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Net cultures

Abstract

I have three aims with this paper. The first is to describe young people's net cultures in a historic context. The second is to discuss adults' relations to young people's net cultures and finally my third aim is to discuss possible strategies for parents and teachers dealing with children's net cultures.

I define net cultures as everything that is done on the Internet and the cultures that grow around these activities.

Thus, first in my paper I will discuss the similarity between the reception of this modern phenomenon and how we received some of the technologies which we today feel to be relatively uncomplicated and highly integrated parts of our everyday life.

Second, as regards adults' relations to young people's net cultures, I will discuss if net cultures are in any significant way different from other youth cultures – regardless of their general nature and character – and if so, whether the adult community, sooner or later, will have to deal with this particular culture in the same way as it has dealt, and is dealing, with other youth cultures.

Finally, I will discuss what strategies parents and teachers may use in order to deal with the Internet's negative, destructive sides as well as understand its positive, developing sides.

What is a net culture?

When I use the term *net culture* I refer to any activity performed on the Internet and the cultures surrounding these activities; e-mailing, visiting web pages, chatting, listening to music, down-loading files, playing games, etc. Some of these cultures are by nature of a negative kind, some of a positive kind and some are neutral in themselves – the value of these cultures lies in their content.

This paper is about adult's relations to young people's net cultures, and in particular about those features in these cultures which to adults might seem unfamiliar or in some cases even frightening and threatening. My main hypothesis, though, is that if adults develop strategies concerning how to deal with this seemingly complex matter, the adult community will be able to take full adult responsibility for the children who grow up today.

How do we adopt new technologies?

It seems that the introduction of new technologies will always be accompanied by problems. If we are able to see these problems as a pattern, we might be able to learn something about our own time. In this section I will discuss the similarity between the reception of the Internet and of other technologies before it.

In the 1970's the word *video* quickly acquired a negative value because it inherited negative connotations from films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. We could not discuss the medium itself without adding the content's value to it. Video, as a medium, was compared to theatre and other cultural phenomenon. This was really no less absurd than stating that John Irving is better read on lint paper than on recycled paper, but still voices were raised against the phenomenon video. However, time has washed away this connection between the medium and what is expressed by it, so that today we can use the word *video* without adding any value to it at all. A closer study of how we have received new technologies and phenomena in the past; the telephone, the television, women working in factories, men in the kitchen, etc. would probably reveal similar patterns of reception. It appears that we are unable to separate the media from the content. If we look just five years back in time we see that this debate was vivid, now with the Internet as the phenomenon in question. Parents and teachers were worried about the Internet and what it could do to children's minds. Voices were raised to ban Internet connections in schools. We were unable to separate the media from the content.

Today the debate has changed. It is commonly accepted (in fact, required) that schools have Internet connections. I think, however, that we can learn from the brief historical description above and try to identify contemporary phenomena for which we cannot separate the medium from the content.

Net communities

Some facts point towards net communities being one of these phenomena. A net community is hard to describe in the words conventionally used to describe analogue phenomena. To get a picture of what a net community is one can imagine a mixture of the school year book, a show room, a telephone, mail, and walking down High Street on a Saturday afternoon. It is a virtual place for communication, showing who you are and looking at others. Most net communities are web based. As a member you log in and get access to your personal space where you can publish information

about your self, true or untrue, as much as you choose. All members can access each other's information and communicate.

