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CHILDREN'S CHAT ON THE NET:

A study of social encounters in two Norwegian chat rooms

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Vebjørng Tingstad

Preface

One early morning, after having had his dirty ears cleaned, a little boy says to his mother: “Mum, what do you think cotton buds are made for?” “Oh,” answers the mother, a bit confused as she has just demonstrated what she thinks is the most essential function of this product. Before she comes up with a good answer, the son suggests: “Do you think they are made for bodybuilding ants?” The mother, who appreciates surprising questions, answers: “Yeah ...maybe.” Then the boy demonstrates with his arms and legs how the ants have to struggle to lift the buds from the ground.

After this little conversation, the son and his mother say goodbye to each other and the social researcher has once again experienced how the material world may appear different depending on the perspective from which it is seen.

This thesis is not about children’s empathy and care for creepy-crawlies, but about children’s communication. However, the story above raises a series of questions for a researcher who is aiming to describe and interpret children’s experiences.

My position as a researcher has been established through countless numbers of talks with children, such as the one presented above. Having been near children, physically and emotionally, through a period of 30 years, has offered experiences and generated theoretical reflections which have had impact on my research approaches. Realising differences between how

children and adults experience the world may be perceived as obvious. We may laugh at the story above and say: “Oh, how lovely and sweet children are.” Yet, statements which create an idyllic and romantic image of children and childhood may be a result of and also a contributing factor to the construction of a distance to children. This distance may conceal cultural ambivalence towards childhood, which is present both as control and protection of children. This may confirm images that limit how childhood is understood and how research may be carried out to explore how children live their lives.

One possible way of avoiding this is to accept and appreciate the unexpected, surprising, confronting and intellectually stimulating voices of children through the research process. I welcome those voices, and they will be present in the thesis, not just as exotic spice for illustrative purposes, but rather as a basic empirical approach from which analyses and interpretations emerge. This does not imply romantic images or ambitions to find an authentic and childish *truth*. The empirical and theoretical focus sees children as active participants in their identity formation, in which media is an important, but not the only part of their lives.

Introduction

1 On the track of a reflexive childhood

This thesis explores how children and adolescents use the Internet as a medium for communication. The study looks at social interactions in chat rooms, where people can communicate with each other online. The empirical focus is on what happens in the encounters on the Net ¹ and how children,² mainly between the age of 11 and 14, experience this kind of communication. This chapter gives an account of the background, intentions and perspectives of the study, defines the research problem and some essential concepts. The chapter also provides a preliminary description of both web chat and the Internet, as these substantial fields represent relatively new phenomena. Finally, the chapter presents some research questions and outlines the content of the thesis.

Background, intentions and perspectives

The Internet has become an integrated part of people's lives. With an extensive access to the Internet since the late 1990's, Norwegian children have become chatters in online chat rooms ³, i.e. they participate ⁴ in an online universe. In this respect, chat rooms represent a new cultural arena

¹ *The Internet* and *the Net* are used as equivalent concepts.

² I use both *children* and *children and adolescents* about this age group. Corsaro (1997) discusses the question of defining boundaries of childhood. He uses the term *preadolescence* about the period from 7 to 13 years.

³ This concept is described on page 6.

⁴ I use the concepts *chatter*, *participant*, *sender* and *receiver* about people who take part in a web chat. A *participant*, however, is usually used in a broad manner to indicate that people in a chat room might be persons who are logged on, but who do not necessarily write messages.

for children. This arena is assumed to create new possibilities for being together, yet we know very little about what kind of *togetherness* this is.

One of the main purposes when planning the study was to explore the consequences of the development of this new media for children's socialisation. In this context I chose to delimit socialisation to cover identity dimensions. This thesis aims to include a rethinking of the concept *socialisation*, which frequently is understood as a more or less instrumental learning of social norms and values in which learning is seen as a one-way process from adults who know to children who do not know (Thorne 1993). This project intends to investigate how chat rooms represent an arena for *identity formation*.⁵ The study sees a connection between what children talk about in chat rooms and their exploration of normative demands and expectations. I ask whether web chat encourages children to explore their *social identity*, seeing this concept as a dualism between *to be alike* and *to be different from* (Gullestad 1989). Gullestad regards social identity as the encounter between the culture and the self, where *culture* is manifested in characteristic forms of actions, attitudes and habits and where people individually create meaning and identity. In this respect chat communication may disclose children's participation in modern reflexive processes, in which the dualism, as mentioned above, is in action. Giddens (1990) considers *reflexivity* as a fundamental feature in all human action. Today, however, this means that social practices are constantly examined and transformed in light of information about these practices, Giddens argues. The concept of *disembedding* refers to the process where social relations are detached from social and binding contexts and rather are

⁵ This concept is discussed in Chapter 7.

reconstructed across time and space (Giddens 1991). My focus implies accounting for the contents and conventions which are presented directly by the participants in chat communication. I also want to involve some social and cultural features which manifest themselves through the web sites and chat rooms and therefore include children in social and cultural norms, expectations and reflexive processes.

Research problem

The project is delimited to the following research problem: How do children and adolescents use web chat and what kind of implications does this activity have for their identity formation?

Firstly, this research problem aims to explore what children and adolescents do when they communicate in a web chat. Secondly, the research problem also focuses on the relation between the communication and its implications for identity formation. This aim includes a complex set of issues. A particular focus will be on the topics *age* and *gender*.

The present work builds on a Master thesis on pre-school children and their television viewing (Tingstad 1995). As in several other studies (Buckingham 1994; Bingham, Valentine and Holloway 1999), this work questions the traditional images of childhood which are present in discourses ⁶ about children and the media. This critical view includes a discussion of the concept of *childhood*, which is often embraced by myths. I consider children to be subjects in their own identity formation at the

⁶ Here I use the concept *discourse* as equivalent to the public debates and cultural narratives about a phenomenon. This is a use of discourse in an open sense (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

same time as they are objects, influenced by economic, historical, social and cultural structures and contexts in which the identity formation takes place.

A part of the cultural context for this study is the dominating social and cultural images of the Internet. In public discourses the Net is often associated with a polarised evaluation, such as fascination and concern. These discourses see the Net as a medium which, on the one hand, represents a fun leisure time activity and a stimulating educational tool and, on the other hand, a medium for child exploitation. The dichotomic perspectives in the evaluation illustrate that there is a tremendous gap between public debates and knowledge based on empirical research. This project attempts to avoid both celebrations and scapegoating of the Internet. Rather, the aim is to grasp the rationale behind chat as a communicative act from the perspectives of the children. The present study has an interdisciplinary approach as it is rooted in a Nordic tradition of child culture research and the International sociology of childhood. My approach aims to establish a link between these traditions by seeing *child culture*⁷ and *identity formation* as processes in which children are active, but in various ways also influenced by structural conditions.

My research contribution aims to explore a relatively new substantial field, chat communication between children in peer groups, to develop adequate methods and to particularly take account of some ethical demands when doing research with children as informants. The question of research ethics is broadly discussed in Chapter 4. These intentions put age as a theoretical

⁷ This concept is discussed in Chapter 3.

dimension on the academic agenda. The study also aims to make links between individual agency and social structure. By focusing on these aspects, I intend to contribute to understanding contemporary images of childhood.

What is web chat?

Web chat is written talk which takes place on the Internet in so-called chat rooms (also called forums or channels). In ordinary language use, *chat* is usually perceived as friendly talk or gossip.⁸ In a chat room people can talk to others by writing messages that immediately emerge on the screen when clicking the enter key. By using the concept of *talk*, I indicate that this kind of communication is not to be confused with the traditional conventions of writing, but is rather to be perceived as an oral interaction. There are many different chat rooms. This study includes observations of two Norwegian chat rooms from the web sites www.popit.no and www.sol.no.⁹ At the very beginning of this study, these were the two rooms that were most frequently used by the children I interviewed. Both of the rooms are part of commercial web sites. POPIT is exclusively designed for children and was operative for the first time in Norway in January 2000. The site is also available in Danish, Swedish and Finnish. POPIT was established as an alternative to existing web sites, which the editors evaluated as not suitable

⁸ *Chat* is also defined as an informal conversation or talk. The verbal form *to chat* is to talk in a light familiar way. The concept *chatter* is used about talking quickly, incessantly, trivially or indiscreetly. This concept is often used about birds' and monkey's sounds. In this thesis *chat* is consequently used about online chat (The New Oxford Thesaurus of English 2000; Illustrated Oxford Dictionary 1998).

⁹ These rooms will be called POPIT and SOL respectively.

channels, which must be downloaded. Communication on the Net is no longer an activity for those that are the most technologically skilled.

Every message starts with the participant's nickname, which may reveal information about the sender, such as sex¹² and age. According to this information, the group of chatters seems to be a mixed group. Those who indicate age, often say they are approximately 11 to 14, sometimes younger than 11 and sometimes 15 years old. This means that the chatters cross some boundaries of age, which is often an organisational dimension in other parts of their daily lives, such as at school and in their leisure time activities. These occasions are usually strictly bound to peer groups. The names also indicate participation from both girls and boys, which means that a chat room may be a common room for both the female and male chatters. This mix also differs from other parts of the everyday lives of children in this age group, which is often gender divided.

In a dialogue-window, chatters can write a message, and by clicking enter, it is sent and can be read by all the participants that are logged on. In an active room with many participants, the writings flow on the screen. The messages appear in the same order as they are sent. As a consequence, the utterances emerge helter-skelter. Approximately 12-15 messages can be viewed simultaneously in the window and it is possible to take a look at earlier writings by scrolling up the window.

In a computer chat, everybody can read what other participants say, unless somebody has decided to engage in private communication. It is possible to

¹² The concepts *sex* and *gender* are discussed in Chapter 7.

arrange a private chat where one avoids disturbing or being disturbed by others. While doing this, it is simultaneously possible to check who is present in the common chat room and what people are talking about. In a chat room it is possible to take various positions of activity; you can participate directly by writing messages, observe or just read the messages rolling up the screen. The great number of participants who do not write messages indicates that many users choose or, for some reasons, are given a role as a passive observant.

In POPIT the user is asked to define a personal profile with respect to age, hair colour, clothes, mood and interests. There is also a menu where it is possible to indicate from which part of the country you come. One recommendation, given in the Net rules which are presented on the site, is never to give anyone personal details such as your name, password, address or telephone number. Thus, the site gives the participant a set of advise for protection, rules for good Net behaviour,¹³ and warnings against breaking the rules. Moderators are authorised to expel chatters who behave badly. These moderators are adults who do this as paid work or children, who have been asked to take on this role for a period.

At first sight, some chat rooms may look like the stall walls of a public toilet with sexualised nicknames and harassing comments and invitations, especially addressed to homosexuals. A newcomer may experience this flow of talk as completely incomprehensible. This impression is strengthened both by the pace and the special kind of language which chatters often use. Abbreviations, arrows, rows of numbers, apparently

¹³ Also referred to as *netiquette*, from Net + etiquette.

meaningless combinations of letters and exclamation marks give a chaotic impression. However, a closer look shows that there are things going on in a chat room that are not obvious or directly available for a newcomer. Behind the chaos, it is possible to discover multi-layered communication with much scribbling, but also a complex mix of various activities, topics, codes, rules and conventions where age and gender in particular are highly performed. What seems like a chaotic flow of meaningless utterances appears as a new possibility for communication and social interaction.

What is the Internet?

Before outlining research questions and the thesis, I briefly present the Internet in terms of technology, history, access and use.

The technology

The Internet is a notion used to refer to a global computer network (Kent 1994; Morris and Ogan 1996; Eggen 1996; Christensen 1997; Maribu 1999). Thousands of networks and millions of computers are connected around the world.¹⁴ The Net offers services that are available from several computers. Various institutions and businesses finance and operate the services. A so-called protocol decides a standard or method for exchanging data. One of the most popular and used service is the global information system World Wide Web (*www*),¹⁵ organised as a hypertext system, which enables the combination of text, sound and picture. This system allows

¹⁴ The Internet counted in January 2000 72.398.092 hosts. A *host* is defined as a single machine on the Net. One year later the number was 109.574.429 hosts. In January 2002 this number was increased to 147.344.723 and in July 2002 the number was 162.128.493. Source: Internet Software Consortium (Permission to publish these numbers was given on e-mail 12 May 2000, appendix 4).

¹⁵ A global information system, here called the Web.

users to click the mouse and thereby rapidly navigate in complicated information structures. The users can find much information which can also be found in bookstores, libraries, archives, art galleries, travel companies, on the radio and television and in newspapers and stores. The connection of computers in networks accentuates the aspect of communication related to the Net in addition to the informative aspect. Communication services, such as electronic mail, online games, discussion groups (news groups) and chat are examples of such services that have online distribution in common, but which offer quite different possibilities for communication. This issue is further described in Chapter 5.

The history

Two features of the Internet are striking: the accelerating extension of the medium and the fascinating possibilities for rapid information search and communication. Historically, the Net has developed from being a technically complicated possibility for the few to being a common property for many, particularly in wealthy Western countries. From having been a technical tool for military purposes, the Internet was for several years reserved for students and people working at universities and research institutions. In the 1980's the Internet was just one of many other nets, and it was mainly used for communication via e-mail. With the launch of the Web in 1993 this situation was dramatically changed. From then on, the Internet was technically available for people in general. The prohibition against commercial activity was removed, and the admission to the Net was now free in the sense that the access increased. Nobody owns the Net or has formal powers to control the activity. Librarian databases were made accessible, first in the USA and immediately after in Europe. The

commercial activities, public administrators and politicians entered the Internet.¹⁶

Access and use

The USA dominates the Internet, followed by Canada, Western Europe (with the Scandinavian countries at the top of the list), Australia, New Zealand and Japan (Celsing 2000). Historically, it is argued, the year 1996 will be remembered as the year when the authorities all over the world realised that the Internet was going to be *the* centre for the most important activities in society. By 1996-97, 98 % of the computers and users of the Internet came from the aforementioned countries. This represented 15 % of the world population (Christensen 1997). Today it is difficult, almost impossible, to give exact numbers for the diffusion of the Net. The number of hosts (see footnote 14) gives, however, an indication of the exponential growth. Table 1 shows Norwegian statistics of Internet domestic access.

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Access at home	13	22	36	52	60
Access at home	15,5	34,5	48,5	70	74

Table 1. Overview of Internet access at home, from 1997 to 2001 in Norway. Percentage of the whole population and in homes with people between the age 9 and 15 (worked out on the basis of Vaage 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002). The unit here is person.

¹⁶ The commercial development of the Net has increased enormously over the last years. One example is the ongoing competition between commercial enterprises to be established with a so-called start page on people's personal computers.

As table 1 shows, Norway is a country with high domestic access to the Net. In addition, several people have access at school and at work, at Internet cafés, youth clubs and libraries. The table also shows that home environments with children have a higher level of access than the population in general. The increasing availability of the Internet creates great changes in people's media environment between those people who have access and those who do not. These differences are conceptualised as *the digital divide*, which is said to separate predominantly white, middle-class Internet users from predominantly minority, lower income non-users (Hoffman and Novak 1998). However, the Net has in a few years become a part of an everyday symbol system, surrounding many people both in private and public spheres.

According to access and use, there are demographic variables related to age, sex, social class and where people live. In Internet use, Norwegian statistics show a youth and male dominance. Patterns of use indicate that pupils and students are among the most frequent users. People in rural areas use the Internet less than urban people. Various investigations (Håpnes and Rasmussen 1997; Stuedahl 1998) indicate that girls and women use the Net in other ways and for other purposes than do boys and men. The Internet is said to have changed girls' use of computers totally, particularly because of the communication facilities. A problem in statistics has been that there is no distinction between various ways of using the Net. The medium is often perceived as equivalent to searching for information on the web. This does not include the use of communication channels. Stuedahl (1998) asks whether this problem might be one of the reasons why statistics on women on the Net show a lower frequency of use than expected. A Swedish study (Celsing 2000) shows that children between the age of 9 and 14 use the

Internet primarily to search for information and use e-mail. This study does not distinguish chat from other online communication possibilities. From 2000, however, chat was distinguished as a separate category in Norwegian Internet statistics (Vaage 2000, 2001). In 2000, 14 % of children between the age 9 and 15 years answered that they had used the chat function the previous week. In 2001 this number had decreased to 11 % for this age group, while older groups had increased their chat activity. Compared with the high numbers of children who have access to the Net, a relatively small number reports about chat activity in the last week. This indicates that children use the Internet for other purposes than just chat. Another interpretation is that many young chatters are non-regulars, i.e. they do not chat every week. One may question whether informants in research underestimate the level of their chat activity. Two reasons for doing so might be that this kind of communication is perceived as less serious than for instance information-search on the Net, and also, that chat is seen as a part of a secret and private sphere.

Research questions

This introduction presents a relatively new and accessible technology, which enables people, children included, to make acquaintances across traditional borders, such as the borders of local societies where children live. Chat also enables people to present themselves in ways which are impossible in *real*¹⁷ life, as the anonymity in the chat rooms protects them from being exposed. The introduction also indicates a mixed user group and a complex form of communication which may appear as incomprehensive and meaningless. The question is what kind of meaning

¹⁷ *Real* written in italics is usually used equivalent to offline contexts, even if online contexts are also perceived as real.

children themselves create when they take part in a chat communication. How do children present themselves when entering a chat room? What kinds of conventions are expressed? What do children perceive as the pleasures and challenges? Studying a web chat challenges, not only traditional concepts of reality and fiction, but also concepts of written and spoken language and traditional research methods. This substantial field also blurs some boundaries in conceptions of the relation between public and private affairs, as apparently personal messages are often published to a large audience. In this respect, I regard chat as a phenomenon which is included in a wider reflexive discourse in contemporary societies, where structural changes have fundamental influence on the individual. Giddens (1990, 1992) conceptualises these changes as *the transformation of intimacy*. Other media products, such as mobile phones and reality television (Dovey 2000), also stimulate the changes of privacy and intimacy to public spaces. From the perspective of a discourse of concern, one may ask whether talking to unknown people online is another example of the fragmented and unbinding social relations in modern societies. From a more optimistic point of view, a contrasting question is to ask whether this kind of communication is to be understood as creative ways of establishing new social spaces, in which people can 'be together' in new ways. Studying this field and aiming to investigate chat communication from the perspectives of the users, I choose a relatively open and exploratory approach.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis consists of eight chapters which are organised into three parts: Introduction, From research questions to inquiry, and Results and discussion. After having introduced the background, intentions and

perspectives of the study, **Chapter 1** figures out some essential questions and concepts.

Chapter 2 presents literature concerning the Internet and chat, with the intention to explore dominating perspectives in this research field. A main goal in this chapter is to outline methodological and analytical perspectives and make choices for the purpose of my own investigation in order to develop new perspectives and knowledge through an empirical study.

Chapter 3 describes a theoretical approach which places the study in an academic framework. The chapter presents the shift in child and media research which includes a discussion of the concept of childhood. The chapter also presents a theoretical position of the study which has developed from Nordic child culture research, the sociology of childhood and symbolic interactionism. A fundamental issue in Chapter 3 is to theorise the question of individual agency and social structure.

Chapter 4 describes and discusses the methodological approaches and choices. The lack of research literature in the field encourages an explorative perspective. The relative extensive presentation intends to make visible various dilemmas and considerations in this process, such as questions related to research ethics.

The chapters 5, 6 and 7 present and analyse data. These chapters are organised under the headlines of three main topics: The contents and conventions in chat communication (Chapter 5), whether and how children create community in this kind of communication (Chapter 6) and how web chat can be interpreted as occasions of identity formation (Chapter 7). The

data raise a series of issues. By looking at web chat in detail in Chapter 5, several characteristic features appear. In chapters 6 and 7, I pursue some of these features, such as how children create and maintain different kind of boundaries and how age and gender are manifested.

Chapter 8 summarises and discusses some main findings and describes how web chat represents a new possibility for children and adolescents to create social interaction. This chapter also looks back to the main intentions of the study and reflects on what the study has generated in terms of new knowledge. Making oneself visible, creating boundaries, calibrating oneself according to codes and conventions in the chat room and creating privacy in public are apparent features in children's chat communication. Age and gender are highly performed. This implies discourses about 'otherness' and 'sameness', which are crucial dimensions in constructing social identity. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the concept of the competent child in relation to social changes. This discussion questions contemporary notions of children as mature and competent, defining children or childhood as being of a certain kind. In conclusion, the chapter suggests some ideas of further research.

In an appendix, I present an index of essential vocabulary and the page number where these concepts appear for the first time.

Part 1

From research questions to inquiry

2 Internet and chat: dominating perspectives

In the previous chapter, I described the topic and outlined the main research question for the present study, which is to explore how children use the Internet as a medium for communication and what kind of implications this activity has for their identity formation. This chapter aims to present research literature and some dominating perspectives which are useful for the purpose of my study. The presentation is not a complete description, neither in terms of substance nor methodology. Rather, I will take a look in various directions and explore methodological and theoretical perspectives which are relevant for my research problem. Since the Internet is relatively new both as a medium for people in general and as a research field, I considered it crucial to explore the Net in general before looking more specifically at the communication dimensions. The chapter outlines some public discourses about the Internet, particularly discourses related to children. The second part, and the most relevant for this investigation, is the presentation of *chat*, both as a phenomenon and a research field.

Sources

I have approached existing literature in a broad manner. However, the search for Internet literature was mainly limited to BIBSYS, a Norwegian library database, while the chat search was more extensive. About 200 hits on the keywords *Internet*, *cyberspace*, *children* and *Internet* were considered as sufficient to get an adequate picture of the Net. The literature review on chat communication is based mainly on two sources. Firstly, using the word chat, I searched the social science database ERIC, for the

period 1992-1999. 116 hits were returned on computer chat in various forms.¹⁸ Four of these titles indicated a relation to children. The first of them was an American survey of children's media use in general (Roberts 1999). The two next were safety guides for parents,¹⁹ while the last one was a technical Internet guide for children (Frazier 1995). Main topics in this overview are, however, chat communication as a tool for teaching, for instance in distant education. Other issues are gender differences, power and harassment in online communication and also software and technological guides. These references gave some indications of the status of the knowledge in the field, but offered limited information for the purpose of my study, which would have been child perspectives and social aspects of online communication between children.

In December 2000, I found a chat bibliography, produced in Germany with references and contributions in various languages.²⁰ The subject of this bibliography was papers about Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which dealt with communication on the Net in the perspectives of linguistics, communication research and/or the social sciences. Here I found 184 references.²¹ Two of the references were about children. The topics of the papers in this bibliography were numerous and with a predominance of chat phenomena seen in light of language, identity, community, social interaction and gender aspects. This body of knowledge was useful in the sense that the literature illustrated how research questions and perspectives were about to become more complex and varied than they

¹⁸ In September 2002, the hits counted 228.

¹⁹ Nevada State Attorney General's Office, Carson City (1999); Armagh (1998).

²⁰ www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~mbeisswe/biblio.html

²¹ In September 2002 this bibliography counted 350 references. Studies of children continued to have a marginal position (4 references).

were just one year earlier. It also confirmed that few studies of children's chat communication existed in these kinds of research approaches. The limited number of studies about children focused, however, on technological skills and how to protect children from inappropriate content. Other written sources are Nordic and International journals, such as *MedieKultur*, *Nordicom Information*, *Childhood*, *European Journal of Communication* and *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. I have also used Norwegian, Nordic and International statistics.

In the later part of the study, I found a web page, *Cybersoc*.²², which offers sociological and ethnographic studies of cyberspace in terms of the concepts of *online* and *virtual communities*. The content on this page is based on a research community that is engaged in ethnographic studies of language, communication and culture on the Internet. In the period of my analysis, this list of references²³ served as a useful additional overview. The list also confirmed the children's marginal position in research on the topic.

Networks and mailing list

I was introduced to several research projects which were relevant for my study via networks and electronic mailing lists. Two Nordic research networks inspired the project in its early stage. One of them was a child cultural research network (BIN-Norden), where two researchers, from the disciplines education studies and ethnology respectively, had started projects about children, chat and computers (Hernwall 2001; Johansson

²² www.socio.demon.co.uk/topicVC.html

²³ <http://unixware.mscc.huji.ac.il~msdanet/overview.htm>

2000). A Danish research project, Children in a digital culture (Holm Sørensen and Olesen 2000; Holm Sørensen 2001), analysed chat as a play culture and focused on levels of reality and fiction and how children (at home, at school and in youth clubs) behave in the *virtual room*. The second network consisted of Nordic child and media researchers (BUM) with members in a European project, Children, Young People and the Changing Media Environment (Livingstone and Bovill 1999; Sjöberg 1999). A part of this study focused on children's communication on the Internet. I have also had access regularly to a Nordic mailing list, ITKULTUR@PSYCHOLOGY.SU.SE.

On the basis of these sources, mainly published up until 1999, I will present some dominating perspectives which inspired and gave direction to the research problem, the methodological and theoretical approaches and choices. Literature that has been published in the last part of this study will primarily be presented later in the thesis.

An inter-disciplinary approach

The search for general Internet research gives an impression of a dominating body of knowledge based in the technological and psychological disciplines. However, further investigations broaden the picture as a whole range of disciplines are engaged in theoretical work on the Internet, such as sociology, political science, economics, communication, geography and history (Jones 1997). Delimiting the search to communication aspects, linguistics, folkloristics, anthropology and geography still represent an extensive body of research (Werry 1996; Karlsson 1997; Jones 1997, 1998; Gotved 1997; Stuedahl 1998; Kramvig 1999; Bingham et.al 1999; Herring 1999). Most of these studies are

theoretical analyses or have adult or young Internet-users as their empirical basis. As already mentioned, a search for studies involving children and childhood restricts the findings. Studies of this kind are, to a large extent, carried out within the disciplines of pedagogy, ethnology and geography (Ebeltoft 1998; Livingstone and Bovill 1999; Bingham et.al 1999; Holm Sørensen and Olesen 2000; Johansson 2000).

The Internet

Although the Internet in the late 1990's represented a relatively new research field, the extent of accessible literature was numerous, both in the social and human sciences. The great number of recent studies strengthened the impression of a rapidly changing medium which attracted great interest. Yet, is it possible to discover a main focus or some basic issues and perspectives in the Internet literature from this period? Starting with a broad picture of the findings, the literature covers two main fields. Firstly, it covers the technology itself. A considerable part of the existing literature gives a presentation of the Net in terms of the technological development of the medium, the history of distribution, instructions for managing the technological challenges and statistics of access and use. Hundreds of practical handbooks offer instructions in how to use the technology. Some of the references concern teaching children about the computer (Grünbaum 1998). A few are especially directed towards children (Frazier 1995; Eggen 1996; Stuur 1997). Secondly, and the most interesting for this study, the literature questions how to interpret the Internet as a medium (Rheingold 2000; Turkle 1995; Jones 1997, 1998). What can this technology mean for human beings? This involves questioning relations, community, changing identities and people's understanding of reality. Other issues explored are language codes and communication styles and the Net as a space for folk

culture and interaction (Werry 1996; Karlsson 1997; Stuedahl 1998, 1999). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, concern about and protection against negative influence from the Internet are common issues, particularly when it is children's use of the Net that is the issue (Bingham et.al 1999). In what follows, I will look in more detail at the dominating perspectives that are of particular interest for the purpose of this study. Before arguing for the choices I have made, I start by discussing how the Internet is conceptualised and understood.

Adult perspective

The literature about the Internet actualises perspectives and problems which raise questions on different levels that are related to both substantial and methodological issues. One, among several dominant perspectives, is the adult research approach already mentioned. A crucial question is whether and eventually, how children and childhood are presented in the literature. A common feature in the studies of the Internet is the absence of seeing age as an empirical and theoretical dimension. Children and childhood are more or less absent. One may ask to what extent methodology and findings developed on the basis of adults' experiences are relevant and useful when exploring children's experiences with the Internet. An assumption in this thesis is that it makes a difference from which position a phenomenon is seen. When asked, children are supposed to tell other stories than what adult informants do (Tiller 1989). An example of the adult perspective is the emphasis on education, skills, control and protection of children. The literature referred to earlier in the chapter indicates recognition of the Internet as a learning tool, as other media such as radio and television, have been previously (Jones 1998). However, there is also a fundamental perspective of seeing children as

vulnerable victims in their encounter with the Net medium. As the media history reveals, there are parallels to this perspective. I interpret these tendencies as an ambivalence which, as we will see in the next section, is in contrast to the public discourses about the Net, in which children and adolescents are perceived as competent and sophisticated Internet users.

Discourses about children and the Internet

Somewhat paradoxically, and seen in light of the marginal position of children in the research literature, the Internet is often connected with the generation referred to as children and young people. Metaphors like *cyberkids*, *the Net generation*, *the digital generation*, *the front soldiers of globalisation* and *nomads of the Net* (Haraway 1991; Tapscott 1998; Williams 1999; Papert 1999) are examples of a conceptualisation which positions children and youth both quantitatively and qualitatively as the most central users of this medium. In this sense, children and young people seem to be understood as a generation distinct from adults, as vanguards in using the Net and as more curious and competent than adults. *Cyberspace* seen as *zones that script the future* emphasises that the Net is a medium for 'tomorrow' (Haraway 1991). On a more general level, the concepts can be interpreted as parts of social and cultural discourses about a popular medium, but also about childhood. This discourse contrasts the discourse in the schools, which have not recognised children as competent media users (Papert 1993). The school has been criticised for not being sufficiently well prepared for the media revolution. The curriculum and educational methods do not take account of changes in society, it is argued (Isern 1992; Erstad 1997; Sefton-Green 1998). There is a gap between life inside and outside school and a disparity between intentions and realities, what pupils ought to learn to deal with a changing society and what they actually learn. In public

discussions, it is often argued that there should be computers in the schools in order to prepare the pupils for the future. This discourse, arguing for one computer per pupil, regards computers as necessary tools for a fruitful education. The Internet has accentuated this argument. A part of such discourses is the question about children's literacy. On the basis of research which shows a declining level of children's reading literacy,²⁴ questions are raised as to how the school system should meet this challenge. Abbott (1998) describes how the web is beginning to blur the distinctions between what he calls conversation and publishing as distinct forms of communication. This also introduces the question about the relation between spoken and written language. Abbott argues that speaking online takes on a written form and writing in cyberspace almost has an oral function. I will come back to this point later in the chapter (see *Language and Interaction*). According to Sefton-Green (1998), one of the most pervasive features of discourses around the new technologies, particularly in relation to the young, is that they are inherently educative. In a number of ways, the use of new technologies begins to question the authority of traditional forms of knowledge. These questions have to be considered in the wider context of changing educational systems, the author argues.

In first world countries, the effect of the new technologies has to be examined in the context of the state's financial retreat in this area and the move towards greater variety and fragmentation in schooling and training programs. In the UK and Australia for example, there is fierce debate between so called 'traditionalists' and 'progressives' about how education should be carried out at the same time as the state is more interventionist in terms of national curricula and inspectorial accountability.In this context the new technologies are frequently represented both as a solution and a threat (Sefton-Green 1998:11).

²⁴ www.ils.uio.no/forskning/pisa/index.html

Seeing new technologies both as a solution and a threat characterises a cultural ambivalence often expressed towards children. This ambivalence is also expressed as a concern about media development in general (Postman 1982). While some discourses to a large extent are associated with an optimistic view both of the Internet, of children's competency and of the future, other discourses are expressions of public concerns. These concerns are often tied to commercial, criminal and sexual aspects. Public discussions and the traditional media contribute to construct and reconstruct images of the Net as a dangerous medium that is governed by the 'stranger danger' (Valentine, Holloway and Bingham 2000). In June 2000, the first Norwegian trial took place where a man was charged with sexual abuse towards two girls he had met in a chat room. Reading about such trials in the newspapers both produces new public concerns and focuses on the Net as something dangerous. Consequently, people ask for censoring of pornography, nazi ideology and propaganda and suggest actions to promote safer use of the Internet (Maribu 1999; Kerr 2000). The discourses and the literature which focus on what is perceived as negative aspects of the Net indicates a gap between public concern about children and the Internet and knowledge which is based on empirical investigations.

A contribution from geographical research takes a critical view on some of the discourses about children and technology (Bingham et.al 1999). These authors argue that the dominant story concerning children's use of the Internet can be read in both a positive and negative sense.

This story orders the world of which it tells according to three binary distinctions: first, between a present rooted in the past and a future symbolised by cyberspace; second, between a *real* space of embodied interaction and a *virtual* space in which location is immaterial; and last,

between the different competencies of adults on the one hand and children on the other to navigate online environments (Bingham et.al 1999:667).

One argument against the kind of approach which is criticised above is that the discourse finds it appropriate to base accounts of children's use of the Net on qualities attributed to each half of the equation in isolation (children, the Internet; people, technology), rather than on what happens in practice when the two interact. A conclusion is that researchers should pay attention to what children themselves think about and do with the online tools to which they have access. By such an approach, it will be possible to change the existing stories, the authors argue. I find these arguments very useful as they emphasise studies of practices where children themselves are actors.

I will argue that it is necessary to critically analyse the rhetorics found in the discourses and metaphors about children and the Internet. Do they express celebrations of the new medium or concerns about the consequences? To analyse these discourses is not the focus in this study, but rather a part of the cultural context in which the study is carried out.

Discourses and metaphors about the Net

The Internet is called the 4th medium, indicating that the medium will take over the position as the dominating medium, such as newspapers, radio and television have done in the past (Jensen 1997). The explosive extension of the Net is often connected with social and cultural changes in general, such as globalisation, internationalisation and individualisation. In the wake of the growth of this medium, we witness series of discourses and metaphors

which construct and nourish images and, to a large extent, myths and metaphors about the Internet.

One dominating perspective on the Internet is the idea of its importance for the development of democracy (Jones 1998). Examples from former Yugoslavia show how the Internet can be used to spread information around the world. The proclamation that “the Internet is going to solve the poverty problems in the world”²⁵ is an example of a rhetoric assertion which is part of an ideological discourse focusing on individual possibilities and responsibilities to create and control one’s life, for example, by using the medium in a political struggle to provide work for more people and develop democracy. A dominating ideology of the Net, often expressed in the trend-setting journal *WIRED*, is said to be the unlimited freedom and openness which gives the impression of a medium that crosses the boundaries between left and right (Hemer and Nilsson 1998). In contrast with this point of view, these authors refer to critics who argue that the ideology of freedom is just an old-fashioned liberalism in disguise. In public discussions, it has been argued that it is naive and even unethical to say that new technologies such as the Internet can solve fundamental challenges related to poverty problems and political tensions in the world.

The Internet is often referred to by means of metaphors associated with the concept of *space*. Concepts in the Internet literature are often influenced by science fiction literature, such as the notions *cyberculture*, *cyborg* and

²⁵ A pop-up text in a television program from a charity concert, *Net Aid*, in October 1999.

virtual reality, which all confirm images of the Internet as a special kind of reality. The author William Gibson introduced the concept *cyberspace* in the book *Neoromancer* (1984). The visions presented in this book are not far from the online world that is introduced by the World Wide Web.

An important part of the discourses about the Net is the language which describes it. In an article, Sørensen (1997) analyses the metaphors used about the Net. Firstly, they have a spatial character, he argues. This is seen in the ways in which they are tied to a spatial praxis, such as *surfing*. This metaphor is used in a large scale and is associated both with the position of the surfing culture, a popular culture in California,²⁶ and post-modern images about a superficial, inconstant and transparent culture. Sørensen refers to a study by Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which is a fundamental study of the social functions of metaphors. These authors argue that the whole conceptual system is based on metaphors that are strong features in defining culture. Lakoff and Johnson tie the use of metaphors to what they call an *imaginative rationality*, which enables an understanding of an experience seen in light of another. "...by means of new metaphors, we create new understanding and a new reality" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:235). This reasoning is easy to relate to cyberspace, Sørensen (1997) says. The physical reality beyond electronic communication is hard to conceive. Instead of using technical concepts, metaphors from everyday life, such as *home*, *homepage* and *bookmark* combined with graphical representations are offered the user. Lakoff and Johnson divide the metaphors into various fundamental types. Two of the most important types are classified as *container* and *orientational*

²⁶ Sung about from the sixties by the popular pop group The Beach Boys.

metaphors. Container is understood as an inner room while orientational expresses geographical expansion. Examples are concepts which describe a subject that is being transported in the virtual world. The transport is described as going *to* another page, moving *up* and *down*, welcoming *in* and links *out*. My preliminary observations of chat rooms showed similar examples, such as *going to another chat site, log on* and *log off*.

Some of the hopes and expectations which are present in public discourses are tied to the question of *community shaping* (Jones 1998). However, Jones questions the notion of community. As argued by Stone (1991), virtual communities and virtual space are social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'. It is argued, however, that a community is bound by place. Jones refers to Doheny-Farina (1996), who argues that communities always include complex social and environmental necessities. It is not something you can easily join, he argues. It is not possible to subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the Net. The question in this project is how children perceive community in chat rooms and whether children adopt traditional concepts of community such as those tied to the local society in which they live their lives, or if such concepts are changing in a globalised world.

Technology, human existence and reality

A dominating perspective in the literature is that the development of technology changes people and the relations between them (Poster 1999). A part of these changes is that the relations between children and parents change when children appear to be the more competent users of the new technology (Vestby 1994, 1996). Baudrillard (1994), for example,

questions how technology influences *human existence* and *reality*. He argues that media forms a *hyper-reality* that is opposed to the true and *real*. By extending this view, it is argued that the computer and particularly the Internet create a space for individual construction of identities where individuals are independent of personal, cultural and social conditions (Turkle 1995; Stuedahl 1998). Stuedahl argues that the body-less existence in the Internet culture offers possibilities no one has previously experienced. On the Net, identity and individuality are released from the physical body, she argues. Criticism has been raised towards deterministic perspectives on the media where it is argued that we have to take account of the complexity in various people's relationship to the media and the contextual relationships within which these are situated (Buckingham 1993, 1996). Within an academic approach where people are seen as actors, the media and technology do not have predetermined effects on their users.

In this project I want to express scepticism towards determinism regardless whether the positions consider the technology or the human being as the most influencing variable. Studies of young people have shown how offline experiences dominate what happens online (Kramvig 1999). Her argument is that there is a connection between the social demands of identity formation and how young people use the new medium. A consequence of this is that it is problematic to talk about a body-less existence. I will return to this point in Chapter 5, under the heading *Reality and fiction*.

I summarise my objections to extensive parts of the literature based on two main issues. Firstly, the literature illustrates how age is an under-estimated dimension, both theoretically and methodologically. This causes problems, particularly because it is far from obvious that the theoretical analyses and

the empirical studies with adult informants are relevant for understanding the phenomenon from children's point of view. An additional problem is that children and childhood appear as universal categories, independent of social and cultural contexts. Secondly, there is an element of determinism in the approaches; technology rules people or, the other way around, people control technology. This issue will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

The objections raised above have consequences for the perspectives I choose when looking in more detail at the literature about chat communication.

Chat

As the research literature on web chat is relatively limited, I include other computer-mediated communication forms when I consider the findings and the perspectives relevant. I will explore dominating perspectives in the literature, whereby I provide an overview of both content and methodological issues within a new and growing field. An aspect in the literature overview is to grasp the presence or absence of a dimension of age and contextualisation. As already indicated, the number of studies in which children are included as informants is limited, with the exception of studies focusing on technical supervision and risks. However, there are some other exceptions, which I will return to later. First, I will take a look at the language in chat rooms as this in the very beginning of the project happened to be a challenge for the researcher as a newcomer.

Language and interaction

Several studies have been carried out as text analysis where the aim is to describe chat as a linguistic phenomenon. I chose two of these, namely

Werry (1996) and Karlsson (1997). These studies present detailed descriptions of the chat language, giving some necessary and interesting information to outsiders about the linguistic codes which are used in this communication form. Werry (1996) focuses on the communication, while Karlsson (1997) also includes an age perspective. Despite the informants in the latter study are adolescents, Karlsson's study was closest to my own topic and the actual age group at the time when I started the investigation.

In the middle of the 1990's Christopher C. Werry (1996) studied two English and French ten-minute sessions on Internet Relay Chat (IRC).²⁷ These were analysed as texts. His focus was the linguistic and interactional features of such communication, which he conceptualises as an *interactive written discourse* (a term taken from Ferrara, Brunner and Whittemore 1991). Werry argues that the texts are to be understood as multidimensional texts because each utterance is displayed in the chronological order it is received by the IRC system. This leads to rapid shifts in topics and greater chance of separate conversations; a complexity that can be a challenge to novice users. More experienced users appear to have internalised what he calls a loose set of conventions that enable them to manage and follow the complex structure of conventional sequences that occur on IRC. Chat lacks so-called paralinguistic cues, such as intonation, pauses, gestures and gases. Speakers on IRC indicate who the intended receiver is by putting the person's name at the beginning of the utterance. They are often competing for attention, which must be recaptured with each new utterance. Werry interprets nonviable forms like *nodding* and *uhhuh* and *mmhm* as a compensation for the weakened link between sender and receiver.

²⁷ Further described in Chapter 5.

Expressions of greetings and farewell are usually directed to all people on a channel. The IRC community uses a set of codes and conventions to symbolise gestures, resembling face-to-face communication, such as hugs and kisses. Some channels offer a set of symbols that can automatically be generated by entering a special command while on the channel. A typical feature on IRC is the tendency to strip down the words to as few as possible letters that will still enable them to be recognised as meaningful. Acronyms as ROFL,²⁸ emoticons,²⁹ arrow symbols as < >, pointing back and forward to the nicknames, clipping of words and other strategies are used to reduce time and effort to communicate. <Franck>Y r excused Diva 8-) is to be read as: “Franck, you are excused by Diva who smiles”. The syllable ‘re’ is short for “hello again” and is used to greet someone for a second time, usually after they have recently left the channel and then rejoined. An innovative set of linguistic devices has evolved that function to create the effects of voice, gesture and tone through a creative use of spelling and punctuation, such as reduplicated letters as in *coooolll* and punctuation to signal pauses. The participants tend to play with language and “produce a bricolage of discursive fragments drawn from songs, TV characters and a variety of different social speech types” (Werry 1996:58). The author argues that the language produced on IRC demands to be read with the simultaneous involvement of the ear and the eye. Both the tempo and the ability to experiment with different roles may contribute to the verbal play that often is seen on IRC. All this contributes to making the conversation more speech-like. However, chat has to be understood as more than simply

²⁸ Rolling on the floor laughing.

²⁹ Graphical representations designed to indicate the speaker’s tone and emotional state. An example is (: -), which is a smiley (smiling face) when it is read with the left ear on the shoulder.

speech-like, the author argues. By taking on properties of direct face-to-face interaction, chat distinguishes itself from other technologically mediated forms of communication such as a telephone conversation. Communication on IRC seems to reproduce or simulate the discursive style of face-to-face spoken language, he concludes. Since Werry wrote his informative text, SMS ³⁰ has emerged as a new and expanding means of communication, especially among children and young people. The language codes in this text messages have great similarities to chat and, in many cases the codes are even equal.³¹

Werry analyses chat as a text, without presenting reflections about age and context. He rather talks about an 'IRC population', presented as a universal group. At the time when he made his study, it probably made sense to talk about a population, as both the Internet and IRC were less accessible for people in general. However, it may be questioned whether this concept has any meaning today. In countries where the Internet access is high, it might be more useful to ask if chat is an activity which is largely taken into account by different age groups and parts of the population. In this respect, the IRC (and chat) population can be assumed to be more diverse today than in 1996, when Werry did his study.

The Swedish linguist Anna-Malin Karlsson (1997) presents a study on youth chatters. She looks at computer chat as a language which lies far from the norm of so-called adult language. This written communication seems to function as a free zone for written language, an arena for genre

³⁰ Short Message Services (text messages) on the mobile phone.

³¹ A recently published Norwegian dictionary contains 300 of the 'coolest' and most used shortenings, smileys and other advise for SMS and chat (Sandberg 2001).

development and language play, she argues. Young people have often been studied as pupils and their written language has been characterised as more or less developed. Karlsson's argument is to regard chat as language emancipation. She analyses the structure of the conversation "as dependent on context and implicitness" (Karlsson 1997:154). You do not refer to each other's messages, which is the norm in other written communication, but give your comments on them. This fact is explained by the brief and immediate style of being direct even if the activity is not happening face-to-face. Another feature is that the texts are not seen as monologic. Karlsson argues that it is easy to decide what are initiations and what are responses. What is more problematic is to understand what is to be regarded as dyads and what is to be characterised as polyades. Usually several people are active, but the question is whether they are really participating in the same dialogues. It may be so that various parallel dialogues take place with little or no contact. These are dyads, in a sense, within the public space. The use of receiver nicknames indicates that the reply is directed to a special person, which can be interpreted both as a method to signalise to whom you are speaking and to exclude others. Karlsson finds that dyads are the dominating form of dialogue and that a chatter can be involved in various parallel dyads. These dyads often have a private character and are not especially reader-friendly for non-participants. In reference to a larger body of chat material, Karlsson finds that every other message tends to be answered. The rest disappears into an empty nothing. She argues that this form of dialogue demands a stronger initiative if it is to succeed, where 'to succeed' is understood as being answered.

By focusing on chat as written language, the researcher may interpret the percentage of answers as low, as there are supposed to be other cultural

conventions in action compared to spoken language. In contrast, seeing chat more as an oral communication form, and as Karlsson suggests, as comments, I evaluate the percentage of answers as high. As Werry argues, chat seems to simulate the discursive style of a face-to-face spoken language and the expectation to be answered may be different when you say something compared to when you write a message. Many messages may be sent without any expectation of being answered, but rather to express something or to be a participant with other people. There are probably many and complex relations between the chatter's expectations and competencies. This indicates an argument in favour of seeing chat as something else than a well-defined written language act in linguistic terms. These two contributions gave a substantial input to my understanding of the language codes, the playful dimensions and the complexity of chat communication. Karlsson emphasises that young people's language forms are often evaluated on the basis of the standards of adult norms. She also focuses on the issues of contexts and implicitness, which I interpret as a kind of common framework in which meaning aspects for the insiders can be explored. However, the studies gave few methodological implications for my own study.

Going back to the issue of community which was discussed earlier in this chapter, I choose this as an important conceptual approach and analytical tool. Abbott (1998) regards online communication as a kind of community, given that the participants appear to be using for instance particular language terms and phrases or they share a common mechanism for dealing with particular forms of behaviour. *Spamming*, i.e. the sending of large numbers of abusive or long messages, is one example of such behaviour. Abbot's reference is e-mails and newsgroups, but the phenomenon is

highly relevant in chat rooms as well. He recommends a socio-linguistic approach, in which more account is taken of language variety, diversity and change than in a traditional linguistic approach. He gives some illustrating examples on emoticons and acronyms which are often used in chat.

:-) humour	BTW by the way
;-) indication of disbelief	OTO on the other hand
:-p putting tongue out	OIC oh, I see!
:-D said with a smile	IMHO in my humble opinion (used sarcastically)
:-(unhappy	ROTFL rolling on the floor laughing

Table 2. Emoticons and acronyms used by young people in electronic communication in the early 1990's (Abbott 1998:90).

