Creating Space
Young people’s use of the Internet for handling anxieties in everyday life

Cecilia Löfberg,
cecilia@ped.su.se
Department of Education
University of Stockholm
106 91 STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN

Abstract

This paper addresses young people’s use of online venues for information, support and communication about topics they find troublesome to express in other settings. The general aim is to explore how young people (age 13-18) ascribe meaning to web pages that are designed to help and support young people in difficult matters (for example, sexuality, the body, mental health problems, drugs and relationships).

The theoretical point of departure for this paper is grounded in new social studies of childhood where children are seen as actors in their own right. The focus is on how the child’s world can be understood from the child’s perspective. Some researchers, within new social studies of childhood, now discuss the need to acknowledge childhood and youth as assemblages of heterogeneous materials. The biological, the social and the technological is seen as different aspects folding into each other, creating the structures of childhood and youth. The results from the study in this paper are discussed out of an understanding of youth as an assemblage of these aspects.

25 semi-structured interviews with young people, aged 13-18, were conducted online through MSN. The empirical material is gathered by self-selection. The informants contacted the researcher after seeing information about the interview advertised on two web pages designed by organizations that work with information and support via the Internet to young people.

The methodological approach is qualitative and based on the theoretical concepts presented above. A first step in the analysis was to, in every interview, identify the overall narrative. Thereafter every interview was coded out from different emerged themes. Further work was to compare themes and look for similarities in the whole material. Through identifying constantly recurring statements, notions, worries, needs, emotional status, and variations of these, a deeper understanding of relevant aspects concerning ways to deal with difficult matters appeared. These aspects were further analyzed separately and in comparison to each other. They were also looked upon in their contextual setting (the patterns of interaction) and the ways they were making meaning in the online context.

Results show that looking for support online is, by the informants, connected to other conditions for expressing anxiety and insecurity than in offline settings. The conditions acknowledge a new line of expressions, especially regarding what is thought of as “unwanted feelings”. In online settings
interaction with others filters through a technology that enables the participator to speak with a voice that reach others without giving them the power of reading unwanted bodily reactions or judging physical markers. This lead to changes in the social act. Principally there are two aspects standing out.

1. The possibility to conceal own bodily reactions (tears, blushing, shame etc).
2. The possibility to be liberated from responsibility for others reactions to what one has to say. Due to the conditions in online settings a certain degree of invisibility is created. Through this invisibility new performativities regarding social expressions and social acts are being accessible. This is experienced as an authentic “me’, an altered visibility, which cannot be expressed in offline settings where there is always a need to maintain a certain social act.

Through the informants in this study it shows that young people, looking for support online, are not comfortable with revealing their difficulties or anxieties in an offline setting. The online setting is attributed as a more non judging context. Information or supporting conversations are seen as given on equal terms to a greater extent than supporting conversations with adults working with healthcare in offline settings. Other aspects that attracted young people to seek support online were; Integrity, knowledge, acknowledgement, instant information/support and the possibility to distance their difficulties from family or other persons in their local environment. The study illuminates online settings as an important space for young people in dealing with what they apprehend as problems in everyday life. Online communication becomes a space where norms and ideals about themselves that they need to maintain in offline settings can be set aside. The venues becomes a space where young people experience that they can get information, support or guidance without risking to be judged or “mastered” by adult society. At the best it can create a space for self-reflection and be a channel to reduce anxiety.

Keywords: Empowerment, Health, Online support, Sexuality, Youth

Cecilia Löfberg,
e-mail cecilia@ped.su.se
Department of Education
University of Stockholm
106 91 STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN

Introduction

Computer mediated communication (CMC) has created new arenas for social performances in contemporary society. Social encounters online is an ordinary part of life for most young people in the western world today. On these arenas, the conditions for activity differ from face to face interaction in everyday life in several ways. Virtual communication is disembodied as the participants are separated from their physical bodies and appearances. This creates a certain anonymity online. Virtual communication is also interactive in synchronous and asynchronous ways, as the participators can be senders as well as receivers, independent of each other in time and space. You don’t have to ‘get together’ in a physical
context to communicate. Researchers in the field of virtual communication argue that these conditions offer new possibilities for people to explore their identities and to express ideas that are not easily expressed in offline contexts (see for example Jones 1998, Hine 2000, Jaquemot 2002, Holloway & Valentine 2003, Stern 2008, boyd 2008)).