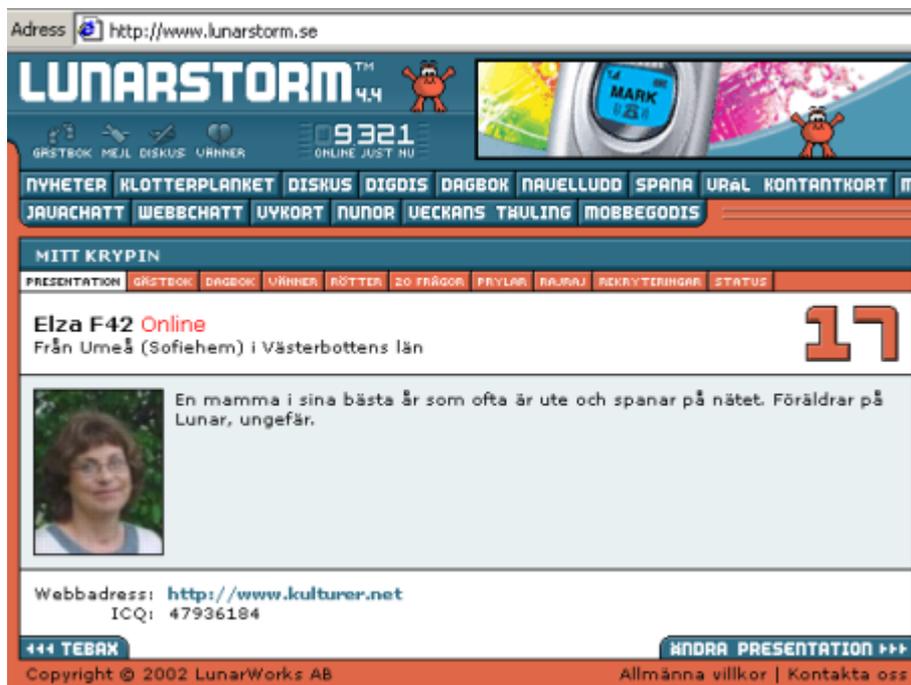


Figure 1. Sweden's largest net community is found at <http://www.lunarstorm.se>.

There has been criticism of the net communities regarding the fact that young people can discuss things and people they hate, that the language used on the Internet is of an inferior kind and that this will prevent young people from being able to communicate in and with the analogue world in just a few years time. Some people also warn about what might happen to the world if young people live their lives on line; split personalities and anti-social behaviour among other threats.

On the other side we find arguments supporting young people and their use of new information technology. Arguments that in short state that it is not the media itself we should focus on. If, for instance, a pupil experiences a need to write down how much she hates her teacher, then the medium – the net community – simply helps her to express this, rather than provokes her to do so.

I will not go deeper into the defence of the net communities, because this deserves a paper on its own, but there is research (among others Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen*, 1995) supporting young people in their choice of living parts of their lives on line. I aim simply to point to the fact that we always seem to fear new technologies and phenomena when they are first introduced, but eventually when this new phenomenon is integrated into every day life and some time has passed, we somehow accept them into our lives no matter how negative we seemed to be at first. It seems that young people have a way of embracing new things and thereby they risk getting onto collision course with the adult community. When we observe that many children hurry home after school just to connect, via the Internet, to the same friend they just parted from, this ought to stir some academic interest.

Modern myths

It is also common that new phenomena are accompanied by modern myths and the introduction of computers and the Internet is no exception, of course. Bengt af Klintberg, the Swedish ethnographer says (my translation) “ *Every technology is accompanied by rumours.*” (GP 21/10/98)

He also claims that

“This is what happens with contemporary phenomena, when people are disturbed or worried by something in our society.” (AB 24/12/98)

The interesting thing today is that the medium itself seems to be instrumental in propagating these myths – it is easier than ever to distribute modern myths, by e-mail or web pages. These modern myths or urban legends dealing with ICT – Information- and Communications Technology – matters are called net lore and can be found in abundance on the Internet. There are stories of the very sick child who wished to receive e-mail from all over the world, virus warnings, Nigeria letters, etc. All of them seeming very accurate, using the right words to sound trust-worthy. If checked, they all turn out to be fake. In some cases they are harmless, but in others they can create damage. If, for instance, a server that is dimensioned to receive a couple of hundred mail every day is bombed by thousands of e-mails at the same time, there will most certainly be problems.

If we accept that modern myths or urban legends appear whenever people feel insecure or afraid, as Klintberg claims, then it might be the case that these myths will only strengthen this fear and alienation.

Can adults handle young people’s net cultures?

In this section, I discuss if adults’ relation to young people’s net cultures are in any significant way different from that of other youth cultures – regardless of their general nature and character – and if so, whether the adult community, sooner or later, will have to deal with this particular culture in the same way as it has dealt, and is dealing, with other youth cultures and any problems they might create. We have figured out ways of dealing with drugs, alcohol and tobacco, school drop-outs, etc. Research has showed ways of dealing with child abuse; how to prevent, how to talk to children about these delicate matters and how to treat the victims. This has made life easier for children and society has been given better means of caring for the young generation. But there seems to be something else at work when it comes to net cultures.

In Sweden the introduction of computers and the Internet did not follow any plan or scheme decided on by the government, it just happened. We speak of the *Internet Revolution* to describe this development. According to the Swedish Competition Authority, Sweden was number three in 2001, after South Korea and Canada, when counting the number of households with flat rate broadband Internet connections. The fact that this followed no plan and was not even foreseen by anyone may have caused some problems. Parents, teachers and teacher education were probably not prepared for the development.