Abbott argues that by the middle of the 1990's, when more people of a much wider age range were using the facilities, most young people seemed to be dropping the use of either emoticons and acronyms except for a few perennial favourites, such as :) to indicate that a comment is not totally serious or ;) if it is flirtatious. Abbott explains this as a consequence of discussions, in which it was showed that these strategies were no longer effective as gate-keeping devices to keep outsiders away or as a code to create a bond of common interest. In this respect Abbott describes how young people, when they communicate online, use different kinds of including and excluding strategies and create boundaries within the communication community. These perspectives were useful for my investigation, as they focused explicitly on social interaction.

New ways of communication

Folklorists look at the Internet as a new type of cultural exchange arising between people. Stuedahl (1999) emphasises that this discipline, through

the focus on oral tradition, always has had a communication perspective on the shaping of communities in folk culture. There are folklorist studies of how people use newsgroups to redefine television soaps which they all have seen (Baym 1993, 1995) and how community and identity is shaped through chat channels (Bechar-Israeli 1995). Stuedahl discusses the challenges in understanding the new community shaping in the digital space. This is a challenge because these communities lack some of the characteristics of the traditional communities, such as time and place. She also discusses the different levels of globality and locality experienced in the use of the Internet. She shows that the differences between the chat channels are very much defined by the level of globalness or localness, and that this also builds usage patterns for the different channels. The global character of the Web has been proposed as the reason why people do not chat on web based communication channels, as they prefer the localness in newsgroups, IRC and Multi User Dungeon (MUDs),³² she argues. Referring to Jones (1997, 1998), Stuedahl has also found that new cultural studies focus on how community is shaped in the communication between users. According to Jones (1997), the traditional understandings of community have been based on a feeling of belonging, shaped on face-to-face meetings. These understandings are tied to connotations such as authenticity and the genuine character in such encounters. Jones refers to Cohen (2000) who questions the idea that people in small-scale society interact with each other as whole persons. Cohen considers such an idea as a simplification. This means, according to Jones (1998), that we are reassured by the belief that the reality our eyes perceive in face-to-face communication is more *real* (or less manipulable) than other media by

³² Further described in Chapter 5.

which we perceive reality. In *Virtual Culture* (1997), Jones discusses the Internet rhetoric that relies on the assumption that political, moral and social problems are the result of a lack of communication and that if we improve communication, we will also solve various problems that plague modern life. Jones' argument is that we should gain more critical awareness of the Internet, and he refers to Innis' work (1951) concerning the social consequences of the fragmentation of modern society. Seeking community online thus expresses fragmentation in modern life and attempts to restore community and the social life. I will return to this issue in Chapter 6.

Methodological implications

The European and Danish projects referred to in the beginning of this chapter appeared to be the ones from which I could draw the most direct parallels to my own study. However, both the format and the focus were different, since they involved various countries and researchers and focused more broadly on the new media environment. A conclusion in the European study, which was interesting for my purpose, was that children tend to be critical users who enjoy new possibilities but are aware of the limitations of the new communication forms. However, it is questionable how representative children in English boarding schools are,³³ how we as researchers take account of social differences in our analysis and, in the end, how we may risk to use a universalised concept of children and childhood. Another conclusion in this study was that children play with their self-presentation through, for instance, their choice of names. An additional issue in the study I refer to above is the relation between the

³³ Parts of the sample were students in boarding schools.

online and offline 'worlds'. If children meet someone online they are likely to subsequently arrange a face-to-face meeting, Livingstone and Bovill (1999) conclude. I do not expect to find the same tendency. One reason for this is the extensive warnings against making offline appointments with online acquaintances.

The Swedish part of the European study (Sjöberg 1999) discusses some of the possibilities chat offers a young user, such as experimentation with identity, the chat room as a free zone and space for privacy and shaping of virtual friendship. People do not have to belong to social and cultural groups which are close in terms of time and space, Sjöberg argues. The question is whether children, as the access to the Net increases, continue to make close links between offline and online worlds (and vice versa), as indicated in the English study, referred to above. An argument in a study with adult informants is that online interaction cannot be separated from the offline social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives (Kendall 1999). Participants share information about their offline lives, Kendall argues. In this respect, questions about how the communication is influenced by time/space and local/global are essential.

The Danish study described above started one year before my project commenced. The methods and findings from this study are presented both in the methodological chapter and in the analysis later in the thesis. In this chapter, however, I will conclude by adopting an ethnographic approach applied in this study and recommended by Kendall (1999) and Paccagnella (1997). My variant of this approach is a combination between in-depth interviews and observation of chat communication. Kendall recommends participant observation, whether or not it is used in combination with other

methods. In my opinion, it is not obvious that this is the best methodological approach when studying children's online communication. This issue is further discussed in Chapter 4, particularly in accordance with the questions of validity and ethics.

3 Theoretical framework

The previous chapters described how chat rooms on the Internet have become a common arena for girls' and boys' online communication. Preliminary observations and literature indicate that web chat is a complex kind of communication in which various dimensions of identity formation, such as exploring age and gender, are present. A focus of my study is to investigate what children and adolescents do in chat rooms. An intention with this study is also to bridge individual agency and social structure. This aim will be the governing idea in this chapter which discusses some key concepts and the theoretical framework. Firstly, I discuss the character of *reality*, which involves establishing an academic stance from which the study is carried out. Secondly, the chapter describes a shift in perspective within child and media research. This part includes various images of childhood. The chapter also describes three theoretical positions, *Nordic child culture research*, *the sociology of childhood* and *symbolic interactionism*, of which all three have influenced and informed the approaches and perspectives of this inquiry.

Theoretical position

What is the basic view on the character of reality? In this project I share the perspective presented by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) who argue that it is pragmatically fruitful to assume the existence of a *reality* beyond the researcher's egocentricity and the ethnocentricity of the research community. With a hint of irony towards the *troublemakers*, such as the poststructuralists and the constructivists, the authors claim that as

researchers we should be able to say something insightful about this reality. “This claim is consistent with a belief that social reality is not external to the consciousness and language of people - members of a society as well as researchers (who, of course, also are members of a society)” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000:3).

Another assumption is that some things have to be evaluated as more valuable than other things. These standpoints are not necessarily more value-loaded and normative than the post-modern proclamations which emphasise that there are no truths and that everything is a social construction (Burr 1995; Søndergaard 1996). The discussion intends to search for theoretical approaches that can be useful for describing and understanding the complexities in children’s media use. The intention of making links between the individual and social structure indicates a connection to the concept of *modernity*. Modernity is to be understood as cultural processes and processes related to consciousness³⁴ with which we interpret our experiences and deal with conflicts in modernisation of society (Drotner 1990). In this respect modernity is a changing and contrasting production of meaning which includes both processes and products, Drotner argues. Modern societies are marked by the fact that old truths are brought forth for discussion. Old concepts and images change not in a vacuum, but in interaction with the experiences in what Adoni and Mane (1984) call the objective, symbolic and subjective realities. Old and new images appear as values, and thereby provide direction for upbringing, education and cultural transmission. Today, individualisation and self-realisation are examples of concepts that appear as fundamental cultural

³⁴ In Norwegian: *bevissthetsmessige prosesser*.

values in a historical period where religion and parts of science no longer have the same influence as the most important meaning-systems as was previously the case. The individual-centred values challenge and contrast traditional common values and make it possible to create individual lives based on new standards. In this respect, the modern individual is free from traditions and authorities, it is argued (Ziehe and Stubenrauch 1983; Giddens 1990; Ziehe 1993). New challenges, however, cause vulnerability. While previous societies were characterised by trust, emancipation and hope, other features such as doubt, ambiguity, ambivalence and risks describe society today, Giddens argues. It is argued that talking about common values and traditions is meaningless in societies that are characterised by this form of individualisation. Individuals are left with their own choices and the risks these choices imply (Rasmussen 1998). In contrast with this point of view, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that even though some traditionally fixed points disappear, this does not necessarily mean that the distinctions between right and wrong disappear. This is a reply to what he calls the post-modern conclusion that anything goes,³⁵ and he argues that doubt stimulates morale and that we need disagreement and thus we have to accept ambivalence. In his book *Postmodern Ethics* (1993) he argues that the ethical challenges have not lost their significance. Rather, they have to be regarded and treated in fundamentally new ways today. As opposed to the post-modern perspective, Bauman argues that our era may be the starting point of an ethical renaissance. This implies ethics in a fundamental sense, in which individual choices and standards must be confronted and cultural products must be evaluated. Seeing concepts and images as part of a changing world challenges our ideas about plain and stable conceptualisation. It is

³⁵ Interview in the Norwegian newspaper, Adresseavisen, 23 April 1999.

necessary to ask questions about the historical, ideological and professional rationale if the concepts are old or new. What do the concepts describe? In which contexts have they emerged? How useful are they as analytical tools? Such questions can generate knowledge in light of both continuity and change. What children do in a chat room, for instance, remind me of some of the writing activities from my own childhood in the 1960's and 1970's, such as secret letters to a friend, declarations of love on a pencil-case, diaries, hit lists and graffiti on a public toilet wall. Most of all, questions as those above emphasise that concepts and images that are taken for granted today also have to be realised as products of specific economical, political, social and cultural contexts. One notion which has become part of a childhood discourse in the Western countries in the 1990's is *the competent child*. I will return to this concepts in the last section of this chapter and in Chapter 8. The investigation of contemporary phenomena also raises questions related to the researcher as a part of the society that is being analysed. This issue is further discussed in Chapter 4. The relative character of both research and concepts raises questions regarding representation. In chapters 4 and 5, I discuss some challenges in connection to presenting and representing children and childhood.

Children as different

There is a long tradition for seeing children as being different (Lee 2001). Children are growing up and are situated in a position as human *becomings* more than human *beings* (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta and Wintersberger 1994). In this perspective, studying children is studying how children are different from adults. A main feature in such approaches is a universal concept of how children are, what they need and how they ought to be taught. Childhood is often seen as isolated from social and cultural contexts

and structures, in which various groups have various positions. The new sociology of childhood (Prout and James 1990; Alanen 1992; Qvortrup et.al 1994; James, Jenks and Prout 1998) criticises such perspectives and emphasises *context* and *the active child* as fundamental dimensions in childhood analysis. Woodhead (1990, 1999) asks for a discussion in which old concepts such as *children's needs* and *socialisation* should be challenged. Also, the ways in which childhood is seen as a part of the social structure are debated (Qvortrup et.al 1994). By regarding childhood and adulthood as separate worlds, we may risk only seeing limited parts of the social world, in which children live their lives as marginal groups. We may also risk underestimating the existence of both common interests and conflicts of interests among children and between children and adults. "After all, not everything in the lives of the little beings who in everyday parlance are called children, follows from their being children and being related to other generational categories (such as adults)," Alanen (1999:5) argues. However, this statement should not prevent us from doing separate studies of children and childhood. On the contrary, I regard it as both relevant and useful to investigate children *as such*, but in light of both individual agency and structural conditions.

Children and media

The previous chapters have shown how the Internet is a topic that is embraced by myths, prejudice and anxiety. Media ³⁶ is often made the scapegoat for problems which may have explanations that are far more relevant. The recent media development has caused attraction and concern in terms of technological optimism on the one hand, and pessimism or

³⁶ I use the term media in a general way.

moral panic on the other. As stated in the previous chapter, the Internet is no exception to this rule. The main research paradigm, in which children's media use has been understood in the last 15-20 years, focuses on the active, competent and media-wise child as opposed to the former images of the passive and vulnerable child who ought to be protected against the media. This chapter will discuss how both of these perspectives view the child as pre-determined to be active or passive, competent or incompetent. Children's use of the media is a topic that gives the adults the opportunity to express their opinions, fears, dreams and expectations about the childhoods of the children, but also about themselves as adults and parents, about modernity and society. It is argued that adult definitions of childhood are designed both to protect and control children (Buckingham 2000). Olesen (1999) argues that there are two tendencies in the media research, namely the adult perspective and the view that the medium is a text which is more or less disconnected from age and context. Even recent media reception studies have been highly adult-centred. According to Olesen, the studies have not been interested in children, or they have taken for granted that children's media use is a direct extension of adults' use of, for example adults from the same social class, gender or same segment of lifestyle.

A common view in many public discourses about children and media is that media has an immediate effect on children. The main perspective in media research has, however, moved from an idea of media effects to media reception. Werner (1994:13) refers to radio propaganda from Germany before the Second World War as an illustrating example. The idea was that a media message had direct effect on the receiver in accordance with the stimulus-response model (S-R model). Studies showed, however, that different receivers reacted in different ways. In other

words, there was *something*, a living and thinking human being, an organism, between the stimulus and the response, which influenced the response the message received (S-O-R model). Other factors can be found between the media content and its effects, such as certain characteristics of the receiver and the content respectively, which weakens or strengthens the effects of the message. Werner argues that the development has gone from a model of transmission (S-R) to a holistic approach in the studies of media effects on children. She thereby emphasises the interaction between the children and all the other factors which influence their lives. Yet, the S-R model still serves as a basis in many empirical studies, she argues. According to Werner, this is reflected in research questions where the consequences of the media content are investigated. This is a way of thinking which is closely related to reasoning of the natural sciences (Werner 1994:15-16). Seeing media use as something which is going on independently of social context, is also criticised by Buckingham (1993). In his more recent work (Buckingham 2000) he argues that many authors working within the apparently contrasting paradigms described as the *death of the childhood* and the *electronic generation* could be understood as technological determinists. This kind of criticism hits authors like Postman (1982) and Papert (1993), who are said to represent the extremes in the discussions about children and the media.

Postman and Papert's contributions illustrate modern media discourses or positions, which stimulate both concern and admiration connected to the media, and understandings of the impact of the media on children and young people. Both of them may claim to have adopted a child perspective, yet, Postman represents an old-fashioned child perspective (which has even qualified to get an anti-Postman page on the Internet), whereas Papert may

be regarded as an advocate for the 'modern' child. While Papert talks about children, Postman talks about childhood. Postman looks at the media as threatening childhood as a protected stage in a person's lifespan. Postman argues that the fundament for modern Western cultures was created with the invention of the art of printing. The development of electronic media destroyed this fundament, he says. Referring to the new childhood paradigm, which is described later in this chapter, this point of view can be criticised for being deterministic and reductionistic perspectives, in which children are seen as passive victims. Papert wants to provide children with what he thinks is an essential presupposition in modern life, namely access to and skills to handle new technologies. He criticises the educational system for not being prepared for the new situation, and he argues for fundamental changes. These two perspectives represent two apparently different discourses: *a classical cultururation discourse*, which sees modern life in opposition to upbringing and teaching and *a technological discourse*, which sees new technologies as the most important source for obtaining knowledge. Both Postman and Papert agree that the development of the electronic media creates a shift in paradigm, i.e. a new relation between children and adults (Juncker 1998). The old paradigm was based in a dichotomic perspective, in which children are seen as people *without* knowledge and adults as people *with* knowledge. Papert uses children's own approaches to knowledge and culture based on research in anthropology, folklore and play culture, while Postman has philosophy and education as a background for his work. The apparently contrasting positions of these authors share similar weaknesses, Buckingham (2000) argues. "As with debates around television, both positive and negative arguments draw on essentialist notions both of childhood and of technology. In effect, they connect a mythology about childhood with a

mythology about technology” (Buckingham (2000:45). Instead, I will argue that we need a careful conceptualisation of the notion of childhood in particular, because prevailing ideas about children are ambiguous (Qvortrup 1991). An argument in the sociology of childhood is that children are no less an active part of the larger society, and that they are no less influenced by major societal events and developments than are other people and groups. From this point of view, childhood is integrated in society. While it is true that the child develops into an adult, it is equally true that “childhood persists as a part of the social structure” (Qvortrup 1991:14). In this project I see media as an important part of this social structure. Before looking at the sociology of childhood in more detail, I will make a brief retrospective account of previous research on children.

Research *on* children before 1970’s

Until the 1970’s research on children was primarily carried out within the discipline of psychology. Even if there were some exceptions, such as in social psychological research, the main methodologies employed were tests, experiments and surveys. Developmental psychology, inspired by Freud, Eriksson and Piaget, and the behaviourist Skinner-tradition, influenced research paradigms into which the researchers were socialised. While developmental psychology focused on emotional and cognitive stages and vulnerable phases for further development, the behaviourists focused on methods to achieve desirable behaviour. The emphasis on maintaining clear and universal concepts about children was motivated by the idea of understanding a developmental course and being able to intervene if necessary to ensure that children would become happy, well-adapted and/or competent individuals. Extensive parts of this research had an instrumental purpose, where the aim was to control children’s

development (Telhaug 1991; Qvortrup 1991). Qvortrup argues that more than anything else the history of education is the history of justification of programmes by means of which children are designed to become mature and responsible citizens. Much of the psychological research had emerged from a theoretical perspective, in which human development was seen as a linear process where influence on an individual (stimulus) has a direct effect (response). As we have seen earlier in this chapter, this view was prominent in the media research as well.

This theoretical approach was challenged by a perspective, seeing people as active and seeing human development as a social and intentional process in the sense that people act in ways which have meaning for them (Berger and Luckmann 1990; Blumer 1969). Consequently, research is not an objective activity. Theoretical knowledge develops on the basis of different human interests rather than on the basis of autonomous processes associated with an immanent scientific logic (Alvesson and Sköldböck 2000).

Although the traditional perspectives remained, and still remain, this shift in perspective occurred in many areas, influenced research in many disciplines and had tremendous methodological and theoretical consequences. Qualitative research approaches emerged, conceptualised for example as *studies in depth* and *bottom-up-perspectives*, in which the prevailing views on ontology (the character of reality) and epistemology (the theory of knowledge) were questioned. A dominating perspective in structural sociology and systems theory had regarded socialisation as transmission of social roles (Parsons 1951). This interpretation of the concept was criticised for being narrow, instrumental and with too much weight on the individual adaptation to society. A theoretical contribution,

symbolic interactionism, is often connected with the works of Mead (1955) and Blumer (1969) who focus on the development of human beings as a social and mutual phenomenon, rather than as a one-way process. I will return to this approach after having discussed the concept of childhood.

Childhood on the academic agenda

I consider the concept of childhood as socially constructed and thus childhood as a notion which is continuously transformed. In the following section I summarise some research contributions which have focused on the concept of childhood and children's agency vis-à-vis structure. The work of the historian Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) was an important contribution to broaden the understanding of the concept *childhood*. He argues that childhood, as a cultural construction, has another meaning in the Middle Ages than in the 20th century. "Ariès' work provided the grounds for its (childhood) analysis in terms of its social context, rather than abandoning childhood to a naturalistic reduction" (James et.al 1998:4). Various disciplines both stimulated and were influenced by this shift in perspective. Empirical studies of small children and their mothers documented that children, from birth, are active in social interactions and not passive receivers of stimulus (Trevarthen 1988). Other psychological approaches also took into account cultural and social contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Cultural studies, by using ethnographic methods, focused on the ways in which people create meaning (Fiske 1987). Sociologists argued for seeing the process of socialisation as an interaction between growing into a culture and being a unique individual (Frønes 1987; Høgmo 1992). The anthropologist Bateson (1972) emphasised the importance of feedback from the surrounding world, which can help to correct people's cultural understanding of existence. The

sociologist Corsaro (1997) uses the concept *interpretative reproduction* to emphasise children's creative participation in society. All these examples constitute theoretical contributions in building a platform for the establishment of new perspectives and methodologies in the social sciences. Although the differences between the various disciplines are obvious, it seems to have been a common interest to ask for an emancipation of the research object (or better: subject) by focusing on context, individual agency and subjective construction of meaning. A part of this approach is the development of a new research paradigm, which sees children as active participants in the construction of their own lives. I consider the conceptual shifts from *development* to *construction* and from *child* to *childhood* as part of these processes and discourses, and as attempts to dissociate from the hegemony of the discipline of psychology.

The Nordic example: child culture research

Before describing the new childhood paradigm, I will take a look at a research field in the Nordic countries, namely child culture research which developed from the latter part of the 1960's. I dwell on it in particular because the history of and the debates in this tradition represent a cultural context for the study by offering a story about the relative character of the childhood concept. In some respects, this story is also a part of a Nordic childhood discourse, which has had impact on political decisions and thereby stimulated to the establishment of welfare services in order to secure children's rights.

In the Nordic countries there was a tendency from the last part of the 1960's, and particularly in ethnological research towards putting focus on what was experienced as a threat of the child culture. *Child culture* was

primarily understood as the products made by adults *for* children, i.e. products that satisfied an adult evaluation of a qualitatively good product, such as literature, songs and jingles. The concerns behind this research interest were also connected to children's traditional play activities. The researchers were afraid that new generations of children would forget the old child culture, which was made *by* children. Researchers argued for gathering, publishing and making archives of traditional children's activities (Enerstvedt 1971). Concerns about the future, criticism towards the psychological hegemony and a growing movement for children's rights also represented some of the motives behind the first inter-disciplinary initiatives to establish research on *child, culture and society* in the Nordic countries (Skard 1973). Firstly, the researchers shared a general concern of how modernity, such as the media development, influenced childhood. Secondly, these initiatives could be seen as a reaction against the traditional views on children as objects for stimulation and teaching-programmes, which were widespread in the Western societies after the Second World War. Thirdly, the child culture researcher looked at herself/himself as an advocate for children's rights and cultural and political action. Children's play culture was, for example, described as an emancipation activity (Mouritsen 1976). This movement was a mixed group. Ideological and political differences might have been some of the reasons why the number of disciplines involved in child culture research diminished during the late 1970's and the 1980's. One of the controversies was the discussion on the concept of *upbringing*. Through her extensive literary work, the Norwegian psychologist Åse Gruda Skard challenged traditional views on the relation between children and adults. She emphasised the adult responsibility of having knowledge about children and adapting the methods of upbringing on the basis of this knowledge. Skard's vision was conceptualised by the

term of *democratic upbringing*. She related this concept not only to privacy, but also to a question of democracy. She saw the upbringing in connection with the development of society, wherein she argued that there is correspondence between life in the inner circle (the family) and life in the exterior circle (society). Democratic principles such as respect and freedom must also be in force in family interactions, she argued. Goals for upbringing were, from Skard's point of view, to establish childhood as valuable in its own capacity and to arrange the environmental conditions in such ways that children are given opportunities to express themselves and develop their creativity (Skard 1973). Skard may be criticised for using universal concepts, such as *children's needs*. However, I argue that by focusing on relational aspects between children and adults, and by stressing the connection between inner and exterior circle, Skard emphasised the relation between individual agency and social structure.

In summary, these initiatives and perspectives may be evaluated in light of two main purposes, namely cultivation and alteration of society. Looking at the Nordic child culture research from this period, the cultivation dimension became the dominating aspect. A general feature is the emphasis on cultural transmission from adults to younger generations. Children's 'own' activity becomes a main focus (Enerstvedt 1971; 1973). Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1970's, the focus of the dominating child culture studies was on cultural products more than on children as acting subjects. In other words, the focus was on products rather than processes and on texts (in a broad sense) rather than contexts (Ekrem, Tingstad and Johnsen 2000). Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, the research interest was, to a large extent, to protect and save what was perceived as traditional child activities from being lost, more so than to

explore cultural processes and the meanings for children who were taking part in these activities. Tradition research and ethnology dominated child culture research in this period. Child culture was, to a large extent, regarded as an independent cultural form, a subculture, which was the children's own culture without any interference from adults. This perspective has a historical parallel to the works of Iona and Peter Opie (Opie and Opie 1969), who in the 1950's and 1960's argued for the recognition of an autonomous community of children. They argued that "the children's world is to be seen as not unaffected by, but nevertheless artfully insulated from the world of adults; it is to be understood as an independent place with its own folklore, rituals, rules and normative constraints" (James et.al 1998:29).

From the 1990's, the view of children's world as a separate world became a subject for exploration. In Norway, the concept of childhood was put on the academic agenda carrying new arguments (Gullestad 1990; Selmer Olsen 1993; Kjørholt 1993; Qvortrup 1993). In the meeting with the social sciences, a concept of child culture, which is more or less separate from the rest of society, was considered too narrow. Gullestad (1990) warned against creating a false and idyllic image of the child culture isolated from the adult world. Based on the idea that childhood is not one phenomenon, but many phenomena, depending on social class, religious affiliation and local society, Gullestad argued for studying processes rather than products. Kjørholt (1993) warned against the risk of interpreting children's own culture as a phenomenon that is disconnected from its context and thereby given the impression of being a common child culture that is independent of the special features within the surrounding adult cultural frame.

Qvortrup (1993) discussed the risk that a narrowly focused child culture research might contribute to a marginalisation of childhood.

This overview is an example of an academic debate which emerged from and was influenced by current social and scientific changes. The debate gave premises for questioning the concepts of *child*, *childhood*, *child culture* and *child perspective* (Kampmann 1998) in the Nordic countries and, to a certain extent, in Northern Europe throughout the 1990's and at the beginning of the new millennium. This discussion raised new types of questions about the research on children and childhood, about cultural and structural conditions in children's lives and about how children act in the different contexts in which they live. Consequently, this discussion is part of the background when I present the sociology of childhood in the next section and later, in Chapter 8, discuss the concept of *the competent child*.

A new childhood paradigm

From the beginning of the 1990's, child and childhood researchers argued explicitly for a new childhood paradigm, as referred to earlier in this chapter. This paradigm attempts to give children a voice through "regarding children as people to be studied in their own right, and not just as receptacles of adult teaching" (Prout and James 1990:8). Key features are that childhood is understood as a social construction, that childhood is a variable of social analysis, that children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right and that children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives. Ethnography is perceived as providing a particularly useful method for the study of childhood. Qvortrup et.al (1994) argue that childhood is a permanent structural category. This implies that children are positioned as

objects for protection, care and control by the adult generation at the same time as they are social subjects who contribute to construct and reconstruct both childhood and society. James et.al (1998) aim to stimulate reflexivity about childhood by deconstructing traditional discourses and offering alternative ways of theorising childhood. “While everyday discourses of childhood seek to explain the ‘truth’ of childhood, the theoretical approaches that we offer in this book will allow us to explain and deconstruct those very discourses that have established taken-for-granted truths about childhood” (James et.al 1998:9).

One of the truths about childhood that are taken for granted is tied to concepts such as the nature of the child, children’s needs and the best interest of children (James and Prout 1990; Woodhead 1990; James et.al 1998). These concepts are not regarded as useful analytical notions. Such concepts express common images of childhood as timeless and universal (Woodhead 1990). These common images or truths have become conventional knowledge which is part of the social and cultural discourses about children and childhood, Woodhead argues. As a psychologist who wishes to warn against simplistic notions, and as a contributor to the construction of the new childhood paradigm, Woodhead explicitly focuses on the ways in which the concept of *children’s needs* are used, especially by social welfare workers, teachers, policymakers and parents. Conceptualising childhood in terms of *needs* reflects the distinctive status accorded to young humanity in twentieth century western societies, Woodhead argues. The concept conceals in practice a complex of latent assumptions and judgements about children. Statements about children’s needs convey an element of judgement about what is good for children and how this can be achieved, by making simplistic inferences and neglecting

cultural contexts and definitions. “A statement about children’s needs would depend on value-judgements, stated or implied, about which patterns of early relationship are considered desirable, what the child should grow up to become, and indeed what makes for the *good society*” (Woodhead 1990:73). He illustrates the conceptual complexity by using the notion *responsibility*, often mentioned as a basic need for children. This is a highly valued attribute amongst Western nations where individualism, independent thinking, flexibility and assertiveness are the routes to personal achievement, he argues. While parents in the USA in a cross-national study (Hoffman 1987) valued the importance of a child becoming a good person, who is independent and self-reliant, children in Turkey, the Philippines and Indonesia were valued for their economic contribution, deference to elders and obedience. When policy recommendations and professional advice are expressed in terms of children’s needs, they give an impression of universal objectivity. In cultural diverse societies, simple generalisations about children’s needs are problematic and may risk becoming ethnocentric, Woodhead argues.

I approach the sociology of childhood as representing useful perspectives in the understanding of contemporary childhoods. The research approach offers a deconstruction, which includes descriptions of former images of childhood and new models for studying childhood. In this respect, we get new points of observation, from which children and childhood can be seen in new ways. The approach offers knowledge about past, but also a guideline for contemporary social science. This is made possible by combining perspectives from two main disciplines: sociology and anthropology. Researchers who question what they perceive as determinism, universalism and reductionism challenge the hegemony of

psychology. Also, this process is related to a much wider process, a process through which the individual voices and presence of children are recognised and accounted for (James et.al 1998:6). The authors see this phenomenon in light of what Näsman (1994) calls the *individualisation* of children and the civil rights encoded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). James et.al (1998) claim that the main distinction between the traditional conception of the child and their approach is in the notions of *becoming* and *being*. "...the epistemological break that we have claimed for the new sociological approaches to the study of childhood is the move to study real children or the experiences of being a child" (James et.al 1998:207-208).

These arguments are the main reasons for connecting my project to this particular research approach. But there are some questions to be asked. It is obvious that former academic approaches neglected the topic of childhood and studies of the experiences of being a child. By calling attention to these aspects, the new sociology of childhood offers a rethinking of previous perspectives. What may be questioned, however, is if some important nuances in the traditional approaches are lost (or at least diminished) in the new paradigm. By defining the whole body of knowledge from the discipline of psychology in the category *transitional theories*, the paradigm risks to underestimate the theoretical contributions which, after all, exist. James et.al (1998) challenge the traditional disciplinary borders and combine a structuralistic and constructivistic perspective. This means that the new paradigm is constructed with fundamental ontological distinctions, in a continuum from structuralism to radical relativism. In their book from 1990, James and Prout admit themselves that it may be problematic to take the consequences of the standpoint that childhood is discursively

constructed. The risk of being situated either in structural determinism or naïve empirism lies implicit in many scientific approaches. By emphasising so strongly children as *beings* (in contrast to *becomings*), the sociology of childhood may risk being deterministic in their interpretations of the notion of childhood, in which children are seen as pre-determined to be active, creative and self-reliant. Thereby, the paradigm risks to underestimate complexities in children's lives. On the other hand, by delimiting the studies to structural dimensions, there are risks for abandoning the real child and the experiences of being a child. These issues are seldom explored because they are situated in the distinction between two different traditions, Olesen (1999) argues. He recommends *contextualism* to overcome some of the challenges tied to the relation between social structure and individual agency. This implies that although children are active, their actions ought to be interpreted within the framework given by the society. A central point is to emphasise that meaning never exists without a context (Olesen 1999:159). Contextualism is a fundamental idea in the tradition of hermeneutics, which is an academic method for interpretation and comprehension (Gadamer 1975; Ramirez 1991). In this respect an utterance, such as a message in a chat room, is not unambiguous. Rather the meaning of an utterance is dependent on the context in which it appears.

Symbolic interactionism

On the background of these descriptions and reflections, I present a theoretical framework, symbolic interactionism (SI) which is a logical choice, as I have decided to focus not on agency or structure, but on the interaction between these dimensions. I regard this approach as particularly useful when the intention is to explore interactional features in human

communication. First off, this approach is a target for criticism from the sociology of childhood, which characterises the approach as one of the transitional theories.³⁷ A main argument against SI is that it starts from the baseline of adult interactional competence. Although SI may also be criticised for being too close to empirical data (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000), and thus may lose the dynamic that is lying in the interaction between the studied phenomenon and the rest of society (Gullestad 1994), the theory has generated knowledge about interaction and interpretation on a micro level and delivered an intense and credible contribution to a new methodology. Symbolic interactionism is often referred to as a theoretical basis in favour of a critical rethinking of traditional concepts of childhood and socialisation (Werner 1994). Below are three fundamental premises of this theoretical approach.³⁸

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with other beings.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

This means that human beings have dialogues with other people, but that they are also able to relate the outside world to an inner dialogue in a reflexive process in which the self is developed. In this respect, human beings can be both subjects and objects at the same time.

In place of being a mere medium for operation of determining factors that play upon him, the human being is seen as an active organism in his own right, facing, dealing with, and acting toward the object he indicates. Action is seen as conduct, which is constructed by the actor instead of response, elicited from some kind of performed organisation to him. We

³⁷ James et.al (1998) do not analyse SI by using the works of Herbert Blumer, who was the one who introduced the concept Symbolic interactionism.

³⁸ My shortenings, Blumer 1969:2.

can say that the traditional formula of human action fails to recognise that the human being is a self. Mead's scheme, in contrast, is based on this recognition (Blumer 1969:65).

In a symbolic interactionist perspective, human beings are seen as living in a world of meaningful objects, not in an environment of stimuli or self-constituted entities. "This world is socially produced in that the meanings are fabricated through the process of social interaction" (Blumer 1969:69). In Blumer's version, Symbolic interactionism dissociates from theoretical approaches (psychology and sociology) that identify the self with the ego or an organised body of needs and motives and which regards the self as an organisation of attitudes or treat it as a structure of internalised norms and values (Parsons 1951). "Such schemes, which see to lodge the self in a structure, make no sense since they miss the reflexive process, which alone can yield and constitute a self" (Blumer 1969:63).

A satisfying theoretical framework has to bridge social structure and person and has to be able to move from the level of an individual to that of large-scale social structure and back again, Stryker (1980) argues. He tries to give SI a renewed position.

A most important lesson to be learned from the intellectual sources of symbolic interactionism is that a focus on the person without a correlative focus on social structure, or vice versa, is necessarily partial and incomplete. A continual theme in Simmel, Cooley and especially Mead is that social structure creates social persons who (re) create social structure who...ad infinitum. But that insight, basic as it is to an understanding of social life, becomes trite and trivial unless it leads to research which specifies both variations in social structure and variations in social persons as well as the connectives among these variations. To accomplish such research, there must exist a conceptual framework facilitating movement across the levels of organisation and person (Stryker 1980:53).

Erving Goffman is called a symbolic interactionist, even though he objected to such a label (Cahill 1992:185). While Herbert Blumer talked about *the I*, here and now, Goffman was more interested in *the ME*, i.e. *the I* in interaction with others. Goffman forces readers out of the convenient illusion that their experience is uniquely theirs (Lemert and Branaman 1997). My preliminary impression of web chat was that it enables people to enter complex sets of reflexive processes. To explore and understand these phenomena, I found the conceptual framework of SI to be a useful approach. I consider SI as a valuable framework for developing and explaining a methodology by taking account of the individual experiences, the symbols and interactions and intending to take the perspective of the *other*, in this respect the children. What appeared as particularly relevant for my purpose was Goffman's notions which describe people's encounters, how they define the social situations and present themselves in those meetings. In Chapter 7, I discuss some of Goffman's concepts which are of particular interest for understanding chat communication.

Child perspective: a slogan in the 1990's?

The fundamental challenge of traditional scientific perspectives has contributed to putting focus on the individual as a subject in science, and has thus recognised a theoretical ideal wherein a more relativised and contextualised perspective is accepted, and where the individual construction of meaning is an essential dimension in order to understand a phenomenon. This shift is seen as a result of different and complex cultural, social and economical changes, such as changes in the status of traditional authorities, individualisation and growing material standards. The great ideologies and stories are said to be dead and the traditional cultural institutions (such as family, school and church) have been

challenged as important institutions that influence people's lives, lifestyles and meaning constructions. The new paradigm sees individuals as subjects that influence their own identities and development, not merely as objects dependent on their physical and psychological environment. In such perspectives, children, as variables in social analysis, are regarded as active participants on the same level as adults. This change has also to do with a change from focusing on structure and system to focusing on individual agency and action. The change, which has occurred within many areas in the same period, may also be interpreted as a change from cultural pessimism to a more optimistic view, in which the individual's possibilities are seen as an important perspective in theoretical work instead of focusing on limitations as a consequence of modernisation.

The changed perspective may also be regarded as part of modern childhood discourses that emerged from political emancipation, questioning of general rights and a democratisation trend where childhood is given a different juridical position than earlier. This discourse recognises childhood as a phase in life with intrinsic value, not only as a preparation to adult life. With increased access to new technologies and commercial products, children have also become interesting as consumers in a commercial market. In addition, children have formal and informal advocates in terms of the increasing growth of professionals who have their daily work with children and childhood. In this respect, childhood is on the agenda both in political, economical and professional terms.

The social and cultural changes and the new paradigm presuppose a rethinking of traditional theoretical approaches, including all stages in the research process. In many ways, taking account of the complexities in

modern life, the new paradigm implies inter-disciplinary approaches, i.e. using more than one theoretical construction, in Kuhn's (1962) terms. Such a perspective aims to satisfy the idea that theory must be plural if it is to survive the challenge of the real and accommodate to the contradictory and fragmenting world of late capitalism (Silverstone 1994). Both Drotner (2000) and Livingstone (2000) argue for a relational approach to media research. Drotner uses the concept of *dialogical research* and Livingstone argues that audience research would better be conceptualised as a *relational or interactional construct*.³⁹ Livingstone's argument is that with the growth of more diverse forms of communication technologies, the researcher's task changes commensurately. A consequence of this, according to Livingstone, is that we must ask how far we can draw on what we already know about communication, especially of mass communication, in our research on the new media environment.

However, it seems to be a significant challenge to overcome traditional academic borders (Livingstone 2000). The question about methods, for instance, has been treated in quite different ways by disciplines from social science and those which are rooted in the humanities (Fetveit 2000). While the concept of method has a central position in social sciences, humanities have, according to Fetveit, a peripheral relation to the concept. When I decided to explore social dimensions of chat communication, I found it useful to search for substantial and methodological knowledge from various traditions. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, analysing this kind of communication by means of linguistic methods gives rich and varied descriptions of codes and conventions related to this special language form

³⁹ Alanen (1999) finds a similar view in the sociology of childhood and asks for a relational methodology in childhood research.

(Werry 1996). However, linguistic analysis risks being limited with respect to context. I wanted to understand both language and social dimensions. From the position of my study and research problem it was necessary to include empirical and theoretical links to various factors influencing children's lives.

This chapter has presented dominating perspectives in childhood and media research and some underlying features that have influenced them. The development is seen as a shift from a psychological hegemony to a sociological and anthropological influence on the construction of a new childhood paradigm. However, the various contributors have drawn on works from various disciplines and research, such as philosophy, technology, literature, folkloristics, culture theory and play culture research. The shift from structure to the individual, from pessimism to optimism, has resulted in valuable research. The new childhood paradigm is understood as an argument for recognising children, so as to engage them to tell their own stories, whether these may be different from or similar to adult's stories. At the same time, this chapter has tried to underline that this optimism has its limitations. By focusing on the image of the competent child too much, there is a risk for constructing a new determinism, in which children are seen as being essentially wise. Cultural images such as the autonomous and media-wise child may be considered as equally limiting and romanticising as images of the innocent and vulnerable child.

A traditional view of children as essentially innocent and vulnerable to media influence is replaced by an equally sentimental view of them as naturally media wise. Both positions reflect an essentialist construction of childhood and youth, and an unduly determinist account of the role of the media technology. Both fail to acknowledge the diversity of the lived experience of childhood, and of children's relationships with the media.

Neither offers a realistic basis for enabling young people to cope with the changing cultural realities in to which they are now born, and in which we hope they will come to participate as active citizens (Buckingham 1998:565).

The concept of *child perspective* became a slogan in the latter part of the 1990's. What in fact is meant by this concept is not obvious without further definitions. Does it presuppose a special kind of research strategy or is it sufficient to choose a research substance that has relevance for children? In the latter sense, it is difficult to see any research field at all that does not have relevance for children. This project aims to take account of children's competencies and activities and some structural conditions under which children live their lives. Such an approach may be expected to broaden the child and childhood research and generate other types of knowledge than for example what is the case with narrow empirical approaches or various forms of social structuralism. The study presumes that there are numerous ways, limited or wide, in which one can succeed with such an ambitious goal. This does not necessarily presuppose children's participation as informants. Children may tell other stories than adults, stories that both complement and correct adult's stories (Tiller 1989). Media statistics are often described in terms of figures and numbers, informing us about the access to and the use of various media. This is necessary knowledge, but it tells only a limited part of a phenomenon which is seen from a limited position, namely the adult position. Statistics on children have mainly been based on interviews with adults who speak on behalf of children, or with children assisted by parents or other adults in the interview situation (Vaage 2000). This is especially the case with young children. Some of the statistics do not take into account children younger than 13 years old,⁴⁰

⁴⁰ www.kulturnett.no/html/internett_som_barneforum.html (Norsk Gallup - May 2000)

while some start with 9 years as the lowest age (Vaage 1998). As recognised in the previous chapter, children's experiences and childhood, as a theoretical concept, are more or less absent in much of the Internet literature. Thus, we know little about how children actually use the Net and how it may be explored, interpreted and theorised. Livingstone (2000) argues that much media research relating to children and young people often starts - sometimes with considerable frustration - with a repudiation of public anxieties or moral panics surrounding the issue.

And similarly today, much work on new media begins by critiquing the technological determinist hype accompanying the introduction of these media. While such a repudiation or critique is often justified, it both distracts us from the careful construction of a theoretical starting point and leads us to underplay, or even reject, the valid expectation upon academic researchers that we should address issues of public concern (Livingstone 2000:10).

A consequence of the new media environment is to regard both people and texts in new ways. More fundamentally, I agree with the researchers who argue that understanding changes in the conception of childhood requires that we recognise "the diverse and provisional nature of contemporary childhoods" (Buckingham 2000:62). This chapter has aimed to avoid media or child centrism by insisting on taking account of both media and childhood in the presentation. With this as a point of departure, I will present the methodology of the investigation.

4 Methods

This chapter accounts for how I have approached the empirical part of this study, how I have collected the data and analysed the material. This includes some overall methodological considerations and reflections about doing research with children and adolescents, on the one hand and, doing online research, on the other. Rather than seeing child research as different from research involving adults, the study focuses on two crucial questions: how should the informants be positioned and what are the implications of this choice when the research subject is a child? However, doing research with children as informants, does pose some particular challenges, which should not be underestimated. The lack of research literature about children's online communication, described in Chapter 2, encouraged an exploratory methodological approach. Partly because of this fact and partly because of a wish to make the validity considerations visible, this presentation intends to give a detailed picture of the various stages of the research process. The chapter also gives an account of ethical considerations, issues to be aware of when analysing this particular kind of data, possible limitations and the question of representation.

Methodological considerations

Some researchers argue that it is not the methods, but rather the ontology and epistemology that are the determinants for good social science (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000), i.e. how you understand and interpret the world and how you choose to obtain knowledge about it. Thus the researcher's position in relation to these issues is crucial for the entire

research process; from defining topic, research problem and methodology to the interpretations and conclusions of the study. Kvale (1996) uses two different metaphors for the interviewer, which describe various concepts of knowledge formation. The *miner* metaphor sees knowledge as buried metal and the interviewer as a miner who unearths the valuable metal. In this perspective knowledge is waiting in the subjects' interior to be uncovered. The alternative is the *traveller* metaphor, wherein the interviewer is understood as a traveller on a journey, using *method* in the original Greek meaning of the word: a route that leads to the goal. Knowledge is the narratives which emerge from the journey and are explored and interpreted by the interviewer. "The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world" (Kvale 1996:4). The journey Kvale refers to may not only cause new knowledge. The traveller might change as well as the journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the interviewer to new ways of self-understanding, as well as uncovering previously taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveller's home country, Kvale argues. Qualitative research has a tradition of focusing on the encounter between the researcher and the informant. This includes emphasis on reflexivity, whereby the researcher is seen not only as an observer, but also as a part of the social world that is studied (Hammersley and Atkinson 1987). This requires reflections about issues such as the researchers age, gender, social and cultural background (Ehn and Klein 1994). A part of this reflexivity is also to be aware of and take into account the power relation that is implicit in a research context. In the end the researcher is the person who decides what and how to interpret and present the informants and their accounts. When studying children, this is particularly important, because the children are dependent on adults and have fewer possibilities to protect

themselves than most adults have. I agree with the authors mentioned above, that the ontological and epistemological position from which a researcher conducts a study is crucial. However, this should not prevent us from providing rich descriptions of the methods, including the researcher's reflections, choices, dilemmas, challenges, experiences and pleasures. Solberg (1988, 1996) asks for more descriptions of the process from which the researchers have got their results. This should be written on 'the blank pages' in the methodology chapters, she argues.

This thesis has an inductive approach in that it progresses from data and not from a hypothesis which is going to be tested. The project is not developed from any grand theory, either. This does not exclude theory from having informed the various stages of the project. The research focus has been to gain knowledge about what is going on in chat rooms with children and adolescents as participants. No researcher enters a research process 'empty-handed'. One of my pre-understandings was a simple one: since children seem to use chat rooms on a large scale, something meaningful is supposedly happening there. What this might be was the point of departure for the present study. I regarded children as the experts on answering this question. This position requires an open-minded approach. "If one wishes to discover how other people experience life, it is necessary to be open to ways of understanding other than one's own" (Alver 1990:18). The project is inspired by media ethnography as it focuses on people as media users rather than the medium itself (Drotner 1993). This does not imply that I have used traditional ethnographical methods, strictly speaking, such as long term field studies conducted within the settings of the participants. However, seeing ethnography, not as a method, but rather as a combination of different methods and a theory about the research process (Skeggs

1995:192) offers a wider definition.⁴¹ Given this definition, ethnography relates to some main issues, such as:

1. The researcher in participation and observation
2. An account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched
3. A study of the *other*
4. Focusing on experience and practice
5. Frequently having culture as the central focus
6. Treating participants as micro cosmos of wider structural processes.

I interpret the examples above as a research approach which recognise children as subjects. The examples also include everyday practices and emphasise the researcher's responsibility to reflect on how to obtain knowledge through interaction. As discussed in Chapter 3, a challenge in research is to integrate micro and macro level. Although this study is a study of individual experiences, it also intends to combine this micro perspective with a view of seeing childhood as a part of a social and cultural structure.

Ethical considerations

Focus on human rights and ethics is an important dimension in the individualisation processes from the 1990's, in the sense that the right of the individual to be protected from various forms of abuse is more explicitly expressed than earlier. Freedom and self-determination are central concepts in this discourse. In Norway, *The national committee for research ethics in the social sciences, law and the humanities* approved a set of guidelines in 1999 (NESH 1999).⁴² There it is emphasised that

⁴¹ From Latin, *ethnos* and *grafein*, which mean *people* and *to write*, respectively.