In research about media use, and even so in the daily round of life, youth of today are distinguished as a generation which has acquired special knowledge about technology in relation to earlier generations. They are called ‘Net generation’ (Tapscott 1998), ‘Electronic generation’ (Buckingham 2002), ‘Digital generation’, ‘Millenials’ (Herring 2008), ‘Digital natives’ in contrast to ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky 2001) etc. Children, adolescents, young people and childhood in relation to new media are discussed from a multitude of angels. In research different perspectives are being spoken for, David Buckingham (2000) illuminates different approaches in research about childhood and new media. New media as a phenomenon that exploits and disrupts the innocence of childhood, and worsens the young person’s possibilities to develop as an individual, is one approach (ibid). Another perspective brings new media forward as a tool that can contribute to the development of a young person’s creativity, social skills and the possibility to “find oneself”, a key to authorization and independence for younger generations (ibid). Both these perspectives distinguish the differences between the world of young people and the adult perspective on this world. Susan Herring (2008) means that these ideas support an exotization of young people in relation to media. Research about children, adolescents and media should challenge this by focusing on young people’s own perspectives on their use of media. “Exoticism can be tempered by a shift from a focus on technologies to a focus on young people themselves and their communicative needs as they happen to be expressed through particular media” (Herring 2008:86).

Several researchers in the field are aware of this and works with acknowledging young people’s own perspectives of their media use (for example Livingstone 2005, boyd 2008, Stern 2008). This kind of work involves research that illuminates the spectra of application fields of young people’s use of new media. By diversifying - and shed light upon the cultural, social and technological complexity that is included in young people’s use of new media - the technology appears as an entity of many and loses its deterministic influence.

This paper has two purposes, one theoretical and one empirical. The theoretical purpose is to introduce a post structural perspective of young people’s ways of taking actions on the Internet. By introducing the concept relational systems young people are here discussed as a part in a system where subjects and objects together create agency.

The empirical purpose is to take a closer look at young people’s use of online venues that are designed to give young people information, support and communicate about topics they find troublesome to express in other settings. The paper is based on an interview study where young people (age 13-18) describe their use and their meaning making of online...
venues designed for these matters (for example, sexuality, the body, mental health problems, drugs and relationships).

**Theoretical and methodological points of departure**

During the last decades we have seen a displacement in the understanding of children and young people. From understanding children as “human becomings” discourses that refer to children as “in being” (human beings) has risen (Holloway & Valentine 2003). The later perspective leads to an ambition of understanding children’s and young people’s realities from their own point of views. This approach signifies children and young people as actors in their own right (ibid). This research has been developed under the research field “New social studies of childhood”\(^1\). My understanding of young people’s (aged 13-18) communication online is based on a theoretical perspective held by researchers in the area new social studies of childhood. Within this perspective young people are seen as social actors in their own rights (Christensen, P & James A 2000, Prout 2005). Young people’s worlds, as they themselves see it, are focused. Childhood and youth are not seen as a biological category but more like a social constructed identity depending on time and context (Holloway & Valentine 2000).

But, what “being a social actor in its own rights” means can be ambiguous in relation to young people. Nick Lee (1998) questions the sociological idea about agency as a property within the individual. Lee put forward the question: Can agency be seen as essential? He emphasize that the agentic independence that sociological theory rests upon is in fact a pattern of dependency between a “network of materials, texts, bodies and persons” (ibid 1998:459). This means that the actor creates agency in collaborations with other subjects/objects and that there is no such thing as independency or essentialism in this process. Alan Prout (2005, 2008) means that new social studies of childhood would benefit of breaking through, above all, the nature-culture binary that often has been used as a concept to understand the worlds of childhood and youth. The theoretical perspective has gone from understanding children and young people as natural to understanding them as entirely cultural in the social constructionism perspective (ibid). Instead we need to acknowledge “childhood as assemblages of heterogenous materials’ (ibid:34). Prout state further:

> In order to understand this it is important to move away from the idea of a determinant process in which one entity, natural, social or technological drives this process. Whilst the properties of nature and culture are not infinitely malleable, they are overdetermined, in the sense that they are complex, emergent and open to contingency. In fact the entities that we call ‘biological’, ‘technological’ and ‘social’ are already networked together (Prout 2008:34)

\(^1\) For an introduction to new social studies of childhood see among others James & Prout (1997), James, Jenks & Prout (1998), Christensen & James (2000)
Prout advocates an understanding of reality where different entities are interwoven in the constructions of what reality is. In this perspective children are neither natural, nor cultural but an assemblage constituted of heterogeneous elements (ibid). This gives an alternative perspective for understanding agentic actions which are within reach for young people today.

