Chapter 52
Youth and Online Social Networking: From Local Experiences to Public Discourses

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

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

The quotation was written by a 14-year-old girl as a comment in an online questionnaire which provides part of the empirical basis of this chapter. The quote captures quite well the essence of what the chapter is about, since it highlights the tension between what young people experience online on a local and day-to-day basis (communicating and hanging out with friends), and then wider public discourses which surround their use of new media.
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(which tend to highlight the pitfalls and dangers
for young people). As suggested by Herring (2008)
public discourses on young people’s use of tech-
nology often seem to be expressions of adults’
“hopes and dreams” or “fears and anxieties”,
rather than reflecting adequately young people’s
own experiences. Herring (2008) identifies three
forms of public discourse (Media Production and
Advertising, Media Commentary and new media
research) which have the common traits that they:
produce or re-produce overly optimistic (uto-
pian) or negative (dystopian) accounts of young
people’s use of media, and represent an outsider
view (adult) on youth’s online practices. She
explores the ways in which young people contest
or condone of these public discourses governed
and produced largely by adults. She suggests that
youth are characterised by a dual consciousness
or awareness where: “young people are aware of
adult representations of their generation and orient
to them, while simultaneously orienting to their
own experiences” (Herring, 2008, p. 78).

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

We find the notion of ‘dual consciousness’
interesting, and while Herring (2008) seems
to ground the concept primarily in a broader,
more general reading with only some concrete
examples, we will discuss the concept in relation
to a number of empirical examples. Thorough
empirically based knowledge within this area is
an important research contribution these years.
Particularly because the topic of young people’s
online social practices is subject of much discus-
sion and concern in the general public debate. As
Sonia Livingstone has pointed out there has been
“a notable discrepancy between the high levels of
public concern over children and young people’s
use of new media and the paucity of empirical
research conducted” (Livingstone, 2002, p. 3).
With that in mind, this chapter is based on five
years of ethnographic research, a comprehensive
open-ended questionnaire about Danish adoles-
cents’ use of social network sites and a media
content survey and analysis.

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

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