⁴² There are guidelines for several other disciplines and from other countries. Some of these are available on the committee's homepage www.etikkom.no

people who are subject to research must be informed in a way that gives them information about the research, the confidentiality and the opportunity to cancel the participation. This presupposes a dialogue between the researcher and the informant throughout the various stages of the research process as well as a researcher that has a reflective and thoughtful attitude related to ethical dilemmas. The guidelines emphasise children's special demand for protection according to their age and needs when participating in research. It is argued that the researcher must have "sufficient knowledge about children" to adapt methods and content to the age group that participates (NESH 1999:17-18). What this means more concretely is unclear. The guidelines focus on the *informed consent* from parents or people who have formal responsibility for the child. This is usually necessary up to the age of 16. From the age of 12, children have a special right to be heard on the issue of research participation. In addition, approval from children is necessary when they are old enough to express this. A presupposition for such an approval is that children have received adequate information about the project and the consequences, that they understand the voluntariness, the confidentiality and, last but not least, that they may withdraw whenever they want. This study aims to develop procedures and take ethical reflections into account throughout the various stages of the research process, within a frame of what is possible to accomplish with limited time available.

Research with children as informants

The choice of methods always expresses ways of understandings (Tiller 1991). In this respect, a discussion of methods will never be about techniques only, but also about how the researcher perceives the phenomenon which is going to be studied. I have carried out all of the

observations and interviews, and consequently these are not only influenced, but also directed by my focus and interpretations. One question which was discussed in Chapter 3, is that research with children poses particular challenges. Is it possible to take the perspective of a child when you are an adult? And if so, what does this mean? *Child perspective* in research is said to challenge the researcher to be “emphatically related to the child’s world” (Kjørholt 1991) and “regard society and culture from the position of children” (Gullestad 1991).⁴³ An essential question when interviewing children is if this is different from interviewing adults. Solberg (1996) warns against becoming ethnocentric in the sense that the researcher occupies adult roles and might have difficulties in obtaining necessary distance to reflect on adult ways of conceptualising children and childhood. She recommends a certain ignorance of age and redirects the attention to the situational context within which children act. To look at children’s *doing* and moving away from their *being*, does not imply any claims that children do not possess qualities different from adults, Solberg argues. Her suggestion is rather that the researcher’s concepts of such qualities should not influence their ways of approaching children in social science research. In principle, we are not facing other methodological challenges when we interview children than when we interview adults, she argues. General principles for establishing a *good relation*, an *explicit contract* about the interview, describing *the purpose* and *why the informant is chosen* is important regardless of age (Solberg 1991). Questions have to be relevant and the interviewer must be able to listen and show interest. What professional interviews with children must be characterised by is the lack of adult supervision, it is argued (Andenæs 1991). *Motivation*,

⁴³ My translation.

contract and *common focus* are key words for conducting a child interview. In this thesis these three dimensions are seen as presuppositions for the establishment of a good research relation. Reflections on this relationship are crucial from the very moment the researcher plans the project to the final stage. In an approach where the aim is, in accordance to Kjørholt (1991) and Gullestad (1991), to be emphatic in relation to the child's world and regard society and culture from the position of children, the researcher also has to take into account the power relation between the researcher and the informant. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) recommends acknowledging the complexities that underlie the simple appeal to listen to the child. The researchers, not the children, generally control the research process, they argue. One power relation in children's lives is the relation between teacher and pupil at school. Even if I avoided a school context for the inquiry, I still ran the risk, as an adult woman, of being associated with a teacher role in the encounter with the children I planned to interview. This could again bias the material because of some images of 'right' and 'wrong' answers. One way to avoid this potential problem was, as I did, to ask broadly and generally about the Internet use and then let the accounts of the informants and their Net use become the points of departure. The problem with this approach is that the researcher in the end has much information which is more or less relevant according to the focus of the study. Another problem is that this broad approach might limit the clarification and focusing of the questions in the interview situation. However, the strength of this approach is that the data has emerged from the informants' own accounts, rather than from prepared sets of questions. What I realised was that the open-minded and general approach allowed the informants to introduce topics I probably would not have had with a more controlled approach. All the observations and interviews were done in front

of the computer. This encouraged and maintained a setting of co-operation rather than questioning. Sveningsson (2001) argues for the interview situation as a co-constructed product.

This view of interviews as a research method leads to a more open-minded approach to both interview situation and informants. No longer does the researcher alone formulate questions and decide what information is important and relevant, but the informants are given opportunities of introducing new subjects as well (Sveningsson 2001: 51).

However, this is a demanding task, especially if the researcher is used to a more structured interview situation. I will not underestimate the personal presuppositions that have developed from an extensive and professional experience with talking to children and parents. Another competence, namely knowledge about cultural symbols of children and youth, such as pop idols, football players and television series, happened to be a doorway to a relaxed, humorous and confidential atmosphere. Some of the children looked surprised when they realised that I was familiar with the pop groups *Westlife* and *A1* and also knew both the characters and content in the last week's episode of the Norwegian television soap *Hotell Cæsar*. Interviews were a useful way of approaching the phenomenon of chat. I did not, however, regard this method as sufficient to get knowledge about what happens when children and adolescents communicate in chat rooms.

Online research: entering a new field of study

At the time when I started this project (1998), the Internet was relatively new, both as a technology and as a tool for people in general. The Net was new as a research field, particularly in terms of the youngest user groups and, not least, the Internet represented a new technology for the researcher.

I entered this field of research in a position of a technological novice. The e-mail system had been introduced only a few years back and those of us who did not belong to the group of vanguards celebrating new technology had for some years regarded the Internet from a distance. Consequently, my elementary skills in using the Internet technology had to be established. I did this by using instruction handbooks, participating in courses and learning by doing. Then I observed various chat rooms and asked participants when I did not understand what was going on. They usually answered. Parallel to this process, I wrote a proposal to the *Norwegian social science data services* and obtained permission to use children as informants in my study. In addition to general ethical rules from the national guidelines, a crucial presupposition in this permission is not to keep electronically information which identifies personal details. After having made appointments with them, these 8 young informants, little by little, turned out to be the masters, to whom I could e-mail and from whom I would usually get a quick answer. At the same time I did a study of Internet literature, as described in Chapter 2. Through the preparations for the empirical part of the study and the carrying out of the first interviews with the children, the focus towards *communication* developed. The children guided me to the rooms they used most frequently and thus these talks were decisive for limiting both the focus of the study and which rooms to choose for observations.

Chat is, in terms of research, a recent phenomenon and thus there are few methodological and theoretical references in social sciences. In Chapter 5, an extensive part of a chat room discussion is presented to show the chaotic nature of this communication. The detailed reading and the following interpretation raise questions about what kind of communication this is and

what is going on. What are the difficulties of collecting and interpreting this empirical material? What distinguishes it from other types of talk or qualitative data, such as a classroom observation or an interview, for example? How can we get reliable data from this chaos?

First of all, it is obvious that the material represents something particular, which poses a challenge in terms of both data collection and analysis. Chat is typical many-to-many communication (Holm Sørensen 2001). As already mentioned, chat has a character of chaos and transience, both regarding participation and content. As chat is more or less a continuous activity, it is not an easy matter to find a starting point of the activity and get a reasonable understanding of what, in Goffman's (1959) terms, the *definition of the situation* is. The communication exists before the researcher comes and continues after the observation is finished. A chat room might be silent for minutes, maybe hours, in terms of utterances until a sudden and huge burst of activity appears, probably if something entertaining or provoking happens or if a special person enters the room. This might be a person somebody has waited for or one who, for some reasons, is popular (or unpopular) in the room. The researcher also faces problems when participants make references to things which happened the day before, for example when accusing each other of changing nicknames. The problem is that the researcher was not present at this special occasion when this happened yesterday. The researcher has to make use of bits and pieces of talk, without knowing in what contexts the communication has appeared. Another question is which excerpts of the communication to choose. Karlsson (1997) suggests focusing on one chatter or one topic. However, her study is a linguistic study and focuses on language details. My focus is interaction between participants. The continuous changes of

topics are an essential part of the interactions. Thus, it is difficult, even impossible and undesirable with my focus, to single out one topic, as Karlsson suggests, and define it as *the* topic of study. Sveningsson (2001) finds that most of the conversations in her material are dyads that go on independently from the other dyads in the chat room. This increases the number of simultaneous conversations, which the researcher has to keep track of, she argues. She chose to isolate conversations in order to avoid distraction from other ongoing conversations. In my material there are obvious dyads, too, but most of all, the messages are intertwined and difficult to isolate. Since the main aim was to explore social aspects, I decided to use *content* as the organising dimension. I will come back to this later.

A second problem with this kind of material is that there are usually no defined and clear roles between the participants in which one asks questions and another gives the answers. Messages are literally spoken in a helter-skelter manner, where they are thrown out into the virtual world. Thus, compared to classroom interactions or interviews, chat is not limited to a dialogue where one paragraph is usually to be understood as an answer to a previous question. On the contrary, the contextual structures that normally help a researcher are absent. In a chat room several parallel dialogues on various topics may be going on or there may be no obvious dialogues at all, just rows of letters, numbers or signs. As the messages are viewed on the screen in the same order as they are keyed, an answer to a question may emerge a long time (or many messages) after the question was asked. Thus, this kind of communication differs from more traditional forms of conversation also in terms of *turn-taking*, i.e. conversations in which one person talks and another listens, where they have systems for

determining when one person's turn is over and the next person's turn begins (Tannen 1982). Chat communication challenges an observer who has to make sense of a flow of parallel and potential dialogues, simple utterances and statements, often performed in a presumably secret language, with a fast pace and with no regard to traditional systems of turn-taking.

A third aspect that must be taken into account is that we face the uncertainty about the actors and actresses. Who is actually writing the messages? Even if a participant presents a credible identity,⁴⁴ such as *boy 14, interested in football and games*, this self-presentation can be questioned. Most of the participants know that this ambiguity is a part of the chat context, whatever their motivation for entering the room might be. If somebody does not know or forgets this contextual frame, he or she is carefully reminded by warnings on the screen each time they log on. Most of the participants involved in a chat room communication do usually not know each other in *real* life. However, some call each other Net friends and may recognise each other through their nicknames. But nicknames may be changed: someone who was *coolboy* yesterday might be *hotbabe* today. Consequently, chat enables participants to play, pretend and present themselves with shifting identities, and they obviously do this on a large scale. This fact questions our images of the self as a uniform or multiple phenomenon (Giddens 1991; Turkle 1995). It also questions traditional images of face-to-face interactions which are perceived as more authentic than interactions without physical closeness. However, a problem is that the researcher does not know if or when the utterances on the screen give a

⁴⁴ The concept of *identity* is discussed in Chapter 7.

true or *symmetric* picture (Goffman 1959) of the participants' *real* life. Nor does the researcher know the individual social and cultural contexts in which the participants live their lives.

Lastly, in a class room observation or an interview, the talking partners can observe both the verbal and non-verbal communication, and adapt questions and answers on behalf of what happens in the context. In a chat room the facial and bodily gestures are absent. The participants have to rely on the written words and other language forms, which attempt to replace emotional expressions and body language. In a face-to-face interview it is possible to ensure a relatively consistent degree of honest and reliable communication. Chat communication has never been established for the purpose of research and is not regulated by any forms of agreement, that an organised talk or interview relies upon. Chat resembles a multiply voiced and loud talk in a dark and crowded room. Observing and analysing this talk is more likely to be compared with ethnographic fieldwork in a foreign culture where meaning has to emerge from and rely on what the researcher is able to observe and make sense of. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the ethnographic approach to the phenomenon of chat has consequences for the way I chose to analyse the material.

Combining methods

There are several arguments in favour of choosing a combination of methods. I decided to include children's account of their experiences and observation of chat rooms. Thus, children's talk about chat and chat actions became two different ways of understanding the same phenomenon. The children I interviewed were not observed online. I regarded applying only one of these methods as insufficient for understanding what happens and

how chat is experienced and evaluated by the users. From the position of observing, I presumed to get unbiased insight into what was actually going on in a chat room. I could have observed together with children and taped their comments. This would have provided useful material. However, this method presupposes both a longer period of fieldwork and a technical possibility to download the conversations directly from the screen,⁴⁵ as the researcher can hardly manage to transcribe and have somebody commenting on the communication simultaneously. Some researchers recommend fieldwork as a useful method for online research (Kendall 1999; Williams 1999; Olesen and Audon 2001). Hernwall (1999; 2001) used a combination of interviews and e-mails. Olesen and Audon (2001) recommend fieldwork together with children while they are chatting and, even if it is a time-demanding method, dictate every paragraph from the screen to a tape recorder. I find this method problematic, especially since this communication differs fundamentally from traditional conventions of writing. Many of the details might get lost in this kind of transmission. Another problem is the risk that children might behave differently when they are being observed. I realised that the children, for obvious reasons, did not feel free to chat as they usually did with an adult observer at their side. In order to get reliable material, I therefore chose to look at the activity in its ordinary context. I expected children's communication in chat rooms to be more authentic without an observing researcher at their side. Due to ethical reasons, I did not want to know the nicknames of the interviewed children. I told them this and showed them by looking in another direction when they keyed their nickname. The main reason for this

⁴⁵ After the period of data collection, I heard about a software program that is useful to download this kind of web sites. Another method is video-typing of the screen.

choice was that I did not want to invade their privacy more than necessary. I wanted them to feel free to chat with their ordinary nicknames whenever they wanted without risking to be recognised by a lurking researcher on their channel. A consequence of this choice was that I did not know whether any of my informants were present in the chat rooms that I observed. However, on a couple of occasions they told me the nicknames and sometimes I discovered their nicknames accidentally when I visited the informants.

What I wanted by using these two methods, interviews and observation, was primarily to explore what these children say they do in chat rooms and what hundreds of children actually do when talking in chat rooms. I assumed that this might give a varied picture. However, what the children and the transcripts from the communication say could not necessarily be expected to be consistent. Therefore, the children's experiences and what was going on in the chat rooms had to be counterpoised in order to avoid a situation where just the good parts were chosen to support a consistent set of conclusions. A consequence of this aim was that the presentation had to show some of the chaos, the transience, the uncertainty about participants' identity and context, the symbols, the codes and conventions. Uncertainty is part of the chat context and therefore this feature also has to be a part of the analysis and the presentation. I regard these two as methods that mutually inspire each other. The interviews guided me to the chat rooms which then became sources for ideas about what to look for in the next interviews. The chat rooms also gave useful contextual information, as in the following example. The chatter Charlotte asks Austin if *he* watches a

special American television series.⁴⁶ Many of the children had mentioned this series when I asked them about their media habits and television preferences. I had not watched a single episode of this series, and although I probably would have understood what Charlotte was talking about (since she said “do you watch...?”), this message got me involved in a kind of youth cultural community of practice and thereby it indicated a probable age of the chatters.

I moved between the two sets of methods, both in the period of data collection and the analysis. Below is a short overview of the various stages in the empirical process presented from the moment I met my informants in their homes. These stages will be discussed in detail later.

Overview of the research procedure

1. Interviews with 8 children about their use of the Internet and chat, carried out in front of a logged on computer in their homes (first visit). Talk from the computer was recorded by a tape recorder and transcribed by a professional. I took notes.
2. Observation of the communication in three chat rooms which the children said they used. These were www.popit.no and www.sol.no/chat and www.spraychat.no. This observation took place in the course of 3 weeks in the winter 1999/2000. The main observations were done in the two first rooms in June 2000, in the autumn 2001 and a few observations in the autumn 2002. Most of the chat was transcribed by hand from the screen because the two chat rooms which were relevant to use,⁴⁷ were impossible to print out.
3. In-depth interviews with the eight children, based on a semi-structured interview guide, situated in the same environments as the first time (second visit). The time interval between the two visits is about two-five months. Tape-recorded and transcribed by a professional. I took notes.
4. Parental interview (third visit) based on a structured interview guide. I wrote the answers down.
5. E-mail contact with the children throughout a period of 2 years, from the autumn of 1999 to the autumn of 2001. I asked questions, made

⁴⁶ In Norwegian: *I gode og onde dager*. In the newspaper I found this programme scheduled on the channel TV3 at 13.20 p.m. every day, except weekends.

⁴⁷ In the third chat room, most of the chatters seemed to be older youths.

appointments for the visits, children informed me about new ways of using the Net, sent me new e-mail addresses, addresses to good web sites and *cool* sites as well as other messages.

6. Interview of a Marketing Director of the web page www.popit.no in March 2001.

Even if chat is written, chat is still a special kind of *speech event* (Cameron 2001) and has to be explored, not within the notions and criteria of text analysis or writing skills, but as *social practice* (Kress 1993). Thus the study had to search for practices and concepts within a multiple set of activities. I had to ask myself what the social and individual context was for the text produced in the chat room. As several examples will show, chat is not supposed to be for the purpose of writing a correct piece of schoolwork or talking correctly, but rather for getting in touch with people. To understand the phenomenon of chat, I realised the necessity of exploring some of these social purposes, from the children's point of view. One of the challenges, as discussed in Chapter 3, is to grasp the perspectives of the children.

Interviews with children

Choosing informants and context

The interviews were carried out with 8 children and adolescents in the age 11 to 14 years old. Four of them were girls and four of them boys. The number of informants is always an essential question. A crucial aspect in this inquiry was to concentrate on few children and be able both to develop a good relation and be able to prepare between the visits. It was also crucial to visit the informants several times and to be able to answer their e-mails immediately. A researcher should not underestimate the time consuming process of making appointments for doing research in home environments. In addition, a part of the preparation for the interviews was observing chat

rooms. It is important when selecting a limited number of informants to have good procedures in order to ensure information rich cases (Patton 1990). All of these children appeared to satisfy this presupposition. I chose children because of their experiences with and fascination for the computer and new communication technologies. Another presupposition was also that the informants had tried chat several times. A couple of children said that they used the Internet primarily for other purposes than chat, and were therefore not included in the sample. I chose the age group of several reasons. According to folklorists, this age group is the most essential for establishing child culture (Enerstvedt 1971). In addition, they are among the high consumers of media (Hake 1995). It is assumed that many children in this age group have established some kinds of media patterns that are not so much regulated and supervised by parents as earlier. The youngest are still children, but on the threshold between childhood and adolescence, while the oldest in the sample perceive themselves as youths. Children in this age group also tend to play and be in peer groups (Frønes 1995; Adler and Adler 1998). The peer groups are often gender segregated. Girls play with girls and boys with boys (Bjerrum Nielsen 1989; Thorne 1993). Some researchers argue that the Internet, and particularly its communication facilities, has influenced and increased girls' computer use on a large scale (Håpnes and Rasmussen 1997). If there is a dominance of girls in these chat rooms, the sample of informants might be criticised for not being representative of the group of actual users. However, based on my preliminary observations, the informants' experiences and the character of the nicknames⁴⁸ showed that we could expect the chat context to be gender

⁴⁸ I must admit that nicknames are an unsure indicator of biological sex because playing and masquerade are parts of the chat communication. *Nicknames* are further discussed in Chapter 7.

mixed. In addition, there was lots of teasing and flirtation, which I interpreted as another indication of a *cross-gender* interaction, in Thorne's terms (1993). Therefore it was an essential point to include both girls and boys in the study.

Chat is typically supposed to be a leisure time activity. Thus the domestic environment was regarded as more relevant as the context for study than a school environment. I could have chosen leisure time clubs, as in a Danish study (Holm Sørensen and Olesen 2000; Holm Sørensen 2001). However, I wanted to focus on the individual use more than the social activity or play in a club. The home environment is the most usual context for these children's use of the Net and also the location which I supposed represented the most relaxed area for exploring the medium. Doing research in people's private homes causes, however, some particular kinds of challenges. Some researchers might perceive it stressful to find a balance between protecting the research situation from being biased by other family members and to be polite and informative in relation to people who welcome researchers in their homes. One plan was to recruit informants online, and I did publish brief information about the project on a web site called School Net,⁴⁹ with a link to my homepage. I asked potential informants to contact me by e-mail. This attempt was not successful. Nobody answered. I decided to find informants offline, which would also diminish the challenge of ensuring their identity, something that would have caused problems if I had used only online informants. Paccagnella (1997) warns against accepting data collected online.

⁴⁹ www.skolenett.no

Even when the design of research does expect some data referring to the “real world”, it is never correct to accept these data without keeping in mind that obtaining information about someone’s offline life through online means of communication – although seemingly easy and convenient – is always a hazardous, uncertain procedure, not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived, but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of “ethnographic context” (Paccagnella 1997:5).

Paccagnella emphasises the risk of misunderstandings due to different codes of communication. Choosing offline informants does not imply that information given offline is necessarily more *true* and *authentic*, in relation to people’s *real* life. In any research, the information has to be interpreted relative to its context.

I decided to recruit informants mainly through a sort of *snowball method* (Patton 1990) and from various areas, both urban and rural, in Mid Norway. An acquaintance recommended the first 3 informants. Two of these were in the same class, and thus they knew each other. The third asked if a relative could join the study. These two go to the same school and know each other well. I contacted the fifth informant on the phone because of an article in a newspaper about a recent computer party.⁵⁰ The sixth informant was recruited via an acquaintance of an acquaintance. This informant chose to include 2 friends and after the first visit, I asked them to continue to be my informants. Thus the 8 informants below have been recruited through 3 different sources. As far as I know, everybody, except one, knows one or two of the other participants. One parent from each of

⁵⁰ A non-stop weekend party, where youths (mostly boys) are gathered in a school building, using their private computers that are installed and linked together for this special occasion. A similar, but bigger happening, TG (The Gathering) occurs every Easter in a sports arena in Mid Norway (Johnsen 2001).

the families returned the informed consent slip. The children confirmed their participation by sending me an e-mail.

Anne	Bengt	Carl	Dag
Erik	Frida	Guro	Hilde

To ensure anonymity, the above list of names, (which are not the informants ordinary names), is presented without any indications on the order they were recruited or the relations between the informants. Age is, for the same reason, just indicated in the text, when necessary. At the time when the interviews started, 1 boy and 3 girls were 13 years old, 3 boys were 12 years old and 1 girl was 11 years old. The age representation in this study refers to the age when the utterance was made. With an extension of the data collection period of about 2 years, the informants' anonymity is further ensured. Contextual information, which could have revealed the informants, is presented about the sample as a unit, not on an individual level. A problem with a snowball recruiting method might be that the researcher loses control of some essential variables, such as the families' socio-economic status. I realised that the children themselves asked if their friends could participate in the study and I wanted to respond positively to such questions. To ensure variety, I asked about the parents' occupation in the first phone call and ensured that the families represented a mixed group according to this variable. However, with regards to social class, there is a small predominance of academics among the parents. This means that the educational background of the parents varies from one to two years in addition to the 9 years of obligatory school (7 parents) to 3-6 years of higher or university education (9 parents). In 3 of the families, the parents were academics, in 2 families both the parents were non-academics and in

2 families the mother had higher education, whereas the father had not and in 1 family it was the other way round. In Norway, people in higher education and universities use the Internet more frequently than do other groups (Vaage 2002). My sample is relatively representative according to this variable. One question is what kind of influence social class has on the children's use of online communication. Do children from non-academic families participate in chat room communication to the same extent and in the same way as children from families with an academic background? My study cannot answer this question. No statistics can, as far as I know, answer this question, either. I suppose if children have access to the Net, the technological competence in using the computer is more related to age than to social class. However, communicative competence is a far more complex issue, and raises questions about digital divides and how new technology is most accessible for the most educated and the prosperous part of the population.

Establishing the research situation

I used the telephone to ask if the children wanted to participate in a study about the Internet and told them briefly about the procedure. I talked to all the parents and most of the children in the first telephone conversation with the families. In those cases where I did not talk with the children, this was because they were busy, ill or not at home. If I made appointments with the parents, I always sent an e-mail to the children to inform them. My daughter advised me not to call the informants at 7.30 p.m. because of a popular television programme every evening at that time.⁵¹ Some of the children confirmed this to be good advice. The main message in the first

⁵¹ TV2, Hotell Cæsar

telephone call was to emphasise that they did not have to decide if they wanted to participate until they had received information about the project. I was given their addresses and then I sent the information, addressed to the children. In this envelope there were two letters, one for the parents and one for the child. In addition there was a return envelope with my name, address and a stamp. I asked the children to give the letter and the envelope to their parents, read the letters, send me an e-mail if something was unclear and ask the parents to return the informed consent slip with the signature of one of the parents. The main purpose in the letter to the children, apart from the ethical issues which were described earlier in this chapter, was to emphasise the fact that I needed their contribution to my research. The content of the two letters was more or less the same, but they were worded differently. The letter to the children was addressed directly to the child as a potential participant in simple language, informing them about the purpose of the project,⁵² the time aspect, the procedure, the possibility to withdraw whenever they want, why parents had to sign up and the guaranteed anonymity. They were also informed about my homepage where they could check that it was a serious project. Children were asked to confirm their participation by sending an e-mail where they told me when they used the Internet for the first time, how much they use the Net and how they used it. To protect their anonymity, they were asked to sign the e-mail just with their first name. They were promised a little sum of money after the work was done. One of my wishes, which I expressed when I talked with the children (and with the parents) in advance, was that the first visit should be so normal as possible, according

⁵² To get information from the children about their use of the Internet, and particularly chat.

to how it usually is. Thus, I hoped to achieve an ordinary situation, if we can talk about an ordinary situation with a researcher in the room.

Data collection period

The data collection period wherein I collected data from these 8 informants lasted for about 2 years, from December 1999 to August 2001. This period covered both summer and wintertime. With regards to the media use, the issue of choosing the right season for data collection is important in countries like Norway, where the weather conditions and the polar nights might have great impact on people's lives in terms of the time spent indoors and outdoors. The children in this study as well as children in other studies show that the media use decreases in the summer time (Vaage 2001). The informants also said that they do not use the computer so much in the summer because they have so many other things to do. My visits usually lasted for one hour, sometimes more, and between 2 and 7 p.m.

Carrying out the first visit

When I came to the children's homes for the first time, as already mentioned, I had made preparations in advance. I had talked to most of the children on the telephone, I had e-mailed them, they had answered me and they had received a letter with information. In this respect the children had got a leading role in the procedure for informing their parents and confirming the participation of the family. Some of them checked my home page, which I had informed them about where there was a picture of me. Thus, when I arrived I felt that I was expected and that the children were well prepared. They logged on the Internet and found a chair for me. Some of the families had prepared for my arrival with coffee and cakes. The feeling of being welcome was emphasised when one of the children had a

phone call, and I was mentioned by my first name.⁵³ Some of the children were home alone, while others had both siblings and parents at home. To exclude disturbing factors, I asked other members of the family to leave the room. I realised that this could cause some questions and explained that my request was based on the need to concentrate and protect the audiotape from disturbing sounds, which would appear as noise. I even had to show out younger siblings, who expected to watch television in the same room. Researchers might perceive such interventions in family life as inconvenient. However, reflecting about these issues are necessary, both to avoid disturbance and protect the informant's anonymity. I informed the children at the beginning of each meeting that nothing of what they said would be told to anyone in a way that revealed them. Although this had been said in the information letter, I supposed this issue to be necessary to repeat.

A practical problem appeared when there was more than one informant in the room. How would I be able to distinguish between them on the tape? I tried and gave up, and put the external microphone on the main informant, i.e. the person who lived in the house while I observed the others. I later tried to compensate for this by extending the second visit, which was organised as an individual observation and discussion. I also had the possibility to use the e-mail system. A challenge in the one-to-one setting (the informant and the researcher) was all the messages on the screen, which seemed to be perceived as embarrassing with an adult observant on the informant's side. One of the girls covered parts of the screen with her left hand while she wrote with the right. When I told her that I knew what

⁵³ In Norwegian: "Hu Vebjørge hen, sjø!"

went on in a chat room, she removed her hand. This might have been less of a problem with more than one informant, even if I did not see this in my sample.

I finished each encounter by asking about how the children had experienced the interview. Everybody said that it was ok. This was an expected answer and I was more convinced that the informants really meant what they said after having asked more concretely, for example if I had used difficult words, if it was embarrassing when I looked at the screen when they chatted, and so on. Before leaving, Dag said that it had been very pleasant. Inviting a meta-communication about the research situation, however, could also generate another direction than expected. Carl asked if I really was going to write a book “about this”. One interpretation is that he was proud to have contributed. In the context of Carl’s experiences with the limited focus on the Internet at school, his reaction can be interpreted as pure and simple astonishment. Erik, who was particularly well informed, evaluated the interview positively, too. However, I never got a single e-mail from him. When I asked him why, he said he had forgotten. The parent interview disclosed that the father had persuaded him to participate in the study. If I had known this earlier, I could have raised the question and asked more specifically if he wanted to withdraw or continue. He probably would have continued, but maybe with more enthusiasm. Moreover, the participation would have been a result of his own choice. I audio-taped the talk and in addition, I took notes.

Carrying out the second visit

The second visit was more structured, as I had brought a set of questions

that were directed more specifically at the activity of chatting.⁵⁴ This visit was carried out as a *semi-structured interview* (Patton 1990). Except for these changes, the situation was organised exactly like the first visit; in front of the computer screen with the Internet logged on. The advantage of coming back was that we were more familiar with the situation; I knew more about the children's activity on the Net and could focus more on the research problem. The second visit also enabled me to register changes, expressed for example as "now I do not chat so much any longer" (Anne). The interval between the visits was from two - five months and in this period we had exchanged e-mails. I could observe and ask the informants about changes and thus the children were enabled to correct or confirm my observations and interpretations. My questions often caused reflections on what I interpret as temporality. When I reminded the children about what they had said and done last time I visited them, both the informants and I realised the changeable character of the activity. The use of adverbs like *now* and *earlier* strengthened this interpretation.

In an interview situation a researcher should not underestimate non-verbal signs, given by the informants. At the end of the second visit, Dag suddenly looked uncomfortable with the situation. I had to reflect upon what the reasons for this behaviour might be. Had I said anything wrong? Maybe he was tired or hungry? I asked him and he said: "eh...it is this ...about anonymity". Earlier in the interview we had talked about pornography and 'dirty talk' on the Net. Even though I had started the interview by repeating the point about anonymity (mentioned in the letter and at the first visit, too), it was crucial to explain once more that nobody would be able to find

⁵⁴ See appendix 7 (in Norwegian).

out what he had told me, unless he told it himself. After this answer he looked far more relaxed and I finished the interview.

E-mails between researcher and informants

In the information letter, the children were, as previously mentioned, asked to send me an e-mail, telling about their age, when they used the Internet for the first time, the extent and content of their present use and how they usually used the Net.⁵⁵ This confirmed their decision to participate and gave me initial contextual information. It also introduced a method, namely the use of electronic mail. The children usually answered at once when I contacted them. I wanted to answer them quickly, too. From time to time they sent an e-mail without having been contacted first, but usually I made the first contact. When they contacted me first, it could be in order to tell me about new and exciting things to do on the Net, new home pages and url addresses, a new computer or equipment, a new mail address, a hard disk crash, i.e. something which had to do with the technology. One example is one of the boys, who sent me an e-mail, where he told me that his family had “got a new, very good computer with an 800 MHz processor and 130 MB working capacity”. He had complained about his slow computer and the new machine opened up great possibilities. Another example is Anne, who asked for contact and Carl who wondered how my writing was going. I used e-mail to make appointments for the visits and keep in contact with the children during the two years the data collection lasted. I asked the informants, in the final stage of the period, to send me an e-mail in which they explained chat to an imagined person who did not know anything about the phenomenon. This was useful as a methodological

⁵⁵ For anonymity reasons, the e-mails were not kept together with personal information.

experiment, even though just a few of the children answered. To produce and send a written story might be perceived as more challenging than the spontaneous e-mail communication we had exchanged earlier. In addition, I had emphasised that this was voluntary and not a part of the contract we had made. They had received their payment, and as such they had completed their part of the job. I was not surprised to register whom of the informants from the sample answered. I experienced these children as active, eloquent and reflected. They had sent more e-mails than the others earlier and their description of chat confirmed that their writing skills were advanced, too. It is important to be aware of how the differences in children's communication skills may influence the relation between interviewer and the informants, as verbal language is a main tool in interviews. The ideal person for interviews does not exist, Kvale argues (1996:146). Co-operative, motivated, eloquent and competent people might be convenient for the interviewer, but not necessarily the people who give the most worthy knowledge about the research topic. I experienced e-mail communication to be a very useful tool for keeping in touch with the informants and giving them the possibility to be in the same position. It is very resource demanding to carry out home visits, and I expected that the immediate and spontaneous character of e-mail could make the process more efficient and it would enrich the data material. What I also could have done was to use the e-mail system as a method for asking emerging questions related to my interpretation and analysis. However, asking questions disconnected from the original interview context would have generated significant problems according to questions about validity.

Interviews with parents

Researchers are recommended to be informed about the context when they

are in the process of doing child research (Solberg 1991). I expected parents to give supplementary and contextual information about the child's everyday life, such as school, family, health, interests, friends, media access, use and level of media regulation. I started the parental interview by informing them that the anonymity principle also was practised in relation to them, which implied that I was not going to tell them what their children had told me. The child was allowed to attend the interview. Only one of the children attended occasionally, and commented and gave corrections while watching a television programme in another room. One of the interviews took place in my office, because one of the parents wished to. Both mothers and fathers took part, but the majority was fathers. The interviews with parents were done as the third and last visit. An argument for carrying out the parental interviews first is that this procedure gives the contextual information before the child interviews. A main reason for not choosing this order (which I think is strictly necessary when interviewing younger children) was to emphasise that the children were the real, main informants in the study.

The interviewer's qualifications

As mentioned earlier, I started the project as a newcomer in terms of technological skills. Reflecting on this, I evaluate this position both as an advantage and disadvantage. A disadvantage of the position as a newcomer is that I ran the risk of perceiving web chat as more chaotic than children and more experienced people understand it. My limited personal experience could overestimate the impression of chaos and lack of content in the communication. Kvale (1996) lists the interviewer's knowledge about the topic as a main qualification. Other qualifications are the ability to keep a structure in the interview, be precise, friendly, emphatic, open,

leading, critical and to remember and interpret, as appropriate. An advantage of my position as a newcomer is that the informants were the real experts on the technological phenomenon which was going to be explored. Children were asked to show, tell and explain. They used the keys, and I chose a position of observation, not participating in chat. Thus, the data emerged from the children's accounts, although my choices, comments and interpretations are my responsibility. I had to repeat some of the things children showed me on the screen or just mentioned with pieces of verbal explanations. If I had not, the transcripts would have been meaningless noise and fragmented pieces of talk.

Interview data

The material from this part of the data collection consists of:

- 14 hours of interviews with children (first and second visit)
- 89 e-mails (my questions and answers included)
- Interviews with 4 mothers and 7 fathers (1 mother alone, 4 fathers alone and 3 couples)

Working with the interviews

From tape to transcripts

The audiotapes were transcribed by a professional transcriber. The process of transcription creates a new text whose relations to the original data are problematic (Lemke 1998). It is always a question of what is preserved, what is lost and what is changed. Spoken language is full of hesitations, repetitions, false starts, re-starts, changes of grammatical construction in mid-utterance, non-standard forms, compressions and elisions, etc., and the tendency is to 'clean it up', dismissing most of these features as irrelevant, Lemke argues. Very often some of these things turn out not to be irrelevant

at all. The author recommends transcribing large portions at a lexical level (for survey purposes), and smaller portions at more detailed levels for more intensive analysis. Lemke argues that all analysis is reductive. Information from the original data is discarded in the process of fore-grounding the features of interest. He recommends preserving the original data in a form that can be re-analysed or consulted again from a different point of view, posing different questions. I chose to concentrate on checking the parts where chat was a topic. I listened to the tapes again, read the transcripts and made notes on the parts which were most relevant for my study. Pauses are marked with 3 dots (...) and laughter is marked in brackets.

From Norwegian to English

There are always fundamental problems with translations, it is argued (Kress 1993). Language and culture are closely interwoven. There are local and cultural specialities, which are difficult, sometimes impossible to translate. After having checked and corrected the transcripts, I made an individual description on the basis of contextual information about the informants, their everyday life and media use. Then every message related to chat was written in the order it was said in the interview. I marked these excerpts to make it possible to go back and check the original data and the context later if necessary. It was necessary. I kept the data in the original language so long as possible to avoid biasing the material. However, after having made this preparation for analysis, I had a report of each of the eight informants. Then I translated the report.

Analysing interviews

The next step was to do what Patton (1990) calls *thematic reading* and *cross-case analysis*. I made some preliminary headings which indicated

both common features and differences. Examples of headings are: typical topics, nicknames, age, gender, sex talk, language and temporality. What emerged as a general interpretation of the material at this stage was the tension between fascination, frustration and boredom. I approached the data and analysed them with a qualitative method, inspired by ethnography. The most important tool in this process is *comparing* (Gudmundsdottir 1992). This implies looking for both similarities and differences. Thus, the point is not just to look for common patterns, but also for uniqueness. In this project it was, for example, important to be aware of how girls and boys might perceive the questions differently or similarly.

Presentation of the interview sample

To anonymise the informants, I chose to present a summary of the sample as a unit rather than the individual child. All the children live in families with relatively high standards of living, including accommodation. All the parents have paid work. Most of the informants do sports; some of them play an instrument and participate regularly in other leisure time activities. Those of the children whose mothers and fathers are divorced have regular contact with both parents. All the children have a stable social network and regular contact with friends and relatives. According to the parents, the children perceive themselves as clever at school, even if there might be some problems with specific subjects. A couple of the children, however, consider themselves in the middle and lower part of the average. This information was given on the basis of a very vague concept, *to perceive oneself as clever or not clever at school*. However, the answers give some indication about a sample of informants who evaluate themselves as relatively competent. The home environment is well equipped with various media, such as more than one television set, videos, radios, CD-players,

computers, mobile phones, magazines, books and comics. A few of the children read books. Without exceptions, the children perceive themselves as the family's Internet expert. The parents confirm this. Most of the children have used the Net at home for more than 6 months, while some of them have years of experience. A common feature is that they use more than one medium and do several things with the computer simultaneously, such as searching for sites, chatting and checking their e-mail. This confirms a European study which shows that the new media are integrated into a media menu that is fairly full already (Drotner 2001). A common feature in my sample is also that the Internet use is regulated in different ways by the parents. Parents emphasise that they trust their children. I interpret reflections about trust as a consequence of my questions about regulation. Putting the concept on the agenda, however, indicates that the Internet (in contrast to books) challenges the question of trust and this is a part of the public discourse about the Net as a dangerous medium. Later in the interview, several parents argue that regulations are necessary for various reasons. One aspect is the economical argument. To surf and chat for the lowest costs, children are supposed to use the Net after 5 p.m. and only use the Net for one hour every time they log on.⁵⁶ The children confirm such rules, but admit that they do not always follow them. However, none of the parents complained about the telephone bills. Money was not a problem. Other reasons for regulation might be more relevant, such as controlling the content and use. One of the mothers said that after 5 p.m. she is usually at home and can take a look at her son's surfing. Other rules were not to download sites because of the danger of viruses and pornography.

⁵⁶ This is the same as recommended in the Net rules made by *Save the Children*.

All the eight children shared a general agreement that they had learnt nothing about the Internet at school. To a great extent they perceive themselves as the experts at school, too. With one exception, the informants experience that chat is not allowed in school time. Searching for school related information sites is perceived as more serious than communication, some of the children suggest. This information was important, since it indicated a cultural discourse about what counts as valuable and useful within the educational system. It questions the relation between what is encouraged at school and what students are interested in. It also questions how the informants perceived me. I did not ask them, but a suggestion is that I was more associated with a researcher and mother than with the role of a teacher. I told them that I was going to write a book about what they told me and that I had children at the same age as them. What was interesting for my project was to question what kind of impact the school context, described above, could have on what the informants perceived as important to tell me. Thus, this little piece of information about what is perceived as serious at school was useful in order to understand what I later interpreted as the children's underestimation of their own chat activity. At a first sight it could seem like chat had a marginal position in their total Internet use. It was the information sites and the games they chose to talk about. To a certain extent this is an important part of their use and chat seems to be something they do parallel to other activities, such as doing homework, talking on the phone or watching television. However, if I had accepted the preliminary impression that chat had a marginal position and chosen to follow the paths the informants lined up, I probably would have misunderstood the extent and the whole range of their chat experiences. When I went further on and we talked about various characteristics of chat (because I knew a bit, but not too much) and asked about concrete

experiences, they showed great competence. This led me to a conclusion that they chatted more than they said they did. Why did they not tell me? Information sites are maybe easier to show a researcher. Searching for useful information is perhaps what they evaluated as the most relevant, according to what I had asked for. And, not to mention that chat is supposed to be more private, an activity somewhere between a telephone call and a letter, and also, as said above, it has lower status.

Observations in chat rooms

To look at the phenomenon from another perspective, I did observations in chat rooms. The advantage of such observations is that they offer direct insight into what participants talk about. However, the researcher can never be sure of the identity of the participants and the participants cannot be sure if the researcher is the person she or he presents. Even if a person presents a credible offline identity online, this is not necessarily in accordance with *reality*. However, as some researchers have argued, the concept of reality is a complex one, and the identity a person presents online can be perceived as equally real as the identity in the world outside the computer (Turkle 1995).

Choosing rooms

When making decisions about which chat rooms to choose, questions arise as to which chat rooms to prioritise and why. Children use a variety of rooms which are established for different purposes, and which have their own characteristics. They are targeted towards different age groups and have various levels of participants and activity. If you want many and various kinds of participants, a good idea is to choose a popular chat room (Karlsson 1997). It was crucial to find rooms in which the main participants

were people in the age group I wanted to study. I also wanted to find rooms, which were recommended by the children I interviewed and rooms where I could find both newcomers and more advanced chatters. This would enable me to observe a variety of participants. The two chat rooms I ended up with are highly visited rooms. It is also easier to anonymise participants' nicknames when using a large room. In large chat rooms, however, it is easier to fuse into the anonymity than in smaller rooms, Sveningsson (2001) argues. In rooms with a high number of participants, actions and behaviour are not noticed and sanctioned to the same extent, as is the case where there is a small group of regulars. Thus, one can expect a larger element of non-acceptable behaviour socially, she argues. Norms and conventions are said to disappear easily in the number of messages in a large chat room, while they are more visible in a smaller one. In my study, such processes are an interesting part of the exploration. Another argument for choosing smaller rooms is that they have more coherent dialogues. Because of the high number of users, the conversations in large rooms tend to be superficial, aiming primarily to find people interested in chatting privately. Unless I am invited or ask to be invited, I have no access to such rooms, which are created within the web site. In the pilot study, I discovered that many of the private invitations were directed to everybody, sometimes organised by means of expressing a community of interests, such as "everybody who likes Britney Spears, key 6666 and come to the private room".⁵⁷ I was not primarily interested in coherent dialogues, but rather the communication as it appears in a large room, for example what happened before some participants left and between those who, for some reasons, stayed in the public room. I decided to reveal the names of the chat

⁵⁷ The numbers 6666 are definitely not chosen accidentally.

rooms in order to illustrate some of the characteristics and reasons why children moved from one of them to the other as they grew older or became more advanced users.

Establishing the research situation

After having chosen the rooms, a question was how to establish a research situation which takes into account the ethical principles and avoids influencing the activity in the chat room. What kind of procedure was the most useful for finding authentic information about the phenomenon in the actual chat rooms? I approach this question by describing my strategy for observation and the level of my own participation. A fundamental question was to choose how to observe. One issue was whether I should enter the chat rooms openly as a researcher, as a participant with a common nickname or pretend to be a young person and thus be a hidden observer? I usually chose the latter position. When I tried to introduce myself as a researcher, the communication stopped. As a participant, I realised that I disturbed the room. In addition, I was not able to make satisfying observations parallel to my own chat activity. By entering the room with an identity as an ordinary chatter, I attained the necessary anonymity. I asked technical questions and received answers. In POPIT I was often contacted, presumably because I chose nicknames which appeared to be popular. These were mainly ordinary female and male names (Helle/Marit and Lars/Don). When somebody asked for private talk, I always said no, i.e. clicked them out. There were a few exceptions when people asked questions which I could answer without disturbing or being disturbed, such as how to make colours. However, I waited until I realised that no other participants were answering. I said “thanks” for instance when a participant, presented as a boy, said that my trousers were cool (my

personal profile appeared on *his* screen when *he* asked me to chat privately). Each time my nickname appeared I ran the risk of being overloaded with requests. This situation indicated the simple fact that my presence as a participating chatter would presumably influence and even change interactions in the room. I decided to minimise my activity, as I realised that I, as an adult, hardly, if ever, could become an insider in this culture. I did not want to try, either. In order to experience chat as an adult person, I entered chat rooms that were targeted towards adult people.

In terms of observation, an important issue was how to decide the focus. When studying linguistic features, Karlsson (1997) recommends concentrating on one chatter or one topic. The aim of my study was, however, to explore what happens between the chatters. During the observation, I realised that something interesting could happen in the course of a few minutes and then the room was suddenly more or less empty and quiet because the participants had left. Sometimes I found it useful to make a more extensive observation, and for example look at the flow of comings and goings which lasted for more than an hour. After a period of pilot observations, I decided to use *content*, i.e. what chatters talked about, as the organising dimension, both of the observation and the analysis.

The researcher's participation

As I already have described, a position with a hidden identity might, from an ethical perspective, be questioned, even if this is recommended in the methodological literature (Patton 1990). Paccagnella (1997) recommends hidden observation to avoid the observer influencing the situation. My main arguments for choosing this approach lie in the fact that this was what

I evaluated as the nearest way possible to study the phenomenon without disturbing it. Another argument is that this kind of communication actually goes on in a public space. I was one of the crowd. Chat rooms of this type are open and accessible to anyone. Everybody has a nickname, and pretending is a part of the convention. Thus, it is likely that many of the participants are aware of the room as a public space. Those who want to chat privately, i.e. by creating a sub-room within the chat room, can withdraw from the public room. This chat habit, which continuously emerges in questions like “anybody who wants to chat privately?” is supposed to increase the chatters’ images of the differences between various levels of publicity. However, even if the chat context is a public space and perceived as such, people have a right to be protected from being compromised. In order to protect participants who write personal details, it has been an issue not to include private information, for example real names, addresses, e-mail addresses or phone numbers. Nicknames, however, are included here, as they are seen as a crucial part of the phenomenon which is studied.

Choosing a research position as an online hidden observer also causes considerations about informed consent. If I, as a researcher, were to provide information about my project in a chat room, probably just a few of the participants would see this information. The next step would be that those who, in spite of this difficulty, wanted to answer me, would have to scroll back to an earlier message or remember my e-mail-address, contact me and thus enable me to carry out the whole procedure of sending information and involving parents who would be asked to return a informed consent slip. However, this would not have solved the main problem, namely that even if some participants accepted my presence and followed

this procedure, most of the others would remain ignorant of it. When I asked for informants, many of the chatters left the room and the rest became quiet. This experience indicates a second problem, namely that the presence of a researcher is likely to influence the communication in a way that not only changes the whole phenomenon, but destroys it.