Catharina Landström (2007) refers to Deluze and Guattaris concept assemblage and state: “Assemblage refigures subjectivity as constituted in complex relationships with technology, placing the relationship as the crucial mechanism, not identity” (ibid:17). Dianne Currier (2003) also refers to Deluze and Guattaris (1987) concept assemblage and writes:

In terms of assemblage, context describes the provisional, transitory and entirely contingent functional amalgams of the disparate component elements. These 'components' are not understood as prior stable entities, nor are 'contexts' understood as pre-existent fields into which component elements are funneled. In contrast, the notion of an assemblage reorients the relation of the whole to the parts. In assemblages, the 'social' as a whole does not function as an overarching structure, which orders the component parts, just as the 'body' as a whole does not order component matter and energies. Rather in each instance, it is the aggregate of the parts that constitutes the whole assemblage. (ibid: 328)

In the understanding of young people’s media use I have been inspired by researchers who emphasize a perspective where the interest is to understand how the subject evolves in intra-action with other entities. In my work I refer to the structure of this process as relational systems. I suggest this concept to signify that systems of relations are crucial for young people’s ways of claiming the Internet. It’s based upon the idea that the relations between interwoven entities such as the biological, the social and the technological together create an agentic arena where young people take part, not as prior actors but as parts in a system.

**Online communication, what are the conditions?**

Holloway and Valentine (2003) have listed some aspects of online communication, appealing to children and young people. They mean that children and young people feel more competent in online environments. Online they also feel liberated in their expressions because physical appearance or body reactions can be hidden (ibid). Further they have time to reflect upon what and how things should be expressed: ‘ICT give them more control over their identities than spontaneous face-to-face encounters’ (ibid:134). Finally they can create a sphere of intimacy where the things that are being expressed will not reach the local peer group and be a cause for slander. These conditions can contribute to an increased possibility to express oneself outside the norms for social agency that is individually experienced in offline settings. Susannah Stern (2008) means that the possibility to present oneself, in form of an identity or a self-image, that cannot be presented elsewhere is imbedded in online
activity. The new line of expression also has impact on young people’s ways of handling feelings and thoughts that they go through in offline settings. Feelings of stress, grief, anger or betrayal can be expressed and reflected upon. Susannah Stern (2008) suggests that self-reflection is “the most commonly cited reward of maintaining a personal site among youth authors’ (ibid:102). In matters that are hard to handle this is named “getting it all out” or “therapeutic” by the informants in Sterns study. Further Stern exemplifies young blogger’s experiences of blogging as a way of “being myself”.

Neither Holloway and Valentine, nor Stern refers to theories about assemblages. Even so this could be understood as descriptions of relational systems that young people come across in their everyday life situations. Instead of describing online communication as a technology where young people find affordances and alternative ways to create identity it could be described as activity between human and non-human elements creating agency through their mutual actions. Seeing it this way we displace both constructions of identity and a deterministic perspective of technology. In focus stands subjects and objects processing together, creating understandings of reality. The feeling of, for example ‘being myself’, can in this perspective be understood as intra-activity between different entities that is experienced by the subject.2 By doing this shift in perspective we acknowledge the agency of the different entities in a relational system and the meaning this has in the creation of the subject.

Young people are in this study understood as parts of relational systems constituted by heterogenic materials, networks where biology, the social and technology unifies in processes of “being”. The concept relational system gives other possibilities to look upon reality. Situations in everyday life are understood as multiple and complex processes where both subjects and objects are in possession of agency. Here, technology is seen as one entity among others which, in a relational system, together creates young people’s agency in everyday life.

