Chapter 1
Young People and Online Risk

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ABSTRACT
The authors suspect that the young perspective has been left out when online risk and safety are discussed in contemporary research. The aim of this chapter is to give a critical approach to this matter and question fear as a driving force for protecting young people online. Interviews with children about their views of internet use (Dunkels, 2007) and a study of safe use guides from European countries conducted in 2008 (Lüders et al., 2009) form the empirical base. The discussion in the chapter is underpinned by ideas of childhood as a social construction, emerging ideas of power relations pertaining to age and theories of technology reception. The authors also introduce a metaphor, the layer cake, to better understand how the same action can be viewed from different vantage points.

INTRODUCTION

but I dont want you to tell anyone, not even my mum and dad!

The above quote comes from a 12-year old girl (Dunkels, 2007) who had just told the researcher how she handles a situation that was part of her everyday life – unknown men making dirty comments about pictures she had posted online. She explained that she had sufficient control over the situation but that she was worried that her parents would get troubled and perhaps restrict her internet use as a consequence.

This is a crucial instance that urges us to propose a critical approach to online risk and safety and question fear as a driving force for protecting young people online. The interviewed girl makes a valuable point when she assumes that her parents will not be able to handle her online reality; this might be interpreted as fear paralyzing her parents. In the following we will present alternative views

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of what constitutes risk and how online safety might be shaped.

Internet use has gone through substantial change since the mid 1990’s when the internet mass use began (Findahl, 2009). One change is how the social network sites differ from the early internet days’ virtual communities (Larsen, 2009). One main difference is that the early meeting places aimed at helping users find new relations while today’s social networking sites mainly help users organize existing relationships. Virtual communities as described by among others Rheingold (1993) build upon their users’ common interests while social network sites are constructed around the users’ personalities. Another difference is the use of open chat rooms that peaked around the millennial and a phenomenon that to a great extent is marginalized today. Applications that require identification are more common today than when the first safe use guides were written. The level of openness, i.e. how much of the interaction is public and how much is private differs greatly among these different applications as shown in the Table 1.

Also, the research approach has changed. Early research on computer mediated communication was predominantly focused on the differences between online and offline. Words like virtual and cyber were used to mark this distinction. There were studies showing that online interaction lacks the ability to convey social information (Yao & Flanagin, 2006). Furthermore, studies were often exoticizing youth and their internet communication, describing the young and their activities as greatly different from earlier generations (Herring, 2008).

The trilogy of the prevailing discourse of fear, what we know about contemporary online interaction and young peoples’ experiences seem asymmetrical. There is a growing suspicion that we might have left out the young perspective when we discuss online risk and safety.

EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Empirically this chapter is based upon interviews with children about their views of internet use (Dunkels, 2007) and a study of safe use guides from European countries conducted in 2008 (Lüders et al, 2009).

Theoretically the chapter is underpinned by ideas of childhood as a social construction (Eriksson, 2008), emerging ideas of power relations pertaining to age (Alderson, 2005) and theories of technology reception (Dunkels, 2007). Childhood as a social construction has been developed mainly

Table 1. The table shows different levels of openness, i.e. how much of the interaction is public and how much is private, in some of the most used interactive applications among young people (Dunkels, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Open chat rooms</th>
<th>Net communities</th>
<th>Instant messaging applications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of openness</strong></td>
<td>Public (Open)</td>
<td>Public and private (Both open and closed)</td>
<td>Private (Closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>Authentication is not compulsory. You enter a chat room to see who else is there and start communicating. The conversation is public.</td>
<td>Membership is required. Many net communities offer different levels of openness within the community. Some interaction is public - often friends’ comments and blogs - and some is closed - often e-mail and instant messages.</td>
<td>Relationships are approved by both parties. Creating a buddy list is one of the central functions. Contact attempts can be accepted or declined. If both parties agree they can monitor each other when on line. All interaction is private.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.teenchat.com">http://www.teenchat.com</a></td>
<td>Facebook Myspace.com</td>
<td>MSN Messenger ICQ (E-mail)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>