Data collection period

I did pilot observations before and parallel to the interviewing. The time of the year and the time of the day the data are collected might influence the material and thus be an important variable with regards to the focus of the study. I carried out the observations in a period just before school terminated and in the summer holiday of 2000.⁵⁸ By comparing the first observations with the pilot observations, I realised that, except from some joyful and celebratory messages about being free from school, the content and participants in the chat rooms did not differ from the period in the springtime. I chose daytime between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and not weekends. One reason for this was that the activity is so heavy in peak time (after 5 p.m. and on weekends) that I had to avoid these periods to be able to register the messages. This might bias the representativeness of the participants, if the period with the heaviest activity is regarded as the most representative of the phenomenon of chat. However, this is not necessarily the case. It depends on the focus of the study. In peak time, the rooms were often dominated by those I will call *open troublemakers*, who sometimes disturb the communication between other participants so that they leave or move to other rooms. This is, of course, an interesting phenomenon *per se*. I found the communication which took place off-peak to be sufficiently

⁵⁸ In Norway the summer holiday lasts from 20 June to 20 August.

complex, rich and fragmented to satisfy the characteristic features I had singled out from the literature study. The Marketing Director whom I interviewed (see the next section) confirmed that there were lots of participants logged on between 1 and 3 p.m., too. However, I reflected on why children who participated in chat communication at this time of the day were at home when they are usually supposed to be at school. Some of the children I interviewed told me that they used to chat at school, too, when the teacher could not see. The following observation (6 July 2000, 14.27 p.m.) shows that children also employ public facilities to be online. A participant asks what time it is. He gets different answers. Participating as *Don 14*, I wonder why he asks this question. “Because I have to go home soon. I’m in the library. Talk ⁵⁹ to you tomorrow” was the answer. This indicates the diverse contexts and times of children’s Internet use, which are far more complex than either at school or at home, or either peak time or off-peak time.

Interview with a Marketing Director of the web site POPIT

I called the editorial office of the web site POPIT, originally to ensure that I could use the material in a publication. One of their official rules is that nothing should be published without permission. In the material I had gathered, however, I was confronted with a special kind of web language which I wanted to hear more about. One example was the concept *underscore*. By using this function on the keyboard children in chat rooms could avoid censoring programs, I was told. In the interview I was also told how the editors observe children’s use of the web sites, moderate the chat room and answers questions from users. I also got information about

⁵⁹ In Norwegian “Snax”, which is a way to say “snakkes” (we will talk later).

technical concepts, language codes and responses from the user group. The most essential information from this interview is included in the presentation.

Observation data

This part of the data collection consists of:

- 22 observations in 2 different chat rooms (14 hours and 52 minutes, 263 active participants, 784 messages, duration from 2 to 125 minutes).
- Interview with a Marketing Director of the web site www.popit.no

Working with the observations

As this topic is a relatively un-mapped research field, there are few theoretical guidelines for conducting analysis of the material. The seemingly chaotic nature of chat poses many difficulties in terms of analysis, if compared with forms of communication that are better regulated. What kind of consequences does the character of the data have for the analysis?

Presentation of the observation sample

Details about the observations are presented in the tables 3 and 4 below, which give the time of the day, the duration, how many participants there are and the number of messages which were sent in the actual interval of time. Active participants are people who send one message or more. This means that those who did not send any messages are not registered in the table. In SOL, however, I could take a look at a list of names, count how many of them were logged on and compare with the number of participants.

No	Time	Minutes	Active participants	Messages
P1	9.20 - 10.20	60	44	213
P2	12.45 - 13.30	45	30	49
P3	11.20 - 12.00	40	9	23
P4	11.45 - 12.40	55	6	9
P5	15.10 - 15.15	5	4	6
P6	8.30 - 8.32	2	1	2
P7	9.00 - 9.30	30	5	25
P8	10.05 - 10.35	30	12	40 +
P9	9.27 - 9.57	30	8	16
P10	13.40 - 14.00	20	8	30 ++
P11	11.55 - 12.20 (evening)	25	3	26
Totally		342	130	439

Table 3. Information about the observations done in POPIT

No	Time	Minutes	Active participants	Messages
S1	10.00 - 10.20	20	1	1
S2	13.55 - 14.45	50	10	14 ++
S3	12.55 - 13.40	45	12	22
S4	13.20 - 14.20	60	30 +	100 +
S5	12.40 - 14.15	125	19	53 +
S6	12.40 - 13.30	50	7	15 +
S7	13.40 - 14.20	40	8	27 +
S8	14.40 - 14.45	5	0	0
S9	11.05 - 12.30	85	16	54 +
S10	14.05 - 14.45	40	12	18 +
S11	14.00 - 14.30	30	17	41 +
Totally		550	132	345

Table 4. Information about the observations done in SOL

The two tables refer to observations in POPIT and SOL, respectively. The observations 1-11 include a variety in terms of duration, number of participants and level of activity. A main difference between the two

channels, as it appears in this material, is the number of utterances. SOL is a channel the children in my interview material visited when they found POPIT too childish. In this respect, SOL is an arena for the most advanced participants which they often enter after having frequented POPIT for a while. More regulars and a higher tempo caused problems in terms of writing down the messages. To indicate that I sometimes had to give up, I have marked the observations with the sign + or ++ to indicate that I lost more than 3 or 10 messages. In contrast to the observations which show a heavy activity, I have included one 2 and 20 minutes observation where one participant asks for somebody to talk to (P 6 and S 1) and a 5 minutes observation with no participants at all (S 8). When I was not able to observe all the messages, I supplied the observation with a brief account of what was going on, such as the topics, the nicknames and the atmosphere.

From screen to transcripts

It was a meticulous process transforming the original messages from the screen to a computer text file based on hand written messages. As mentioned earlier, I could not copy and print the chat. I asked both the computer service at the university and one of the web editors for help in this matter, without success. It was possible to print one picture of some messages, but not the whole body of utterances as shown below in figure 3 and excerpt 1 respectively.

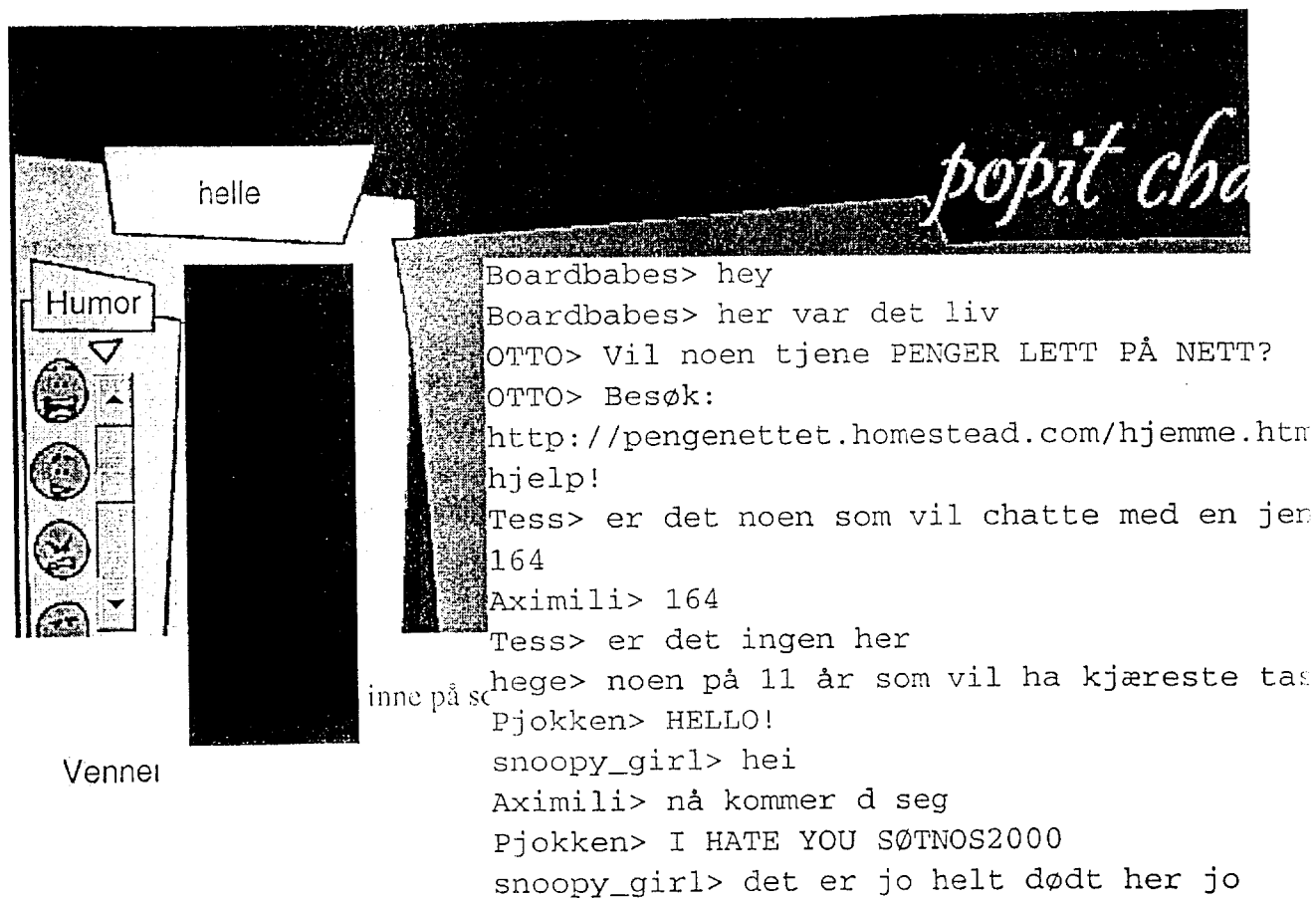


Figure 3. POPIT's chat site.

This is an example of the problem with printing directly from the screen. If we compare figure 3 with excerpt 1, we can see that some of the text is lost (in the messages 5 and 8).

1 P 9

1 Boardbabes>hey	1 Boardbabes>hey
2 Boardbabes>her var det liv	2 Boardbabes>it's lively here
3 OTTO>Vil noen tjene PENGER LETT PÅ NETT?	3 OTTO>Anybody who wants to make EASY MONEY ON THE NET?
4 OTTO>Besøk: http://pengenettet.homestead.com/hjemme.html	4 OTTO>Visit: http://pengenettet.homestead.com/hjemme.html

<p>hjelp 5 Tess>er det noen som vil chatte med en jente så tast 164 6 Aximili>164 7 Tess>er det ingen her 8 hege>noen på 11 år som vil ha kjæreste tast PROFF 9 Pjokken>HELLO! 10 Snoopy_girl>hei 11 Aximili>nå kommer d seg 12 Pjokken>I HATE YOU SØTNOS2000 13 Snoopy_girl>det er jo helt dødt her jo 14 Charli>halloooo alle sammen 15 Aximili>morn morn 16 Charli>er det ingen jenter her?????????? 17 Aximili>hva heter hunden til boby i bobys verden???? 18 Aximili>haloooooooooooo 19 charli>den heter Roger 20Aximili>d vet jo du ALT om 21 Charli>hva heter hovedstaden i Tyskland? 22 Aximili>Berlin 23 dissy>har ikke pepling</p>	<p>help 5 Tess>anybody who wants to chat with a girl key 164 6 Aximili>164 7 Tess>nobody here 8 hege>anyone who's 11 who wants a girlfriend ⁶⁰ key PROFF 9 Pjokken>HELLO! 10 Snoopy_girl>hi 11 Aximili>now it's going better 12 Pjokken>I HATE YOU SØTNOS2000 13 Snoopy_girl>it is completely deatd here 14 Charli>helloooo everybody 15 Aximili>hello 16 Charli>no girls here?????????? 17 Aximili>what's the name of boby's dog in boby's world???? 18 Aximili>heloooooooooooo 19 charli>it's name is Roger 20Aximili>this you know EVERYTHING about 21 Charli>what is the name of the capital in Germany? 22 Aximili>Berlin 23 dissy>haven't got a clue</p>
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Based on the hand transcriptions, the communication was written in a computer text file. When the communication from a screen is taken down by hand, some details might get lost. These potential biases are not possible to correct, since the communication has vanished once you log off. It is also difficult to scroll and check details in earlier writing while observing simultaneously. Thus, the presentation can make no claim to be 100 per cent reliable in terms of language details. Yet, I will still argue that the

⁶⁰ *Kjæreste* can refer to both girlfriend and boyfriend.

method I used to reconstruct the chat was the most efficient method possible with these two chat rooms at the time when the observations took place.

From Norwegian to English

After having been transcribed, the texts were translated from Norwegian to English. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, translations cause problems because of local and cultural differences. Chat language is no exception.⁶¹ In order to come as close to a chat language as possible, I have consulted an English chat room⁶² and my own children, who became advanced both in English text messaging (SMS) and chat during one year in London. If it makes sense to talk about a Northern European child culture, perceived as a common and shared cultural practice, we might expect chat culture to be a part of it, even if there are assumed to be some significant differences in how *childhood* is perceived and experienced in England and Norway. At any rate, there seem to be strong similarities between Norwegian and English chat communication, even if the language and culture are different. In addition, the study focuses on chat as a social practice more than on linguistic precision. The data are presented in both Norwegian and English.

Choosing excerpts for analysing

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, an essential question is what to choose from the transcripts in order to represent the most useful material with respect to the research focus. With 14,5 hours of observations, where each

⁶¹ How do you translate *Thule tuller med en kylling fra Sylling*? In Norwegian this is a jingle, probably produced in the context of the spontaneous chat culture.

⁶² www.habbohotel.co.uk

of them could last from 2 to 125 minutes, it was obvious that I had to give some thought to what to include in the analysis and what to leave out in the final presentation. The excerpts, which are presented in this thesis are (with the exception of excerpt 2 in Chapter 5), parts of more extensive sequences of chat, from which I started the analysis. I have left out messages above and below the excerpts, but not in between. However, this process is a further step in the direction of taking the communication out of its original context.

Analysing observations

In the preparation of the material for more systematic analysis, I approached the data in two different ways. Buckingham (1999) questions how we can integrate different forms of analysis, such as text analysis and audience research, instead of seeing them as contradictory issues. Firstly, I made a *thematic reading* and a *cross-case analysis*, as I also did with the interview material, described earlier in this chapter. I started open-mindedly to explore what was going on, what the chatters talked about, if they posted their messages to someone special or to everyone in the room, how many participants were active and how many were not, if the messages were answered and what kind of language they used. I also looked for similarities and differences in order to check if the two sets of data were consistent for example in terms of topics, style, language and conventions. Secondly, I approached this part of the material with focus on discourses.⁶³ One of the discourses I wish to pay particular attention to is interpreted in the cultural context as dealing with becoming and being an

⁶³ Here I use the concept of *discourse* as a conversation, talk or dialogue (The New Oxford Thesaurus of English 2000).

adolescent. Although my analysis can make no claim of being a discourse analysis in a strictly linguistic sense (Cameron 2001), I have been inspired by some of the concepts and approaches from this tradition, which suggests that we make sense of discourse partly by making guesses based on knowledge about the world (Cameron 2001:12). In a chat context, it is useful to look at ‘the language beyond the sentence’. I also interpret the concept of *reframing* (Tannen 1982) as an advice to look closely at the messages (sentences), to go back and re-interpret the meaning of the first sentence and ask what is going on.

Through this preliminary analysis, I realised that ‘talking about’ and ‘doing’ chat might offer both a consistent and a different picture of the phenomenon. The individual accounts of chat did not to the same degree provide rich descriptions of the complexity in terms of atmosphere, language codes, turn taking and content. On the other hand, the observations were limited in terms of context and meaning aspects. Because I had started the analysis of the pilot material, I could ask the children questions, which emerged from the chat rooms I observed. Thus, I was able to compare the children’s accounts with what I observed in the rooms. Sometimes the content of the discussion could be checked in printed sources, such as when the topic was a television programme. Programme overviews presented information of the correct title, what type of programme it was, which channel it was on, the duration of the programme and when it was scheduled. An example is, as mentioned earlier, when Charlotte asks Austin if *he* watches *I gode og onde dager*. We do not know if Austin and Charlotte are a boy and a girl, respectively, if Austin in fact watches this soap or if these participants watch the television programme in question at all. However, the main issue here is that two

participants, apparently a girl and a boy, make reference to a television programme which exists in the *real* world and which, according to the interviews, is very popular among young people, particularly girls in Norway at the time. In this respect, this bit of information may be a validation of the sample. Charlotte asks Austin if *he* really watches this soap. She apparently does not expect a boy to profess such a media preference. When girls and boys are used to what Thorne (1993) calls *cross-gender chasing*, which dramatically affirms boundaries between the two sexes, it is supposed to be hard work to blur these boundaries. The preliminary observations indicated that these boundaries constituted another cultural context for the chat communication.

Possible limitations

As described earlier in this chapter, chat communication lacks much of the contextual information which usually helps a researcher. Chapter 4 has described how the study deals with this possible limitation. The chapter argues that the data from the chat rooms are credible, even if people take on roles and many of the conversations are made up. However, the data require an exploratory approach when it comes to the interpretations. Another challenge is that chat communication enables people to move their conversations from public to private chat rooms. Private conversations are held below the surface. This may lead to, as Sveningsson (2001) also notices, erroneous conclusions about what is actually going on. I had no means of observing these conversations. However, I realised that what happened in the public room represented a variety of topics, activities, codes and conventions. In this respect, the data which emerged from the open and crowded rooms, give rich descriptions that relate to my research problem.

The question of representation

In the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the issue of using children as informants and potential consequences in relation to the researcher's position. One question is, as discussed earlier in the thesis, how to position children and childhood in the social structure. Strandell (2002) discusses how children are represented as research subjects in reports after the study is finished. She refers to childhood research which has stressed the question about seeing children as social actors in their own right. Strandell present a series of challenging questions, asking what kind of actors children are in research and how their actions should be conceptualised. Other questions are: What attributes do we attach to children and childhood? How do we tell the story? What stories do we tell? To what end? For whom do we tell them? (Strandell 2002:19). I will return to this issue in Chapter 8.

Validity, reliability and generalisability

Kvale (1996) argues that issues of verification do not belong to some separate stage of an investigation. They should rather be addressed throughout the entire research process. A question is whether the results are generalisable; whether it is possible to *generalise* results from a small sample to a larger one. According to Kvale, the positivist quest for universal knowledge, as well as the cult of the individually unique, is replaced by an emphasis on the heterogeneity and contextuality of knowledge, with a shift from generalisation to contextualisation. *Reliability* has to do with the consistency of the research findings, whether the findings of a study can be trusted. A traditional criterion of this concept is that other researchers can repeat the investigation. In observations and qualitative interviews, this claim does not make sense, and the researcher has to develop procedures to ensure reliable material. The detailed

presentation above aimed to make the procedures visible and show the challenges, the dilemmas and the decisions related to questions about how I carried out the interviews and observations, the process of transcription and translation and finally, the analysis. *Validity* concerns the extent to which a method investigates what it intends to investigate. But validity is not only about methods. “The craftsmanship and credibility of the researcher becomes essential”, Kvale (1996:252) argues. He outlines three aspects of validation as investigation.

1. To validate is to check
2. To validate is to question
3. To validate is to theorise


A solid piece of research should present the procedures in ways that make these investigations possible. However, the power to make the choices, to single out what to make transparent and what to check, question and theorise, lies in the hands of the researcher. Does the researcher take the power relation in the interview situation into consideration? How open or pre-fixed are the categories from which the analysis begins? Which excerpts from the data does the researcher choose and regard as typical of the phenomenon? What kind of procedures does the researcher use to validate interpretations during the data collection?

I finish this chapter by quoting an ambitious goal.

Ideally, the quality of the craftsmanship results in products with knowledge claims that are so powerful and convincing in their own right that they, so to say, carry the validation with them, like a strong piece of art. In such cases, the research procedures would be transparent and the results evident, and the conclusions of a study intrinsically convincing as true, beautiful and good. Appeals to external certification, or official validity stamps of approval, then become secondary. Valid research

would in this sense be research that makes questions of validity superfluous (Kvale 1996:252).

The next chapter introduces part 2 of the thesis, Results and discussion, and presents chat communication in terms of its content and conventions.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ In order to distinguish the data material from chat rooms from the interview data, the first type of data is marked with a computer symbol  and the number of the observation in the thesis. The last number refers to my own transcripts (see tables 3 and 4). I include both the Norwegian and English versions of the chat excerpts to make a comparison related to the translations possible. When personal pronouns like *she* or *he* are written in italics, this indicates the performed sex (gender), not necessarily the biological sex of the participant.

Part 2

Results and discussion

5 Chat communication: contents and conventions

Talking to unknown people on a computer might be seen as the ultimate evidence of both individual and social loneliness. As one of the fathers of the children in the sample said: “I have people to talk to in real life”, where it was implicitly understood that people who bother to communicate in chat rooms have few or no friends, talking face-to-face is far more preferable than talking online or computer communication is perceived as ‘not real’. This chapter presents what children say about talking in chat rooms and transcripts from such communication. This includes a discussion of the joys, topics, language, structures and challenges of chat and gives a flavour of what kind of communication this is and how it resembles or can be distinguished from face-to-face communication. Step by step, the presentation looks at content, conventions and codes in entry rituals, language rules and play, as the issues emerge from the two chat rooms and the interviews. Some of the issues raised here will be further discussed in the next chapters about *community* and *identity formation*. The present chapter starts with a discussion of the concept of *communication*.

Communication: the concept

The noun *communication* (from Latin *communicatus*, shared) can simply mean the act of having verbal or written contact with somebody. A lexical definition also includes succeeding in conveying one’s meaning, feelings

and thoughts to others.⁶⁵ Historically, the meaning of the word has moved from mainly referring to physical means of communication (roads, railways) to including a means for passing of information and maintaining social contact as well (Kress 1993:4). With the conceptual change from IT (Information technology) to ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in the middle of the 1990's, communication was included as a part of both the conceptualisation of digital media and people's images of the new computer-based possibilities. Nevertheless, it is argued that the transport metaphor (S-M-R: sender-message-receiver) has continued to be a major model in communication theory (Kress 1993). As described in Chapter 3, this is too simplistic a model in order to understand communication today. An alternative to this perspective is seeing communication as a dynamic process (McQuail 1983; Saville-Troike 1989; Halliday 1990; Kress 1993, Werner 1994). The concept is then closely related to action and use; communication is something people do, a process that involves a range of activities, aspects and participants (Kress 1993). Firstly, communication is about meaning rather than about information. By this distinction, matters such as attitudes, social relations, individual feelings, the social positioning of sender and receiver are included in the conceptual framework, in addition to those features which are normally thought of as information – that is statements about the physical and social world (Kress 1993:4). Secondly, communication is about the production and consumption of meaning in actual processes of communication. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to both producers and consumers of meaning in the actual processes of communication. Thirdly, communication happens in a world that is socially and culturally formed. Thus,

⁶⁵ The Chambers Dictionary 1994; Kress 1993.

communication never involves just individuals expressing their meanings. The argument is that meanings are produced and consumed by individuals who are already socially and culturally formed and thus draw on the meanings of their cultural and social group. Fourthly, communication is much more than the sharing of meaning or the mutual construction of meaning. Interactions between and across the diversities of groupings are as likely to involve contradictions and contestations, as they are to involve sharing. Lastly, Kress argues that the processes of communication are likely to be based on difference and on the resolution of difference at one and the same time. Thus, there might be elements of instruction, control and even oppression in communication processes.

The point is that the processes of communication always take place in a specific social and cultural setting, never simply between you and me just as individuals; and the structures of power, of authority, as well as the structures of solidarity, exert their influence on the participants (Kress 1993:5).

For the purpose of this thesis, this set of conceptual clarifications is useful. It emphasises communication as a complex process between people in various positions. It also focuses on the importance of individual interpretations, social relations and contexts, both in agency and structure.

Until the age of the Internet, the concepts *sender* and *receiver* (or producer and consumer) of communication were fairly clear in the sense that the participants involved in a communicative act, such as a telephone call, a letter or an ordinary discussion were (more or less) easy to identify. Now these obvious roles and settings are unclear. A striking feature in chat communication is that people do not need to present themselves as the persons they are, in terms of age, gender and other personal properties.

Internet technology enables children to “communicate more easily with each other and with adults, without even having to identify themselves as children” (Buckingham 2000:98). Thus, children can talk with people they do not know, they may pretend to be someone other than who they are, and people they talk to might also be somebody else than they say they are. In this respect, chat is a sort of written masquerade. These new forms of communication demand an open and flexible concept, which is able to include all these complexities. Communication in a traditional and narrow meaning includes verbal or other symbols, which are openly used to pass on pieces of information that are connected to these symbols, Goffman (1959) argues. This is what he refers to as the expressions which a person *gives*. However, people’s ability to express themselves also relies on the expressions a person *gives off*. This involves a wide range of actions that are perceived as characteristic for the actor. These are the actions we usually perceive as unconscious and unintended actions.⁶⁶ There is *symmetry* in the communication when the expressions a person gives and gives off are consistent. On the other hand, there is *asymmetry* when these expressions are inconsistent. One may ask whether it makes sense to talk about symmetrical and asymmetrical communication in the chat context. I expect the communication to be a relatively flexible and changing phenomenon in chat rooms, as the claim to behave consistently is far less prominent here than in face-to-face relations, which were the focus of Goffman’s analysis. One may also ask whether one can expect all children to be so rational and consistent as Goffman’s adult perspective suggests. However, the social and cultural practice which he describes is an essential part of Western behaviour, and thus also a part of the socialising context in

⁶⁶ Concepts from Goffman’s works are further described in chapter 7.

which the chat communication takes place.

In this thesis, the concept of communication will be used about every communicative action which emerges in the chat room. This means that every utterance in which the sender either succeeds in conveying meaning to others or not is conceived of as a part of a communicative context that in the next turn might appear as meaningful, even if the single utterance seems completely meaningless. Before presenting and discussing the chat communication in detail, I will distinguish it from some other possible types of online communication.

Computer-Mediated Communication

The extensive use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is closely tied to the growth of Internet technology and access to it. Before the Internet, chat was made available on bulletin boards and servers. Chat rooms are small-scale electronic communities which enable users to 'talk' to each other by using a written language (Werry 1996). There are several thousands of these rooms available on the Internet. Some of them disappear and others develop in a continuous flow, which means that children's interests in special chat rooms also change all the time (Holm Sørensen 2001). Chat is a synchronic communication in the sense that people can be located with computers all over the world or in the same physical room at the same time. Thus, chat is a real time activity. Chat rooms are easily available on many web pages (web chat), but can also be downloaded from an IRC ⁶⁷ server somewhere in the world. This is one of the largest chat

⁶⁷ Internet Relay Chat

systems and one of the most used is mIRC.⁶⁸ IRC has to be downloaded, there are codes and commands and the program is less user-friendly for newcomers than web chat. Therefore, a participant on IRC is supposed to be a more advanced chatter than a web chat user (Karlsson 1997).

Chat is similar to and different from other computer based communication systems, such as e-mail (electronic mail), discussion groups and MUDs.⁶⁹ E-mail is one of the most used services on the Net and it is effective in exchanging ideas, asking questions and making agreements. E-mail communication is asynchronous in time, which means that the sender and the receiver do not have to be 'present' at the same time. As chat happens in real time, the messages can be read simultaneously from the moment the participant enters the chat room. In contrast to a chat message, an e-mail is sent to one or several known receivers. E-mails are often signed with the sender's *real* name, while people in a chat room use nicknames. In a chat room the participants⁷⁰ do not necessarily know each other's offline identity. While e-mail has a private character, MUDs, discussion groups and chat rooms are public, in the sense that the contributions can be read by all the participants. MUD is a service that enables groups of users to take part in the same online universe, in role-play, for example (Turkle 1995). A discussion group on the Net is a service where everybody can join the discussions on selected topics. The community is basically constructed on the basis of shared interests and not previous relationships. A chat room may also be regarded as serving the purpose for people with special

⁶⁸ This program is available on the Internet and can be down-loaded from the web-address <http://www.mirc.com>

⁶⁹ Multiple User Dungeons or Multiple User Dialogue (Werry 1996).

⁷⁰ *Participant* is used equivalent to the chatter's nickname.

interests or for people at a special age. People who know each other may also make an appointment to chat on a special channel at a special time. However, the huge majority of the participants in chat rooms is not gathered in the room because of a special interest in playing a game, to discuss a special topic or other goal-oriented purposes. The children in this study say that they expect to talk to people and talk about everything in chat rooms. Thus, the children emphasise the chat encounters in their own capacity as their main reason when they are asked why they chat. A Danish study confirms the same reasons (Holm Sørensen and Olesen 2000). These encounters have a character of many comings and goings. People can physically leave the computer and still 'be' in a chat room as long as the site is logged on. Thus, a chat room is transient and continuously changing in terms of participants, content and atmosphere.

A chaotic 'nature': on the verge of breakdown

As a result of these characteristics, chat communication often appears to be chaotic, as if on the verge of a breakdown. Below I present a transcript that shows some of the chaos that meets a newcomer in a chat room.⁷¹

2 POPIT 2

coolgirl2>123456789	coolgirl2>123456789
SNUPPENE>123456789	SNUPPENE>123456789
Superpopit>aaaiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnaaaaaaaaaa	Superpopit>aaaiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnaaaaaaaaaa
!!!!	!!!!
SNUPPENE>OOOOOOHOHOHOO	SNUPPENE>OOOOOOHOHOHOO

⁷¹ The nicknames are not translated when they are used as a sender, except after the arrow (as *dr.naked*). With a few exceptions, there has been no attempt to translate spelling and punctuation errors. However, where verbs and letters are missing in the Norwegian transcripts, they are also missing in the English version. When two words are written without intervals, this error also will exist in the translations.

<p> Girl12000>noen pene gutter? Superpopit>jjjaaaaaaa Cool_girl>hvis det er noen søte gutter som vil chatte tast 3333 S*e*s*y_s*e*x>dr.naken Chattgirl>KEVIN??? dr.naken>ja charlotte>er du her her baby_girl? catclaw>Noen s*exy gutter på 12? Baby_boy>det er meg PumaGirl>heyhey Coolgirl>erica er du en dust ledigjente> jenter12> kiss_babe-girl> sylla>noen som vil leke ledigjente>love MISS SLIM SHADY>alle dere små jenter er pervo Pernille>ønsker venner fra 10-12 Jenter12>e d noen kule gutter som vil chatte Tast 777 nå! Pickachu>Hey girl 13 catclaw>ikke si dere digger Pokemon dreamgirl>er Marthe her? catclaw>alle guttersom er her si hei catclaw>ingen gutter her? PopBoy>jo Brunette>ER DET INGEN GUTTER HER ELLER? 2r`war>jeg er her og jeg er en gutt Tille>nei.Det e ingen gutter her. Bare gi opp Caroline>Er det noen som vil være venner med meg? Caroline>Er det noen som liker Ole Brumm Tille>Yes Tille>jeg liker Ole Brumm drimboy>chatte noen Caroline>Er det noen på ti år her Caroline>Er ingen 10 år #kizz_me#>er det bare drittunger her???????? Kosegutten>jo pacificgirl er 10 år pasificgirl>d e æ ikkje pasificgirl>æ 11 Kosegutten>nei 10 Caroline>Er det noen som er yngre enn 10 </p>	<p> Girl12000>any pretty boys? Superpopit>yyyyyyyy Cool_girl>if there are any pretty boys who want to chat push 3333 S*e*s*y_s*e*x>dr.naked Chattgirl>KEVIN??? dr.naken>yes charlotte>are you here baby_girl? catclaw>Any s*exy boys who's 12? Baby_boy>it is me PumaGirl>hi hi Coolgirl>erica are you a nitwit ledigjente> jenter12> kiss_babe-girl> sylla>anyone who wants to play ledigjente>love MISS SLIM SHADY>all you small girls are perverts Pernille>desire friends from 10-12 Jenter12>any cool boys who want to chat push 777 now! Pickachu>Hi girl 13 catclaw>don`t say you dig Pokemon dreamgirl>is Marthe here? catclaw>all boyswho are here say hi catclaw>no boys here? PopBoy>yes Brunette>AREN'T THERE ANY BOYS HERE OR? 2r`war>I`m here, and I`m a boy Tille>no.There are`nt anyboys here. Just give up. Caroline>Anybodywho wants to be friends with me? Caroline>Anybody who likes Winnie the Pooh? Tille>Yes Tille>I like Winnie the Pooh drimboy>anyone chatting Caroline>Is there anybody who is ten years here Caroline>Is nobody 10 years #kizz_me#>are there only brats here???????? Kosegutten>Yeah pacificgirl is 10 years pasificgirl>I am not pasificgirl>I`m 11 Kosegutten>no 10 </p>
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år Misssixty>HVIS DU TROR AT NOEN HER ER 10 ÅR SÅ HAR DU KOMMET FEIL Caroline>Hvor gammel er du Tille Caroline>hei da Puzzy>kan jeg gi dere et tips:trykk www.chat.no så kommer dere til et mye bedre chat enn dette høle her. DER FINS DET MASSE GUTTER JENTER	Caroline>Is anybody younger than 10 years Misssixty>IF YOU THINK THAT SOMEONE HERE IS 10 YEARS THEN YOU HAVE COME TO THE WRONG ROOM Caroline>How old are you Tille Caroline>hi there Puzzy>Can I give you a tip: Push www.chat.no , then you'll find a much better chat than this pit. THERE YOU'LL FIND LOTS OF BOYS GIRLS
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Structure in the chaos

Firstly, let us take a closer look at the structure of the transcript. Every message can be divided into three main parts: the name of the sender, an arrow that is to be read as a colon and the utterance. A chat message starts with the participant's nickname.⁷² The name emerges in the window when the enter key is pressed, whether a message is written or not. On POPIT the nicknames appear in a window when the owner of an alias keys the button *chat*. When connected on the different channel, e.g. SOL, a list of aliases appears, giving the participants the possibility to check who is on the channel and what they are talking about. In POPIT, there is no such list. If you want to participate or enter the room, you choose a nickname that is kept throughout the chat if it is not changed. When a participant leaves the room, the name disappears from the list. In this way the list of nicknames is completed as the participants come and go. This possibility enables chatters to know who is present in the room. The arrow behind the nickname points to a written message that is often shortened to a minimum. The messages may, however, run over several lines, often with disconnected letters. This

is frequently perceived as bad Net behaviour and may result in eviction from the channel if there is a moderator ⁷³ present in the room. In this observation presented above there are a total of 30 active participants in the sense that they have written a minimum of one message each. One third of them send more than one message, such as Catclaw and Caroline, who write four and seven messages. This means that the large majority only writes one message each in the common room.⁷⁴ We will return to potential reasons for this later. Approximately half of the messages in this transcript are formulated as questions, one third are answers and the rest are greetings and various comments, statements or pieces of advice.

Starting at the beginning of the transcript, coolgirl2 keys numbers from 1 to 9 and is answered by SNUPPENE ⁷⁵ who repeat the same numbers. This might be a code for something these *two* (if there are *two*) have in common. The repetition may also be a confirmation for coolgirl2 that *she* has been seen (or heard). However, as the observation starts without any insight into the context and the rest of the transcript contains no further information, it is impossible to know the meaning of these numbers. In the third message, Superpopit shouts for a girl named Aina. Many letters and exclamation

⁷² The phenomenon of *nicknames* is further discussed in Chapter 7.

⁷³ By a keying error I wrote this word as *moder stor* in a preliminary draft of this chapter. In Norwegian this means, directly translated, *mother big*. Some of the moderators, who are authorised in several ways to keep acceptable moral standards on the Net, actually seem to be perceived exactly as the Norwegian expression implies, as 'a big mother'.

⁷⁴ The concepts *common room* and *public room* are used as equivalents to distinguish this part of a chat from a *private room*. In a private chat room two or more participants have decided to withdraw from the common room where everybody can read the messages.

⁷⁵ The plural, definite form of the noun *snuppe* is used to refer to a sweet girl, often ironically.

marks express the shouting. SNUPPENE continue and are supposed to be more than one person, because the suffix *-ene* indicates that it is a plural noun in Norwegian. *They* key a row of letters which may be interpreted as shouting as *they* write capital letters. Girl12000 asks for sweet boys and superpopit, who has not received any answer from Aina, at any point in the common room, answers “yyyeeeeeeees”. Cool_girl (not to be confused with coolgirl2) invites sweet boys to chat privately by asking them to key the number 3333. Somebody in the room may follow this appeal. If they do, they are invisible in the common room. Except for coolgirl2, none of the participants above write any more in public. Their silence in the common room may also be a sign of being busy with the computer otherwise; they might have left the room or chosen to be silent listeners (*lurkers*) who prefer to observe others in the room without saying anything. Only Cool_girl and those who might possibly be involved know if they have entered a private chat.

Several conventions or customary practices are performed in chat rooms. One of these is, as mentioned above, the use of capital letters to express shouting. Another example is the extended use of underscore, both in nicknames and messages, (such as in cool_girl). This convention is also a strategy to trick the censoring program. The nickname S*e*s*y_s*e*x might have led to the user being evicted because of the word *sex*, which is among the inappropriate words in these chat rooms. The first part of the name (sesy) was probably meant to be *sexy*. By placing stars and underscore between the letters, the censoring system does not read the last part of the name as *sex*. Thus, So S*e*s*y_s*e*x is probably allowed to ask for dr.naked without being evicted from the channel. Yet, we do not know for sure, because this is the only message this person sends with this

nickname anyhow. The kinds of words which qualify for bad behaviour, vary. The moral standards seem to be both a result of the moderator's changing evaluation and of the censoring program, which warns and removes participants who use particular words and expressions. How children react to being evicted is an issue I will return to later. Chatters also use stars (asterisks) to symbolise a smile or to show that the sender is having fun. This functions as a *sign vehicle* (Goffman 1959) and a *marker for interpretations* (Audon and Poulsen 2001). Chattgirl then asks for Kevin. According to the conventions described above, this message is, more precisely, to be read as a shouting question because of the capital letters and the question marks. Dr.naken (dr.naked) answers yes, not to Chattgirl, but to S*e*s*y_s*e*x, who might already have left the room. Then charlotte asks if baby_girl is present. *She* is not, or more correctly, *she* does not answer in public. Catclaw asks if there are any s*exy boys who are 12 years old. The asterisk is used as above, to trick the censor. Catclaw limits the question and asks for persons with a particular age and sexy boys. This might be an indication that catclaw is a girl, probably younger than 12, in *real* life. But we cannot be sure. Whether Baby_boy's answer "it is me" is meant for catclaw or charlotte, is also impossible to know. A probable suggestion is that Baby_boy has changed nickname and has been baby_girl earlier. If Baby_boy's answer was a response to the question about sexy boys of 12, *he* probably would not have written "it is me". *He* would rather say "I am" or something similar. PumaGirl says "hi" (in English), but gets no answer in the public room. Coolgirl2 asks Erica if *she* is stupid. From this moment only catclaw of the eight original ⁷⁶

⁷⁶ *Original* refers to the active participants from the very beginning of the observation.

participants continues to say something. Then three chatters just send their nicknames without writing any messages, perhaps just to register their presence in the room. Sylla asks if anyone wants to play. This message is not answered in the common room. One of the three mentioned above, ledigjente writes “love” (in English) before MISS SLIM_SHADY ascertains that “all you small girls are perverts”. This participant obviously perceives (or pretends to perceive) most of the others in the room as girls and, in addition, small girls. To be characterised as perverts is definitely not very flattering for any participant and may be interpreted as a way of being told to shut up. This illustrates how participants position themselves in different ways in the room. The *MISS* above might be disappointed because *she* does not find any boys in the room. The fact that several of the visitors have asked for boys, may confirm an impression of a room dominated by girls. But this does not have to be the case. Holm Sørensen and Olesen (2000) find that boys often tend to choose girl identities when they visit a chat room. A pragmatic reason for this is that boys want to talk to boys and because participants in chat rooms tend to choose chat partners of the opposite sex, boys choose a female identity. Another reason, according to the authors above, is that girls tend to get more time to formulate messages. Thus, boys have a better chance to get a response when they choose a girl identity.⁷⁷ An alternative interpretation might be that boys prefer talking to boys because they presume to be more familiar with cultural codes, such as topics, style and language. When children use chat rooms, they tend to move between different levels of reality and fiction, Holm Sørensen and Olesen argues. Playing with identity on the Net is in this respect a part of

⁷⁷ *Gender and identity* are further discussed in Chapter 7.

what Stone (1991) conceptualises as *computer cross-dressing*.

Pernille tells that *she* is seeking friends from 10 to 12 years old. We do not hear anything more from Pernille. Maybe *she* gets friends at *her* own age in a private talk or maybe not. Jenter12 (girls of 12 years old) invite cool boys to key 777 if they want to chat. This nickname indicates more than one chatter because of the plural suffix *-er*, but it may also be a nickname established by some friends and occasionally used only by one of them. Pickachu says “Hi girl 13”. This message really creates activity in the room related to gender, age and, most of all, what kind of interests are regarded to count. Choosing a nickname such as Pikachu (who is a main figure in Pokémon films) provokes catclaw to say “don’t say you like Pokémon”. From catclaw’s point of view, this might be evidence of being situated in a context of hopeless, old-fashioned and/or childish people. Catclaw might have exchanged *her* last Pokémon cards last week and performs a youth discourse where it is important to disassociate oneself from everything which can be perceived as childish. Another possibility is that catclaw is a girl (as suggested above) who has never been interested in Pokémon. After dreamgirl has asked for Marthe without getting a reply, catclaw makes an attempt to gather the masculine part of the visitors by saying “all boys here say hi”. When nobody answers, catclaw asks if there are no boys in the room. PopBoy answers “yes”, but catclaw, who has been part of the chat from the very beginning, has already uttered the final word. From now on, there are new performers on the stage. Brunette also asks for boys. Capital letters are used and might as such be read as shouting. 2r`war answers “I am here and I am a boy”, while Tille recommends

Brunette⁷⁸ to give up the project of finding boys in the room. Caroline is the most sustaining of all the participants. *She* asks for friends, if anybody likes Winnie-the-pooh and if anybody is 10 years old or younger than that. Caroline gets an answer from Tille, who likes Winnie-the-Pooh, too. Drimboy (be aware of the spelling error in the name) presents an open invitation by saying “chat anyone”. Drimboy is maybe inspired by dreamgirl’s name some seconds ago and in a hurry it may not be so easy to spell an English nickname correctly. At this moment #kizz_me# obviously has had enough of this childish talk, and asks if there are only “fucking brats” in the room. Kosegutten (the cuddle boy) answers that pacificgirl is ten years old. This message provokes pacificgirl, who up until this moment has said nothing, to shout “I AM NOT”. A new message from pacificgirl emerges immediately, giving the information that *her* correct age is 11. It is, of course, very provoking to be perceived as 10 if you actually are 11. But how does kosegutten know that pacificgirl is in the room? In some chat rooms a list of participants is shown on the screen. In this case, however, there is no such list. Kosegutten knows, for some reason, that pacificgirl is present. *She* might have said something before the observation started. They (kosegutten and pacificgirl) might have an arranged chat where teasing is a part of the play between them. They might be classmates, neighbours, present in the same library or sharing the same leisure time club. Misssixty shouts to Caroline that *she* has come to the wrong place if *she* thinks somebody in the room is 10 years old. Caroline is polite, *she* probably takes the consequence of Misssixty’s information and says “hi then”. Puzzy writes the last message in this observation. This is a recommendation to proceed to another chat room where there are many

⁷⁸ Brun=brown in Norwegian. This name probably refers to hair colour and not the skin.

more boys and girls. Puzzy gives the web address to this site which is the other chat room that is being observed in this study. Some chatters leave, the activity in the room is slow for some seconds, and the observation is closed.

To summarise, I will return to my earlier point about chaos and the continuous risk of breakdown. What creates the chaos and what does it contain? After having read the first transcript, some preliminary answers appear. First of all, the large number of participants makes the chat room crowded. Consequently, different kinds of interests and expectations are performed with respect to both content and style. These are issues of continuous quarrel and negotiation. The fact that a participant's identity (name, address, age) is anonymous is also expected to influence and stimulate chaos. Relatively often participants leave the room and invite others to do the same. In this crowd of potential chat partners, some participants work hard to achieve contact with the right partner, or perform a convention of what counts as appropriate interests and behaviour in the chat room. The risks of being revealed are limited. Different kinds of expectations among the participants, such as numerous questions about biological sex and age of the chat partners, also contribute to this chaos. This summary leads to the next section, which discusses how children establish the communication.

Strategies to cope with challenges

Children use different kinds of strategies to establish and maintain communication and cope with challenges which appear in chat rooms.

How to get started?

Goffman (1959) argues that in encounters people usually act to give the impression which is in this person's interest to give: people are dependent on other people to realise themselves. What a person does will have a decisive effect on how other people perceive this person. The opening definition of the situation forms the starting point for the interplay which follows. This seems to be crucial in chat rooms, too. Looking at how talk is initiated and how participants introduce themselves gives many indications of the basic character of chat communication. How is the talk established? What are the rules for presenting oneself and what happens when the rules are broken? These are all questions that deal with social presentation. Obviously, there are several rituals of entrance and departure; "ceremonies of greeting and farewell" (Goffman 1967:41). Because the children define chat rooms as places where they can meet people, establish contact and do what they want, the starting procedure is often both open and polite, for example "hi everybody" or "anybody who wants to chat?" However, some participants sometimes have other purposes than being polite. My informant Carl often enters the chat room to make fun of, tease people or get something to happen in the room. In this mood people might perceive him as both extremely funny and rowdy. Goal-oriented greetings are those that are directed to someone special, a girl or a boy, someone of a particular age, from a particular place or with a particular interest or looks, such as sweet, cool and sexy. The greeting "hi again" indicates that a participant has been in the room previously and wants to introduce their return and be recognised. The greeting rituals or introductory comments are often loaded with meaning, and as such they frame the rest of the talk. The common chat room seems to be a stepping-stone to a private chat for some children, while others usually remain in the public room. The nickname is decisive

for success. Choosing the right name is therefore a crucial part of the introducing procedure in presenting oneself as an interesting chat partner. Dag experiences rather often, not to get any response and he has an idea of what might be the reason.

V: When you get access and go into a chat room...

D: Yes

V: Don't you participate in the chat?

D: Yes, but nobody writes back

V: No, nobody answers

D: No

V: No

D: Sometimes, though, ...but this is in a way...the first times...hi...and then they answer and...no more...in a way.

V: No...no

D: So it remains to find a starry name.

V: Is that what it's all about?

D: Actually...yes, quite a lot!

V: So...to be answered, get contact, it depends on having a cool name?

D: Mm

V: Yes, you must have thought of that in advance?

D: Yes

Dag explains his lack of success as a question of choosing an appropriate nickname. This is obviously a great challenge. The conversation above also indicates other challenges.

How to keep the talk going?