Young people, adults and virtual space as entities in relational systems

Previous research indicates that young people’s use of online communication to a great extent is about maintaining contact with peers in the local environment (Livingstone 2005). They also develop competence in expressing themselves in inventive ways which gives many social contacts and high status in the chat room (Holm Sørensen 2001). Time and space conditions together with the possibility of different levels of anonymity all increase the experience of online communication as something “easy” (Löfberg 2008). They also experience that online communication is less judging which leads to initiatives that wouldn’t be taken in encounters with others offline (Holloway & Valentine 2003).

2 The concept ‘intra-activity’ is presented by Karen Barad (2007, 2008) and turns our attention towards the ongoing processes in-between human and non-human elements.
In this study we focus on young people’s online communication within a specific field, which is handling worries and anxieties in everyday life. In this field adults have a part to play as designers and editors of the venues, those who edit the information given on the venues and as those who gives support in chat communication with young people seeking support. The adult subject becomes an additional entity in this relational system. The virtual space is another part of the relational system. The specific design of a virtual space affects the agency that is performed. If we understand social encounters between young people and adults as something that is performed in relational systems it is not the categories young and adult that stands against each other. Instead we turn to what entities are active in a specific relational system and how these entities work together. What Prout (2008) names entities of the ‘biological’, ‘technological’ and ‘social’ can, in this context overall be defined as:

- Young people
- Adults
- Technological entities as computer, virtuality, texts and visual expressions
- Discourses
- Specific venues designed for giving young people information and support or chat with adults about sexuality, the body, mental health problems, drugs and relationships.

It is from the joint action of these entities that the subjectivities of young people are reflected.

**The interview study**

35 semi-structured interviews with young people, aged 13-18, were conducted online through MSN. During autumn 2009 and spring 2010 these interviews were conducted within the scope of the research project *Creating Space. A study of young people’s use of The Internet forums for articulating their life situations.*

The empirical material is gathered by self-selection. The informants contacted the researcher after seeing information about the interview advertised on two web pages designed by organizations that work with information and support to young people via the Internet. The two web pages whose users has been interviewed are: **UMO.se**, “UMO is a national web-based youth friendly clinic for young people aged 13 to 25 years. The purpose of the site is to make it easier for young people to find relevant, current and quality assured information

---

3 www.attutryckadetsvaraonline.wordpress.com

The research project is seated on Department of Education, Stockholm University and financed by The Knowledge Foundation, a research financier for universities with the task of strengthening Sweden’s competitiveness and ability to create value.
about sex, health and relationships” (Umo.se/ 20100813). **Tjejzonen.se** “Tjejzonen is a non-profit association with no affiliations with a political party or religion. Our target group is girls and women between the ages of 12-25 years… We are a free zone for girls and offer activities, support and help” (Tjejzonen 20100813).

The interview material is divided as follows:

- 15 interviews with girls (aged 13-18), users of the information site UMO.se
- 10 interviews with boys (aged 13-18), users of the information site UMO.se
- 10 interviews with girls (aged 14-18), users of the support chat on the site Tjejzonen.se

The interviews are semi structured in that sense that certain themes has been present in all interviews. These themes are: *Practical procedures (how, when, how often, etc), The importance of the virtual space to seek information about and express things they find troublesome to handle in everyday life, Their own experiences of this type of interactivity online.* The interviews with users of Tjejzonen also include the theme *To relate to an adult supporter.* Besides these themes every separate interview had its own themes depending on the interplay between what the informant wanted to tell and my questions.

The methodological approach is qualitative and based on the theoretical concepts presented above. A first step in the analysis was, in every interview, to identify the overall narrative. After that the material was coded looking for themes in every interview. As mentioned above further work was to compare themes and look for similarities in the whole material. Through identifying constantly recurring statements, notions, worries, needs, emotional status, and variations of these, a deeper understanding of relevant aspects concerning ways to deal with difficult matters appeared. These aspects were further analyzed separately and in comparison to each other. They were also looked upon in their contextual setting (the patterns of interaction) and the ways they were making meaning in the online context.

Through an application to *The central ethical review board for research involving humans* in Sweden the study has gained ethical approval. The researcher has no knowledge about the informants’ identities. The only connection between the interviewer and the informant is the hotmail address that the informant stated for the contact via MSN.