The adult community has grown accustomed to the currents of information running **from** the adults **to** the children. Calculus, queens and kings, tying your shoe-laces,

creating an off-side trap, etc. Bringing up, teaching and training is all done in the same fashion. The *Internet Revolution* turned out to be something else. Suddenly we had this new technology which was adopted by the children first and some, quite few, adults. This was not something new per se, the young seem to adopt new technology faster than older people. But the *Internet Revolution* can be seen as a proper revolution, not just any new technology. Bard and Söderqvist (*Nätokraterna*, 2001) counts to four information revolutions, where the spoken word is the first, the second is the written word, the third is the printed word and the fourth is ICT. This might mean that the *Internet Revolution* has had a greater impact than other new technologies and thereby any problem related to the generation gap when it comes to knowledge, will be even greater. In that case, the adult community needs to study young people's net cultures before bringing up, teaching and training children.

The technology, the machines, also seem to constitute a problem for the adult community. Computers were originally designed to be used by professionals and this is still evident in the user interface. When talking about interface design the expression *transparent technology* is used in order to illustrate the importance of the technology itself not being in the way of the tasks. Modern ICT is, however, not very transparent yet. Compared to other everyday technologies such as the telephone, video recorders, sewing machine, etc., modern ICT still seems to be very complicated to use.

The factors mentioned in the paragraphs above might be part of the explanation to the difficulties adults seem to experience when approaching – and trying to come to grips with – young people's net cultures.

Do we need a net strategy?

If we then accept the idea that as adults we are bound to experience difficulties in our efforts to deal with young people's net cultures, we might find that we need a strategy, or many different strategies – net strategies – in order to position ourselves in relation to, and cope with, these cultures. Adults, whether we are parents or teachers or just concerned citizens, need tools to be able to take full adult responsibility in these matters.

If we take a quick look at other areas where adult responsibility is crucial, my question may be clearer. When small children learn to walk, we show them how to act in traffic situations. Traffic is an everyday phenomenon that constitutes a great threat if not handled properly. Still, all it takes is a five minute observation of a zebra crossing to notice that almost every adult seem to have a similar strategy when dealing with this great threat to children's life and well-being. This strategy is probably inherited, not genetically, but copied from the adult's own childhood, from other parents, etc. There is no such thing (at least not in Sweden where I carried out my zebra crossing investigation) as a formal parent education where adults may pick up their traffic strategy. And still this strategy seems to exist.

Thus, we would almost certainly have a dangerous situation at hand if we lacked a strategy for guiding our children to cope with traffic. We would probably have a similarly dangerous situation if children did not learn how to deal with traffic on their own as they grew older.

By now, the reader should have realized what my point is. Internet traffic is in significant ways different from motor traffic, but the comparison holds ground in some important respects. Young children (new users) most likely need guiding from a responsible, well informed and secure person, when first encountering the phenomenon. Later on, they most likely will develop skills to help them deal with problems as well as take advantage of the opportunities of the Net.

These strategies must be on different levels; the personal level (“What do I think of this? How will I act?”), the school level (“What is our school’s approach? How will we use, or not use, the Internet?”) and various government levels (“What are the dangers of this new technology? How do we act in order to make best possible use of this new technology?”)

Depending on how one defines a strategy (Merriam-Webster defines strategy to be “a careful plan or method”) one might say that people have strategies for every act they perform. In this paper I believe we must say that a strategy must be a more or less conscious one.

On a personal level we might picture net strategies for the person herself, for her family or friends. The next level might be the school strategy or the organisation one belongs to. The highest level could be the government level, counties, nations or unions of countries might formulate a net strategy.

Is it possible to create net strategies?

As a teacher educator I have suggested a plan to meet the problems this paper has out-lined. This plan has been fairly successful in the pre-service courses my department gives as well as in in-service training at Umeå University. Some interest from parents’ organisations and libraries has also been noticed. The aim of the plan is to provide teachers and parents with tools to help them cope with the challenges of young people’s net cultures.

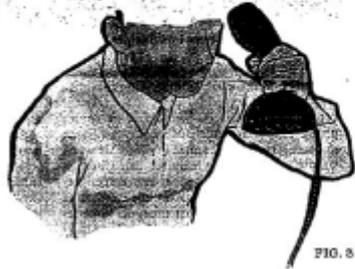
The plan, called Net Strategies, consists of four parts: technology; net cultures, the legal side of the matter and searching on the Internet.

Technology

The first area is the technology. Until the user interface allows us to handle modern ICT in the same relaxed fashion as we handle for instance the telephone, we have to learn more about the technology.