The next vulnerable phase is how to continue the talk, particularly since it is on the verge of breaking down all the time. There seem to be three main challenges: the computer capacity, the chatter's writing skills and the ability to present him/herself as an interesting person. In this sense, the choice of nickname is crucial to succeed and get a chat partner. A participant with the nickname *jeg er meg* (I am me), saying "I am me and that's cool" may be perceived as a cool person, but this participant also runs a risk of being perceived as not cool at all, but rather selfish and

arrogant. A crucial point is how fast you can respond. It is a struggle against time. With an old and slow computer you have fewer chances to succeed unless you are a brilliant 'talker' or 'writer'. Humour and irony are effective tools for success in a chat room. This is illustrated in other studies, which find a significant correlation between humour and social competence (Sletta, Søbstad and Valås 2001). Carl's statement that "you have to be cheeky in an elegant way" is supposed to be humorous, as most of the e-mails from Carl were. He seems to have few problems with reading the chat. In this sense he could understand what was going on. Baym (1995) shows how humorous performances are used among adult participants in an online newsgroup to create group solidarity, group identity and individual identity. But a chatter also has to be quick, which might lead to a stressful situation (Holm Sørensen and Olesen 2000). "If you are not quick enough, they chat with somebody else. They cannot be bothered to wait", Dag says. Frida complains about their slow computer. Some chatters get a reminder if they do not talk. Carl gets such a message, too, telling him that he has not said anything in 12 seconds. A person's interests are also crucial, especially in the introductory phase of a chat.

F: If, for example, it is a ...person who...is watching television the whole day, having no leisure interests...then it is not so very exciting...talking with them.

V: No?

F: Then they don't have so much to talk about- only what has happened on television.

V: Yes. For you then, this is not an interesting person?

F: No

V: What makes a person interesting, though...giving you the feeling of wanting go further

F: Hm...for example... if we have the same interests and...

Watching television does not count for Frida. Leisure time activities that match her own interests are, however, what makes a chat partner an

interesting person. As we will see in the discussion of the community and identity aspects in Chapter 6 and 7, communication in chat rooms is also, in Kress's (1993) terms, based on difference.


Protection and rules

The Internet discourse contains stories about the Net as a dangerous medium. The children in my sample are fully aware of the potential dangers on the Net. How do children conceive this issue, and do they protect themselves? All of them have experienced things they did not like, for instance when somebody says nasty things to them. "There's much talk about sex in a chat room", Guro says. Hilde tells about what she calls perverse people, insisting on talking to her. Erik calls a chat room a place to put things. "It's like a big library; you can put everything there". Participants with boy's names often talk about sex and sex-related topics, it is argued (Knudsen 2001). They use traditional codes of sex and gender, where they talk directly and as a monologue. During the interview Anne covers the window with her left hand until I say that I know what is going on and what the talk is about. Swearwords and verbal attacks sometimes dominate the room completely or emerge as a single message. Some parents are seriously concerned about all the sex talk in chat rooms and ask why this sometimes seems to be the dominating topic. From a Freudian perspective we could argue that a chat room is seen as suitable forum to perform taboos in disguise. With the extensive cultural exposure of sexuality through television and films, particularly in the Western world, we may ask whether sex really represents a consistent taboo any longer.

Flaming (attacking others) is a widely recognised phenomenon within the computer culture and is seen to result from "a lack of shared etiquette by

computer culture norms or by the impersonal and text-only form of communication” (Kiesel, Siegel and McGuire 1984:1130). The argument is that rather than being mitigated, as is often the case in face-to-face disagreements, online disagreements are exaggerated. In this context, we might suppose that flaming and disagreements are initiated as a form of exploration. When children say that they sometimes try to disturb the chat room just to see what will happen if they break the rules, we may interpret their communication in the context described above.

All the children are aware of the rules about never giving personal details such as their name, address and phone number to people they do not know. Most of the children have also been warned against people trying to make appointments for meeting them in real life. These children have strategies to protect themselves. Active resistance and warnings are common strategies. People in the chat room often oppose sex talk. Rude behaviour seems to generate talk about the talking. This meta-communicative chat entails discussions about standards for the communication and strategies to cope with those who break the rules for good Net behaviour. In the following transcript a *girl* suggests a change in the way of talking:

 3 SOL 4

Your_girl_for_ever>kan vi ikke snakke finere til verandre	Your_girl_for_ever>can't we talk nicer to each other
---	--

The only answer to this message is from a participant, bullying *her* because

of the spelling mistake ⁷⁹ by asking if *she* has paid attention at school. The context for this question is a high level of activity, partly rude behaviour, according to the moderator @Kitty. There are sexual expressions, swear words and harassing comments, especially directed to the moderator. Some participants characterise the talking as bullying of @Kitty, who gets assistance from another moderator, named @Peppy_xer. They give warnings and evict participants, and the chat continues with a quiz about pop lyrics and groups. Parallel to this activity, some of the participants discuss what to do with the nasty boys: evict them or ignore them? There are arguments for both views, but one of the participants recommends ignoring them as an obvious strategy. “It is so easy; just don’t listen to them”, this participant says. This is not always an easy matter. The next transcript shows how several people are involved in stopping what they perceive as inappropriate behaviour. When entering the room, there is a rapid flow of words with sexual character followed by long rows of letters and numbers, especially from Stan. A participant with the nickname Girl tries to stop this by saying: “Stop! Boys!” Some of the *boys* leave the room (Information about comings and goings emerges in the window). Girl tries to organise an alliance against Stan and gets help from a moderator with the nickname Overkill.

4 SOL 2

Girl > tast 333 de som hater Stan <Overkill> Stan, du ignoreres herved Dj > takk for støtta deres	Girl > key 333 those who hate Stan <Overkill> Stan, you are hereby ignored Dj > Thanks for your support
---	---

Dj, who has obviously been exposed to some of Stan’s attacks, offers

⁷⁹ In Norwegian: *verandre* instead of *hverandre*.

thanks for the others' support. We are informed that Stan has left the room. After this intermezzo many chatters also leave, while other participants continue or start talking. Messages like "you are so childish" and "not now again" with many exclamation marks witnesses the presence of people who in various ways mark a reaction against talk they disapprove of or want to make a statement about. Such reactions often cause new counter reactions. People being criticised for their behaviour seem to have four main strategies. They may leave the room, invite somebody to talk privately, express regret for their bad behaviour or continue until a moderator evicts them.

A chatter who has occupied the room with rows of sexual expressions and invitations withdraws from all he/she has said earlier when criticised.

5 SOL 10

SyBeRsPaCe>prøver bare å provosere litt,ser at det ikke funker,alt jeg har sagt er bare kødd	SyBeRsPaCe>just tries to provoke a bit, realise that it does not work, I have just been kidding with everything I have said
--	---

This message can be read as an attempt to be excused and accepted in the room. The sanctions that may have lead to this turn of behaviour probably resulted in a stop in the use of this nickname. SyBeRsPaCe did not return. S/he probably did not want to be recognised as a rowdy person.

In a message coca asks those who want to talk about sex to come to the private room. This shows how some people try to redirect talk from the open and public chat room to a private room. In the public room there are, as we have seen, formal and informal rules and conventions that moderate the talk. All the children know many of these rules and conventions, as they

are given reminders on the start pages. Participants respond directly to people who break the rules and give warnings to other people. A person with the nickname photo⁸⁰ asks if there are any girls who want to make money easily. Some chatters with girlish nicknames respond positively to this invitation. Then a warning emerges, presented as **WARNING** with capital letters and bold type, saying that photo is changing nick; this probably means that photo tries to send the same message with different nicknames. Photo might have been evicted from the channel for some reason and comes back ‘dressed’ in another name. Some children will probably perceive the warning as an advice to protect themselves against an unreliable person in the room, while others will follow both coca and photo to their private rooms. This researcher does not.

The message from slinky_2 in the next transcript shows that signs from the keyboard can be transformed to give another meaning and function than they usually have.

6 SOL 2

slinky_2>er det noen her som har store (.) (.) gutt12>haha	slinky_2>has anybody here big (.) (.) gutt12>haha
--	--

The sign (.) (.) is to be read as a computer visualisation of a woman’s breasts. The laughing answer from gutt12 confirms that the message has been understood. Such signs are used, partly humorously and partly to get by the censoring program. Use of the word ‘boob’ might have qualified the speaker for being evicted, while the sign, made of brackets and single

⁸⁰ In Norwegian: Foto.

stops, is expected to pass through. It did. Both the technology and the moderation may encourage what might be called a creative use of the keyboard. 'Talking dirty' can also enable boys to "cultivate and celebrate their bad boy image" (Buckingham 1999:227). In this respect, performing what is perceived as bad Net behaviour may be interpreted as ways of making distinctions on the basis of symbols from a culturally formed world rather than performing hostility towards other participants in the chat room. This interpretation focuses the link between structural features and individual agency.

Play

In this section I present some findings and discuss them in terms of some concepts and criteria related to *play*. I intend to show that chat may also be perceived as *not play*. As we already have seen, it might be problematic to understand the content in chat. What is it all about? An outsider might perceive the talk as completely meaningless. Children talk about chat rooms as places to play and pretend in order to get friends (and enemies, too, Carl says). A chat room is also a place to plan other activities. One of the boys says that he and his friends use the chat room to plan and arrange strategies to beat opponents in computer games. "Then you meet on a chat page to arrange a bit... about... then it is about beating them, you know... the game". This form of chat is what Holm Sørensen (2001) calls an extension of the computer playing culture. While girls, to a large extent are oriented towards the talk, boys are oriented towards the game. She argues that chat gives children opportunities to extend the playing universe as their cognitive images and skills no longer necessarily have to be tied to concrete material. My observations show that it is possible to do fun things in chat rooms, such as exchange pictures and experiment with colours in

order to see your own text easily on the screen. It is also possible to arrange activities for several participants, such as a quiz. A quiz is often about pop artists and lyrics, football games, teams and players, i.e. it is related to children's *real* life experiences. Participants score points when they answer correctly or 'sing' a text. This seems to be a challenging activity in the sense that the participants have to make agreements about the various roles in the quiz. There are many discussions and negotiations in order to decide who asks questions, who gives the points and how easy/difficult the questions should be. It requires high speed and a skilled person to be the leader of this activity if it is going to succeed. Few people seem to want this role. Actually it is supposed to be more entertaining to answer and get points. A reasonable interpretation is that a leader is a 'visible' performer and cannot hide his/her lack of competence. Thus, there are similarities between chat as a social practice and play. Both Werry (1996) and Holm Sørensen and Olesen (2000) talk about chat as play as *verbal play* and *playing culture*, respectively. When playing, children move between levels of reality (Bateson 1972; Levy 1978). They send out many explicit and implicit messages in order to interpret the activity within the correct frame. Such messages are also given in chat rooms. The message "Sorry, I was just kidding", tells the participants in the chat room that "what I did a while ago was play" and "what I am saying now is not play". By saying: "I was just kidding", the participant takes back what s/he had said earlier and confirms an understanding of the frame of the reality others are supposed to find trustworthy. As when children play face-to-face, chat sometimes collapses. In private chats, the talk sometimes stops because the participants have nothing more to talk about, some of the children say. This is also the situation in a public room. The four messages below indicate some of the problems.

7 POPIT 2

```
coolgirl2>123456789
SNUPPENE>123456789
Superpopit>aaaiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnaaaaaaaaaa!!!!
SNUPPENE>OOOOOOOHOHOHOO
```

The utterances above have very few substantial elements that resemble a dialogue in the sense that people talk together. Rather, the messages can be read as attempts to be heard or seen. When children play or talk face-to-face, they have physical and emotional closeness both to people and the substances (such as toys). Through planning and negotiations they ‘do’ the play. In a chat room children have to do things only with words, signs and symbols transformed from the computer keyboard. Thus, they have another repertoire that on one level is more limited from when they can play and communicate. However, many children use the written language in quite sophisticated ways. But for a large group of children, the content is not necessarily the most essential thing. What seems important is the potential for *instant messaging* (Castells 2001; Audon and Poulsen 2001) and being ‘together’. In a Danish article (Audon and Poulsen 2001), the authors argue that participating in chat presupposes a highly developed communicative competence, which includes the ability to use written language in a universe with interactive synchronicity. This means that they have to communicate in writing with the same speed as in oral communication. The cultural dominance of writing places written language in the public sphere while speech is usually seen as a part of an informal and private sphere (Kress 1998). From this point of view and particularly in educational discourses, chat and play are supposed to be placed in the latter category, although the communication tool is written language.

Let us therefore look closer at chat as *play* in more theoretical terms. In

what follows, I will describe some theoretical approaches, present some critical reflections and discuss whether, and possibly when, it is useful to talk about chat as play.

Chat communication takes place on several levels simultaneously. One level consists of what just has been described, what the play is about. Another level is how the play is played, the planning, the negotiations, the joys and the collapses. The first level refers to the topics which the participants talk about. The other is the level on which the relations between the talking partners are negotiated, it is argued (Audon and Poulsen 2001). In line with this argument and according to Schwartzman (1978), children's social fantasy play may be analysed as a text where the player performs both as a subject and an object. The player can stay in the play or withdraw. Play also has a periphery as well as centre (Åm 1989). The periphery is understood as the borderline between play and non-play while the centre is deep play, where the participants forget themselves. This shows the double character of play, Åm argues. Seeing chat in the perspective of play, it often seems to be situated on this borderline between play and non-play, i.e. in a state of continuous negotiations. This has to do with the transient character of chat that I have described earlier and may lead to a conclusion that children never reach the level of deep play. However, this conclusion is problematic. On the one hand, children say time flies when they chat. Suddenly they get a reminder (on the computer) telling them that they have been chatting for 1 hour and they are surprised because they thought they only just started. That they forget the time indicates a state which resembles play where children are deeply involved in an activity. On the other hand, the repertoire of action is relatively limited, as words are the main tool in establishing and maintaining the play.

Particularly for the younger children, this causes a challenge. In addition, there is much talk about how the chat should be conducted; who should be qualified to participate and what should be appropriate topics. Such negotiations sometimes reach dimensions which might be perceived as enjoyable by some participants, while others regard them as noise which prevents them from chatting and talking about what they want, i.e. other chatters disturb the play. The message “I was just kidding”, quoted earlier, indicates that some chatters may interpret the chat activity as play, while others conceive it as serious which in this context is non-play.

The participants might be, in Schwartzman’s (1978) terms, both subjects and objects, as the anonymity permits them to play roles in different ways than in real life. From this perspective, the apparent wish to be in the chat room is more understandable than if the communication is seen as just chaotic messages going back and forth. It seems important to stay in a chat room and to prevent others from leaving. The transcript which was presented earlier in the chapter can therefore be read as an indication that any message gets the talk going and is therefore useful to prevent people from leaving the room, which will ruin the chat, play and fun. Apparent meaningless rows of letters and numbers may be interpreted as a part of the context on the verge of a continuous collapse; as a way to say: “I’m here! The room is not empty! Come on! Talk to me! Play with me! Stay!” Thus everybody is important in order to give the play content and meaning.

So far I have deliberately avoided providing a definition of the concept *play*. Instead I have presented some data, interpretations and theoretical reflections. The presentation covers some of the ambiguity among theorists about play. Sutton-Smith (2001) argues that this ambiguity, to a large

extent, is a result of a lacking clarity about the popular rhetoric that underlies the various play theories and play terms. *Rhetoric* is not so much the substance of play, its science or theories, “but rather the way in which the underlying ideological values attributed to these matters are both subsumed by the theorists and presented persuasively to the rest of us”, he argues (Sutton-Smith 2001:8). Much of this rhetoric appears as values that are taken for granted. A dominating rhetoric usually applied to children’s play is the rhetoric of play as progress, Sutton-Smith argues. This rhetoric considers children (and animals, but not adults) as adapting and developing through their play. This is an assumption, which is more often assumed than demonstrated, the author argues.

Most educators over the past two hundred years seem to have so needed to represent playful imitation as a form of children’s socialisation and moral, social and cognitive growth that they have seen play as being primarily about development rather than enjoyment (Sutton-Smith 2001:10).

Consequently, play is a preparation for maturity that is not valuable in its own capacity. The desire for children to make progress in development and schooling has led to play being considered either a waste of time or a form of children’s work performed by educational conservatives and progressives, respectively. Sutton-Smith compares their definitions of play given by child players themselves. These are generally centred on having fun, being outdoors, being with friends, choosing freely, not working, pretending, enacting, fantasy, drama and playing games. There is little or no emphasis on the kind of growth that adults have in mind with their progress rhetoric, he argues. However, while various theories disagree about the specific kinds of development which are instigated by play, they all assume that play does indeed transfer to some other kind of progress

that itself does not constitute a form of play. These theories are, according to Sutton-Smith, the best demonstrations of the way in which the field of child play is dominated by the rhetoric of progress. Sutton-Smith's discussion is useful as it emphasises play as a problematic concept which is often employed theoretically without clarification of underlying ideological assumptions. Thus, there is the danger that everything is characterised as play as long as activities contain some elements which usually are perceived as play. Sutton-Smith argues that play provides a form of mental feedback which reinforces animal and human variability. In this respect the concept *variability* is the key word to understanding play. He characterises play by *quirkiness, redundancy and flexibility*. His definition of play⁸¹ implies that virtual simulation makes both mastery and further chaos possible. With reference to the inconstant and spontaneous character of chat, this definition allows the activity to be characterised as play. As my examples have shown, there are also many chat rooms which collapse, people become silent, withdraw or leave and go to other chat rooms. From this point of view, chat might also be perceived as not play.

Language

Quirkiness, redundancy and flexibility are also present in the language in chat. The Internet is said to be a communication medium with its own logic and its own language (Castells 2001). One question here is if chat is to be understood as talking or writing. Although chat is written, it is associated with an oral style. "Chat is talk", Anne says. She is an advanced chatter. Carl says that chat is both talking and writing. According to him, chat is

⁸¹ "...a virtual simulation characterized by staged contingencies of variation, with opportunities for control engendered by either mastery or further chaos" (Ibid.: 231).

babbling, too. In an e-mail to me, Carl writes: “Usually I chat about my pc, computer games or common interests, pets is also something I tal...oops! CHAT about”. Carl seems a bit confused about what chat should be called. However, he is a smart boy with a sense of humour and there was no reason for him to correct the error he was about to do. It might very well have been a deliberate mistake. Nevertheless, the phenomenon illustrates that some people may refer to chat as something between writing and talking. Writing is the antithesis of spontaneity, Kress (1998) argues. A question is if the actual language people produce in chat rooms is more similar to face-to-face speech than other kinds of written language (Cameron 2001). Chat is characterised by an extensive use of a special kind of language that may bewilder an outsider. The language, with the spelling errors and violation of rules, also challenges traditional conventions of what counts as writing. New language forms develop in a symbiosis between different technologies, such as the Internet and SMS (short message service, used on mobile phones). Chat blurs the distinctions between speech and writing, it is argued (Merchant 2001) and as such it constitutes a new linguistic genre best described as a rapid written talk.

Before I describe the linguistic features in more detail, let us take a look at two typical messages: “GBYE THEN FOLKS” and “Camilla:asl?”⁸² The goodbye is shortened and the participant uses capital letters. Camilla is asked about age, sex and location. A chat room usually contains a mix of capital and small letters, question marks, numbers, abbreviations and whole paragraphs. Chat language is characterised by a Net lingo (unfamiliar

⁸² The question mark is a part of the message.

language or jargon) that becomes a part of a linguistic repertoire, such as smileys (emoticons) which replace face-to-face emotional expressions. A common smiley is :-), read as a smiling face when you put your left ear on your left shoulder. Some of the children say that they usually ask in the chat room if there are things they do not understand. POPIT offers a 'smiley school', giving instructions on how to key the various symbols. The abbreviation *ASL* (age, sex, location) is the most used and is said as an introductory question. Another abbreviation is, according to the editor of POPIT, *ith* followed by a question mark. This means *in the house* and replaces a long question to ask if a special person is in the room. *PA* is an abbreviation for *parents alert* and is to be read as a warning against adults/parents or other people in the physical room where the chat takes place. When *PA* is used, a chatter may want to finish the talk because s/he is disturbed. It may also explain for the other chat partners why the participant, if still in the room, suddenly behaves in an extraordinary way. Thus a chatter manages to define the situation and maintain a consistent manner of communication, even when disturbed. Rows of meaningless keying are called *flooding*, which is non-acceptable because they occupy the space for other participants, children say. Codes, signs, pauses, abbreviations, acronyms, arrows and versals are all expressions which make the communication efficient, clarify the intended interpretations and replace the gestures that are usually part of face-to-face communication.

The youngest chatters often struggle to manage these challenges such as the high pace, and to understand what is going on in the room. The youngest and less advanced chatters do sometimes not have a clue about what the elder and more advanced participants are talking about. This would probably have been the situation in for example a schoolyard, too.

However, in a chat room, everybody is together if they want to be. What kind of togetherness this is, I will return to later. The youngest participants seem to develop strategies to cope with some of these challenges. Marking messages with different colours is one example. By choosing different colours for the messages which emerge on the screen, they are easier to identify as explicit and individual messages. The 11 and 12-year-old chatters often talk about how to make colours. The following participant even uses this fascination in order to get in touch with others with the same interest.

8 SOL 5

tweety12>noen som liker å bruke farger og vil chatte med meg tast @@@@	tweety12>anybody who likes to use colours and wants to chat with me key @@@@
--	--

Nobody keyed @@@@, but tweety12 had more in her/his repertoire. After a while s/he came up with a quiz, which was more successful. But the great interest in learning technological skills is here given as a good reason for further chat. Colours are not just made for fun: it is also a strategy to cope with major challenges related to language.

“All topics, except...”

At a first sight the two chat rooms in the present study (as well as others) may appear to be one big contact advertisement, disconnected sentences from a diary or graffiti on the stall walls of a public toilet with sexualised writings and invitations. Some messages are disparaging comments, often addressed to homosexuals, to black people and people from Pakistan. Sometimes this kind of communication dominates the chat room completely. However, there are usually many other things going on, too,

often as parallel dialogues about whatever the present participants might want to talk about. As discussed previously, the content is not necessarily the most important aspect, even if it might sometimes be goal-oriented, such as when Erik uses chat to improve his computer skills. Anne says: “it is almost the same as when you are talking with a friend in the phone”. The expectations of finding people “to talk to about everything”, indicates that a chat room is an open-minded room where all kinds of topics are welcome.

However, the picture is far more complex. A set of rules and conventions seems to regulate the agenda. A consequence of this is that the room is open to all kinds of topics, except those that are regarded as inappropriate by one or more participants in the room. What is appropriate or not may vary from one minute to another, as it depends on the present actors. Hilde is, however, quite sure that if somebody asks for something serious, they will probably not succeed in finding any chat partner. Serious issues in the chat transcripts seem to be talking about school subjects, politics and philosophy. “I talk about what I like to do and where I like to travel”, she says. Guro chats about her interests. These are all subjects that are apparently not included in Hilde’s and Guro’s concept of serious matters. The references quoted above indicate a dominating convention towards chat as a relaxing leisure time activity. At the same time children tell about how they use chat rooms for learning purposes, how they ask in the chat room when they can not manage the technology, ask chat partners to refine their computer skills and share their excitement when they have succeeded. But the character of the chat is still recreational (Werry 1996). Comments and questions about current events are typically appropriate topics, as the message below:

9 SOL 2

Larviks_girl>hva ble stillinga mellom frankrike og nederland i går?	Larviks_girl>what was the result between france and the netherlands yesterday?
---	--

Questions about results from a recently played football match are usually answered and often by people who have been silent until this question emerges. Considering football as primarily a male interest, this observation indicates a group of boys or men who are usually silent, but let their voices be heard when somebody asks such questions. In chat participants produce a bricolage of discursive fragments drawn from for example songs and television characters (Werry 1996). Topics such television programmes and football matches are useful topics for establishing relationships, it is argued. Talking about such topics may be regarded as “speech which serves simply to establish and maintain communication” (Buckingham 1993:40).

Although school subjects are forbidden topics, complaining about school and stupid teachers is really an appropriate topic which is responded to without exception. With many children in various age groups, the experiences of school are quite different. Complaints about school, and the joy and expectations for the summer holiday are shared with chat partners in the following transcript.⁸³

10 POPIT 3

Summer_girl>nå slipper vi skolen i 3 måneder	Summer_girl>now we don't need to go to school for 3 months
Zombie>og dumme lærere	Zombie>and stupid teachers
Zonebabe>nei 12 måneder	Zonebabe>no 12 months

⁸³ In this transcript the researcher (the nickname Lars) asks a question.

<p>Zonebabe>hehhe Summer_girl>Jeg har 1 år igjen på barneskolen søtjente_15>du må gru deg til ungdomsskolen søtjente_15>hater skolen-lærere-ungdomsskolen søtjente_15>ungdomsskolen er helt grusom!!!! Lars>hvorfor syns du ungdomsskolen er grusom? søtjente_15>fordi den er det søtjente_15>jeg er bare såååå glad for at jeg akkurat er ferdig på ungdomsskolen Zonebabe>dritherlig med sommerferieJIPPPPIIIIII!!! Zonebabe>SKA FÅ MEG EN TYPE I SOMMERFERIEN de 2 kuleguttene>er skolen et drittsted som alle hater tast 111 for ja tast 1234 for nei Zonebabe>1234 Jordan>1234 de 2 kuleguttene> er alle snål skolen er jo et drittsted</p>	<p>Zonebabe>hehhe Summer_girl>I have 1 year left in barneskolen *⁸⁴ søtjente_15>you have to worry about ungdomsskolen søtjente_15>hate school-teachers-ungdomsskolen søtjente_15>ungdomsskolen is awful!!!! Lars>why do you think ungdomsskolen is awful? søtjente_15>because it is søtjente_15>I'm soooo glad that I've just finished ungdomsskolen Zonebabe>fantastic to have summer holiday. JIPPPPIIIIII !!! Zonebabe>GOING TO GET A BOY FRIEND DURING THE SUMMER HOLIDAY de 2 kuleguttene>is school a dump everybody hates key 111 for yes, key 1234 for no Zonebabe>1234 Jordan>1234 de 2 kuleguttene> is everybody strange school is a dump</p>
---	--

De 2 kuleguttene (the two cool guys) try to establish a 'community of opinion' about school. They are not satisfied when only two people with the same opinion respond to their invitation. A question is if the researcher's message (from Lars) provoked de 2 kuleguttene to consolidate potential people of the same opinion as them.

“Fun and pleasant... but boring, too”.

Chat is experienced as exciting and fascinating; particularly in the very beginning of the children's chat career. “It is fun and relaxing”, Carl says. At school few of the children are allowed to use the computer for chat. Dag

⁸⁴ *Barneskolen* (6-12 years) and *Ungdomsskolen* (13-15 years) in Norway roughly

and Hilde like chat because it is fun. “It is good fun to talk with people”, Hilde says. Carl says that he tries to disturb⁸⁵ the chat in order to have so much fun as possible. “Then you get cheeky replies back and you learn new things”. In this context learning is supposed to imply learning new ways of being cheeky. A cheeky reply may be poking fun at the nickname, giving a sort of negative comment on it and so on. Then he can answer back in the same manner. If somebody has the name Jostein Gaarder (Norwegian author of the book *Sofie’s world*, a book about philosophy), Carl may call this participant a philosopher (which should be interpreted sarcastically). “You should be cheeky in an elegant and fun way”, Carl says and continues: “But you may risk being evicted and that is boring. If you choose to cheek the wrong person, the moderator, for example, you may end up in trouble”. Carl’s cousin once called the operator an ‘overgrown light bulb’ and was thrown out. Carl teases, makes fun, is cheeky, plays tricks and says whatever he wants to see if he is kicked out of the channel. Carl is an advanced chatter in the sense that he masters the challenges and the chaos, elaborates different kinds of behaviour and uses the chat room for his own purposes.

Even if chat appears to be a fascinating activity, it is perceived as boring, too. Dag says chat is boring in the long run. Frida and Guro also draw this conclusion. Guro got tired of it, but she allows friends who do not have Net access at home to chat when they visit her. This may indicate that chat literally represents rooms to visit in order to have fun and relax, talk without obligations for a while and then leave when you want or have other

correspond to Primary and Secondary School in the UK.

⁸⁵ In the Norwegian dialect: *herpe te*.

things to do. Thus, chat is an activity 'in between' other activities. The children say that the parents' regulations or siblings who claim time on the Net often interrupt them. Many of the children say that chat represents a marginal part of their total time at the computer. Most of them have some forms of regulation of their computer use. Erik tells what the main rules are, but admits that he often breaks them. The inconstant character, the comings and goings, the asking (and shouting) for people who suddenly disappear, are in many cases results of regulations and interruptions outside the chat room, not a consequence of the chat room itself or the participants.

Reality and fiction

One question is whether, or rather when, chat communication is perceived as reality (situated in the physical world) or fiction (made up). Utterances such as: "it varies", "it depends" and "usually" in the children's answers when they are asked about this issue indicate a dynamic, changeable and flexible character of chat communication. It is not possible to ascertain: "this is how I do it" or "this is not how I do it". Even if children say: "I prefer to be myself", their practices show that this might mean quite different things. It depends on who are present in the room, the mood, the topics and the style. The complexity is also emphasised by Frida's apparent self-contradictory answer that she talks with people of her own age, when she actually has told me and showed on the screen that she both pretends to be older than she really is and that she talks to people older than her. Thus, *age* in this sense is a category Frida uses in her manoeuvring between a fiction and a reality-oriented world. As we saw in the references to play theory, the movements between levels of reality are a characteristic feature of play, exemplified in Levy's (1978) concept *suspension of reality*. To play in this sense is to be deeply involved. It is something which includes

moving beyond the borders of reality.

In the era of new technologies, the concept *virtual reality* covers what is perceived as a mix of fiction and reality, it is argued (Knudsen 2001). The opening manoeuvres in a chat room, such as the name, age, location, often seem to be reality oriented. The technology, however, enables fiction. Hilde and Guro say that they talk about real things, not fantasies. This indicates a dominance of reality-oriented communication. However, further conversation with these girls, both together and alone, and observing them while they chat, reveals that they move far across the border into a fictional world. Together with a third friend they constructed, as mentioned earlier, a chatter on the basis of a mix of attributes from all three of them. Even though they did this, they did not mention the possibility that the person who answered could also happen to be a 'constructed' person. The fiction was *real* for them while they positioned the answering chatter in reality. Chat is perceived as a place where identity is constructed as fiction, and where you, as acting in a dialogue, can do whatever you want to and be whoever you want to (Meyer 2001). Anne also relies on nicknames although she knows pretty well the convention that many of the participants, herself included, pretend and lie. Nevertheless, on one level she believes in her own immediate interpretation of the nicknames. "There are not only girls; there are boys, too, actually". She shows me a list of participants in the chat room. She marks one of the male names and asks *him* to chat in private, but *he* leaves the room. "He went! That was stupid of him, I think!" Anne says indignantly.

There are two main genres of chat, the fiction and the reality oriented, Holm Sørensen, Olesen and Audon (2000) argue. In their study in Danish

schools, leisure time activities and domestic arenas, they find that children move between various levels of reality and fiction. This reflects, in their opinion, cultural knowledge of the chat room and the children's own writing skills. This also illustrates the concept of *communicative competence*, developed by socio-linguists (Hymes 1972) who argue that linguistic competence is not always sufficient in communication. In addition to managing the vocabulary and the grammar, it is necessary to know how the words and the grammar can be interpreted in a variety of ways in different contexts. The ability to practice *code switching* indicates the ability to move quickly between codes and contexts. This ability is highly relevant when communicating in a chat room where people, topics and styles alter rapidly. Although Anne appears to be an advanced chatter, which includes knowing that people pretend, she still talks about the male chatter as a *he*. The Danish study, referred to on the previous page, indicates that when children are in the game (i.e. in an anonymous communication with a fictive identity which the partner should not reveal), they perceive others on the Net as objective identities, while they, on the contrary, represent the fiction. On the reality level, children act with the expectations that their chat partners are also acting on this level, such as talking seriously, chatting, teasing and playing, but nevertheless, as themselves. It is seen to be a question of age and competence to be able to move between levels of reality in this type of communication, as is the case when children play.

Virtual reality: another reality?

Cyberspace, with its associations to science fiction, reflects an image of a 'reality' which is different from, independent of and separate from the reality outside this space. The terms *VR* (virtual reality) and *RL* (real life)

are parts of such an image that raises fundamental questions about the character of reality. A highly important reflection in scientific studies is the discussions about the question of rationality and relativism. The concept of relativism is a complex concept (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000; Kjølrup 2000) and is not a part of this discussion. However, even when accepting that knowledge is socially constructed, this project sees some social-constructivist positions,⁸⁶ interpreted in a wide sense, as problematic, especially when they deny any existence of reality, independent of individual constructions.

Within a perspective of realism it is argued that an empirical science presupposes the existence of an empirical world (Blumer 1969). Introducing these issues also introduces scepticism to some post-structuralist approaches which study the Net as a space for constructing shifting and multiple identities (Turkle 1995). Obviously, realities on the Net may give quite different possibilities for individual action than for instance the classroom, the schoolyard or the football match give. However, in this thesis it is seen as problematic to separate the virtual reality from what we usually call the *real world*, although it may be useful as an analytical distinction. We know little about how children's play in so-called cyberspace resembles or differs from what usually is understood as traditional play. A question is how children perceive the Net as reality. So far the data suggests that it is meaningful to regard cyberspace as any other reality or room where children use their creativity, curiosity and competence. This means that children will probably act with this medium with the same mental scripts as are used in other cultural and social

⁸⁶ Discussed in Chapter 3.

settings. This approach supposes that the everyday life reality keeps the status as the superior reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This does not imply that an everyday reality is simple to explore. When we observe children's play, for instance, the complexity of the inter-related individual, social and cultural factors is a striking feature. This is the case also when children communicate on the Net. The chatters meet the medium with various expectations, feelings and competencies. Children show various repertoires of action in the virtual rooms as in the *real* rooms.

Between public and privacy

Chat is situated on a borderline between the public and the private sphere. The anonymous and the intimate style seem to represent mutual prerequisites. The anonymity permits intimacy in public. Most of the children perceive a chat room as a place for telling and being told secrets. They can talk about things they never could have said to anybody at school. The public room is often a necessary step to get in touch and make appointments for dyads or smaller groups. Many participants ask for private chat in the common room. Of a total of 213 messages (☞ POPIT 8), 25 were planning and negotiating private chat. When I ask Carl if he talks much in private, he answers that it varies. Talking in private is not without risks. If Carl starts to talk with a person, it is a bit difficult to escape, he says. In this case Carl finds it problematic to redefine the relation with the chat partner and withdraw. The obligations and responsibility clash with the anonymous and *depersonalised* chat style (Werry 1996) without obligation that is characteristic in the common room. A solution is to change nicknames in order not to be recognised. Thus changing identity is a strategy to maintain anonymity and protect oneself from being recognised by a particular partner.

There seem to be three main ways of handling the question of publicity and privacy. (1) To meet in public and talk in private. (2) To meet in public and talk/listen in public. (3) To meet in real life and talk in public or private. It has to be realised that the group of silent listeners is a significant part of the logged-on participants in a chat room. Silence is a part of a communication system (Saville-Troike 1989). Knowing that somebody is 'out there', observing and listening to what is said is supposed to have great impact on the activity in a chat room. The performers have an audience. Some children are probably stimulated to talk by the fact that they have a huge and invisible audience, while others prefer to be present, but silent.

A youth cultural code

Most of all it seems that chat communication is a narrative of being a child and becoming a youth. Chat rooms are places to 'park' childhood or at least dissociate from what might be perceived as childish. It is not a novel phenomenon that young people are interested in the recent forms of the media. This has been the situation the last century, Drotner (1998) argues. In her opinion, this interest has to do with the fact that young people are about to leave childhood and enter adult life. In this process they need some markers to guide themselves in their saying goodbye to 'the old' and greet 'the new'. Different cultural spaces are useful tools in such processes.

Studying chat in this perspective, youth cultural codes are constructed and reconstructed, often by means of media figures and appropriate interests. In this perspective we also have to consider the focus on age as an including or excluding category. A chatter is allowed to be neither childish (for example, by displaying an interest in Pokémon and Winnie the Pooh) nor

too old (more than 25). One participant even chooses the nickname *pokemonhater* (a person who hates Pokémon), which emphasises the relation s/he wants to express to this cultural phenomenon. If somebody says they are 10 years old, they risk being told in a rough manner to leave the room promptly. Constructing a youth cultural context implies limiting the borders of age. In this context we have to interpret messages saying that some topics are too childish for a chat room and that people older than 25 years are *fossils* who have nothing to do in the chat room. Karlsson (1997) estimated the average age of chatters to be from 12 to 20 years in Sweden in 1997. Three years later, when chat was included in Norwegian statistics (Vaage 2000), the largest age group was youth from 16 to 24 years. However, younger children are often silent listeners in rooms which are meant for or used by people older than them. In this context we may also read the conventions for behaviour and style in a chat room. Breaking taboos and giving cheeky replies are a part of a youth convention that is continuously constructed and reconstructed through ongoing negotiations and discussions. An extensive part of a chat is meta-communicative utterances, dealing with issues such as language and atmosphere and what kind of standards the chatters want in the room. This can all be seen as attempts to explore various ways of relating to other people and constructing peer relations. The use of instructive meta-communicative language, such as acronyms and smileys, is also a way to ensure correct interpretation (Audon and Poulsen 2001); i.e. correct in terms of conventions in the chat room. The mix between first language and English and the extensive use of the letter z, for instance in the nickname *Puzzy*, may also be regarded as youth cultural signals which reflect influence of hip-hop and techno (Knudsen 2001). In an article about youth style, Clarke (1986) argues that selecting objects which create the 'style' is a question

whether there is correlation between the self-consciousness of the group and the prevailing meanings of potential objects. This is part of the problem for those chatters who want to establish a youth cultural style in chat rooms. The correlation does not necessarily exist because chatters are not a group in terms of a sub-culture, whose members are together face-to-face and share some common values. However, one of the main functions of style is, according to Clarke, to define boundaries for being members of the group with respect to other groups. As this chapter has shown and the next two also will illustrate, marking of boundaries is a prominent feature in the chat rooms.

Summary

This chapter has presented some characteristic features of online chat rooms as a communication medium, such as language, topics, strategies, rules and conventions. The concept of communication has been discussed historically and understood as a dynamic process which includes a wide spectrum of activities, dimensions and participants. This implies that a communicative act includes mutual constructions of meaning based on both sharing of meaning and conflicts between the various actors. There are structures both in the communication medium itself and in children's use which constitute prerequisites for the participants. On the other side, the actors are not seen as passive consumers or victims of these prerequisites, but rather as active contributors in a complex communication that is difficult to follow. A striking feature is the chaos and anonymity which makes a written masquerade possible. This is a part of the pleasure and excitement, but also part of the frustrations and challenges. From the participants' point of view, some of the pleasures are found in the expectation of meeting people and talking about whatever they want. This

may explain why a search for an overall topic is more or less pointless. Theoretically, the data have been presented and discussed mainly with reference to a socio-linguistic perspective on communication, Goffman's concept of self-presentation and play and humour research. A conclusion is that chat rooms seem to be places to explore and 'park' childhood and construct a youth cultural style and identity.

Trying to grasp some of the characteristics and compare these with what children say they enjoy, might give a confusing impression. What is perceived as pleasure at one moment might in the next moment turn out to be something boring. This is confusing only if the aim is to find a universal conclusion of what kind of communication chat is for children. But this aim would not pay respect to the diversities of individuals and contexts. An important question is whether there is anything related to how this mode of communication is used that is specific to children and youth. What they say they enjoy, such as the large number of people, the anonymity, the play, the violation of the rules: would not adults enjoy this as well? And do children enjoy this all the time? So far, the presentation has shown that children are in chat rooms on a large scale, and it seems important for them to be there, to talk and be answered and to establish relations by using the public room to arrange meetings in privacy. The next chapter discusses how children create a community in chat rooms.

6 Constructing community in chat rooms

In academic discourses, the Internet is often talked about as a collection of digital, virtual or interpretive *communities*. In my definition of chat communication in chapter 5, I referred to a linguistic definition which characterises chat rooms as small-scale electronic communities. The question *that* the Net represents a community, is more or less taken for granted in these discourses. It is argued that people will inevitably build virtual communities with Computer-Mediated Communication, in the same ways as microorganisms inevitably create colonies (Rheingold 2000). One of the explanations for this phenomenon is that more and more informal public space disappears from people's *real* lives.⁸⁷ Therefore people have to create new ways of organising the communities. The question is what kind of community does web chat represent and, more importantly, how do children construct and conceive of chat rooms as a form of community? This chapter explores these questions and starts by discussing the concept *community*.

Community: the concept

How people come together in various kinds of communities has been an object of study in a large number of investigations. In the introductory chapter of Ferdinand Tönnies' book *Community and Society*⁸⁸ (Tönnies 1955:3), the author argues for studying "the sentiments and motives, which

⁸⁷ *In real life* (also IRL) is often used to make a distinction to *virtual life* (Rheingold 2000).

⁸⁸ Original title: *Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft* (1887).

draw people to each other, keep them together, and induce them to joint action". The concept *community* is often used about the public in general or a body of people in the same locality. The concept may also be defined as a group of people who have common interests, characteristics or culture or a common possession or enjoyment.⁸⁹ The notion is also defined as a possession which is *shared, close and intimate* (Jensen 1990). Thus, community can be understood as a quality of a group or personal relations between members of groups, characterised by shared interests or care. The notion is often used about religious or political communities where there are more or less strict boundaries between people *inside* (us) and *outside* the community (them). The notion *we-community* is used about children's establishing of social life and play (Nilsen 2000). The notion of community is often used about encounters face-to-face and is perceived to have mainly positive connotations where these encounters are regarded as more authentic and valuable than when people meet in other ways. Confronted with new technologies, Jones (1998) recommends rethinking the way we use *face-to-face* as an ideal type of communication. An argument is that the concepts *meet* and *face-to-face* have to be defined in new ways as the social environments change (Stone 1991). In this respect *community* does not necessarily presuppose a face-to-face meeting.

However, whether an encounter is face-to-face in the literal meaning or in an electronic environment, the community that may develop does not need to be conceived of as exclusively positive. Members of a community may, for example, use various strategies of power to decide the agenda, the style and the prevailing definitions at the expense of other members or potential

⁸⁹ The Chambers Dictionary 1994.

members. The question is whether the data material shows tracks of common interests, characteristics or shared culture among the participants. These are all features which ought to be present if we claim to talk about community, according to the definition above. If we find such features, how are these performed and perceived? Do chatters talk about themselves as a group, and do the accounts imply that the children share a common possession or enjoyment? Community is a complex concept and if it is to be used as an analytical tool, it is important to make clear how it should be used. This will be the case, whether we talk about communities in a traditional way or, as in this context, about new and electronic ways of being together in chat rooms. To pursue the questions above, we need to go further in order to find a more useful and analytical definition of the concept.

Cohen (2000) offers an alternative to former approaches to the study of *community*. He argues that these approaches treated the subject in largely structural terms. His main argument is that a community has to be perceived both as a social process and a creation of cultural meaning. In this sense the concept has both practical and ideological significance. The author recommends that the advice from Wittgenstein should be followed and a definition of the concept community should be formulated by seeking “not for the lexical meaning, but for its use”.

A reasonable interpretation of the word's use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. “Community” thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference (Cohen 2000:12).

Cohen argues that the element which embodies this sense of discrimination is the *boundary*. The boundary marks both the beginning and the end of a community. This marking is necessary to encapsulate the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction. Boundaries are marked because communities interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished, Cohen argues. The ways they are distinguished will vary, dependent on the specific community. He emphasises that not all boundaries are objectively apparent. They might be in people's minds, as the meanings people give them. In this sense we are talking about the symbolic dimensions of community boundaries. In chat room communities there are no apparent physical boundaries, with the exception of those formed by the technology itself. The question is whether, and possibly how children mark boundaries in online chat rooms. The discussion here aims to capture some of the experiences and the meanings children attach to web chat. I will use the concept community as referring to something children *do*, as a *practice*, rather than something that *is*, such as a fixed quality of an online community. Baym (2000) who studied an Internet soap opera fan group (r.a.t.s.) discusses this understanding. Her study showed how an online group comes to create practices of interpretation, criticism, humour, relationships, norms and individual identity. This group had come together due to a common interest among adult people. However, the ways Baym understands community might be transferred to a chat room where children come together without having any specifically defined common interest, such as people do when they meet in a newsgroup or discussion group.

Rheingold (2000) asks if cyberspace might perhaps be one of the informal public places where people can rebuild aspects of community or if cyberspace is the wrong place to look for the rebirth of community since it does not offer “a tool for conviviality but a life-denying simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another”. In either case, Rheingold argues, we need to find out soon. Thus, the author presents a rhetorical question and an apocalyptic vision at the same time, as he seems quite happy with the possibilities the virtual communities offer people. Baym (2000:205) criticises Rheingold for seeing online communities in utopian terms in that they free us from physical constraints and allow us to organise ourselves by interests, which enables us to “find kindred spirits and liberation”. She is also critical of different perspectives which she mentions as the *other extreme*. This includes the many dystopian warnings that once we are grouped by interests rather than by geography, we will lose our connection to the real (i.e. geographically local) community. From this perspective, a consequence is that these more important communities will suffer. Baym addresses such debates by considering different uses of the term community and recommends more concrete descriptions of what we discuss. One of the conclusions in Baym’s book is that if “one wants to understand a community, then one should look to the ordinary activities of its participants” (Baym 2000:22). Stressing this definition may also help to avoid the dichotomous perspectives that have characterised recent work where the tendency is to be either celebrations of online possibilities or dystopian warnings against the dangers (ibid.: 205-206).

Let us take a look at the ‘ordinary activities’ of the participants in this inquiry. What are the practices and how do children speak of them? Chapter 5 showed how chat communication is constantly on the verge of

breaking down. The chapter also discussed how chat is a written masquerade characterised by a youth cultural code. We are now going to look at how these characteristics relate to children's expressions of similarities and making of distinctions. Do children see themselves and others in the room as *us* and/or *them*? If they do, how do they express this? If there is a *social glue* (Rheingold 2000) that ties children together as a community, what does this glue consist of?

The chat context

I choose to start the exploration of these questions by discussing one of the web sites, POPIT, with particular focus on how it addresses children. The reason for this approach is that the portals of web sites seem to frame the activities in specific ways. A question is whether the web sites frame chat communication as an activity between people who share a common body of interests, style and symbols that mark boundaries between themselves and other people in the chat room and outside. In Chapter 5, I discussed the special kind of language used by chatters. Before looking more closely at the practices and what children say, I will take a brief look at some cultural prerequisites for the activity and consider some characteristics which might have the function of establishing and maintaining boundaries in the chat room and in this respect contribute to framing the chat activity.