In the next section young people’s perspectives of and reasons for using the Internet for these matters are presented and discussed. In the final section this will be related to the idea about relational systems.

**Young people’s own perspectives of handling anxieties in everyday life on the Internet**
The reasons for using venues online to seek information, ask questions, or chat with adult supporters varies. Among the informants there is those who surf on the net and read about these issues because it’s interesting, there is those who seek support because of feelings of insecurity about their own body or how to behave in, for example, a sexual situation, there is also those who experience life as troublesome and communication online is seen as one (not seldom the only) possibility to express what they really feel. The personal narratives in the interviews differ. What will be discussed here are themes that were frequently recurring by many informants about why the Internet was used for these issues.

The informants’ experiences that they online can look up information ask about things and express themselves in chat beyond what they find comfortable in offline situations. Below different informants, users of UMO.se, express themselves about why they use the venue.

First, it doesn’t take as much time as offline encounters and it feels better when they can’t see me. What if you run into them “in town”, that would feel rather tough. It’s better to use UMO as much as possible. (girl A, 16)

I have trouble opening up, I keep almost everything secret, but it’s easier through the computer when you don’t have to sit and stare someone in the eyes. (girl B, 15)

No teenager likes a visit at the health school department. That often means that you have some kind of “problem” and that isn’t very comforting to communicate with someone else. (boy A, 16)

It’s not always you feel secure with the person you are suppose to ask in real life, then it’s easier to do it on the internet (girl C, 15)

I’m not always able to get it out ‘crying’ and people can’t hear what you say when you’re crying, and I can’t get it all out because I feel so stupid. It’s a relief to just write down everything you feel without standing there all naked (girl D, 17)

You can see that others also have their problems and maybe read about someone that got the same problem as you have. It means pretty much to know that you’re not alone. (boy B, 16)

The Internet as a communication form where young people can express thoughts or feelings has been discussed many times in previous research about the Internet communication.

Informants statements shown in this paper are all translated from Swedish to English by the author.
for example Holloway & Valentine 2003, Buckingham 2008). What is interesting here is how this can be understood in relation to young people’s positions in different social contexts in western society. Media and cultural notions about sexuality and health influence young people’s ways of meaning making. In the same time these are matters where confidentiality is of great importance in this age group (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Young people usually seek information about this via media or in the peer group (Subrahmanyam et al, 2004). What we can see example of in the quotations are young people that avoid speaking about this face-to-face with adults in the same time as they are in need of information and support. There is a need to retain integrity. What the informants express is that they are interested in the information/support from adult society (in this case UMO.se) but they prefer not to show themselves. What could be the reasons for this?

In many of the interviews notions of adults appear in the role of both bearer of knowledge and judges of what is an appropriate frame for young people’s knowledge and behavior. This becomes clear in the next quotation from a 14 year old boy that tells us why he chooses to seek information online.

I: What parts of the venue are you interested in
Boy: eeh... sex and relationships I think, and smoking, and drugs
I: What makes you look for information about this online?
Boy: It’s a little hard to ask an adult about this personally sort of, if you have questions, it feels like they suspect you, that you take drugs or drink, sometimes they seem to get suspicious. On the the Internet it’s much more anonymous and you can read and write questions without someone’s wondering about it, sort of.
(boy C, 14)

In his statement it comes clear that the boy experiences that his curiosity about these things makes adults worry. The Internet becomes a possibility to communicate and gain information from adults about things he wants to know. Offline he cannot get this kind of information from an adult without experiencing a sense of unpleasantness. Here anonymity can be seen as a part of a release from norms, values and social scripts related to the categories young/adult and their encounter with one another regarding knowledge and support in this area. As we also can see in the two statements bellow, adults are experienced as less judging and easier to approach online.

Well, you dare to ask more online. They on UMO.se don’t judge you, which others can do (boy D, 15)

It’s a good way for me to get in touch with help from adults. Sometimes you can need that instead of asking someone in my own age (boy E, 18)
The possibility to be anonymous, which is a very often mentioned condition for the Internet activity, is in this study strongly connected to getting information/help/support from adults and in the same time avoid judgments from adult society.