When the telephone was a new medium there was some need for instructions for the user. Figure 2 is an example of this – an instructional page from the telephone directory. The text points out to the new user that the person you speak to is not able to actually see you, and that you must tell her who you are. These old instructional texts and images bring out a smile in our faces today, but was called for at the time.

När man telefonerar till en person, som ej känner ens röst, börjar man med en artig förfrågan om man kan få tala med den person man



söker, ty det är ju ej säkert att denna själ svarar i tele-
 Figure 2: Telephone instructions.

till den som underrättar vederbörande, vilken då får klart för sig vem som önskar tala med honom. Man undviker att telefonera vid tider då man vet att vederbörande sitter vid sin måltid, vilar



We need to be able to solve everyday problems not having to rely on technicians as soon as a problem arises. Probably we will have no need for courses in technology in a few years time, but until then it is essential that adults learn more in order to support young people in their net activities. There is a big difference between knowing how something works and knowing how to use it. The telephone is fairly easy to use, we can see elderly people use it as well as small children, without necessarily knowing how the telephone is built, what technology it rests upon, etc. A car is another example of technology we use every day without feeling the demand of knowing exactly how it works. In the early years of personal computers, many computer courses started with stripping down or building your own computer. This may be the right way for some, just like engines and engineering is interesting for some car drivers and telephone speakers. But for the not-very-interested it is important to find the means of making the computer a tool for every day life, a tool that one can treat in the same relaxed fashion that one handles a telephone, a TV set, a dish-washer, etc.

Net cultures

The second area is young people's net cultures. Adults need to orientate themselves in the wide range of positive and negative activities that the Internet offers. If, for example, a child receives a threatening e-mail it is essential that the teacher or parent has the knowledge either to deal with this directly or to be able to find help. A problem today is that many adults feel that they are insufficiently competent in dealing with these matters. They have difficulties distinguishing between e-mail and web pages, chat rooms and search engines, and do not feel comfortable when talking to children about their net habits.

Laws

The third area is the legal side of the matter. Laws are, generally, the same in the digital and the analogue world. Some laws are specific to the digital world, though, and need to be studied in order for us to understand what is legal and what is illegal on the Internet. The hard truth of the matter is that any citizen is obligated to know all the laws which are applicable to her, and a not too far-fetched assumption is that understanding and, as a consequence of this, lack of understanding, following these new laws, constitute a problem for many adults and children today. School and

parents have strategies for teaching children what is right and wrong. Most people have a feeling of what you may and may not do in the analogue world. For instance, it is not necessarily allowed to keep something you find just because it is lying around. The same law applies to things found on the Internet; images, texts, songs, video clips, etc. The difference is that almost everything on the Net is just lying around. With a few simple clicks you can down-load items and publish them on a web site, and thereby breaking the copyright law.

Searching

The fourth area is searching on the Internet. The Internet is a powerful resource for information, but it is not anything like the media we are used to. On the Internet you can find Encyclopaedia Britannica and neo-Nazism and everything in between. This, of course, calls for extreme caution when using web pages as a sources of information. Every net user needs to understand how to distinguish good from bad sources and how to find the required information. This can be very hard when you are a beginner and there are many traps to avoid.