A chat room has the character of an *informal setting*. Reflecting the anarchy of the Internet, there are no traditional institutional frames and regulations in a chat room. To a large extent, the participants themselves create the language, topics, style and conventions within a frame of a relaxing *leisure time activity*. Nevertheless, these are cultural and structural features which, in addition to some other features are supposed to tell

participants what chat is all about. These features are manifested both through the start pages and the various hyperlinks. Another frame is the *moral system*. This is performed for example through the presentations of rules for good Net behaviour and the risks one faces if the rules are broken. Participants are expected to behave in a kind and polite way. Chatters are also advised to protect themselves against people who may not respect the moral system. POPIT offers a list of nine warnings which inform you that if you follow the rules, you should surf safely on the Net. In addition, organisations like *Save the Children* have made a set of rules that are attached as a hyperlink. Some of the children have a copy of these rules in front of their computer and most of the parents refer to these guidelines when talking about their attitudes towards regulation of the child's Net use. To construct and maintain a set of shared norms, chat rooms (and users) are protected and regulated by a moderating system. Thus, all participants are confronted with moral standards, either by the written rules, the censoring programs, the eviction system or the internal policing by the participants themselves. The chat context is constructed as something made *for* children and policed *by* adults (or children who, for some reasons, have obtained the position to moderate the communication). In this sense the moral system is a shared norm system, either the participants accept it or not.

By presenting rules and warnings, the Net editors also give children a *narrative about risks* and dangers connected to chat communication. The focus on risk is part of a widely pronounced narrative in contemporary discourses about children and media (Buckingham 2000). The Internet is no exception. When the web site tells the participant that s/he can surf safely if s/he follows the rules, the underlying message is that safety cannot be guaranteed if the rules are broken.

Another feature which is manifested through the web site is the *images of children as active* and self-esteemed individuals. This might be seen as a contradiction to the protective style described above. However, children are addressed directly as “you” and treated as competent subjects in finding the options on the web sites. In a friendly way, the sites guide the individual user, saying for example: “Is there anything you can’t find? Search in the databases to see if you can find what you are seeking for”. Thus, the chat context recognises *individuality*. The child as a web user is perceived as a person who is deliberately searching for knowledge and entertainment. By constructing a special site for children, however, images of childhood as different from adolescence and adulthood are constructed or maintained. The links to the parents’ site and the aims for the site emphasise children’s use of the Internet as a question of upbringing, control and regulation. Children are seen both as competent and vulnerable. The images of childhood are in other words ambiguous.

Gender construction is also a significant feature of the chat context. The web site emphasises gender by using the slogan ‘girl power’ as a popup, and thereby the site is defined as a place for vigorous girls. Half a year after the last observations were done, a new text emerged when a girl power link⁹⁰ was clicked on. This text says: “Hi girls. Finally we’ve got a special girl forum! Now you can discuss, tell your opinion and give advice about fashion, make-up, flirting and all those other things you are engaged in”. What all those other things might be is not specified. The gendered image appears sometimes, such as in this example creating a form of stereotype that implicitly marks the boundaries between girls and boys. However, this

⁹⁰ 28 May 2002

does not seem to prevent boys from visiting the sites. On the contrary, the pink colours and the girlish style might be perceived as a guarantee of meeting girls in the room. The personal profiles which participants are asked to choose (such as hair, clothes and interests) include both prototypical girl and boy appearances. One may, however, ask whether the pink style supports a stereotyped, feminine code. On the other hand, it may also be argued that the profiles, links and also the commercial wrapping to a large extent communicate gender-mixed messages. A main point is that children perceive the web site as a site for both sexes, but also that gender is a crucial element of identity here. From the perspective of the web editor, it is crucial to reach both girls and boys, because of the intention to make an alternative site for children and, but also because both sexes are targets for advertising. Therefore, in targeting children as consumers, the welcoming appeal to the site has to attract both girls and boys. In this respect the commercial marketing embodies structural and cultural standards which address children in terms of *consumption*.

Identifying elements of community

Above are some characteristic features presented, which are manifested both in texts and pictures on the web site POPIT. But it is not the structures themselves that create meaning for people, it is argued (Cohen 2000). The chat context, as described above, is seen as only one part of the epistemological world, from which children perceive and construct meaning. How do children themselves perform these dimensions of community? As we saw in Chapter 5, there are several examples of what Cohen calls a *common body of symbols*, particularly in terms of what kind of language and topics are recognised as appropriate. Talking about pop idols, how boring school is and breaking the rules are practices that

function as markers of boundaries. According to other media, television programmes, pop idols and football matches seem to represent a common culture (Buckingham 1993). But this concept has to be understood in terms of shared reference points in which differences (eg. Pokémon, Chapter 5) are constantly constructed and reinforced. Thus, people in the chat rooms constitute similarities and differences both inside the chat room and towards outsiders. By focusing on boundaries, however, one may run the risk of underestimating the openness of the chat room community, although there are limitations in this openness.

Without exceptions, the children say that chat rooms are places to “meet people and talk. This is what it is all about”, Erik says. He wants to expand his circle of acquaintances, he says. On the Net he expects to find people who share his interests. Thus, chat partners are associated with what Goffman (1979) calls a social group sharing properties which distinguish this group from other social groups. Although these encounters primarily are of short duration, they seem to be important in themselves. Some of the fascination lies in the possibilities. “On IRC there were 130 people once”, Hilde says. Guro thinks it is boring when there are only a few people in the chat room. But as most of the children say: “There is always somebody there”. This means that the opportunities to be social are just a few keystrokes away. However, you do not have to be social if you do not want to. CMC is a way to meet people, whether or not you feel the need to affiliate with them on a community level, Rheingold (2000) argues.

It's a way of both making contact with and maintaining a distance from others [...] in traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, then getting to know them; in virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them (Rheingold 2000:11).

This change in the order in which people usually get to know each other raises interesting questions in relation to post-modern identity, suggesting that the computer enables people to escape from pressure in *real* life and relate to multiple identities (Turkle 1995). In Chapter 7 I return to this issue. Another approach is to see this break as a way of exploring boundaries, which is a crucial consequence of Cohen's definition of the notion of community. Based on interpretations of what the children say in the interviews and what appears in the excerpts, a common theme seems to be identifying and negotiating similarities and differences. Being together is the raw material for this process. This presupposes a minimum of participants. The children want to be where their friends are (i.e. in the same chat rooms as their friends are). In this sense *friends* are mainly people they know from *real* life. However, when talking about the Net as a place to make friends, friendship is so far only a possibility. When I ask what a friend is, Carl answers that a friend is somebody you can meet every day. By *meet*, he thinks of offline encounters. Erik enters IRC and wonders if there is anybody he knows there. And in the concept *knows*, he includes both school friends and people he has recently talked with in the chat rooms. Thus Erik, who is two years older than Carl, is more willing to include Net friends in his concept of friendship than Carl is. Some of the children always chat together with some friends, almost never alone. When Anne tells that she yesterday chatted one hour with a friend, the *with* in this context means with her friend sitting by her side (offline), while these two had a chat going on with some others (online). This indicates that there is often a social activity in front of the screen, too, and not only in the chat rooms. What these examples indicate most of all, however, is the constant wish to be among people preferably peers, either in front of the screen, on the screen or both. I will come back to this issue in Chapter 7.

“Anybody who wants to chat?”

The standard opening question in the two chat rooms is: “Anybody who wants to chat?” Another common question is also: “Anybody who wants to chat privately?” Those who want to are asked to key either some letters or numbers.

11 POPIT 1

Cool-boy>Privat?000 sviffer>000 nettbayb>vi møtes etter på jeg må chate med noen andre KB>snakke privat,tast 2000 BigOne>någen som vil chatta? nettbayb>000 hotgirl>Hei er det noen som vil chatte privat med meg Alex>2000	Cool-boy>Private?000 sviffer>000 nettbayb>I 'll meet you later I have to chat with somebody else KB>talk in private, key 2000 BigOne>anybody who wants to chat? nettbayb>000 hotgirl>Hi anybody who wants to chat in private with me Alex>2000
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This excerpt shows how the web chat is a place to meet up in order to make closer contact in dyads or smaller groups afterwards. Sometimes such questions dominate the messages completely. The observations show that generally there are few actors/actresses and a vast audience. Often there are some main characters (sometimes just one) defining the situation as well as the atmosphere. Somebody who might either agree to or oppose what has been said always responds to these characters. In addition to these participants, who probably do not represent a stable and fixed group, there is often a large group of silent listeners. All these people, who in some channels can be seen with their nicknames on the participant list, might not be physically present at the computer all the time. Nevertheless, many of them start talking when the dominating characters and troublemakers disappear. Thus, the number of people in the room and also the attitudes

and the atmosphere the chatters are able or willing to create are crucial for participation. For some reasons, some people remain, in Goffman's terms, *backstage* while others are highly visible *frontstage*. The character of chat as an open, large room is perceived both as a possibility and a challenge. The most experienced chatters find possibilities to limit the high number of participants by choosing chat rooms with a technology that enables a more predictable list of participants. What usually regulates the choice of a special chat room in preference to others is the probability of finding particular people, including friends in *real* life. "The clue is to choose a good chat room", Erik says. A good chat room is where he finds friends and where exciting things happen. The 13-14 years old children in the sample try various chat rooms more often than the younger ones, who seem to have more than enough difficulties coping with one chat room. The most experienced children use IRC regularly and very confidently. IRC has to be downloaded and requires some technical procedures in order to enter. This excludes some of the less advanced chatters. Another chat facility is msn.⁹¹ In this system the participant loads people's names into the messenger service and it tells them when they are online, so this is a much more protected space limited just to people you know off line. The msn is easy to download.⁹² None of the children in the interview sample had experienced this possibility.

Erik plans to try a new site that many of his friends talk about, ICQ.⁹³ "Heard about it today...many people are using it, you know". He explains it as almost like an e-mail, "but it may be chat, too", he says.

⁹¹ www.msn.no/computing/messenger/Default.asp

⁹² This information about msn is given by Sue Cranmer, University of London.

⁹³ www.icq.com/icqchat

E: As if somebody is talking to you, although you are not there. Then it comes...it is saved so you can go and have a look at what they have said to you. It is not such a huge program as those others. It appears in windows on the side here.

V: Mm

E: Such as...you see who has talked to you. And if you go in one day and just send messages to another person, so...then you have a number ...you get...as if you get an address, but it is just a number.

V: Exactly

E: And then you save lots of numbers, which...those are the ones you know...and then you write to them...a message...and then they'll get it.

V: Yes, it is a way to limit the large number of people?

E: Yes

V: So you can choose some of them?

E: Yes, that's possible. But as to.... I think you can manage meeting just a few people, by searching for them.

V: Mm

E: And you can save them and ask for their numbers.

The advantage of ICQ is, as Erik describes, the opportunity to talk with a limited and chosen group of people. "It is also possible to identify other people with a number", Erik points out. Thus, he can take a look at earlier messages because he can save them. He is also able to see who has talked to him and what they have said. And, maybe the best of all, he can decide whom he wants to speak to. This way he can be sure that the receivers will get the things he has written. "Those are the ones you know", Erik says. The way he talks about ICQ as both talking and writing, confirms an impression of a mix between e-mail and chat. In some ways it seems to have some of the qualities of an ordinary paper letter, too, and, as shown below, as a replacement of the phone.

E: If you give the number... there are very many on the Net using ICQ, so you just can...if you want to arrange things, you just send...instead of calling.

V: Yes

E: Because he's maybe...

V: There you know you will find someone interested in the same things as yourself?

E: Yes, in a way, if you...if I am playing [playing games], I meet somebody who is...an ok guy, I just ...say the ICQ number.

V: Yes, but then you give an identity?

E: Yes, the ICQ number

V: Yes

E: But

V: You don't have any scruples about doing this?

E: No

In this system the chat partners get a kind of identity to larger extent than in the chat rooms Erik has used before. Although he has no experience of using it, Erik knows quite a lot and has great expectations. "ICQ is a sort of community of shared interests", he explains. I think he perceives this communication as more serious than the conversation in the chat rooms he has visited until now. It seems to offer a way of managing the chaos and unpredictability described in Chapter 5, but also one that comes closer to forms of communication that are regulated better. ICQ (read: I seek you) is an Internet medium that has gained more and more popularity, Sveningsson (2001) argues.

ICQ is a software with several functions. To start with, it enables users to see who of their friends are currently online, provided that they have the same software installed and that they are listed on the user's personal contact list. The software also provides fast and easy ways of contacting these persons through e-mail-like messages, web links or chat connections. ICQ is a faster way of contacting people than logging on to a chat room via a web browser. If the purpose of chatting is to talk with a person with whom one is already acquainted, many choose ICQ rather than a regular web chat (Sveningsson 2001:23).

Erik and his friends are up-to-date and do discriminate between various

possibilities of online communication, according to what purposes they have. However, at the time of this interview, Erik had just heard about ICQ. And, more importantly, he had “so many other things to do”. An interesting feature is that after a period in the public chat rooms, children seem to prefer smaller groups, with people they know in *real* life or share some interests with. This seems to have something to do with a changing of position or status in the chat room as a part of growing experience and maturity. Chatters change their status from having been *newbies* to become *insiders* (Sveningsson 2001). I will come back to this issue later in the chapter, where I discuss what I call *the chat pedagogy*.

A recent type of online chat also illustrates the phenomenon of learning to become an advanced chatter. This chat is organised as a hierarchy (a ship) where a chatter reaches higher levels according to quantity of participation, skills and appropriate behaviour.⁹⁴ Reaching higher levels increases the possibilities of getting access to more chat rooms, a list of friends, to send and receive mails and be ‘married’ with the friend on the ship. Having reached a higher level, the most experienced participants are supposed to get rid of *newbies* and troublemakers, and they might conceive of the chat rooms as a space where they can influence what happens more than in rooms which are open for everybody. In this respect, this kind of chat rooms is rather less open than the rooms I have described earlier. Visiting this ship also creates opportunities for recognition and communities, as Audon (2001) found in a Danish chat room called Høyhuset. A community is not something which emerges automatically when people are together. It

⁹⁴ <http://chat.nettavisen.no>

has to be created and, as we have seen in the examples so far, this requires that some prerequisites are met.

Friendship or an ethic of friendliness?

Earlier in this chapter I have referred to Carl and Erik's thoughts about online friendships. From Carl's point of view a friend is somebody you meet in flesh and blood, while Erik is more prepared to open the door for online friendships. A question is whether (or how) the existence of virtual communities is likely to change our experience of the *real* world, both as individuals and as communities (Rheingold 2000). Friendship is an essential part of the *real* world. Merchant (2001) argues that as the use of chat rooms increases, the distinction between actual and virtual friends might break down. A question is what he means by a friend and what the author defines as break down. An essential difference between one's relationships with friends and acquaintances is that the friend is the person "to whom one confides the secrets of one's heart", it is argued (Schneider 2000:129). As we shall see in the interview with Frida (p. 194), the Net friends can be the friends who are told the secrets which are too secret to be told to a friend in *real* life. This indicates that the children use relationships on the Net in quite sophisticated ways. Nothing in the present material indicates that Net friends replace friends the informants have offline. Also, there is nothing that supports the conclusion that the distinctions between offline and online friendships are broken down or blurred. On the contrary, both in the interviews and the excerpts from the Net, the distinctions are clear. As we are going to see in the next excerpt, hotbabe emphasises that when she is talking about how many friends *she* has, *she* refers to the friends in the chat room.

In studies of adults, it is claimed that online groups develop personal relationships and friendships. Members of discussion groups, for example, tend to look at each other as a bunch of close friends (Baym 2000). However, as already mentioned, these arguments refer to adult people who talk about particular issues of shared interest for the participants. In POPIT and SOL, asking for friends seems to be more visible than signs of close relationships. If they exist, they probably would be difficult to observe. Friendship is a complex emotional phenomenon that is not necessarily visible for observation in this context. Also, as we have seen earlier, there are various levels of friendship. A Net friendship may include different level of intimacy and confidence than a friendship in *real* life. One reason for this is obvious. If a chatter chooses to be anonymous, a Net friend is physically unable to spread gossip in the schoolyard. A less obvious reason is the friendly and supportive atmosphere between the participants in the chat rooms. Close friendship, however, seems to presuppose physical closeness too, many of the children say. A consequence of this is that it might be more useful to talk about relationships rather than friendship between children in chat rooms. In addition, these relationships seem to be of the nature found in a Swedish adult sample; they are “sporadic, random meetings between people who will most likely never meet again” (Sveningsson 2001:161). This fact does not prevent children from mentioning chat partners as friends. But it might have some implications in terms of how much people invest in those relations. In this respect *netfriendship* is a particular kind of relation which may offer opportunities to test “a series of social identities” (Corsaro 1997:165). Including and excluding strategies in chat rooms are similar to playing processes *in real*, where, as also emphasised by Corsaro, issues of acceptance, popularity and

group solidarity become a very important part of the differentiation in peer relations. Lilli misses *her* friends, whoever they might be.

12 POPIT 10

lilli>jeg savner mine venner hvor er dere alle sammen hotbabe>???? hotbabe>gutt eller jente lilli>jente hotbabe>jeg har 5 venner niggir>bare 5 hotbabe>nei 6 niggir> e du træg lilli>jeg vil ha fler venner hotbabe>innpå her da vet du Charlotte>austin:ser du på i onde og gode dager ⁹⁵ eller no sont? Austin>selvfølgelig Charlotte>gjør du det? Austin>ja hotbabe> *if you are rich or poor I like you* lilli> noen som savne meg her? lilli> så kjedelig her lilli> noen som trodde jeg var en gutt?	lilli>I miss my friends where are all of you hotbabe>???? hotbabe>boy or girl lilli>girl hotbabe>I have 5 friends niggir>only 5 hotbabe>no 6 niggir> are you slow lilli>I want more friends hotbabe>in this room, you know Charlotte>austin:do you watch I onde og gode dager ⁹⁶ or something like that? Austin>sure Charlotte>do you really? Austin>yes hotbabe> *if you are rich or poor I like you* lilli>anybody missing me here? lilli>so boring here lilli>anybody who thought I was a boy?
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Lilli owns one third of the messages in this transcript. Whether this communication really describes messages from a girl without friends, is an issue for discussion. However, the topic is on the agenda for a while. Friendship may be developed better in private chat rooms. However, the children do not talk about such relations. They talk more about the possibilities of meeting people, in general terms, than about specific friendships developed in the rooms. An exception is a few stories about

⁹⁵ The name of a television series on a Norwegian channel.

⁹⁶ See footnote 95.

exchanging e-mail addresses and a dyadic communication by mail. Chat friends can become e-mail friends. Such relations that move from the public to private sphere are also found in other CMC, such as discussion groups. Baym (2000) refers to a study from 1996 which shows that 60.7 % of the participants had established personal relationships through Usenet. But as Carl put it, being friends presupposes meeting in *real* life. A Net friend is different from a *real* friend, he thinks. I asked Frida if Net friends may be experienced as friends. She answered:

F: Yeah....can write secrets to them, for example.

V: Mm

F: Such as secrets you don't want to tell any of the friends you talk with at school...

V: But how can you be sure that a Net friend keeps a secret?

F: Yes, ...you mail....not chat with him.....then you can wait a bit...and then give him small secrets, in a way.

V: Mm

F: And then you may write a big secret later.

V: Mm

F: And if there are such chat friends....then ...if you have chatted several times, then you can tell him a secret, if you have chatted many times with him.

V: Buta chat friend can't spread gossip....to anybody?

F: Mm...to his friends, though.

V: Have you written a secret to a Net friend?

F: Yes. A mail friend... yes

V: Yes. A mail friend.

F: This is a girl, though.

V: Yes, a girl

F: Yes

When Frida tells secrets to a chat partner, she feels that this person is among her friends. The pattern is that the public room is used more for making appointments than for developing friendship, both in Carl's and Frida's understanding of the concept. By contrast, Audon and Poulsen (2001) found that private chat rooms have a 'village structure', which means that there are fewer and more binding contacts. These contacts

Lizzy and Mizzy continue this talk for a while. Mizzy presents an emotional reaction by sending the following message: Mizzy>crying. The sadness does not soften Lizzy who answers quickly: Lizzy>>Mizzy:IDIOT (Read as: Lizzy says that Mizzy is an idiot). Other participants comment on what they call a quarrel between the two participants. Mizzy is active for a few minutes more, asking others if they want to chat, whereby she gets a quick refusal on an invitation to Coolio, before disappearing from the window, but still staying in the room. Expressions of emotions are often seen as a part of the messages. The lack of non-verbal communication and the fact that participants do not risk revealing their offline identity are seen as two reasons why people in chat rooms seem to exaggerate manifestations of emotionality (Sveningsson 2001). In summarising the transcript above, one interpretation is that Mizzy tries to correct Lizzy. Although *she* is rejected and called an idiot, *she* takes the position as the harmonising person, giving positive feedback at the same time as *she* presents *her* emotional reaction, where *she* says that *she* is sad (crying). Another interpretation (of *her* penultimate comment in excerpt 13) is that, from Mizzy's point of view, the whole discussion is an ironic or humorous incident. From this perspective the chat room is a community of performance, where not only Lizzy, but also the audience is an important addressee for Mizzy's messages. With reference to *real* life experiences, Schneider (2000) argues that in the same manner as it is important to distinguish between a friend and a best friend, it is important to distinguish the levels of dislike, too. Thus, Lizzy and Mizzy might have performed their liking and disliking for some minutes or hours, even days or months before the observation started. The creation of boundaries is, nevertheless, obvious.

Greeting and farewell ceremonies

As we have seen in Chapter 5, a chat room is a room with greeting and farewell ceremonies. The *ceremonies of entrance and departure* (Goffman 1967) are mostly directed to everybody in the room, such as “Hello” or “Hi everybody” when somebody arrives and “Bye, bye folx” or “Goodbye everybody I am leaving now”⁹⁷ when they leave.

Greetings provide a way of showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous co-participation, and, typically, that this relationship involves sufficient suppression of hostility for the participants temporarily to drop their guards and talk (Goffman 1967:41).

The first impression might be crucial for the rest of the discussion. Thus, the way of entering a room is important. Sometimes the greetings are addressed to someone special or, as shown in the following example, to all girls and ladies in the chat room.

14 SOL 5

Brad_Pitt88>ER TILBAKE OM 20 MINUTTER DAMER snill_gutt14>si hade til meg a jenter kozzy>ha det snill gutt snill_gutt14>jeg kommer igjen i kveld	Brad_Pitt88>BACK IN 20 MINUTES LADIES snill_gutt14>say goodbye to me girls kozzy>bye kind boy snill_gutt14>I'll be back this evening
---	--

The participant Brad_Pitt88 is probably a boy (because of a male nickname) born in 1988 (about 12 years old at the time of the observation). *He* uses a loud voice (capital letters) when *he* announces his short break

⁹⁷ In Norwegian: “HDET DA FOLKENS”

from the chat room. All ladies in the room are told to expect *him* back soon. Snill_gutt14 ('kind boy', 14 years old) also publishes *his* goodbye to the female participants. Only one girl answers. However, this is a person with the nickname *kozzy*, who probably is perceived to be a girl with a cosy and cool name. Snill_gutt14 announces *his* return later in the evening.

Sometimes participants say that they have to leave. They inform the others about their leaving with regrets by saying "sorry, have to go". If somebody has to break off the chat because of a sudden interruption (such as parents in the room), the message PA (parents alert) may be used to inform the other participants about their leaving without saying goodbye in a proper way. I never saw this abbreviation in my observations, but the editor of POPIT included this in a list of shortenings which he has found in the chat room. The greeting rituals indicate that it is important to inform about comings and goings. They may also indicate a feeling of responsibility towards chat partners. Farewells, on the other hand, sum up the effect of the encounter on the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they meet next time (Goffman 1967). Sveningsson (2001:135) finds in her adult sample that regular users have a certain signoff, "a way to announce that they are leaving the chat room". She regards such habits as an important part of the shared culture. Creating and using this kind of performative posting shows the user's familiarity with the environment and the chat room culture, she argues.

Chat pedagogy: induction and guidance of the less skilled

Chat is an activity between participants with inequalities in their abilities. I expect this tendency to increase in the future, as the user group today is less homogenous than earlier because of the increased accessibility of chat.

There are newcomers and experienced chatters, skilled and less skilled chatters, people in various age groups and people of both sexes. One question is whether there are instances when these people are taught by each other. The mix of prerequisites, interests and motivations is a gold mine for children (and adults) for learning how the chat room functions by drawing on other people's knowledge. The number of potential teachers enables participants to ask questions and get replies about difficult words and expressions, shortenings and possibilities, such as how to create your own message in a special colour or advises about going to another chat room. All the children in the sample see themselves as the most experienced computer user in their families. They expect other children at their age to have the same computer skills, too. "I am a key'er, not a zapp'er", Carl says. This confirms that he perceives himself as a computer user more than a television viewer (although the time he spends on the Net is much less than the time he spends on watching television). He is about to become an *insider*, in Sveningsson's term. However, Carl's Internet use is an activity in between other activities and Carl's parents regulate his use of the Net. Thus, his frequency in the chat room is unstable.

Anne is more of an insider. There are few restrictions laid down by her parents as long as she does her homework and carry out other duties. She shares her experiences with other people on the Net and advises a newcomer "to try again and again and ask" like she has done in the past and still does. I have used this method, too. Without exceptions, I have received answers when I have asked. This might have something to do with the supportive style and the *collective goods* (Rheingold 2000) that often emerge in a chat room when somebody addresses a problem. With reference to his fieldwork on a computer conferencing system for adult

people, Rheingold describes the social glue that binds members of this system into something resembling a community. Parts of this glue are *knowledge capital* and *communion*. The first concept refers to the body of expertise that can emerge at the very moment it is needed in order to solve a problem. *Communion* refers to the constant potential for being supported. In a Danish leisure time club, chat is one of the activities. Friends help each other to correct spelling errors. This is crucial in order for them to appear as older than their actual age (Knudsen 2001). It is not surprising that this is important, as age seems to be an essential part of the chat discourse. Knowledge is the ticket to the community on the Net and thus a tool to establish status, it is argued (Stuedahl 1998). Sveningsson (2001) finds that a large part of the observation transcripts show questions about computers and software. There is a general helpfulness here, or as I will argue, a sharing of knowledge.

However, as we saw in Chapter 5, the youngest children in particular make a significant effort to understand chat language and codes. Communicative competence is about much more than understanding a language. It is also about being able to interpret what is going on. Bengt develops his chat skills dramatically during the period of the inquiry. At the time of the second visit, chat had a marginal position in Bengt's total Internet use. The family had recently got a new computer and thus he had only just got access to the Net at home. Bengt was fascinated by all the possibilities on the Internet and he smiled when talking about football sites and games which were his favourites at that time. Chat did not seem to appeal to him at all. When he talked about his chat experiences, he said that he did usually not write so much text. He rather keyed a name of an animal or asked for a name. He never had a reply. Bengt's mother did not think he

perceived himself as especially clever in Norwegian as a school subject. This may explain why he did not look at himself as a writer. One and a half years later, however, he appears to have become an advanced chatter on IRC. He chats every day and what he likes best is all the stories, he says, laughing. Stories are supposed to be understood as the more or less credible accounts, performed by the people in the room, himself included. During this period Bengt became a competent participant and more than an occasional key'er in chat rooms. The high number of participants, earlier referred to as *silent listeners* (Corsaro 1985), may be conceived of as a group of passive observers that are unable to participate. However, this position may also be understood as a dynamic way of learning in a process where newcomers become part of a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), as we saw in Bengt's case. Seeing learning as a process that takes place in a participatory framework, i.e. as an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice, the authors emphasise an understanding of learning as a process involving "the whole person rather than *receiving* a body of factual knowledge about the world" (ibid.: 1991:33). Their concept *legitimate peripheral participation* provides "a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts and communities of knowledge and practice" (ibid.:29), they argue. Day after day, Bengt played, tested and asked ("I don't see him any more", his mother said). This example emphasises another dimension of chat rooms as a community of learning and teaching.

Between doubt and confidence

The children never know if the people they talk to really are who they say they are. Moving between levels of reality is part of the chat context. Participants in a chat room have to protect themselves against the risks of

this uncertainty at the same time as they are dependent on confidence to get contact. In conversations about this phenomenon, none of the children says they trust chat partners until they have talked privately for a longer period. However, when they chat, they talk to and about other people on the Net, and thereby they apparently accept the identities these participants announce. The fact that trusting another participants' identity is a question of credibility, nevertheless leads to a situation where chatters from time to time have to consider what to believe or not and what to have confidence in or doubt. When regarding chat as reality-oriented (*real* life-oriented), as discussed in Chapter 5, the chatter is engaged in an ongoing reflexive process, which involves deciding both what to give about her/him self and what not to give. One of the safest methods is to present yourself in a way which is likely to be accepted and recognised. Whether this is the motive Frida has when she chooses her nickname is unclear. Nevertheless, she does not want her nickname to be connected to an identity that can be perceived as not cool. Presenting and protecting one self are two sides of the same coin.

F: If somebody I am talking to smokes and thinks that's cool...and then I say that I don't want to smoke...and then the others don't want to talk to me and maybe say on the open channel that ...my nickname does not want to smoke because she doesn't think that's cool...

V: Do you think you make a fool of yourself then...in public?

F: Yes

V:Mm. But don't you think somebody would have supported you, too?

F: Yes, maybe

V: So... cha...that's not the place to talk about such things?

F: No

Another important issue is to protect your *real* identity, i.e. details which would reveal facts about where you live and such things. It may happen that Hilde gives her e-mail address in a chat room, but never her mobile

phone number. Carl says it might be troublesome to escape from a private chat. When there are many participants present this enables the chatters to hide in the crowd. “It is easier to talk with people on mIRC, because there are so many there”, Hilde says. “Always”.

V: But are you more certain that these people are young people?

H: No,I don't know.

V: No, you don't.

H: No

V: So when Babe 17 and Boy 15 arrive...do you trust this?

H: No (laughs)????

People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in *real* life, “but we leave our bodies behind”, Rheingold (2000) argues. ”You cannot kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries” (Rheingold 2000:xvii). I will sum up some of the boundaries children create in chat rooms.

Boundaries

In order to claim that children conceive of chat rooms as a community, it is necessary, according to the definition presented in the beginning of this chapter, to uncover some boundaries through which community seems to be constructed. What kind of practices show that children create and maintain similarities and differences? Below are listed some of the boundary markers which have been discussed.

Language	Topics	Interests
Status	Friendliness	Humour
Hostility	Greeting rituals	Teaching

These boundary markers are active both towards people inside the chat room as well as towards what might be perceived as groups and communities outside the chat room. The markers seem to provide a way to positioning the chatters vis-à-vis each other and also create a practicable number of chat partners. I have chosen to analyse boundary markers by examining the social processes and creation of cultural meaning which are included in Cohen's definition as both loose and strict sets of processes. This means that boundaries have to be sufficiently loose to enable the chat room to welcome new participants and strict enough to exclude chatters who do not contribute to making the chat room an attractive space. The main issue is that the communication functions well, in the sense that it flows in a way that allows people to participate. The exploration of boundaries is a question related both to people who are participants in the chat rooms and also to the outside world.

Recapturing of a public space?

After having presented various ways in which children's communication in chat rooms is perceived and constructed in terms of community dimensions, a new question appears: Why do people use large parts of their days (and nights) to be in these rooms? Several researchers have tried to answer this question. As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, Rheingold gives a kind of compensatory explanation of why people build virtual communities: it is because of the lack of informal public space in people's *real* lives. He refers to Ray Oldenburg who in the book *The Great Good Place* (1991) argued that there are three essential places in people's lives: the place we live, the place we work and the place we gather for conviviality. Examples of the third type of place are cafes, pubs and town squares. Oldenburg's argument is that such places are where communities

can come into being and continue to hold together. These are the unacknowledged agorae of modern life, he argues. From Rheingold's point of view, Oldenburg explicitly put a name and conceptual framework on a phenomenon that every virtual communitarian knows instinctively, the power of informal public life.

Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off hours, as well as at other times. The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres. Though a radically different kind of setting for a home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends. Such are the characteristics of third places that appear to be universal and essential to a vital informal public life... (Rheingold 1991:10).

If we accept that people use cyberspace to construct third places, how do they practice this? And is this a useful perspective with respect to children? Do we think about children in terms of populating the third places or are these conceived of as places for adults? Do we recognise the school as a formal place where children are supposed to work or do we think about school as one of the third places of children? Modern societies organise childhood in formal institutions which might obviously be perceived as relaxing places, but which are formally constructed as a second place, in Oldenburg's terms. Schools are places for work. In Western countries, children's everyday lives are far more organised and controlled by adults today than in earlier times. Children spent much time together in groups during earlier periods in the history of the Western societies, it is argued (Schneider 2000). "For much of the day, children provided for many of

each other's physical and emotional needs, in situations where children now receive support from parents and teachers" (Schneider 2000:129). The answers to the questions raised above are crucial for how the children's leisure time is perceived. People tend to make connections with each other when they live their lives situated in different areas or moving between them. New technology makes this easier. The extensive use of mobile phones in the Western parts of the world, particularly by children, might be seen as a parallel to the other new ways of making connections. In the light of children's adult-organised lives, both in institutions and leisure time activities and, as international trends show, with schooling at home, one might ask if the new modes of using technology offer a way for children to recapture the third place, the informal public life which has been reduced by modern society. Research in the UK, for instance, suggests that children today are much more confined to their homes and much less independently mobile than they were twenty years ago (Buckingham 2000). Much of the data seems to support such a view, which presupposes some essential ideas of a universal motivation towards sociability. However, in a literal interpretation, contemporary children can hardly recapture something they never have experienced. The pleasures lie in meeting other people, being together and having fun – and these are ultimately the strongest indications of and motivations for the construction of a community in the chat rooms.

Summary

Does it make sense to talk about chat rooms in terms of a community? This chapter has tried to present some results and some arguments which support the conclusion that this might be a useful perspective. The discussion of the concept of community emphasises a dynamic definition, whereby a community is seen as something people *do* rather than

something that *is*. However, what distinguishes a community from other kinds of social relationships is the marking of boundaries. People in a community have something in common which distinguishes them from other groups. So far, it has been possible to identify some concrete and highly recognisable aspects that may serve as characteristic features of these chat rooms before the children arrive. In Chapter 5 we discovered that chat communication represents a special kind of language which in various ways constitutes a youth cultural code. In this chapter we have seen how one of the web sites defines its own cultural and structural characteristics, which focus on chat as a leisure time activity, narratives of risks and a shared norm system with specific rules. We have also seen how the web site highlights individuality and images of childhood by means of addressing children as competent individuals. Gender is performed and constructed by presenting girls and boys as different, to a certain extent through stereotypes. Last but not least, children are perceived and addressed as consumers through the commercial marketing. Meanwhile, boundaries are created and maintained by the children themselves through a set of markers, such as language, topics, interests, status, friendliness, humour, hostility, greeting ceremonies and teaching. This chapter suggests that chat communication might be seen as a way for children to construct informal public places in historical and cultural contexts where access to such places is reduced or limited.

7 Web chat and identity formation

“Growth isn’t just adding inches. It’s also about youngsters finding their feet.” This is the message in an advertisement to parents who are invited to let their children attend an art school in their leisure time.⁹⁸ ‘To find one’s feet’ can be seen as a metaphor for the process of exploring “who I am” and “who I want to be”. This chapter investigates chat rooms as a tool for children in their identity formation and focuses on social interaction on the Internet. Seeing communication as a social action, the presentation draws both on anthropology, sociology, psychology and folkloristic studies. This includes how children present themselves and how they perform dimensions such as age, gender and location.

Identity: the concept

The concept of identity can be analysed on different levels of abstraction. By *identity formation* is meant both the process of the children growing into a society and the lifelong identity processes in which an individual acts reflexively in relation to the self and the surroundings. The notion of *formation* refers both to something that is formed and to the act of having or taking form. This double perspective is a guideline for the following discussion of the concept of identity. Giddens (1991) presents the concept of *self-identity*, which is defined as how the individual perceives the self in light of personal biography, i.e. the individual perception of identity. Self-identity is the personal comprehension of oneself as an individual. In the

⁹⁸ Hendon & Finchley Times, London, 4 April 2002.

book *Stigma* (1990), Goffman discusses the concepts of *personal* and *social identity*. Personal identity includes all marks and pegs as well as the unique combination of life history items that come to be attached to the individual with the help of these identity markers. Social identity, however, covers the categories, by which a society classifies people, together with the attributes which are to be perceived as natural for the members of any single category, Goffman (1990) argues. Goffman's theories of roles show how people behave and act in relations to others, something which influences both how we perceive ourselves and others, but also how individual roles are influenced by others' expectations and actions. In this respect, social identity is manifested as normative expectations and demands. It is this part of the concept of identity I will focus on in this thesis.

A distinction might be drawn between Goffman and Giddens when questioning the existence of an authentic self. While Goffman talks about presentation of self (i.e. there is an authentic self behind the presented self), Giddens talks about the changing and reflexive self (i.e. the self is continuously constructed). This might lead to the conclusion that Giddens rejects the idea of a constant and basic essence of the self. However, when he describes how people adapt themselves and perform according to social demands in contemporary societies, he dissociates himself, in my opinion, from such a perspective, seeing individuals as tending to develop multiple selves in which there is no inner core of self-identity.

Yet surely, as an abundance of studies of self-identity shows, this is plainly not the case. The maintaining of constants of demeanour across varying settings of interaction is one of the prime means whereby coherence of self-identity is ordinarily preserved. The potential for the

unraveling of self-identity is kept in check because demeanour sustains a link between 'feeling at home in one's body' and the personalised narrative. Demeanour effectively has to be integrated into that narrative for a person both to be able to sustain 'normal appearances' and at the same time be convinced of personal continuity across time and space...(Giddens 1990:100).

The notion of *demeanour*, defined as manner, attitude, behaviour and conduct,⁹⁹ relates to Bourdieu's use of the concept *habitus*, understood as a way of being and thinking which, for instance, is embodied through interactions with the cultural, social and material environment (Bourdieu 1995). Habitus refers to a phenomenological approach, wherein reality is seen as relational. This perspective is far from the psychological views, for example represented by Allport (1956), which does not focus on the factors shaping personality, but rather on the personality 'itself'. As Mead (1955) argued, it was a tendency in psychology to deal with the self as a more or less isolated and independent element, a sort of entity that conceivably could exist by itself. Thus, both psychology and sociology have a long tradition of recognising the relation between the individual core of identity and society. This link is important to take into account, both because psychology has been criticised for underestimating social contexts, but also because some social theories, such as social constructivism, seem to underestimate the importance of early childhood experiences and the 'living child' (James et.al 1998). Giddens (1991) discusses the problems faced by contemporary identity projects that have been emancipated from traditions and authorities. His terms *danger* and *possibility* indicate that children and youth are terribly alone and blissfully free in their identity formation. In this respect, the individual identity project is perceived as a far more central and complex ongoing project today than in earlier times,

⁹⁹ The New Oxford Thesaurus of English (2000).

particularly for young people. The concept of identity is useful, especially in Western societies, where people today show signs of uncertainty about identity, the social anthropologist Gullestad (1989) argues. In her opinion, Goffman's notion of *social identity* expresses in a nutshell a central dilemma in all social life, because the definition of the concept is 'to be alike' at the same time as it implies 'to be different from' or 'distinct'. The concept of social identity thus connects the self to the social and cultural life (Gullestad 1989).

Historically, identity has been related to occupation, social class, family and nation (Stuedahl 1998). Today, however, identity is often referred to as tied to structures, social and cultural groups and spaces, she argues. Styles and symbols are ways of relating to modernity. It is also argued that technology has to be taken into account if we want to understand ideas about identity today (Hannerz 1983). The technological achievements of the last centuries have produced a radical shift in our exposure to each other. A psychological approach to the consequences of these changes is that "the process of social saturation is producing a profound change in our ways of understanding the self" (Gergen 1991:6). His main argument is that emerging technologies have saturated the human self with multiple voices and disparate positions for being. Consequences of this are what he calls *identity production* and *fractional relationships*, i.e.; relationships built around a limited aspect of one's being (Gergen 1991:178).

The Net is often, particularly by authors who define themselves as post-structuralists, understood and conceptualised as a space with unlimited boundaries in which one can freely create oneself because of what is understood as an independence of body and other personal, cultural and

social conditions (Stone 1993; Turkle 1995; Stuedahl 1998). It is argued that the computer has changed from having been a tool for calculation to being a tool for simulation (Turkle 1995). Online it is possible to make friends, communicate with other people and play with *multiple identities*, independent of time, space, age, body and gender, it is argued. It might be questioned how freely people can create their identities. However, it is obvious that the Internet technology contributes to a shift in the ways people can be together. Online 'togetherness' creates new possibilities for social encounters. It is argued that chat rooms have become playgrounds or workshops for developing and testing identity, and that these are resources in children's identity construction (Holm Sørensen and Olesen 2000). This relies on a conception of identity as a constructive process dependent on time, space and situation, in contrast to a former notion of identity as a more or less fixed individual property. In chat rooms children get to know something about other people, and they are confronted with social demands and expectations which question what is strategic for them to make relevant about themselves, in Goffman's terms. Considerations about *self-presentation* and what to keep *frontstage* and *backstage* imply, however, a self-conscious manipulation.

Frønes (1995) argues that the relation between social structure and social action has to be viewed in terms of the interplay between the acting actors, their competence and their social and cultural field of action. This involves seeing identity as a strategy, not just something that is acquired. Personal identity is seen as something that is continually constructed and reconstructed. This perspective argues that the "mechanism in this process will often be contrasting, i.e. affirming what I am not, just as much as what I am" (Frønes 1995:190). When seeing identity as a continuous, life long

process, it is not just attributed (James 1993), but it can be negotiated and managed (Goffman 1990). An anthropological definition of the study of identity includes exploring the 'apparent paradox' of the continuity between the social space and the individuals that constitute it, James (1993) argues, referring to Ardener (1987:39). This means, "to understand how they are defined by the space and are nevertheless the defining consciousness of that space". The question here is, therefore, how are children defined by and how do they define 'cyberspace' themselves.

**“You have to find a starry name!” The key to success
is in the nicknames.**

Many chatters make significant efforts in order to present an appropriate identity and to reveal each other's identity on the Net. Example of this is when a chatter, mega_Male asks another participant: "Are you a girl? How old are you? Do you come from Oslo"? However, before these questions can be asked, mega_Male has, for some reasons, decided to 'be' mega_Male on the Net. Choosing a nickname (or a 'nick') is a part of the entrance ritual; it is something a participant is required to do in order to enter a chat room. The nickname is, as we have seen earlier, crucial for success. But what is a successful nickname? A preliminary impression is that many names have the prefix *cool* and *sexy* while some names seem to indicate a belonging to or a distance from cultural characters and figures. Age and gender also seem to be a part of a nickname quite often. However, a study of 231 nicknames in the two chat rooms shows the following patterns:

Nr.	Categories/Characteristics	Examples	Number
1	Anglo-American and constructed Norwegian names	Charli Mads	61
2	Names indicating biological sex Some more female than male Most of them in combination with other features, such as age.	Girl Popboy	55
3	Ordinary names, most Norwegian. Most female	Line (female) Rune (male)	33
4	Love, affection, sex, appearance. Mostly female and in English	Hotgirl KISS_ME Sweetgirl	25
5	Names combining name or biological sex with age	tamara11 gutt12 (boy12)	15
6	Well-known people; cultural characters, figures and politicians.	britneyspears SADDAM pokémon	14
7	Letters, initials	Hgj KB	9
8	Computer-related names. Majority in English	Nettbabe Chat_King	9
9	'Cool' names	Mobil_girl mafia-babe	9
10	Names indicating more than one person	Boardbabes Morten og Kim (2 male names)	7
11	Humour	BigOne (name of a pizza) Promp (fart)	6
12	Message or a sentence	I_miss_tranceboy Jeg er meg (I am me)	5
13	Place, local belonging	Osloboy Sandnes-jentene (girls)	4
14	Ordinary Norwegian names and age Just girls	Stina_14 Silje_13	3
15	Interest	Hestegaljente (girl who loves horses), foto (photo)	2
16	Animal	katt (cat)	1

Table 5. Overview of various categories of nicknames, sorted according to number. Where not indicated, gender differences are minimal or not present.

The list above shows 16 different categories of names, two-three examples of each category and the total number of names in each category.¹⁰⁰ The list

¹⁰⁰ The whole list is presented in an appendix.

also shows various ways of combining features, such as age and gender. The largest group constitutes the people who have the most anonymous names. These are Anglo-American and Norwegian names. Some of them are constructed from a Norwegian name, such as Mads.¹⁰¹ Those who are or want to be perceived as a girl or a boy also constitute a large group. The group of ordinary Norwegian names consists of more female than male names. In this respect anonymity, gender and ordinariness dominate the preferred nicknames. Age, love, popular culture, appearance, interests are also sources from which children create nicknames. Computer concepts, humour, location (where people live) and personal interests are others. However, this pattern does not necessarily mean that the names at the top of the list are the names that happen to be answered. According to what children say, the categories 4, 8 and 9, i.e. those with a cool image, are most likely to be answered. Thus, there seems to be a conflict between the names children say they prefer to use and those which make them to attractive chat partners. With reference to IRC and grown up chatters, Bechar-Israeli (1995) discusses people's choice of nicknames.

Since a person's physical existence and identity must be condensed textually into a single line, which states the nickname and the electronic address, the person will attempt to make these representational elements as prominent as possible. The way to do so is to choose an original nick which conveys something about the person's 'self' and which will tempt other participants to strike up a conversation with that person (Bechar-Israeli 1995:2).

A nickname is the ultimate visual sign of a personal identity. The nickname introduces the personal profile a participant wants to present. Erik thinks the name boy12year is a typical nickname. In the list above it can be found in category 5. He also thinks it is possible to know who is a girl and who is

¹⁰¹ Mads is a male name.

a boy, just by looking at the names. When I ask him if a boy can have the nickname Babe, he confirms that this might be possible, but just for fun. “People must have cool names”, says Frida. “What is a cool name?” I ask. She shows me what she means.

F: This is not a cool name...
V: Tony Montana is not cool?
F: No.....This maybe....
V: Hotboy is cool

A nickname Guro likes is jenter14 (girls14). When Hilde chooses a chat partner, she looks for simple nicknames, preferably names which are ‘boyish’ and never those she thinks are old people ¹⁰² (25 or more). This presentation indicates that there is a close relation between the nickname and the personal style or image children want to perform. However, this can be a very temporary performance. In contrast with adult chatters, who tend to keep one ‘nick’ and one identity for a long period of time and become deeply attached to it (Bechar-Israeli 1995), children say they often change nick. Bengt changes nickname and profile for the purpose of not being recognised. The choice of nickname is perceived as decisive for getting a reply or not. But, if you do not succeed with one choice, you are allowed to change nick. Frida has used this possibility, too.

V:It does not look like you are answered.
F: No
V: No
F: It depends on what kind of name you have, too, though.
V: Yes. Do you change the name if you think that’s the reason?
F: Yes

¹⁰² In Norwegian: *oldinger*.

Warnings may emerge on the screen from people having revealed that others are operating with various nicknames. There might be several reasons for giving warnings. Often it seems to be a game, sometimes in a rather rough style between people who chat regularly.