When young people seek support online through chat conversations with adult supporters the complexity around adults as both helpers and controllers is intensified. Below a girl tells us what she thinks about the possibility to chat with an adult supporter on “Tjejzonen”

*I wouldn’t really mind if they knew much about me, because they don’t know me and they can’t do something that I don’t want them to do, for example talk to a psychologist. It feels safer; you know that nothing can happen. If I would talk to someone at school I don’t know if they will call my mother and tell her, but if I chat with tjejzonen then I know that no one I know will find out and get worried.*

(girl E, 15)

In the quotation anonymity as “unknown identity” is not the issue. Instead the girl emphasizes importance of anonymity for the lack of control the adult online supporter has over her local conditions. Through seeking support online she doesn’t have to be worried about possible consequences like being “ordered” to go to a psychologist. She also avoids awakening the mother’s concern in an attempt to spare her. Here are two other examples from interviews with girls using chat support on ‘Tjejzonen’

*I have my ‘hidden’ side which I only show here (in the chat), or…I hide it for family, friends and everybody else, but it takes a lot of my thinking. I guess it’s almost the only thing I can think of. Here (in the chat) is the only place where I can talk about it.*

(girl F, 17)

*You can reflect upon what you want to say. Sometimes when you talk directly to somebody you just say something. Like if my parents asks me how I am I just say ‘fine’ but when I chat I can tell how things really are and in the same time think through what I want to say. It’s harder when you talk ‘ordinary’* (girl G, 14)

The way these three girls describes it chat conversations are a type of conversation you can control. In the descriptions above the main focus is on the possibility to chat, get support and maintain control over the situation in the same time. These girls express an aspect that is reoccurring in the interviews with girls who seek adult conversation support online. They want to talk about their problems and they want to avoid interference from close relatives or local health services. Many of the girls that were interviewed had bad experiences from local health services and felt that they weren’t listened upon. In opposition to this they felt welcomed and respected when reading information or communicating with adult supporters online. Here are some examples:
Well if I recognize myself on UMO.se and they suggest how to solve a problem or so, then it’s easier to believe in it or stronger to do it because you know that UMO thinks like you because I recognized myself. (girl H, 15)

***

On ‘tjejzonen’ they talk pretty much as they were my friend. They don’t make judgments They ask how you are and how you feel about what you’re doing to yourself. They don’t immediately say that it’s a bad thing. You get some kind of confidence. (girl I, 17)

***

I dare to ask all my questions. It really feels like they know what they talk about. You feel confident with the answers you get. You understand what they mean. In other places some doctors and persons has a way to complicate things when they answer and it’s hard for me to understand. (girl J, 15)

Anonymity and recognition are two reoccurring aspects that young people mention in their choice of handling their anxieties online. Concerning anonymity it’s a possibility to conceal own bodily reactions (tears, blushing, shame etc). It is also crucial to be liberated from responsibility for others reactions on what you have to say that. The latter aspect also relate to the possibility of maintaining control over a local situation.

The informants refer to the lack of unpleasant feelings due to aspects of anonymity. Herring (2008) means that anonymity that needs to be related to how young people use the net instead of discussing it as “afforded by the medium”. “To what extent do young people mask their identity in different contexts of computer-mediated communication, and for what intended effect?” (ibid:86). Controlling the situation or avoiding the feeling of being judged by another human being is an important part of anonymity for the young users in this study. It is also experienced as a possibility to handle their own and others’ presumed uneasiness about their emotional reactions. In this way anonymity in this context has a meaning that relate to a need of integrity and a changed way of using their agency.

**Theoretical remarks**

Young people in this study declare many reasons to seek information and support about difficult matters. For example they don’t have to consider aspects of time and space in the same ways as in offline situations. They can seek information on a time or in space they themselves choose. They also state that the Internet is easy to access and because of that a natural source for looking up information. Many say that they can read and reflect over information in their own time. All informants also mention anonymity in one way or another. Here there is a tension between a wish to get information from adults about these topics and the unpleasant feeling that is related to asking adults about these things. One
reason for this could be the power structures that are imbedded in most discourses concerning a generational divide. We can, from previous research see that young people and adult interact in discursive power structures positioning young people as subordinated to adults (see among others Mayall 2002). These discourses can be understood as an element of relational systems. In young people’s statements from the interviews it shows that certain discursive power structures lose its impact. The hierarchical positions between young peoples and adults are, in some, ways leveled out.