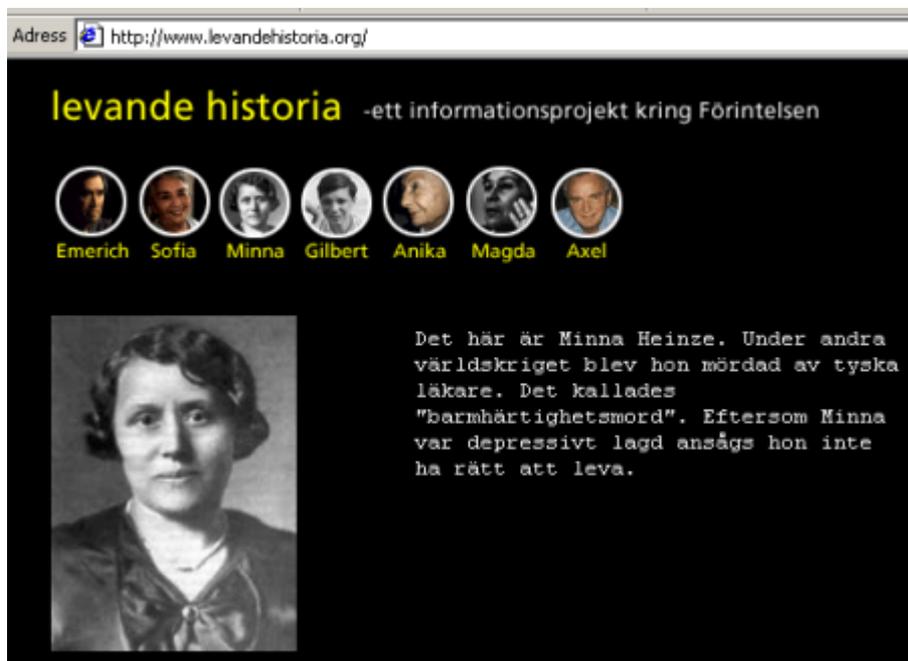


Figure 3: Levande Historia – the Swedish Government's web site about the Holocaust. This page tells us about Minna Heinze who was murdered during the Holocaust.

Levnadsöden

Simon Wiesenthal, mannen med det foto

Judar

Elie Wiesel
Filip Müller
Mel Mermelstein
Rudolf Vrba
Simon Wiesenthal #1
Simon Wiesenthal #2
Simon Wiesenthal #3

Tyskar

Franz Stangl



Lögnaren Simon Wiesenthal

Figure 4: The web site that denies the Holocaust. This page has copied the design of the Swedish Government's web site (figure 3), but instead this shows pictures of, among others, world famous Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal. The text under the picture reads "Simon Wiesenthal, the liar".

One example, among many others, is the one of *Living History* (Levande Historia) – the Swedish Government's web site about the Holocaust. The address of the web site is www.levandehistoria.org. Some time after the launching of the site the address www.levandehistoria.com contained similar information, but at a closer look it turned out that the second site denied the existence of the Holocaust. Swedish history revisionists had bought the same address as the Swedish Government, but at the top domain *com* instead of *org*. The experienced web user is aware of what addresses are possible to buy for a private person and that you often find this kind of, perfectly legal but unethical, attempt to use the credibility of others for the opposite interest. This is only one example of important knowledge when using the Net as a source of information.

What might the problems with the net strategy be?

Criticism against the plan – Net Strategies – described above are mainly the following.

- The only information we have about the future development of ICT is that it will change and change rapidly. We can say nothing of what direction development will take. This leads to the fact that any strategy formed today may be obsolete in just a few years.
- The idea behind the plan is a top down construction where the experienced teacher educator outlines a strategy and shows the less experienced teachers and parents where to find the information and how to develop knowledge.

The plan for developing a net strategy has a good and indisputable cause, but it can run into problems in reality. Any plan like the one described may possibly be out of date the minute it is published due to the speed of development in the field of ICT.

If we accept the idea that ICT has changed our information paradigm, we must accept that ICT is here to stay. Therefore the need for net strategies, or ICT strategies remains. The problem with the suggested plan is not the aim – developing

tools for creating net strategies – but rather the format – top down teaching from the expert to the beginners.

Instead there may be a need for something we might call a meta strategy. This could be a strategy based on how previous new phenomenon were received and adopted, and taking into consideration research results. This meta strategy might also be of help for collaborate learning to take place instead of traditional top down teaching.

This brings us back to the main hypothesis of this paper – if adults were to develop strategies concerning how to deal with young people's net cultures, teachers and parents would be better prepared to take responsibility for the children who grow up today, and share with them the exploration of this new medium.

Summary

This paper presents some hypotheses about young people's net cultures. It draws parallels between modern ICT and other technologies and it presents some tendencies concerning how adults relate to young people's net cultures. It has also attempted to show that there is a need for strategies and awareness if we are to deal with this new phenomena.

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I do not place the web address of the history revisionists here, and the reason is that if the reader believes what I have described above is true, then please do not visit web sites run by history revisionists. I did this dirty job for you. If, on the other hand, you think that I might be wrong, do not hesitate to find out for yourself. The reason I warn you is that any web site needs visitors to be able to keep on existing. Let us not give these criminal, or on the border of criminality, web creators a reason to carry on. If you have questions, please contact me and I will be happy to help.

Quotes

“Varje teknologi åtföljs av rykten.” (Every technology is accompanied by rumours.)
Bengt af Klintberg, Göteborgsposten 21/10/98.

“Så blir det när det handlar om ett nutidsfenomen, när människor störs eller oroas av nåt i samhället.” (This is what happens with contemporary phenomena, when people are disturbed or worried by something in our society.) Bengt af Klintberg, Aftonbladet 24/12/98.

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