15 SOL 9

mango_babe> FUCK MOBILGIRL mango_babe>mobil_girl: du er en jævla dust, å nei! Nå kom fly_girl vi kranvla med henne i går. Hun er jo frekk mot alle!!! mango_babe>slitsomt fly_girl>mango_babe: hva het du igår dahhh?!! mango_babe> guess!!!! fly_girl>limit mango_babe>fly_girl: OK JEG ER limit fra I går Texo>mango_babe er lesbisk!! Texo>har ikke bilde men er SEXY fly_girl>hvor gammel er du??? Manu4u>Foto er pedofil ADVARSEL Foto>Sogndal Manu4u>Foto er ute og bytter nick mango_babe>gleder meg til fly_girl stikker!!!!!!!!!!	mango_babe> FUCK MOBILGIRL mango_babe>mobil_girl: you're a bloody idiot, oh no! now the fly_girl has come we quarrelled with her yesterday she's cheeky to everybody!!! mango_babe>annoying fly_girl>mango_babe: what was your name yesterday thennn?!! mango_babe> guess!!!! fly_girl>limit mango_babe>fly_girl: OK I AM limit from yesterday Texo>mango_babe is a lesbian! Texo>has not got a picture but is SEXY fly_girl>how old are you??? Manu4u>Photo is a paedophiliac? WARNING Foto>Sogndal Manu4u>Photo is changing nick mango_babe>look forward to fly_girl's dropping out!!!!!!!!!!
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In this excerpt mango_babe first attacks Mobil_girl by calling *her* a bloody idiot and then flies into passion because another participant, fly_girl arrives. Fly_girl tries to reveal that mango_babe has changed nick and asks what name s/he used yesterday. Fly_girl is asked to guess; *she* guesses limit and mango_babe admits that s/he was limit yesterday. Later in the transcript people are warned that the participant with the name photo is changing nickname and is a paedophile. Earlier in this chat sequence (which is not presented here) photo asked for girls who want to earn

money. Three participants answered yes and two asked photo to “fuck off”. In the course of the 14 messages above, two participants are objects of evaluation concerning their nicknames. Changing nick is, particularly in the latter case, connected to a questioning of the participant’s credibility and purposes. There are also nicknames that indicate more than one person. Some of the informants in the interviews say that they sometimes construct one joint identity when they are chatting together with friends. An example is three girls who make a mix of personal attributes from each of them. Then they add 3 years to their *real* age.

Talking about ugly names shows how the question about name and gender are closely related. “This has to be a boy! I bet it’s a boy!” Anne says. “It is a boy – only boys can think of such names.” Unfortunately, the actual name causing Anne’s exclamation is impossible to hear on the tape. Her reaction is a result of what she thinks is a masculine way of presenting an identity. We do not know if Anne is right in her evaluation that this is a boy. She might have her reasons to be so sure. As we are going to discuss later, there may be some characteristics of this special kind of communication which encourage gender stereotypes.

Both names and nicknames are understood as closely bound up with one’s sense of identity, it is argued (Morgan, O’Neill and Harré 1979). While nicknaming in *real* life involves being given a name by others (and often against one’s will), nicknames in a chat room are chosen by the person himself or herself. While nicknaming in *real* life often is a matter of appearance, family relationships, local culture and so on, the self-given nicknames in chat rooms are nourished by other sources, such as popular culture, global orientation, humour and identity processes. This enables

people to play with various kinds of names and also change these whenever they want. Nevertheless, there are some advantages to keeping the same name. The logic behind this argument is that a stable nickname enables more stable communication. In the vulnerable phase as the first messages really are, the name is the only basis from which the participants can hope to recognise and distinguish each other.

E: have met somebody who I talk to...English people, too.

V: Yes

E: But I have not continued to have contact ...with them.

V: No. Is it one message forth and one back and then....no more... or?

E: I have met the same people several times though, because they have been there many times.

V: Yes, so you recognise them? They have the same...

E: Yes, they have the same name.

Erik has talked several times to the same person. Asking him if he uses the same nickname just now, he first answers yes and then he says "...it varies, in fact". The point is that he does not always want to be recognised. Sometimes he wants continuity and recognition while he also appreciates anonymity from time to time.

V: Mm. If you don't want to be recognised?

E: Then I just write something else

V: Yes, does it happen often, that you...?

E: No, but....I usually want to be recognised though

V: Yes, why?

E: Then somebody comes to talk to me and...

V: Yes

E: saying hello again...

After having reflected on this issue, he realises that what he appreciates most of all is when somebody remembers him. This requires a stable nickname.

Holm Sørensen and Olesen (2000) argue that both boys and girls choose chat partners because of the name. The nickname should be neither 'rocked' nor 'sexy', one boy (13 years old) in their study says. They find, as I also did, that a common choice is ordinary names. In addition, the names should not indicate social class, be old-fashioned or associated with a concrete personality. The study above shows that it is the younger children who choose the name of a football player. Advanced chatters are more likely to choose the name of a character from a computer game in order to attain recognition. Some names are connected to the prefix 'sexy'. The main object is to find an appealing nickname, or as Dag in the present study says: "a starry name".

'Age-ing' and gendering: being a child and becoming a youth

We have already discussed that age and gender are present in chat communication in various ways. Age and particularly gender are often parts of the nickname: they are so important that they need to be presented every time the owner sends a message. The most visible evidence of age as a significant feature for distinction in chat rooms is, however, the ritualised introductory question that starts with a question about age. Why is this so important as the first step into a talk? First of all, it is a convention that is encouraged by the ways the web site asks people to present their personal profile. Some of the children say that they do not know exactly what the letters ASL mean, but they know what to say when they are asked. Secondly, the question is crucial for making assumptions about the chat partner's identity, even if the messages are not always credible. But there are several other reasons for getting confirmation of age, seen in light of the various interests, presuppositions and expectations of the group of participants. The youngest children seem to ask for chat partners of their

own age. Hilde (14) thinks the youngest people in the chat rooms are 10 years old, while Anne (11) thinks the youngest are 9. This seems to be the lowest age at which children present themselves, both in their nicknames and in the messages. Pervo_gris,¹⁰³ who asks for anybody of 6 years and less, would probably not have been taken seriously if there had been other people in the room. In this case there were just this participant and the researcher, who did not answer. Another possibility is that people in the room would have suspected this participant to be (or pretending to be) an adult with sinister intentions. The eldest girls want older chat partners than themselves. The last time I visited Hilde, she tells that she usually talks in chat rooms with people around 20. Guro (14) pretends to be 17 to ensure that somebody wants to talk to her. The eldest or the most advanced boys want chat partners of their own age and with the same interests as themselves, such as computer games.

The categories age and gender are not just biological and cognitive features, but also a matter of social and cultural value, emphasised by several structural features in society, such as the organisation of school and leisure time activities in age homogenous groups and gender-defined settings. Gendering, the process of transforming biological sex to the social and cultural phenomenon of gender, is a widely studied topic, mostly due to the emerging field of feminist studies since the 1970's. These studies question biological determination and the concept of *natural gender differences* (Thorne 1993). Age, in contrast, has (with the exception of statistics) more or less been a field of study within the discipline of psychology, where emotional, physical and cognitive development has been the main focus of interest. A critique of this perspective is that it is

¹⁰³ *Gris* is Norwegian for *pig*.

based on a universalising concept of childhood as an underlying assumption and that childhood is valued only as a preparation for adult life, not in itself. The sociology of childhood argues, as discussed in Chapter 3, that children are to be regarded as beings, not only becomings (Qvortrup et.al 1994; James et.al 1998). However, this position should not prevent us from also considering children as becomings. Even if childhood is recognised as valuable in its own right, children are becoming something they are not yet. Much of children's discourse ¹⁰⁴ about age is related to calibrating yourself in this way, as older/younger, more or less powerful etc. This thesis will argue that it is possible and even necessary to employ both these perspectives if we want to explore what happens in the lives of contemporary children. It is possible to look at both the present and the future in order to avoid the risk of being short sighted and thus neglecting children's life 'here and now'. Taking such a perspective, it is crucial to take account of children's own stories, expectations and concerns on the one hand and, the various structural conditions under which childhood is experienced on the other. By only arguing that the child is wise and competent, we may lose an essential part of the temporal aspect of childhood. Age is seen as performed and socially constructed through a process of 'age-ing', in which various requisites are available and several co-performers participate. Thus, the meanings of age are socially defined.

Web chat is a means of exploring age and gender. Many of the messages and conversations can be read in that context. Some of the messages are performed as a quiz, as described in Chapter 5. Persons who are able to

¹⁰⁴ Here the concept *discourse* is used as a particular way to talk about and understand the world or parts of the world (Winther Jørgensen and Philips 1999).

give the correct answers get credit. In the following transcript age is the topic for the quiz and the participant kozzy gets the award.

16 SOL 5

i_miss_tranceboy>hvord gammel er jeg	i_miss_tranceboy>how old am I
kozzy>14	kozzy>14
sweety>13	sweety>13
Tine>15	Tine>15
Selma>15	Selma>15
I_miss_tranceboy>1 poeng til kozzy	I_miss_tranceboy>1 point for kozzy
tweety12>er jeg en gutt eller en jente?	tweety12>am I a boy or a girl?
sweety>jente	sweety>girl
kozzy>jente	kozzy>girl

The exploration is often less explicitly related to age and gender than this conversation implies. When interpreting chat communication, it is useful to look for what is expressed more indirectly, and thereby recognise that everything is not present in the text (Cameron 2001). What kind of nicknames, topics and behaviour count as appropriate and not appropriate? What happens when somebody breaks the rules and taboos? The utterances “This is not a place for small kids!” or “Are there just small girls here?” may be interpreted as a way to construct the chat room as a space just for peer groups or teenage groups and thus make boundaries and constitute similarities and differences. The message may also be interpreted as a way to say that “I am older than you” and thereby claiming that “I know something you do not know”. This might give the participant another position in the room, a position s/he does not necessarily have in real life. A higher age may also qualify to acquire some rights that younger children do not have. In this sense inclusion and exclusion strategies are parts of ‘age-ing’ and gendering projects, focusing on both equality and differences. In a study of chat conversations in UK, Willett (2002) argues that her

informants (girls between 10-13) explore discourses around gender and sexuality, they take risks and they play with taboo topics. James (1993) emphasises the importance of age and gender in children's experiences of childhood. In her studies with preschool and primary school children, age and gender were two aspects of identity that the children used to differentiate one from another. By constructing and reconstructing equality and differences, participants tell others in the chat room how they are alike and how they are unlike (or how they want to be alike and unlike). For children in particular, this is an essential part of the concept of social identity, which was described earlier in this chapter.

Age is less present in the list of nicknames than in the transcripts. This may indicate that the children are more interested in other participants' age than presenting their own. Questioning age seems to underpin a large part of the messages and is discussed frequently in the interviews. Carl is sure that people usually pretend to be older than they are, not younger. Age seems to be crucial to get access to talking with older people. Asking Dag, if he says he is 12 (his real age), he answers: "It is almost nobody...such young chatters...on the real big sites...maybe they are 14 or more...I think". His references when he answers are sites for older people than him. To be where he likes to be, he simply has to pretend to be older than he in fact is. But everybody knows that the given age is not necessarily the real age. Dag is likely to find a chat partner of his own age who is also pretending to be older. Thus it might be necessary to go through a series of masquerades until the chat partners realise that they are at the same age, interested in the same things and, most of all, dare to talk about it.

Frida usually visits several chat rooms and has talked to people aged 30

years. There might be somebody aged 10 here, too, she says. However, these are all exceptions, she thinks.

F: Actually, there is no age limit. I hardly believe this guy is 18....

V: No...how do you see that

F: How he says...he is fooling around and...

V: Do you think he seems a bit childish?

F: Yes

“But on SOL adult people cannot chat”, she says “because there it is an age restriction from 10-15 years”. It does not seem to strike her that people younger or older than this age limit can break the rule in order to get access to the room. Thus, she trusts the credibility of the participants on this level, while she is otherwise fully aware of the play and pretence when it comes to the question of *real* age.

Age might, as we have already seen, be used both as an including and excluding dimension. Thus age is not just a social category, but also a social strategy. Age does not just tell what a person is, but what the person will become and what the person has been (Frønes 1995:190). In this context it seems meaningful to read the message “don’t say you like Winnie-the-Pooh!” as a strategy to inform readers that liking this character belongs to past times, even if those past times might be only two weeks ago. Earlier Frida, Guro and Hilde say they entered a chat room simply because they thought it was fun. Now they say they do it when they are bored. Anne also frequently uses the adverbs *now*, *earlier* and *any longer* when talking about chat. This emphasises the dynamic and process-related character of their Internet use, also exemplified in this e-mail to me from Anne:

Hi. Thought I should mail you and ask for contact and tell you about my new great hobby, which is making homepages. Almost nobody is chatting any more, so there is not so much to write about that, really, but many are involved in making homepages. Most of them don't chat at all while somebody is on mIRC once a week or something like that. Just wanted to tell you and give you the URL to my homepage.

In this context it is useful to ask if Anne's focus on temporal changes in her priorities marks an important distinction from something she has finished, or at least finished in the way she used it before. In this sense this shows the complexity and relations between dimensions such as age, cognitive skills and maturity.

Similarly, in Chapter 5, excerpt 10, when talking about how happy they are to have finished school,¹⁰⁵ how they hate school and that school is a dump, the seven participants are also performing age. In this chat room most of the audience seems to be younger than these seven celebrating participants. On one level, the performance is a warning against what might lie ahead for those who have not yet reached this stage at school. Calling the school a dump is also a symbolic action, informing other participants in the room what kind of narrative about school that it is appropriate to retell. In this perspective the utterances are much more than a celebration of the transition to college or leaving what the participants might think is a boring place. It is also a narrative of becoming an adolescent. One of the chatters (with a girlish name) shouts that *she* is going to get a boyfriend during *her* summer holiday. In this case the chat room is a safe place to explore and express joy and expectations about an essential issue for somebody on the threshold to an adolescent and adult life.

¹⁰⁵ In Norwegian: ungdomsskolen 13-15

Sex and Gender

In the previous section I discussed how the questions of age and gender are closely related in chat messages. In this section, however, I concentrate on the issues of sex and gender. Asking about the participant's biological sex is the second part of the introduction ritual, mentioned earlier. Focusing on this issue might contribute to generate gender stereotypic expectations. This is also a risk in interviewing children about sex and gender. A crucial and critical question is the researcher's own expectations or biases. An obvious feature is for example the question about inclusion and exclusion. Taking into account the fact that we do not know the biological sex of the chatters, but rather have to rely on strong indications or accept the play, it may be claimed that girls are performing inclusive strategies and boys exclusive. However, making such a conclusion may simplify what is actually going on. It is more accurate to suggest that the roles which the children perform are gendered, and that in these performances, both girls and boys explore what it means to be girls as well as boys. Thus sex, sexuality and gender are objects for exploration. The tools, however, are picked up from the children's social lives, which include a whole range of stereotypic attitudes towards for example marginal groups, such as gays and lesbians. According to Kress' definition, discussed in Chapter 5, children have picked up those stereotypes from the *socially formed world*. What might be perceived as feminine and masculine behaviour can also be explored by both genders. In accordance with face-to-face settings, gender separation is more likely in crowded settings, Thorne (1993) argues. A parallel to a crowded web chat is highly relevant.

The communication is sometimes characterised by waves of both confrontations and harmonising activity. This does not permit a special

kind of attitude or behaviour to dominate; rather, it is a continuous flow of attack and defence, critique and concessions. This might be different when adults communicate online. When Herring (1999) studied an IRC channel and an academic discussion group, she found what she calls a rhetoric of harassment of females by male participants. Adler and Adler (1998) argue that both girls and boys display common patterns of inclusion and exclusion. This is a perspective which contrasts with dominant assumptions about children's social behaviour, and it suggests that girls try to beat each other verbally and wound each other emotionally, while boys, who are supposed to lack interpersonal skills, merely wound each other physically. The two chat rooms seem to be mixed communities, also in terms of gender. It may be questioned if chat rooms have more extensive possibilities for exploring gender than *real* life has, for example in a classroom where boys are said to dominate girls (Hey 1997) or where there might be limited interaction between boys and girls (Lidén 2000). The understanding of boys' culture as a culture of coolness and girls' culture as a culture of compliance and conformity (Adler and Adler 1998) may also be questioned. At any rate, it is not possible to observe features of masculine hegemony, such as Herring and later, Kendall (2000) found when they studied adult chatters. It makes sense to talk about a gendered agenda in chat rooms with children, but a salient feature is the mix between the genders and the protests when somebody breaks the rules and conventions. Thus, the chat room is a sort of fitness centre for exercising one's abilities in expressing oneself, in which one can negotiate, explore, protest, be visible and take on a leading part. On the other hand, if an 11-year-old girl is called a "fucking bitch"¹⁰⁶ when she has broken the chat

¹⁰⁶ This expression is from the preliminary observations and was written in English originally.

style and said something which is perceived as extremely stupid, she might think that she has come to the wrong place and prefers to keep quiet or withdraw. It is likely that there are vast numbers of experiences such as those described above. This has to do with the simple fact that a chatter can be rude without risking any punishment or sanctions in *real* life. As children enter this kind of communication with a variety of motivations and aspirations, establishing and redefining of the communicative contract take place continuously. New nicknames with other styles emerge in the very moment troublemakers disappear. This is a tendency which indicates that many children also occupy the role of audience.

The overwhelming majority of friendships during middle childhood are said to be with members of the same gender (Schneider 2000). In chat rooms, however, girls and boys are together and can, if they want, talk to each other. Hilde thinks the number of girls and boys are about the same in a chat room, while one of the boys is almost sure that there are more girls there. The children have clear assumptions, which to some extent are stereotyped views, about gender differences related to what girls and boys talk about and how they talk. Girls talk about pop idols and television series. Girls talk about clothes and “all those things”, while boys talk about what has happened at school, Erik says. Some of the girls themselves extend the topics to include personal interests and future plans. Both girls and boys say that boys talk about games. Anne knows for sure that there are boys in the chat rooms. “Boys are there, too, but they are so rough and serious... and boys: games, games, games and war!” When Dag is asked if boys and girls write about the same things in a chat room, he answers that he thinks this has to do with hobbies. What Dag might mean is that the topics instinctively become different, dependent on if there is a girl or a

boy who is speaking. Another interpretation could be that the hobbies are more important than biological sex. However, this is a less probable interpretation as he continues and says it is girlish to chat. He believes that few girls talk about games. "Codes and computer games are boy things", he says. Thus, the chat genre and the discourse about the phenomenon chat itself seem to be perceived as feminine. However, some boys try to make the content masculine. The interviews show that it is less common that girls pretend to be boys than the other way round. Through interviews with adults who communicate online, Turkle (1995) found that many men pretend to be women on the Net. In this respect, the boys in my study and these men are more likely to perform feminine identities than girls and women are to perform masculine identities. Gender research uses the concepts *cross-gender relations* and *cross-dressing* to describe how people cross gender boundaries (Thorne 1993; Adler and Adler 1998). Similar concepts, such as *gender swapping* and *computer cross-dressing* are common concepts and popular phenomena in the cyberspace discourse (Stuedahl 1998). It is argued that the bodiless existence on the Net enables people to explore a great number of identities. One may ask whether boys tend to cross gender boundaries to a larger extent than girls and if they do, what are the reasons? In order to answer this question an extensive body of personal and biographical data is required, and this is not intended to be a part of this study.

During the pre-adolescent period (between childhood and adolescence) people tend to develop from a period of romantic neutrality, via romantic tension to romantic awakening, Adler and Adler (1998) argue. Different patterns of friendship and interaction have been well documented, suggesting that boys tend to play in large, competitive, athletically oriented

groups, while girls prefer small, intimate and nurturing groups. Girls and boys often occupy different locations on the playground and participate in distinct activities, they argue. The argument is that this separation exists more on a superficial and behavioural level than on the deeper level of children's attitudes and feelings. What seems to prevent cross-gender interaction is the fear of reprisal, they argue. Even if there may be brutal exclusion strategies in use, chat rooms are free from reprisals in Adler and Adler's terms. Thus chat rooms might give the children some breathing space and an opportunity to relax from strict gender roles in *real* life. Research suggests that the social segregation of preadolescent girls and boys appears less universal than previous research has claimed (Thorne 1993; Adler and Adler 1998). Girls and boys voluntarily cross gender boundaries and the separation is not so absolute as has been asserted, Adler and Adler argue. On the Net, however, stereotypes are seen as necessary to assert or maintain one's biological sex (Stuedahl 1998). Thus, when entering a chat room, girls are supposed to be more girlish and boys more boyish. Stuedahl finds it difficult to use traditional explanations of gender in the culture of the Internet, since neither the biological nor the social (sex or gender) aspect determines the user's identity. One question the author asks is how we will understand electronic gender identity. I agree that this is an essential question. Seeing the cultural phenomenon of *gender* as a flexible social construction (Drotner 1991; Butler 1999) permits a series of interpretations of what is to be perceived as boyish and girlish identities. In chat rooms, for example, this is, as mentioned previously, apparent in the exploration and negotiation of masculine and feminine manners. The post-structuralist view of gender as performance (Butler 1999) implies that gender involves 'trying on' identities (masquerade) although we all have histories, and thus are less free to choose. However, by writing off the

social, biological and psychological prerequisites, we may run the risk of forgetting that individuals are already socially and culturally formed when they enter the Internet. Even if the Net enables people to play and explore different identities and thus changes some images of identity formation, such perspectives, as described above, might overestimate the influence of the Internet and consequently underestimate the significance of issues like personal biography and cultural and social features.

Does location matter?

Location represents the L in the acronym ASL, which is an essential part of the introductory ritual in chat rooms, providing information about where the chatters live. One question is if children think it matters where the chatters come from. Messages such as the following: “Do you live in a red house?” “Anybody from Oslo here?” (☞ SOL 9) and “I have a Net friend in Florida” or “The whole world is out there” (interviews) indicate that the phenomenon of *location* is in question, from the nearest local neighbourhood to a more global perspective. Erik once moderated an English chat room, he tells me. When I visit Anne, she writes an e-mail to an English speaking girl. They have met in a chat room and exchanged e-mail from time to time. Anne has forgotten where the girl lives. They address each other with shortenings (one or two letters). “Long time ago since last time I write to u. How r u? I’ m just fine! Gotta go. Luv from An...”. Anne asks me how *since* is spelled, and she is not sure if the Net friend answers. This is a contrast to the friends she has where she lives. They always answer. Frida, Guro and Hilde discuss if they shall go to a German channel, something they have done several times before. Suddenly somebody from their hometown answers. Then the temperature rises.

F: Oh!!! What's that?
G: ...from Trondheim...
V: Mm
F: Ask where in Trondheim!
V: Yes...17
F: Yes
V: Mm
H: Boy....He asksd if you are a boy.
F: If I was a boy?
V: Yes, thinks so
F: Oh!!!!
F: 10 years older!

When they ask *him* to say exactly where he lives, *he* leaves the room. One of the girls says *he* may not come from Trondheim. Frida writes that she has bluegreenblackwhite eyes. None of them has ever met somebody from a chat room in *real* life. The closest they have come is the telephone call mentioned earlier and e-mail. To ask for or reveal where people live, is an activity that takes place continuously. The interest in this might, however, be a result of people risking being recognised if they live in the same local community. Thus, inquiring about location is in some cases important in order to protect anonymity. It is amusing to reveal others' identity, but no fun if others come too close to their own doorstep. However, thinking of the possibility of meeting in *real* life is exciting. This possibility increases, the closer the chat partner lives. Chat communication blurs geographical boundaries at the same time as identification of location seems to be important. As age and gender become visible features of identity (i.e.who you are in *real* life) online, location seems to acquire a sort of status as a marker of identity as well. This contrasts with an anthropological study of adolescent participants in chat rooms. Investigating youth chatters, Kramvig's (1999) informants say that it does not matter where you come

from. Chat is independent of place, they say. It is who you are (i.e. your personality ¹⁰⁷) that matters.

The chat room as a symbolic scene

Identity projects are encouraged by many sources. The commercial market is one of them, offering a rapidly shifting set of requisites in terms of cultural products and symbols. These are often directed specifically to young people and include products such as mobile phones, clothes, food and music, and thereby presenting a lifestyle that is attractive to young people. The appeal “hurry online now!” presented to Norwegian children and young people in a television programme ¹⁰⁸ relates online participation to a lifestyle of being young, modern, cool and popular. This invitation corresponds to children’s and young people’s efforts to be connected to a social world, literally speaking. In a cultural context where traditions and old authorities are said to have lost their force as important meaning systems, new and more informal storytellers enter the stage. Chat rooms and schoolyards are two of these stages that are important for children’s social explorations and performances. On the basis of a Danish film ¹⁰⁹ Gleerup (1999) shows that young people create hierarchies that are ruled by symbols and lifestyles in which both the well-dressed models and the contrasting, so-called anti-social groups take part. The author refers to play culture research (Mouritsen 1996) that emphasises how children’s cultural understanding and preparedness to act is established through exercise and play. I interpret a chat room both as an important tool and a trigger which provides raw material for such exercises and play. In addition, chat rooms

¹⁰⁷ My interpretation

¹⁰⁸ *Etter skoletid* (After school hours) NRK 2, 8 May 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Lise Roos, *Frikvarter*.

are seen as a social space within which children “identify one another and themselves” (James 1993:3). The three girls, mentioned earlier, who were creating one identity with some characteristics from each of them, giggle and laugh in excitement when a boy who is 17 answers. They are experienced pretenders. Two of the three girls pretend to be another person when they chat alone, they say. “But this becomes very difficult when I am asked about telephone numbers and many such things”, Hilde says. When people are being untruthful about themselves, it is about how beautiful and rich they are, she thinks. This is information which makes them more attractive as chat partners. When she wants to talk to people who are older than herself, Hilde says she is 16 or 17. “It may happen that I say things that are not quite true...to make me more interesting. If somebody writes hopeless things, nobody wants to talk to you. It’s smart to lie a bit”. Many people lie about their appearance. “They say they are thin when they are rather fat”, Guro says. She does not like to lie about her age herself. She prefers to act as herself, while Frida can be another person on the Net.

V: Is it so...in a way that you think...you are another person on the Net than you are otherwise?

F: Yes.

V: Mm...are you in a way not Frida then?

F: No.

V: No.

F: Then I am Anette (laughs)

V: You can be Anette who has quite different characteristics than you, or?

F: Yes.

V: Do you think you could have been Anette¹⁷ other places than on the Net, then?

F: No, I don’t think so.

V: No

F: You can see that I am not 17 years old

The eldest boy in the sample adds half a year to his age. If (or when)

somebody lies about himself or herself on the Net, Anne thinks this is about how they look and how old they are. Kramvig's (1999) study indicates that chatters may feel more self-confident on the Net than in *real* life. The Net, as an arena for self-presentation, is perceived as offering more freedom than in the every day life outside the Net. One question is whether the experiences online qualify children and young people to express themselves and be more self-confident offline, too, or if this competency and self-confidence are limited to the Net where nobody can see them.

In a chat room environment people can create their own identity from scratch, it is argued (Bechar-Israeli 1995). On one level, this represents what Ziehe and Stubenrauch (1983) and Giddens (1991) call the unique possibility people in modern societies have to create their own lives, disembedded from old authorities and traditions. On the other hand, one of the dangers is the individual vulnerability, as the various life-projects become a more or less private issue. Taking Bechar-Israeli's utterance literally, the idea of creating an identity from scratch could be seen as a celebration of the individual possibilities in contemporary societies. For several reasons, however, this idea is problematic. Firstly, it presupposes an idea of identity as something superficial which is possible to 'mark' and 'delete' at any moment. A great body of knowledge shows that a human being does not have an identity like a blank sheet of paper. In this thesis it is sufficient to refer to Kress' argument about how individuals who communicate are already socially and culturally formed and thus draw on the meanings of their cultural and social group. This does not prevent people from deconstructing old truths and redefining positions, but it sets limits to what is possible.

Being visible: a risky project?

Fundamental social changes on a global level have impact on human life on an individual level, it is argued (Giddens 1991). These changes offer possibilities, but also doubt and risks. Changes in traditional roles and movements towards a more egalitarian society open up for other possibilities for individual choices than in societies where roles are more or less decided through a fixed destiny. People in the Western societies, in particular, are continuously confronted by the demands to make choices about who they want to be. In chat rooms, choices are performed and constructed, as we have seen, in a variety of ways, such as through nicknames, personal profiles, interests, idols, language, behaviour and norms. The freedom to choose is usually understood mainly in positive terms. However, there are also risks, uncertainties and challenges associated with these new possibilities. People have to open up more and trust the people they talk to. If you want to trust somebody, you must take risks, too, Giddens argues.¹¹⁰ The empirical material in this inquiry shows that chat rooms are places where children can explore their identities without risking too much, as long as they follow the rules not to give any personal details to people they do not know. Frida emphasises that everybody can see what she writes. This is exciting, but a bit scary, too. Chat rooms are perceived as a place to ask for advice and get support. Experiences in *real* life are not always supportive. She experiences pressure, which she does not experience in chat rooms, for instance, the pressure to start smoking. It is risky to talk about this at school. In general, it is risky to tell secrets, Frida says. To friends at school she only dares tell small secrets, not the big ones. Once she told a boy that she was in love

¹¹⁰ This topic was discussed by Anthony Giddens in a lecture on 23 January 2002, LSE (London School of Economics).

with another boy and then he told her secret to the whole class. That was embarrassing.

V: But it may be other secrets than being in love, can't it?

F: Yes, if you are bullied, maybe.

V: Yes

F: Or such things

The issue of smoking represents a major problem for Frida until she asks a Net friend what to do. She also learnt a secret from her. This is a relationship that has developed to a dyadic relation via e-mail over some months. Her Net friend, who lives in another part of the country, supports her in saying “no, thanks” when somebody offers her cigarettes. Next time somebody is eager to persuade her to smoke, she is more self-confident when she rejects the offer. A majority of the children trust some people in the chat room and may talk about things they could never have talked about in the schoolyard. However, this level of confidence emerges primarily after a while, when they “know each other” or “trust each other”, and, most importantly, after having met in private rooms or written e-mails to each other.

Frida, Guro and Hilde discuss the fact that somebody can also pull their leg. By regarding themselves as objects and victims, the girls remember that they once had arranged a telephone call with a *he*, who had given them *his* phone number in a chat room. When they called *him*, somebody answered and said that *she* was in the library. They were embarrassed, but they have a good laugh when they think about this experience. However, there are other risks than feeling embarrassed in front of the classmates or in a telephone call. Somebody might try to destroy the computers.

F: And now somebody wants to send me something...a game.
V: Mm
F: Can play, but it is not so very smart to receive it...it may be a virus.
V: Have you ever had that?
F: No

There is also a good reason for protecting one's *real* identity. The three girls never give their identity in terms of names and addresses to anybody, they say. The closest geographical location they give is "outside Trondheim", maybe the name of the part of the town. The risk of giving information about such personal details is that people can find their e-mail addresses and "even find me", Guro says. They discuss whether to answer a request for a private chat with a person who says *he* is 25. They think *he* is probably not the person *he* pretends to be, but "it is fun to play the game", they say. They show me a chat room for people "over 18 and for everyone". Dag has heard about risky things on the Net, too, but has never experienced anything himself, he says.

D: ...it may happen that people...ask you for the name and..
V: Yes
D: ...phone
V: mm
D: Or...buy drugs on the Net.
V: Yeah,, have you heard other people who have talked about this or have you seen it being offered yourself?
D: Only in theory
V: You think it is only in theory? You have never seen anybody actually offering it?
D: No
V: No
D: No, never...Of course, there are other things, though....when I have come on a wrong page..

People who are interested in getting personal details, selling drugs and showing pornography are among the risky things, Dag says. These are also the main issues in the discourse about Internet dangers, which Dag might

have picked up. By 'a wrong page' Dag refers to addresses that are automatically changed and lead to sites he has not searched for. Dag sometimes comes to what he calls a 'fysjfyj' site (a pornographic site) that takes over everything. Asking Erik about sex talk, swearing and such things, he answers that "...yes, there are some people who are quite different from others". Thus, Erik talks about this topic in a distanced way, as something other people do. However, when I asked if those things dominate the chat rooms he usually visits, he answers that "it depends on whom you are talking to and what you do". Interpreting the use of *you* indicates that 'dirty talk' also is a part of his chat habits. Asking if he thinks somebody has played him tricks, he answers:

E: You may think you talk to a boy and then it is a girl, because you do not know for sure.

V: No?

E: You simply have to trust the person.

V: Yes

E: ...that it is true

V: Yes, but I wonder, if you are talking for a longer period, you must be revealed.

E: Yes, you will reveal yourself after a while, I think.

V: Yes

E: It depends....

V: Yes, have you been stressed because you have tried not to be revealed?

E: Yes, but I...it depends on what I am doing. If I say I am another person, it is actually a bit stressful sometimes (he laughs).

V: Yes, to be that person for a while.

E: Yes, if somebody ...if you know...if you are a person you know, talking with another ...who knows this person

V: Yes?

E: And then, in a way...oh, what was i...

V: Yes

E: Then you have to think it over...

V: To avoid being revealed?

E: Yes

V: Too many things to take care of?

E: Yes

V: But when you pretend to be another person, are you in a way the other person, or are you Erik?

E: No, I try to be the other person so much as I can, but I don't manage, in a way.

V: Why?

E: Because you don't know everything about the other person. You know how he usually expresses....

V: But if the person you talk to is a person you don't know, then you don't have to pretend...

E: Then I can just be myself

V: Yes

E: That's what I usually do.

V: To be yourself?

E: Yes

V: Yes

E: Don't try to be another person?

V: No

E: Just normal

Erik describes the challenges of playing roles and manages to keep the play going without being revealed. Online chat is an activity where children have to find strategies to manage challenges, such as protect themselves and the computer. Some people in chat rooms are too insistent, Anne explains. Once she realised that she could use the ignore button. That was a good solution to get rid of people who do not respect a 'no'.

A: I was chatting with a....¹¹¹, I think.

V: Mm.

A: And then somebody came – again and again and again and again – and I – only: NO! I chat with another girl! Again and again and again!

V: Somebody wanted to chat with you?

A: Yeah

V: And it didn't help to say no?

A: No

V: No?

A: So then I realised....some places you can find such things as ignoring..

V: Yes, you managed to stop it?

A: When you press ignore, then nobody can come through, whatever they do.

¹¹¹ Anne was not sure if it was a *he* or *she*.

V: This is a way to protect yourself, isn't it?

A: Yes.

This is Hilde's experience, too. She may give her e-mail address to people in a chat room, but never her mobile number. "If you experience something you do not like, you can click them out", she says. To have the opportunity to 'click somebody out', gives a feeling of control.

A tool for exploring sexuality or a playpen for paedophiles?

The Internet and especially chat rooms are said to be an ideal place for adult people who want to expose their sexual wishes and likings towards the youngest part of the population. Nigel Williams,¹¹² who is director of the British organisation Childnet International, describes cyberspace as a playpen for paedophile people. The Net is an efficient way to exchange and distribute pornographic material to children, Williams argues. He recommends parents to teach children to be as careful on the Net as when they cross the street. He offers a special web page to find information about chat dangers. This initiative raises questions about standards for behaviour in chat rooms. What counts as good and bad Net behaviour? It also raises fundamental issues about images of childhood and adulthood, about sexual knowledge and education, and about protection from being 'attacked' by people who lurk around on the Net and who look at chat rooms as a new arena for more or less inappropriate behaviour.

Horizontal socialisation

Taking reservations about the uncertainty of the participants' age into

¹¹² www.chatdanger.com

account, there is, however, reason to assume that most of the people in the two chat rooms of the present study are children and young people between 11 and 14 years. The large number of participants indicates that children, if they want to, find other children of the same age. Many participants ask for chat partners who match their own age. With reference to offline encounters, social relations between children are horizontal, it is argued (Frønes 1995). This implies that the actors are of equal status, in the same position and on the same level. While the parent-child relation may be regarded as ascribed, friendship and social contact with others of the same age is in principle something that must be achieved, Frønes argues. The equality in peer groups gives these relations a special status as an instance of socialisation into the demand for competence of modern society. In this respect peer relations are said to have structural properties that cause special kinds of presuppositions for socialisation and learning.

Another sociological approach is presented in Adler and Adler (1998), where preadolescence is presented as a phase, characterised by the emergence of peer identity, social preferences and the roots of adolescent behaviour patterns. "Preadolescents start seeking their identity through accomplishment, through meaningful interaction with peers and through attachment to social groups" (Adler and Adler 1998:199). Corsaro (1985), with reference to Piaget, ties equality to the cognitive features children have in common. Anthropologists accentuate socialisation between children by looking at culture and context. Identities are to be "tried and tested out in the company, largely, of other children" (James 1993:96). Referring to Geertz (1973), James suggests that the *culture of childhood* is to be understood, not as an object, a thing, but as a context within which children socialise one another as well as socialise with each other.

A formulation like “children create their own culture” (Adler and Adler 1998:206) may be interpreted as if they regard *children’s culture* as a subculture. By emphasising children and adults in terms of difference we may risk constructing children as an age group separate from society. By seeing an automatic conflict of interest between children and adults, we may fail to see that they might have both common and contradictory interests. The question is why the lines of age demarcation seem to develop in a way that makes a more and more age limited division of people into separate age groups. The commercial market encourages such a development and age becomes a question of niche marketing. In addition, the institutional age hierarchy from early age (e.g. at school) serves to reproduce social patterns of behaviour. In this context it is, therefore, crucial to emphasise the focus on age that is present both in the children’s own accounts, as already described, but also in the social and structural features which are specific according to time and space.

Breaking the rules and being cool: two sides of the same story

The moderating system is one in which the web editor can ask some children to police the chat room because they have shown good chat behaviour. POPIT has also engaged an adult woman in a part time job to control and evict unwanted participants. When children are evicted, some of them send e-mails to the web editor, either to express their fury and frustration at having been excluded, or some of them simply ask when they are allowed to return. The company usually answers the children. This is a part of its ideology, but also a necessity for a commercial company in order to keep the children positive and present. Eviction from the chat room might be amusing, and sometimes the primary goal of the children. However, children may sometimes have a good reason to question the

forms of policing. One of the boys does not always understand the logic behind the decisions. Carl thinks that the possibility of being evicted from a discussion is quite good fun. In this context I interpret 'fun' ironically. In Carl's opinion, you should be allowed to discuss a topic without being evicted. When asking him what he thinks is fun about a situation where he is on the verge of being kicked out and whether it is fun to see how far he can go, he answers: "No, it is not only that. It is...just before you are evicted...then it is a matter of pleading for mercy" (he laughs). I ask if there is any point in being 'cool' in a chat. Managing the convention of playing with language by using shortenings is one way of being cool.

C: We do use shortenings

V: Yes?

C: But those I showed you last time.

V: You did

"It is difficult to be cool on the Internet", he says. "You don't manage to sit like this on the Net, you know", he says while he makes faces.

C...but you can...if you just throw a reply straight out to the world and you hear...a scornful laughter, for example: hahaha...with a star ...

V: Oh

C: Then...as...if the rest indicate LAUGHING with stars on the site...

Then you...that's how you are cool on the Net.

V: If somebody is laughing at you?

C: Yes, in a way.

V: Yes

C: I'm not sure, actually...

V: No

C: I've no idea

V: No

Carl seriously thinks the system with moderators is ok. What is stupid, he thinks, is that they do not care if you ask them to evict somebody. Many of the moderators do not do their job properly, he thinks.

C: They do as they...they sleep at work, so to speak.
V: Do you think so?
C: Mm.
V: They just remove the worst things?
C: Yes, they are so...it does not matter if you call a guy an idiot. But if you write it in capital letters...
V: Yes?
C: THEN you are not allowed to be there any longer!
V: Hmm
C: That counts as shouting, you see...
V: Ok, you are allowed to write idiot with small letters?
C: Yes, you can. But if you call a guy... or anybody... funny...with capitals...
V: it is not allowed, either?
C: No, it counts as shouting
V: Ok
C: ...or howling, so to speak
V: Yes
C: If you for example shout AAAA with capital letters, then it becomes ÆÆÆÆÆ! (laughs)
V: Yyes
C: Then you get a message....for example, yes “be a bit careful with your caps, boy!”... or such things.
V: Have you got such messages?
C: Yes, many times.
V: Many times?
C: Has become a sort of a hobby

Once Erik was excluded from the chat room for 15 minutes because he said the same things many times. “This occupies too much space in the room”, he says. Thus, he violates the rules at the same time as he accepts their existence. Some of the children have been moderators themselves. People can get this position if they ask. Erik knows a lot about the system of moderating chat rooms. Those who have this position, always get it from somebody who is or has been a moderator earlier. Erik has experienced that this position has been given to half of the school. Eventually, almost everybody had been moderators, “and then, you see, it is not so...” But you can be (logged on) on the Net as a moderator without being present and doing the job, he says. So if it seems like 4-6 people are policing the chat

room, this does not necessarily mean that everybody is watching what's going on. This fact may explain Carl's frustration about moderators who are "sleeping on duty".

It is possible to find the reason why you are excluded by clicking the link: WHY. I ask Erik if he thinks it may happen that somebody sometimes tries to be evicted. He thinks so. Usually the sanctions are exclusion from the channel for an hour. Then you may come in again.

V: Is it for a longer period than an hour?

E: I have only experienced one hour.

V: Mm

E: It might be for longer time, too.

V: Mm

E: But then you can just choose another name

V: Mm

E: But it does not always function.

The system of policing the chat rooms seems to trigger some children to experiment and explore what kinds of behaviour count as good and bad manners. The sanctions are just efficient for a short time. And if a chatter cannot be bothered to wait, s/he can change identity and be welcomed back and get a new chance.

Looking back to the concept of identity, I will make a connection to the concept of reality, discussed in Chapter 5. Kramvig (1999) shows that the question about reality is a main narrative both in the mass media, but also in academic analysis of the impact of the Internet on identity and culture (Stone 1993; Turkle 1995). One argument is, as mentioned earlier, that the Internet enables people to experiment with multiple identities because the new technology emancipates the individual from the body. However,

Kramvig sees a connection between what happens on the Net and in the outside world. She argues that what happens outside the Net, has major impact on what happens on the Net. This is also the conclusion in the Danish part of the European study, referred to in Chapter 2. Data from Denmark (Drotner 2001) does not support conclusions wherein the Net is seen as a medium which shapes fragmented personalities and a pseudo-community (Beniger 1986) and more playing and dynamic personalities (Turkle 1995; Tapscott 1998), i.e. conclusions which make strong claims about the impact of the medium. On the contrary, one may play with parts of the identity, Drotner argues, but this is very close to the interests one has outside the virtual world. In other words, as suggested in Chapter 3 with reference to Berger and Luckmann (1990), the physically experienced reality retains its status as the overall or defining reality. In the youth sample, which Kramvig investigated, she found that the identity projects comprised of developing relationships. A main issue in her work was to explore young people's self-presentation in interaction with other people on the Net. 'Being' on the Net gave an experience of being 'oneself', a situation which was perceived as more authentic than in a face-to-face situation. They also built networks of relations. Looking back at the definition of social identity, these two dimensions are closely connected to the question of 'being different from' and 'being alike'. To explore who you are or want to be, you need a group of trustworthy and credible people to mirror your own identity work. Therefore, to meet people might be a prerequisite to 'be oneself' and 'find one's feet', whether it happens in a reality or fiction oriented frame.

Summary

This chapter has discussed chat rooms as a tool in children's identity formation. The concept of identity is discussed in relation to definitions made by Erving Goffman, Anthony Giddens and George Herbert Mead. This includes a discussion of the concepts of *personal identity*, *social identity*, *multiple identities* and *the authentic self*. The discussion shows how children are challenged in order to succeed in chat communication. This includes questions of how to pretend, present and protect oneself in a complex set of strategies to maintain recognition and anonymity, closeness and distance. In this written masquerade, age, gender and location are significant dimensions. The notions of *social identity* and *self-identity* are explored by presenting ongoing performances of being alike and unlike. This is seen as part of a youth cultural discourse on the threshold between childhood and adolescence, but also a period when the commercial market starts to focus on lifestyles as an essential issue. The present account dissociates from a universalising concept of gender which mainly focuses on differences between girls and boys. However, the material shows distinct differences, both in the ways girls and boys talk about how they chat and what they actually do when they are online. The chapter also discusses chat communication as a risky project, thereby drawing attention to concepts like trust, secrets and control. Another implication is that the public concern about chat rooms as a playpen for adult paedophiles might be exaggerated. One reason for this suggestion is that many of the sexual invitations allegedly come from children who probably are exploring gender and sexuality. Also, children are warned and thus many of the participants are fully aware of the potential dangers on the Net. Together with the adult moderators they develop individual and common strategies to protect themselves. I interpret much of this talk as parts of the context of

horizontal socialisation rather than as performance by adult abusers. The chapter confirms previous assumptions in which it has been argued that there is a close relation between the online and offline life.

8 Creating new possibilities for social interaction: concluding summary and discussion

Moving towards a concluding summary of this study implies focusing on particular issues and fading out others. This final chapter summarises the data, draws lines to the main intentions of the study and discusses some essential findings. The chapter also makes some suggestions with respect to further research. The main purpose of this study has been to explore web chat, how children and adolescents use this kind of communication and what kind of implications the activity has for their identity formation. The preliminary observations, presented in Chapter 1, questioned whether chat rooms represent a new social arena, in which children and adolescents are together and socialise in different ways than earlier. Particularly due to certain characteristics of the web chat, such as the anonymity, the spontaneity, the high numbers of participants and the immediate responses, I expected this kind of communication to generate different kinds of social relations between the chatters, as compared to situations where people are together face-to-face. The project has also presumed that communication in chat rooms reflects social changes. Some of these changes are described in Chapter 1 with the concepts of *disembedding*; the process where social relations are detached from local and binding contexts and *reflexivity*; the social practices which are constantly examined and transformed in light of information about these practices (Giddens 1990, 1991). I expected that web chat reflects traces of such practices. Initially, I argued for a rethinking of the concept of socialisation, in order to focus on methodological

flexibility, ethical considerations and awareness of new constructions of childhood. Before discussing the essence of this research contribution, I will summarise the data chapter by chapter, but under new headings.

