look back, how is the list run today as compared to when it was created – and has the organizing and administration of the list changed along the way? If yes, what is the background for these changes – are there specific episodes that caused the changes (subscription, open vs closed, the list administrator's function)
- What did you think in relation to participant criteria, that only women can participate, and only those who are positive to the Organisation's aims? Did you reflect around how a gender criteria could be controlled and if it could be problematic?
- What do you think about this today?

### **Issue 4: Conflicts, regulation and the Organisation's role as list owners**

- Who, would you say, is responsible for Sapfo as a group? What is the Organisation's part in relation to the group as a collective?
- Who is responsible for sorting out conflicts on the list? Is this something that has changed in light of concrete episodes on the list/other lists?
- When does the Organisation get involved to solve a conflict on the list? Do you remember the last time when this happened - can you give concrete examples of this? What did it center around?
- When the debate about the transsexual participant was at its worst, how did you relate to it? Can you describe the considerations that were made before you chose to act - what did the process look like 'behind the curtains'?
- How was the communication with the group - did it mostly take place through the list mistress, or did you read the discussions yourselves?
- Did individual participants contact you in the board, or members of the board?

### **Issue 5: The episode with Hans**

- Can you describe how you experienced what happened in relation to 'the gang of four' that it is referred to?
- Has this episode had any consequences for how you run the list today?
- Is it possible to avoid episodes like this, do you think, or reduce the chances that it will happen again?
- What do you think about the future of Sapfo?

### **Issue 6: Sapfo and other lists**

- Are all your discussion lists run the same way, do you experience the same problems with all of them? How are they different?

### **Finally:**

- Do you think that the way that Sapfo is organized today, with a non-participating anonymous list mistress works? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages with this way of

organizing in light of what has happened on the list during the last year?