Buckingham (2000) means that the dominant discourse about the development of the child is a natural, caring environment. Maintaining this discourse about children and their development demands that childhood and adulthood is separated and that children and young people is a distinguished social group. To reinforce this young people need to be excluded from areas in the adult world that they are not seemed to, developmentally, handle. These areas are violence, sexuality, economy and politics, areas which young people today gain knowledge about through media (ibid). When young people break through to these areas one can assume that adult society is seeing an alarming crossover. The statements that are made in the interviews can be interpreted as statements about a discursive shift where there is a possibility to ask and get support from adults in the same time as it is possible to avoid the risk of being categorized as someone out of their “proper place” in the social “youth” categorization.

Relational systems

The information that comes from the interviews can be seen as developing out of a relational system. The mutual agency in a relational system becomes the point of departure for being a subject. This perspective doesn’t change how young people use the Internet for handling anxieties in everyday life but it changes our understanding for how agency is created.

The aspects of anonymity that is important for these young people can be seen as an outcome of a relational system where different entities interwoven together creates the possibility to communicate like this. Earlier in this paper the overall entities in the active relational system has been mentioned as: Young people, Adults, Technological entities as computer, virtuality, text end visual expressions, Discourses, Specific venues that are designed for giving young people information and support or chat with adults about sexuality, the body, mental health problems, drugs and relationships. It is the mutual activity of these entities that becomes the space where young people (and the other entities) act.

In this relational system the technology communicate a certain degree of invisibility through the loss of the body and bodily markers. The young subject can experience aspects of anonymity that makes it possible to seek answers, state questions and communicate with adult supporters without changing their social acts in their local context. This means that they feel more in control over the situation and more comfortable with what they can
express without being taken under control by someone else. The adult subject can inform, answer or support the young subject without taking responsibility, in form of actions, in the young subject’s local context or close relations. Discourse frames positions where young subjects can receive information or support and adult subjects can give information or support on more equal terms where young subjects are given their own rights without being seen as “belonging” to the adult society as a point of departure for caretaking. Venues inspire and present rules for communication.

In the relational systems that are created the subjectivities (young or adult), the objectivities (computers, venues, information texts, chat tools or discourses) co-produce, for example, patterns of interactions between young people and adult society. Such patterns are more resistant to power structures between generations. These relational systems shall not be seen as in opposition to other relational systems. Instead, the way we communicate with each other is a consequence of the relational system we take part in for the time being. Neither relational systems nor the agency that is expressed through those are static. This means that relations systems are fluent and in constant change.

Conclusions

Young people use the net to seek information, ask or talk about what they experience as difficult matters in everyday life. They express a relief in using the Internet for these matters. They also emphasize anonymity as a possibility to avoid others (usually adults) interfering with their lives in the same time as they can receive help and support from them. In this way anonymity is given significance as an aspect which reinforces integrity in relation to adult control.

A young person that seeks information or support about sexuality, the body, mental health problems, drugs and relationships sees in the adult world a source of information and knowledge about these topics. In the informants’ notions (about face-to-face discussions with adults about difficult matters,) it becomes clear that in such encounters the integrity is at stake (will not be in control of their local social acts, local situation and information to close relatives).

The venues that offer information and support in these matters online become a possibility to gain knowledge and express things that is otherwise kept a secret. Many of the informants say that the information they can get online or the support that comes out of a conversation with an adult supporter is a way to release worries and anxiety, if only temporary. Several of the girls who choose to communicate with an adult supporter online also state that they know that they have to do more than communicate online if they want to feel better in a long time perspective.

Understanding young people taking part in a society of social and technological change from the idea of relational systems breaks up the perspective of technological determinism. Also
the image of today’s children and young people as special in relation to new media looses up in the idea of relational systems. Young people today can chose to cooperate in different relational systems in their search for information, knowledge and support in difficult matters. They can do it on- or offline depending on how they will or dare to meet adult society. These different alternatives are an extended space for action. It can also be seen as an extended possibility for adult society “get through” to young people.

References

BRIS (2009) Barnen, BRIS och IT. www.bris.se


Tapscott, Don (1998) *Growing up digital: the rise of the Net generation*  

Downloaded 20100815


Downloaded 20100815