Making oneself visible

In Chapter 5 I emphasise communication as a dynamic process and look at contents and conventions in chat rooms. My perspective implies an action-oriented interpretation of the concept, including production and consumption of meaning. However, this activity happens in a socially and culturally formed world. Thus chat does not occur in a vacuum. With reference to Kress (1993), I argue that communication, in addition to sharing mutual construction of meaning, is a matter of contestations and contradictions, where issues such as power and authority are involved. Throughout Chapter 5 this is for instance exemplified by tensions between participants, who express different standards of behaviour, evaluate different topics as appropriate or move between different levels of reality. On the one hand, there is the written masquerade and the chaos which enable children to hide in a secret 'room' where they may have fun or explore serious matters based on a thought that strikes them. The children usually seem to use their offline experiences, such as school issues, leisure time interests, music and television preferences etc. On the other hand, the participants can decide when and how to be visible. When talking disparagingly about homosexuals, people from Pakistan or childish chatters, however, the chat takes on a character that is concretely and closely connected to social and cultural values and attitudes. Children have not by themselves thought of homosexuality, Pakistani origin or being childish, for instance, as qualifications of a negative evaluation or public scolding. When children dissociate (with exclamation marks) from

different kinds of human attributes and characteristics, I interpret this as a way to ask what counts as appropriate or acceptable in society. In this respect, 'dirty talk' is an invitation to negotiate cultural values, but also to explore individual sexuality. When disparaging or extremely kind comments (such as "Fucking bitch" or "I love you as a friend") appear in the chat room, this activity usually generates an immediate counter-reaction by some of the participants. In this respect, exaggeration of emotions and expressions often activate discussion, quarrel, negotiation and support. The opposite might also be the case: messages to make something happen in the room may be the main goal with such comments, as one of my informants reported. To interpret the comments quoted above as disparaging or extremely kind is, however, value-loaded. In some youth cultural settings, these comments are probably more customary than in other youth and adult contexts and thus a part of a common vocabulary within this particular setting. This chapter emphasises the complex and dynamic character of communication where an essential aim is to make oneself visible, regardless of 'oneself' being performed as a made up self or not.

Creating boundaries

Community is the focus in Chapter 6. I started the investigation with a kind of scepticism towards what I perceived as taken-for-granted assumptions about community as a characteristic feature among online participants. More precisely, I wondered what kind of community could it be possible to create online? My reluctance was anchored in a conceptual understanding of community, particularly when linked to children as more or less dependent on face-to-face encounters. However, the web chat uncovered what I interpreted as a sense of community, for instance through the greeting rituals. I looked in the material for signs of common interests,

characteristics and shared culture among the participants and approached the data with a more open and analytical concept, wherein I saw community as a social process and a creation of meaning. Cohen (2000) defines community as members of a group of people who have something in common which distinguishes them from the members of other groups. The distinctions are marked by the boundaries that are created, he argues. Two apparent boundaries, which are continuously discussed and negotiated in the two chat rooms, are related to age and gender, expressed like “How old are you?” and “Are you a girl or a boy?” The overview of cultural features presented in Chapter 6 indicates numerous ways of cultural framing that exist in the medium itself. Presenting information about age, appearance and interests, for instance, is what chatters are asked to do before entering the chat room.¹¹³ Most of all, however, community appears as expectations of meeting someone who has common interests. First of all, chat is about “meeting people” and “talking about everything”. This means that community is something that has to be created, and which also requires some presuppositions. Certain kinds of boundaries are useful to establish and also to maintain a community of ‘us’. Boundaries are explored and marked in different ways: through language, topics, interests, status, friendliness, hostility, humour, greeting rituals and instruction. The extensive level of induction and guidance of the less skilled is an example of the inclusive style that is manifested again and again by the chatters. The European study discussed earlier in this thesis shows how children and adolescents’ convergent ¹¹⁴ media learning is more advanced and differentiated in their leisure time than at school (Drotner 2002). This

¹¹³ In POPIT

¹¹⁴ The different media, e.g. TV, the Internet, telephone, printed media are ‘melting’ together.

indicates that much of the 'learning for life' happens in media-related leisure time contexts and among peers. With reference to the concepts *situated learning* and *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), discussed in Chapter 6, the data illustrates the argument of focusing on learning as participation in the social world. I will return to this issue later in the chapter.

Calibrating oneself

Chapter 7 analyses chat rooms as tools for children in their identity formation. This concept refers to the process of being formed, but also to the act of having or taking form, i.e. both the structural and the individual aspect of identity formation. The chapter describes how identity historically has been connected to work, social class, family and nation, while identity today is tied to structures, social and cultural groups and spaces. The chapter also refers to assumptions that the technological achievements of the last century have produced a radical shift in our exposure to each other. A main argument is that the emerging technologies have saturated the human self with multiple voices and disparate positions for being. Consequences of this are identity production and fractional relationships, i.e. relations are built around a limited aspect of one's being. The Internet, in particular, is conceptualised as a space with unlimited boundaries to freely create multiple identities, independent of dimensions such as time, space, body, age and gender. I approached the data with questions related to how children were defined by the chat room and how they defined it themselves. Children pretend, present and protect themselves in order to obtain and maintain recognition and anonymity, closeness and distance. Much of the children's communication about age, for instance, has to do with calibrating themselves as older/younger, more/less powerful,

regulars/newcomers etc. The significance of nicknames and sex is part of the same sort of communication, as mentioned above. Youth cultural symbols/child cultural symbols, cool/not-cool, peer/not-peer are important dimensions. The children I interviewed tended to underestimate their chat activity, yet they were both lurkers and even regulars. The flexibility in chat rooms offers children and young people, for the first time in history, a possibility to pretend to 'be' another person, with a fictional offline identity where they can make up biological sex, age and body, without being revealed offline.

'Cross-dressing'

Questions about one's own and others' age and biological sex constitute a continuous theme in these chat rooms. As discussed in the previous sections, making oneself visible, creating boundaries and calibrating oneself vis-à-vis others are constructs in 'age'-ing and gendering processes and are continuously performed. I use the term *children and adolescents* about the chatters, even if their offline identities are a matter of uncertainty. Both the interviews (with the children, the parents, the marketing director of the web site POPIT) and the observations confirm the impression of an overwhelming majority of children in the two chat rooms I observed. The data indicates that girls chat more frequently than boys. However, this conclusion is a matter of discussion, since boys often choose girlish nicknames and may bias the perception of the participants' gender. In addition, boys tend to underestimate the extent of their own chat activity, as it is regarded as a girl activity. In spite of this uncertainty chat rooms appear to be an arena where children, as expected, cross some boundaries related to age and gender.

The concept of *cross-dressing*, discussed earlier in the thesis is highly relevant. According to Corsaro (1997), the focus on age can be perceived as a Western phenomenon, as grouping of children is much less age segregated in non-Western societies. He argues that there is a growing debate whether or not girls and boys have different peer cultures. As discussed in Chapter 7, a common assumption has been a general acceptance of seeing girls' and boys' socialisation as belonging to two different cultures. However, Corsaro warns against accepting this view of children's gender relations too rapidly. As with the question of age, this assumption is based on studies of white, middle and upper class American children. Corsaro argues that there is little support for claiming universal patterns of different values and social relations by gender. The simple boy-girl distinctions in attitudes to, and use of, computers are inappropriate, Holloway and Valentine argue (2002). Even while the data about children's web chat confirms gender differences, one should be careful to draw hasty conclusions about this issue.

Creating privacy in public

As discussed in the section about exaggeration of emotions, children also cross some boundaries when it comes to the level of openness and intimacy. This may be regarded as part of the social transformation of intimacy (Giddens 1990; Dovey 2000). On an individual level, it is not so risky to perform emotions, ask for advice and be rude online than in an offline setting. In a face-to-face interaction with peers, the fear of being teased, bullied or punished may prevent some children from saying no to a cigarette when they in fact do not want to smoke or from saying that they are in love with someone. In this respect the chat room represents a place to be protected both from social sanctions and embarrassment offline. Yet, the

anonymity which allows the spontaneous and open communication can also be viewed as a weakness with regard to the ability to develop close relations in chat rooms. Some chatters solve this problem by establishing private rooms. Particularly the insiders tend to perceive the common room as insufficient to satisfy their expectations of a good chat room. The public discourses about children and the Internet have focused on the potential dangers associated with paedophiles, who are trying to make appointments with children via the Net. This issue questions parents' regulation of children's Net use. As we have seen, chatters who want to talk about sex (sexuality) are often asked to "come to the private room". My data does not answer the question of whether or not sex talk is really carried out in these private rooms and, possibly, by whom, whether the invitations to talk about sex is performed to announce knowledge about sexuality and a cultural taboo or whether invitations are used as excluding strategies towards some participants in the chat room. In most of the cases when sex talk appears in the common chat room, one or more chatters intensely express their negative attitude, often by asking people to leave the room or asking moderators to evict them. Such messages emerge frequently on the screen particularly when chatters have used 'dirty' words or invited other people to participate in Net sex, for instance.

A characteristic feature of chat communication is that it allows participants to explore different kinds of identities. While chatting, participants in chat rooms can change their online identity by changing nicknames, for instance. Chatters do not have to keep a consistent conversation or style throughout the chat discussion as the web chat is constantly shifting both in terms of participants, topics and style. Many children perceive this possibility as fascinating. At the same time it generates a conflict as the

inconsistent communication might prevent chatters from being answered. However, we have seen examples of how this shift also can cause a high level of responses, as chatters on the alert want to reveal the *real* identity of an inconsistent and unstable participant.

A chatter is confronted with and explores social and cultural norms and demands which are active within the context of the chat room, such as those connected to presenting oneself successfully, performing appropriate behaviour and interests, showing competence to handle challenges, performing a youth cultural style, exploring sexuality and protecting oneself from being exploited. In short: to become an advanced chatter is dependent on the ability to be aware of what counts in order to become popular. The examples of the social and cultural norms and demands which are present within the chat room are seen as parts of norms and demands in action in a wider sense, both in terms of society in general and as a consequence of the characteristic features of the particular age group in question. With reference to face-to-face interactions, Corsaro (1997) points out that everyday activities in peer cultures enable preadolescents to negotiate and explore a wide range of norms regarding friendship processes, personal appearance, self-presentation, heterosexual relations, personal aspirations and relations with adult authority figures. By participating in organised and informal games, verbal play routines and collaborative storytelling, “preadolescents explore developing norms and expectations about themselves and their place in peer and adult culture without the risk of direct confrontation and embarrassment”, Corsaro argues (ibid.:168). This description of children’s offline play may be significant features also online. However, as I have discussed in this thesis, offline play is not exclusively an activity without risk of direct

confrontation and embarrassment. In contrast, we have seen that offline interactions might also be perceived as risky and that social identity sometimes may be better explored online. By using the concept of *insider*, I raise the question of regularity and competence performed by chatters. Chat rooms are arenas where some participants behave in a way that gives them a position of being accepted, i.e. *becoming insiders* in Sveningsson's terms (2001), while others keep a status of *being outsiders*. Jones (1997) compares communication in a virtual culture with a library where people are among others, but not with them in terms of interaction. If one is lurking around and not interacting, one is no more part of the social arena than is a wallflower, Jones argues. Strictly and literally understood, seeing interaction as action between someone, I agree with Jones. A lurker who does not say anything in a chat room can hardly be said to participate in an interaction. However, a silent listener, for instance, who suddenly comes up with information about a football match, or a new chatter who enters the stage when troublemakers disappear has presumably participated in a way before s/he writes a message. In this respect, a web chat is a *market of possibilities*, in which children can move between different levels of regularity and visibility.

We have now seen how the main research question can be answered in different ways. Initially, I challenged myself by stressing the necessity of avoiding one-sided celebration and concern rhetorics. I also expressed scepticism towards seeing the Net as a completely different world, where *real* life experiences (i.e. offline experiences) should be more or less disconnected. I wanted to challenge the dichotomised perspective of children where they are regarded either as victims or victors of this kind of communication as well as of media in general. In order to avoid what I

perceive as deterministic perspectives, I chose to view web chat as a complex and diverse activity; as one part of a broader media and child culture, situated in a particular historical and economical context. This makes visible discursive practices among children. Through web chat children get to know what other children (and other chatters) think and do and how they talk and behave. Chat is, as already mentioned, a part of a broader media culture. Children and adolescents use different kinds of media and often at the same time. And, according to Erik, the 'whole world' is on the Internet. Through a convergent media culture, children get to know *otherness*, in Drotner's terms (Drotner 2002). I argue that children and adolescents also get to know *sameness*, as the media (chat rooms included) problematise questions and dilemmas which are of current interest across geographical boundaries. In terms of a globalised media culture, where different media are increasingly intertwined, questions regarding issues like drugs, sexuality, lifestyles, dreams, love and education become a joint concern among people who have access to those media. All the issues above are present in the two chat rooms.

The competent child and the destabilised adulthood

The headline of Chapter 1 questions a conception of childhood which, in contrast to previous images of childhood, includes children in reflexive processes. A focus of the present study has been children's socialisation and the processes of constructing social identity. I expected to find traces of children's involvement in such discourses in web chat communication. I also intended to look more closely at the concept of *the competent child*, which has become popular the latest years. This implies an awareness of contemporary images of childhood. Buckingham (2000) argues that the modern conception of childhood arose as a result of a complex network of

interrelationships between ideology, government, pedagogy and technology. By seeing childhood as a part of a changing society, the aim of this study was to pay particular attention to the conceptualisation of childhood in contemporary societies. Referring to public narratives about childhood, Kjørholt (2001) argues that competence is described as a kind of individual and immanent quality all children have by virtue of their being natural beings. The public narrative of 'children as an endangered people' may be interpreted as constructing childhood and reproducing stereotypical images and romantic ideologies of the ultra-competent and mythical child, Kjørholt argues. Conflicting interests among children are for instance not taken into account in these narratives. In this perspective, images of the competent child are equally universalistic as the images of the vulnerable child. Lee (2001) argues that social studies of childhood should be more sensitive to childhood ambiguity and less reliant on problematic notions of human *being* and thus better understand human variation. The images of a flexible adult and self-identity which is open to changes have replaced previous images of a stable adulthood, Lee argues. This destabilisation of adulthood has consequences for parents' authority over their children and thus also for children's socialisation.

As long as tradition and reproduction of roles was more important than choice, flexibility and negotiation in shaping the family, then adults, simply by virtue of having greater experience of the past than their children, could enjoy the status of *experts* on how to live (Lee 2001:19).

The phrase *the democratisation of family* (Beck 1992) implies that adults are no longer the experts. Lee (2001) suggests a future in which children to the same extent as parents may become actively involved in shaping their families through negotiation and participation in decision-making

processes. Beck (1992) argues that social changes, such as those tied to new kinds of settlements have great consequences for people's social interactions. Social relationships and social networks have to be individually chosen; social ties are becoming reflexive, so that they have to be established and maintained and constantly renewed by individuals. Beck emphasises that the ability to choose and maintain one's own social relations is not an ability everyone has by nature. This is a learned activity, dependent on issues like social and family backgrounds. The reflexive conduct of life, the planning of one's biography and social relations, give rise to a new inequality, Beck argues, namely "the inequality of dealing with insecurity and reflexivity" (Beck 1992:98). In this respect we face, not just the question of a digital divide, discussed in Chapter 1, but also a reflexive divide between those who have the necessary communicative competence and those who have not.

Strandell (2002) discusses whether childhood research, in its efforts to treat children more in line with people of other ages than has been the tradition in research on children, runs a risk in tying itself too strongly to the competence paradigm. Strandell considers this position as doubtful, as this paradigm becomes modelled as the opposite of the developmental paradigm. She asks whether the competent child runs the risk of being trapped in a too narrow and inflexible notion of children's agency. The author refers to Lee (1998) who claims that, in order to make children and childhood fit into sociological theory, the sociology of childhood has solved the ontological ambivalence between *being* and *becoming* by declaring children more or less mature and complete. Strandell's argument is that the question is not whether children are to be seen as either competent or immature. "It is about *not defining* children or childhood as

being of a certain kind. It is about using knowledge of children's actions and interactions for a theoretical broadening of notions of agency", she argues (Strandell 2002:33). Aiming to bridge the gap between structure and agency in childhood research, this conclusion enables researchers to take account of complexity in children and adolescents 'lived lives'.

The data has shown a complex kind of communication with many participants and often situated on the verge of breaking down. Chat is usually associated with a leisure time activity. We have also seen numerous examples of pleasures and challenges and how children approach chat communication with certain kinds of protection strategies and thereby take account of potential risks. Children play, talk about experiences from their *real* life, negotiate and quarrel, teach and support each other, have fun, poke fun, 'talk dirty' and are bored.

This study claims that an active web chat establishes, maintains and refines different kinds of communities of practice. In this respect a web chat is a completely recent opportunity in children's social interactions with peers. In chat rooms, children and adolescents are enabled to explore social and cultural norms, demands and expectations as a part of their identity formation. Theoretically, the study draws on different contributions in order to look at the issues from different angles. Aiming to bridge the gap between agency and structure in childhood research, the project has studied children's chat communication in relation to crucial features in modernity.

Summary and further research

This study has investigated a new media phenomenon, web chat, and how children and adolescents use this kind of communication. The project has

given five main research contributions, in which the most essential has been to describe and analyse chat communication by using children's accounts. The study has made links between the social study of childhood and media research and explored an inter-disciplinary research approach. Methodologically, the project has combined traditional methods, such as interview, with more recent and new approaches, such as online observation and using e-mail.

Further research may develop and explore questions related to methodological challenges and ethical considerations in child and Internet research. The public concern about children and the Net and the call for regulations, for instance expressed through the implementation plan, initiated by the Norwegian Ministry of Child and Family Affairs (BFD 2001) challenges researchers to take seriously potential negative consequences of the Internet. However, further research should avoid the dichotomic perspectives which have, as described in Chapter 3, previously dominated research on children and media.

Substantially, further chat research should explore what happens when children and adolescents establish smaller units for chat communication and whether chatters develop closer contact when they go to private chat rooms. Empirical studies can investigate whether chat communication creates a new kind of openness or whether this is a new way of making boundaries that contain the same elements of integration and marginalisation as is the case in offline settings. This thesis has focused on social identity. It will be of particular interest to study the relation between online and offline life and to challenge Turkle's (1995) perspective of seeing 'life on the screen' as independent of offline life. Another issue is

what happens and what is perceived as important when the chatters grow older. What are the preferences, pleasures, rules, conventions and challenges when the adolescents are 16 years old? The question of gender has been raised as a crucial issue. Further research might ask whether boys really take on female identities in chat rooms or alternatively, what the boys say they obtain by this performance. In a perspective of education and teaching, the questions of communities of learning are crucial (Wenger 1998). What and how do children and adolescents learn when they teach each other and what should be the consequences in education? In the perspective of the Internet as a global medium, further research can clarify whether children and adolescents cross national borders in their chat communication or whether they prefer to 'be' in the local societies where they live.

Further research should also, more broadly, pay attention to the rapid changes in the media culture and what happens when children utilise a convergent media culture, where different media melt together and where chat communication is just one among many other activities. Children who are growing up today will face challenges related to handling complexity, dilemmas, ambivalence, ambiguity, conflicts and power. Drotner (2002) argues that cultural formation ¹¹⁵ will not just be about particular kinds of knowledge and values, but also about particular ways of acting vis-à-vis knowledge and values. One argument is that the technological convergence will inevitably cause divergence, i.e. increasing differentiation between different kinds of user groups (Drotner 2000). The media are increasingly intertwined in social, political and economical processes which are taking a

¹¹⁵ My translation of the Danish noun *dannelse*.

global form. These changes require a rethinking of both how media culture should be researched and how children and adolescents act reflexively in a socially and culturally formed world.

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Vebjørng Tingstad
Pedagogisk institutt
NTNU
7491 TRONDHEIM

Dato: 06.09.99 Vår ref: 9901118 KJ/RH Deres dato: 24.08.99 Deres ref:

FORSKNINGSPROSJEKT SOM OMFATTES AV KONSESJONSPLIKT

6771 Barns bruk av Internett

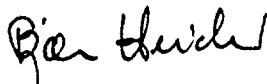
Vi viser til mottatt meldeskjema, 24.08.99, angående konsesjon for ovennevnte forskningsprosjekt. Prosjektet utløser konsesjonsplikt i henhold til Lov om personregistre m.m. § 9, første ledd.

Saken er behandlet ved Datafaglig sekretariat og oversendt Datatilsynet 06.09.99 for endelig avgjørelse. Datafaglig sekretariat har anbefalt at prosjektet gis konsesjon. Datatilsynet opplyser overfor Datafaglig sekretariat at saksbehandlingstiden er ca. 4 uker. Prosjektet kan ikke startes opp før du har mottatt konsesjon fra Datatilsynet.

Dersom noe er uklart ber vi deg kontakte oss, gjerne over telefon.

Kopi av innstilling følger vedlagt.

Vennlig hilsen
Datafaglig sekretariat


Bjørn Henrichsen


Kathrin Jakobsen

Kontaktperson: Kathrin Jakobsen Tlf. 55 58 89 30

Innstilling til Datatilsynet

Forskningsprosjekt

Dato sendt fra
Datafaglig sekretariat: 06.09.99

Saksbehandler Kathrin Jakobsen

Prosjektleder:

Vebjørng Tingstad
Pedagogisk institutt
NTNU

7491 TRONDHEIM

Prosjektnr.: 6771

Prosjekttittel:

Barns bruk av Internett

Formålet med prosjektet er å utvikle en teoretisk og metodisk forståelse for interaktive mediers funksjon og kvaliteter i et relasjonsperspektiv der barn brukes som informanter.

Utvalget omfatter 8-10 barn og deres foresatte som har internett tilgjengelig hjemme og som i større grad enn gjennomsnittet bruker internett. Prosjektleder oppretter direkte kontakt med utvalget via internett og på 2 spillebarer i Trondheim.

Opplysninger samles inn gjennom nettkommunikasjon, intervju og observasjon. Primært vil det bli fokusert på barns kommunikasjon over nettet. Prosjektleder vil be barna om å sende e-post til prosjektleder om deres opplevelser og vurderinger av internett. Prosjektleder vil videre komme hjem til de av barna som er villige til å la seg intervju for å se på når de bruker internett og gjennomføre intervjuet. Intervjuguide er ennå ikke utarbeidet. Tema vil være omfang av barnas internettbruk i forhold til andre medier og tidsbruk i forhold til andre aktiviteter. Foreldre/foresatte vil bli intervjuet om familiens bruk av internett.

Skriftlig informasjon om undersøkelsen sendes ut via internett eller direkte til de barna som rekrutteres via spillebarer. Her blir det gjort rede for formålet med undersøkelsen, hvilke opplysninger som skal samles inn og hvordan, hvem som har tilgang til dataene og hva som skjer med disse opplysningene når prosjektet er avsluttet. Brevet er utformet i et enkelt språk tilpasset målgruppen. Datafaglig sekretariat vurderer informasjonen å være tilstrekkelig til at barna kan gi tilbakemelding om de har lyst til å være med eller ikke.

Barnas samtykke innhentes ved at de sender en e-post til prosjektleder med navn, adresse, telefon, kjønn, alder, foreldres navn, når de brukte internett første gang, hvor mye de bruker nettet og til hva. Datafaglig sekretariat har ingen innvendinger mot denne framgangsmåten. I brevet blir det opplyst om at de som ønsker å være med på prosjektet, skal vise meldingen til sine foreldre/foresatte. Det blir også oppgitt en adresse på internett for dem som ønsker å sjekke ut riktigheten av meldingen. Opplysningene som barna blir bedt om å gi ved tilbakemelding/påmelding er ikke av sensitiv art og skal kun nyttes som utvalgsriterier for prosjektleder.

Skriftlig informasjon om undersøkelsen sendes foreldrene pr. post etter at barna har gitt melding pr. e-post om at de vil være med. Det informeres om formålet med undersøkelsen, hvordan data skal samles inn og hvilke, at foreldrene også vil bli bedt om å la seg intervju, frivillighet og mulighet til å trekke seg og taushetsplikt. Videre blir det redegjort i detalj for hvordan data oppbevares i prosjektperioden og hva som skjer med disse etter prosjektslutt. Det blir presisert at den e-posten som barna sender til prosjektleder ikke vil bli underlagt spesielle sikringstiltak. Det blir også opplyst at foreldrene vil bli forespurt om å la seg intervju og hva tema for intervjuet vil være.

Skriftlig samtykke fra foreldre/foresatte blir innhentet, både med tanke på barnas deltakelse og egen deltakelse.

Innsamlede opplysninger (intervjudata, observasjonsdata og innholdet i e-posten fra den enkelte deltaker) registreres på edb sammen med et kodenummer som viser til en manuell navneliste. Ved prosjektslutt makuleres navnelisten og ev. utskrift av e-post. Det edb-registrerte datamaterialet anonymiseres. Det er ikke lagt inn ekstra sikring av e-post som blir sendt til prosjektleder. Datafaglig sekretariat finner dette akseptabelt på bakgrunn av opplysningenes karakter og at barna og deres foreldre/foresatte er innforstått med og har samtykket til denne framgangsmåten.

Datafaglig sekretariat finner opplegget rundt undersøkelsen tilfredsstillende og anbefaler at den gis konsesjon i henhold til rammekonsesjonen for NTNU 31.07.2002



Vebjørng Tingstad
Pedagogisk institutt
NTNU
7491 TRONDHEIM

Deres ref
9901118 KJ/RH
6771

Vår ref (bes oppgitt ved svar)
99/2099-2 SVE/-

Dato
17.09.99

KONSESJON TIL Å OPPRETTE PERSONREGISTER IHT RAMMEKONSESJONSORDNINGEN FOR NTNU

Datatilsynet har mottatt Deres melding innkommet til oss den 08.09.99 om opprettelse av personregister i forbindelse med prosjektet "Barns bruk av internett".

Vi har gjennomgått materialet og gir Dem med hjemmel i personregisterloven § 9, herved tillatelse til å føre det ovennevnte register, og å innhente opplysninger som er gitt i meldingen.

Som registeransvarlig oppnevnes Vebjørng Tingstad.

Prosjektleder er Vebjørng Tingstad.


Datatilsynets tillatelse er gitt på følgende vilkår:

- at betingelsene i rammekonsesjonen for NTNU blir fulgt.
- at første gangs kontakt opprettes ved at prosjektleder tar kontakt med respondentene via enkelte aktuelle sider på internett og på to spillebarer i Trondheim. Respondentene får ved kontaktopprettelsen overlevert informasjon om undersøkelsen, og velger selv om de vil ta kontakt med prosjektleder i ettertid.
- at personidentifiserbare opplysninger ikke registreres ved hjelp av edb. Det elektroniske register kan inneholde et referansenummer som knytter seg til en manuell navneliste. Denne forutsettes oppbevart adskilt fra det elektroniske register og forsvarlig nedlåst i arkivskap.
- at det innhentes aktivt informert samtykke for alle deler av undersøkelsen. Det forutsettes at samtykket fra respondenten er reellt. For respondenter under 16 år skal det i tillegg innhentes skriftlig samtykke fra foreldre/foresatte.
- at lydbånd oppbevares på forsvarlig måte og nedlåst i arkivskap når de ikke er i bruk.

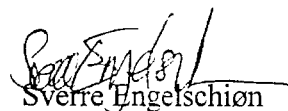
- at det i informasjonen til respondenten klart kommer fram at undersøkelsen er frivillig, og at vedkommende kan trekke seg fra undersøkelsen på et hvilket som helst tidspunkt.
- at det innsamlede materialet slettes/anonymiseres ved prosjektavslutning, senest 31.07.2002.

Det bes om at ferdig utarbeidet intervjuguide oversendes Datatilsynet for vurdering, før intervjuene finner sted.

Med hilsen



Mette Borchgrevink (e f)
rådgiver



Sverre Engelschiøn
førstekonsulent

Saksbehandler: Sverre Engelschiøn, telefon 22 39 69 00

Vedlegg: Taushetserklæring

Kopi : Datafaglig sekretariat, Bergen



Vebjørng Tingstad
NTNU
Pedagogisk institutt
7491 TRONDHEIM

Deres ref
9901118 KJ/RH 6771

Vår ref (bes oppgitt ved svar)
99/2099-4 SVE/-


Dato
29.11.99

INTERVJUGUIDE - FORSKNINGSPROSJEKT OM BARN OG INTERNETTBRUK

Vi viser til konsesjon av 14.09.99 og Deres brev av 10.11.99.

Datatilsynet har tatt den oversendte intervjuguide til etterretning.

Med hilsen


Sverre Engelsen (e f)
førstekonsulent

David R. Conrad, 10:17 AM 5/12/00 , Re: asking for permission

Date: Fri, 12 May 2000 10:17:04 -0700
From: "David R. Conrad" <David.Conrad@nominum.com>
Organization: Nominum, Inc.
X-Mailer: Mozilla 4.72 [en]C-CCK-MCD {Sony} (Win98; U)
X-Accept-Language: en,ja
To: Vebjorg Tingstad <vebjorg.tingstad@svt.ntnu.no>
Cc: isc-info@isc.org
Subject: Re: asking for permission

Hi,

Permission granted.

Rgds,
-drc
Executive Director, ISC

Vebjorg Tingstad wrote:

>
> ISC
> To be sure that it is ok to quote some of the ciphers from the Internet
> Domain Survey Host Count and reproduce the figure in a Norwegian doctoral
> thesis, I hereby ask for permission.
> Vebjørng Tingstad

CH@T-M@IL-CH@T-M@IL-CH@T-M@IL-CH@T

Informasjonsbrev til barn om undersøkelsen *Barn og internett*

Er du mellom 10 og 15 år? Er du ofte inne på pratelinjene på Internett eller skriver og får E-post? Har du lyst til å fortelle om dette til en forsker? Da har du sjansen nå. Det du og andre barn og unge forteller, skal brukes i en undersøkelse om barn og Internett-bruk i Norge.

Du lurer kanskje på hvordan dette skal foregå? Det skal du få vite mer om her. Kort sagt: Jeg vil komme hjem til deg 2 eller 3 ganger. Først vil jeg at du og eventuelt vennene dine kan vise meg hva du/dere bruker Internett til. Jeg vil så intervju deg ut fra noen spørsmål som jeg spør alle barna som er med i undersøkelsen om (NB! Jeg skal ikke intervju vennene dine). Siste gangen vil jeg intervju foreldrene dine. Etter at vi er ferdige med dette, kan det tenkes at jeg trenger å sende deg en e-mail for å spørre deg om noe. Du kan også sende meg en e-mail hvis du har noe å fortelle om det vi har snakket om i intervjuet eller nye ting som du har oppdaget på nettet.

Flere barn og unge skal delta i undersøkelsen og det skal skrives en bok om det dere forteller. Ingen får vite hva akkurat du sier og du kan ombestemme deg og si nei hvis du finner ut at du ikke har lyst til å være med mer. Når boka er ferdig, blir alle kladdepapirene ødelagt. En god grunn til å si ja er at de som er med og bestemmer i samfunnet trenger å vite hva barn og unge gjør og opplever i hverdagen sin, for eksempel på Internett. Og hvordan du bruker nettet og hva du synes om det, er det du som er eksperten på. Derfor er det viktig å vite hva akkurat du har å fortelle. Når jeg har fått vite det jeg trenger å vite, får du 100 kroner for at du har hjulpet meg med undersøkelsen.

I Norge er det en regel som sier at foreldre eller foresatte må gi barn som er under 16 år lov til å delta i slike undersøkelser. Dette må gjøres skriftlig. Derfor, for at du kan være med, må de voksne som har ansvar for deg, også få informasjon om hva dette går ut på. Hvis du fortsatt henger med, skal du gjøre følgende:

Vis den/de voksne både dette brevet og det andre som jeg har skrevet til dem. Hvis du eller de vil sjekke at dette ikke er noe tull, gå inn på følgende hjemmeside:

<http://www.sv.ntnu.no/ped/Vebjorg.Tingstad/default.htm>

De voksne må så skrive under det som kalles samtykkeerklæring og sende til meg i den konvolutten som jeg har lagt ved.

Når de har gjort dette, sender du en e-mail så fort som mulig til Vebjorg.Tingstad@svt.ntnu.no med noen opplysninger om deg selv. Jeg vil vite alderen din og når du brukte Internett første gang, hvor mye/ofte du bruker nettet og hva du bruker det mest til?

OBS! OBS! JEG VIL HELST IKKE AT DU SKRIVER ANNET ENN FORNAVNEN DITT UNDER DET DU HAR SKREVET.

Jeg ringer tilbake for å avtale når jeg kan komme på besøk.

Med hilsen Vebjørn Tingstad

INFORMASJONSBREV TIL FORELDRE/ FORESATTE OM UNDERSØKELSEN *BARN OG INTERNETT*

Dette er et informasjonsbrev til de voksne som har ansvar for barn som vil delta i en undersøkelse om Internett-bruk.

I undersøkelser som omfatter barn under 16 år, skal man vanligvis innhente samtykke fra foreldre/foresatte. For at dere skal kunne gi deres samtykke til at barnet deltar i undersøkelsen, får dere her en kort redegjørelse for hva den går ut på.

Undersøkelsen er et ledd i et doktorgradsarbeid ved Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige Universitet (NTNU) i Trondheim. Prosjektet er delfinansiert av Norge Forskningsråd og skal undersøke hvordan 10-15-åringer bruker og opplever Internett. Undersøkelsen er godkjent av Datatilsynet.

Jeg er mest opptatt av barns kommunikasjon over nettet. Derfor vil pratelinjer og e-post stå sentralt. Jeg vil komme hjem til dere 2-3 ganger, både for å se når barna (enten alene eller sammen med venner) holder på med Internett og for å intervju dem. Foreldre/foresatte vil også bli spurt om å la seg intervju om familiens bruk av Internett. Barna vil bli oppfordret til å sende e-post til meg etter at besøkene er over, blant annet for å fortelle hvis de oppdager noe nytt, morsomt, spennende, dumt osv. på Internett. Jeg ønsker videre å kunne spørre barna via e-post hvis det er noe jeg lurer på om deres Internett-bruk. Barna vil få en pengepremie på 100 kroner når hjemmebesøkene er over.

Medvirkning i undersøkelsen er frivillig og de som deltar kan når som helst trekke seg og få innsamlede opplysninger slettet uten at de må begrunne denne avgjørelsen. Forskeren har taushetsplikt og opplysninger vil bli fremstilt på en måte som sikrer at de ikke kan spores tilbake til enkeltpersoner eller familier. De opplysninger som registreres, dvs. intervju- og observasjonsmateriale vil bli oppbevart utilgjengelig for andre enn undertegnede og vil bli anonymisert ved prosjektslutt. Det samme gjelder papirutskrifter av e-post. Innhold i e-post som ligger på nettet, har som vanlig standard e-post ingen spesielle sikringstiltak ut over at prosjektleder oppgir brukernavn og passord når posten skal hentes. Barna blir oppfordret til kun å bruke fornavn når de sender e-post. Dette på grunn av anonymitetshensyn.

Undersøkelsen skal være avsluttet i juli 2002.

Ytterligere opplysninger finner dere i informasjonsbrevet til barna.

HVIS DET ER NOE DERE LURER PÅ, RING 73 590955, 73 920457 ELLER TA
KONTAKT PÅ E-POST: Vebjorg.Tingstad@svt.ntnu.no

Underskriv samtykkeerklæring og returner i vedlagte svarkonvolutt.

TAKK FOR HJELPEN!

Med hilsen Vebjørn Tingstad

-----klipp her-----

Samtykkeerklæring

- Jeg/Vi samtykker i at vårt barn,(barnets fornavn) deltar i undersøkelse om Barn og Internett.

..... / - 1999(Foreldres/foresattes navn)

- Jeg/Vi samtykker i at jeg/vi som foreldre/foresatte blir intervjuet.....

INTERVJUGUIDE - BARN

1. **FAKTISK BRUK AV INTERNETT, CHAT OG E-MAIL:**

- Hvor bruker du internett ?
- Hva bruker du internett til?
- Hva bruker du chat til?
- Hva bruker du e-mail til?
- Hvordan?
- Hvilke datanett deltar du i?
- Har du faste møtesteder på nettet?
- Hvilke bokmerker har du lagt inn?
- Hvor mye bruker du Internett i forhold til andre medier, som for eksempel TV, video og bøker?
- Bruker du biblioteket?
- Hvor mye bruker du chat og e-mail i forhold til andre måter å bruke nettet på? (Spill, fakta, musikk, film)
- Hvordan vil du beskrive et vanlig døgn fra morgen til kveld?

2. **KUNNSKAPER OM INTERNETT, CHAT OG E-MAIL:**

- Hva kan du bruke internett til?
- Hva kan du bruke chat til?
- Hva kan du bruke e-mail til?
- Hvordan har du lært å bruke nettet?
- Hva har du lært om internett på skolen?
- Er det spesielle ting du må vite eller gjøre for å delta på nettet?
- Er det spesielle ting du må passe seg for?
- Hvordan finner du ut hvilket nettsted/hvilke nettsteder som passer for deg?

3. **VURDERING AV CHAT OG E-MAIL i forhold til andre måter å kommunisere på:**

- Beskriv likheter og /eller forskjeller mellom å skrive til noen på nettet og å skrive brev som sendes med vanlig post?
- Beskriv likheter og /eller forskjeller mellom å skrive til noen på nettet og å snakke med dem *på ordentlig*?

4. **OPPLEVELSE AV CHAT OG E-MAIL:**

- Hva liker du best?
- Hva syns du er morsomt?
- Prøver du å være morsom eller *kul*?
- Hva bestemmer om du velger det ene nettstedet fremfor det andre?
- Hvordan vurderer du nettsteder der voksne tar bort det de mener ikke passer?

5. HYPPIGHET- INTENSITET:

Får du svar og i tilfelle raskt?

Hvordan holdes samtalen i gang?

Hvor mange skriver du fast med og hvor ofte?

Hender det at du holder på med mange ting samtidig på nettet? Beskriv.

6. INNHOLD I CHAT OG E-MAIL:

Sier du at du skriver eller snakker på nettet?

Hva skriver du vanligvis til andre barn om?

Hva skriver de til deg om?

Finner du ut noe om seg selv (og den andre) når du skriver til noen på nettet?

Hender det at du skriver om krig, fred, miljøspørsmål, rasisme eller andre ting du mener handler om politikk?

Hender det at du skriver om vennskap, kjærlighet, rett og galt?

7. KJØNN OG GENERASJON:

Skriver jenter og gutter om de samme tingene eller forskjellige ting?

Skriver barn og voksne om de samme tingene eller forskjellige ting?

Fins det typiske *jentegreier* og typiske *guttegreier* på nettet?

Hva kan voksne som ikke barn kan?

Hva kan barn som ikke voksne kan?

8. VENNSKAP:

Opplevs *nettvenner* som venner?

Er vennskap på nettet noe annet enn vennskap *i virkeligheten*?

Hva er eventuelt likt og hva er forskjellig?

Har du noen gang opplevd at det er tryggere å fortelle noe, diskutere noe eller spørre om noe på nettet enn *i virkeligheten*?

Har du avtalt å treffe noen du er blitt kjent med på nettet?

9. FORHOLDET MELLOM VIRTUAL REALITY OG REAL LIFE:

Skriver du om ting på nettet som du aldri ville finne på å snakke med noen om *på ordentlig*?

Skriver du om ting på nettet som du gjerne ville snakke med noen barn eller voksne om *på ordentlig*?

Er virkeligheten på nettet mindre virkelig, like virkelig eller mer virkelig enn det vi vanligvis kaller virkeligheten?

INTERVJUGUIDE - FORELDREINTERVJU

Hensikten med intervjuet gjøres klart for foreldrene, nemlig at de kan gi informasjon som er nødvendig for å forstå og tolke det barnet forteller i et så bredt lys som mulig. Intervjuets felles fokus er barnet. Både barn og foreldre er blitt orientert om at de selv velger om barnet skal delta i dette intervjuet, men at det primært er foreldrene som skal intervjues. En annen hensikt er å gi foreldrene informasjon og delaktighet i prosjektet, som til nå i hovedsak har hatt fokus på barnet. Etablering og vedlikeholdelse av gode relasjoner, kontrakter og felles fokus vil være viktig for det videre forløp av prosjektet, som blant annet inneholder en løsere struktur av kontakten i form av e-mail-kommunikasjon mellom forsker og barn.

Intervjuets innhold og todelte form beskrives: 1) Bakgrunnsopplysninger og 2) Medietilgjengelighet, barnets medieprofil og internett-bruk. I dette inngår spørsmål som beskriver deler av en sosial og kulturell kontekst; familie, vennskap, helse, trivsel, skole, mestring, gjøremål, samt medievaner generelt og kunnskaper om barnets internettvaner og bruk.

Gjennomføring: Jeg ønsker at spørsmålene skal danne utgangspunkt for samtale mer enn at de skal følges slavisk. Strukturen, progresjonen og felles fokus søkes sikret gjennom noen fastsatte spørsmål. Denne metoden velges dels også i den hensikt å forenkle etterarbeidet. Intervjuet må imidlertid gi rom for både spontane innskytelser, tilsynelatende selvmotsigelser og lite gjennomtenkte vurderinger. Et mål vil være å få detaljerte beskrivelser og vurderinger, men fremkommet på en slik måte at det er mulig i ettertid å se hva som er konkrete eksempler og hva som er foreldrenes eller forskerens tolkninger og vurderinger.

Anonymitet: Jeg understreker at jeg ikke kommer til å fortelle hva barna deres tidligere har sagt. Dette er en kontrakt jeg har med barna. Foreldrene bes om å fortelle dette til barna etter intervjuet hvis de ikke selv er med på det.

DEL 1 - BAKGRUNNSOPPLYSNINGER

1. Barnets navn.....Dato.....Hvem deltar? Mor-far-barn
2. Hvor mange personer i familien?
3. Mors og fars alder
4. Søskens alder og kjønn

5. Foreldres yrke, utdanning og arbeidstid

6. Hvor lenge har familien bodd i boligen?

7. Hvilke personer har barnet kontakt med ut over den nærmeste familie?

8. Venner?

9. Fritid – Barnets og familiens?

10. Barnets generelle helsetilstand, søvn, appetitt og trivsel?

11. Hva gjør barnet hjemme?

12. Tror du/dere barnet oppfatter seg som flink, middels eller svak på skolen?

13. Hva blir barnet glad for? Sint for?

14. Hvordan tror du/dere barnet opplever å være barn?

15. Er det vanlig at dere snakker om ting som skjer i samfunnet?

DEL 2 - MEDIETILGJENGELIGHET, BARNETS MEDIEPROFIL OG INTERNETT-BRUK

16. Hva finnes av medier hjemme? Hva bruker barnet?

- a. TV: 1. Hvor mange apparater? 2. Hvor mange kanaler?
- b. TV-spill
- c. Video
- d. PC
- e. Radio
- f. CD-spiller
- g. CD-romspiller
- h. Kasett-spiller
- i. Platespiller
- j. Mobiltelefon: Hvor mange?
- k. Aviser
- l. Ukeblad
- m. Bøker

- n. Tegneserier
- o. Tidsskrift

17. Mediebruk andre steder enn hjemme?

18. Hvem bruker Internett i familien?

19. Hvor mye (timer pr.uke)?

20. Hvem kan mest om nettet?

21. Hender det at dere holder på sammen på nettet?

22. Har dere regler som regulerer nettbruken?

23. Kostnader pr.kvartal?

24. Hva vet du/dere om chatting, diskusjonsgrupper og e-mail?

25. Bruker du/dere dette selv?

26. Forteller barnet noe om sine møter på nettet?

27. Hva vet du om barnets bruk av disse mulighetene på nettet?

28. Hva tror du chat , diskusjonsgrupper og e-mail betyr for barnet?

29. Er barnets Internett-bruk i samsvar med eller i konflikt med foreldrenes ønsker?

30. Eller er dette et medium barnet styrer over på egen hånd?

NB! ORIENTERE OM NESTE TRINN I UNDERSØKELSEN: SPØRSMÅL PÅ NETTET I SEPTEMBER 2000. BE FORELDRENE ORIENTERE BARNET OM DETTE I TILLEGG TIL AT DET SENDES EN E-MAIL TIL BARNET SELV.

30. Synspunkter på spørsmålene

Nicknames

Aina_Helene	Diessel	Jenny
Alexander	dissy	Jenta_di_kanskje
Alex	DJ	jente11
Anne_ki	Don	jenter12
Austin	dreamgirl	Joey
Aximili	dr.naken	jonas
Babe	drimboy	Jordan
Baby_boy	Eline	Jo.Smith
Bigdick	Erica	jonas
BigOne	ewo	Jugen
Blondie	fly_girl	Julie
bob2	Foto	Kaare
Boardbabes	giblankeF	Karina
BODYLOVE	girl	Kastanjegirl
boy....	Girl_16	Katt
Brad_Pitt88	girl_2000	Kay_leigh
britneyspears	Girl12000	KB
brummn	GP	KISS_ME
brunette	Guest	kjekken
Bærta	Guest2	knut
Candy	gutt	kolboy
Carli (?)	gutt11	Koozejentå
Caroline	gutt_12	Koseguten
Carry	guttegal1	kosejenten
catclaw	hege	Koselig_jente
ccc	Hellameg	kozegutt
Chacha	Hella_meg	kozejenta
charli	Hestegaljente	kozzy
charlotte	hgj	kulejenter
Chattgirl	HillBilly	Larviks_girl
Chattis	HnZzz	ledigjente
Chat_King	Hold_it33	lexi
Christian	Home_boy	Liam_Gallagher
coca	hotbabe	lilli
cool-boy	hotgirl	LINN
coolfyr	idiot	lisa
cool_girl	Iglo	listening
coolgirl2	i_miss_tranceboy	Lizzy
Coolguys	ina	lotte
coolio	ingen	Lucky
Datagal	ip8	LuNiTeCh
de2kuleguttene	Iselin11_Oslo	mads
destiny	j14_Oslo	mafia_babe
Dex	Jarod	Mango_babe
Didel	jeg er meg	Manu4u

Marco	Playgirl	Sweetgirl
Martica	pokemonhater	sweetkissgirl
mega_Male	poobee	sweety
michelle	Popboy	SyBeRsPaCe
Mie	princess	sylla
Misssixsty	promp	søtjente_15
MISS SLIM SHADY	PumaGirl	tamara_11
Miss_Universe	Pusur	Tamera
Mizzy	Puzzy	TaRzAn
Mobil_girl	Rainbow six	tenkern
Mongis	Real_boy	Tess
Monica.h.l.love	Romeo	Texo
Morten og Kim	Rune	The_babe
Mr_RomanceMulan	rusken	thule
Mulan	Sabba	Tia
nagder	SADDAM	tille
nettbabe	Sandnes_jentene	Tussi
nettbayb	Secca	tweety12
nettsøker	S*e*s*y_s*e*x	vakes
nice_girl	Silje	Vicy
niggir	Silje_13	Vralfy
No_rart_no_titter	Skygirl	wicky
Nordstrand_boy	slincky_2	wildboy
Nrn	Snuppa	winnie
Osloboy	SNUPPENE	Winniethepooh
OTTO	snill_gutt14	x`x`x`x
Over30	snoopy_girl	Your_girl_for_ever
pasificgirl	Stainy	zex_girl
Partygirl	Stina_14	Zombie
Pent_brukt	susi	Zonebabe
Pernille	summer_girl	2r`war
Pervo_gris	Superguy	#kizz_me#
Pickachu	Superpopit	
Pjokken	sviffer	