The Construction of Identity on the Internet: Oops! I've left my diary open to the whole world!

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Introduction

Jens Qvortrup (1997) paved the way for the recent social studies of childhood by providing evidence that children have not been so much ignored as they have been marginalized. Adults can become overconfident in their own abilities and forget about their own shortcomings. Children, as women once were, can be forced into an undesirable helplessness and vulnerability, and be punished if they resist (Alderson, 2000). Qvortrup (1997) emphasized that in current debates people talk and write a lot about children but not with them, drawing our attention to the idea of letting children speak for themselves. He posed a famous question, asking if children are a group of people who may legitimately claim to be ‘heard’ or is it so that children are seen as a group who have to mature before they obtain a voice. To the present day,
when researchers intend to find out what children and young people’s attitudes towards their own life or school is, the usual approach is to carry out different kinds of questionnaire-based studies, interviews or observations. According to Jens Qvortrup (1997), all our knowledge on children and childhood seems to be based upon and centred around experiences of those who shaped the conceptual frameworks and methods of research.

This article argues that in spite of all the risks and dangers threatening children on the internet, this media can be used advantageously by researchers who see children as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives. In this article, children’s digital diaries on the internet is my only empirical material and I regard children as my main source of information to collect data about what children think and not how they think (Hartman, 1986). I argue that the internet has the capacity to give children access to a social arena to make their voices heard and by doing this pave the way for them to compensate their marginalized position in the physical world. I also share Livingstone and Bovill’s (2001) conviction that children and young people are capable of learning and developing methods to resist the harmful effects of internet communications.

A review of the previous research on children and the internet

This article recognizes and builds on previous works in relation to the study of children and the new digital media (Buckingham, 2003; Hernwall, 2001; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; Montgomery, 2002; Tapscott, 1998). Many of these researchers have tried to oppose the simplistic moral panic about the negative influences of the internet, while at the same time they oppose the optimistic and naive praise of new technologies. Even though adults were all children once, none of them were thus exposed to the global development of mass media. Montgomery (2002) writes that with their engaging, interactive properties, the new digital media are suggested to have more impact on how children grow and learn, what they value, and ultimately who they become, than any other medium before. She argues that even if the experience of children and young people growing up in the media environment today is vastly different from that of adults, they are in need of adults’ company and advice until they master the art of critical thinking.

Don Tapscott (1998) found the internet fundamentally different from previous communication innovations, such as the development of the printing press or the introduction of radio and television broadcasting. These latter technologies according to him are often unidirectional, hierarchical, inflexible, centralized and controlled by adults. Tapscott (1998) argues that the internet has created a free zone for children; there, they not only have control over their computers but of their social communication. I find Tapscott far too optimistic and deterministic when he forecast a ‘paradigm shift’ emerging from this new medium of human communication.
Buckingham (2000b) not only argues against Tapscott’s technological deterministic opinion but is also critical of his essentialist view of childhood and youth, which leads to an unduly determinist account of the role of media and technology. In his book *After the Death of Childhood*, Buckingham (2000b) criticizes the idea that all generational differences between adults and children in the present day are produced by the internet, rather than a result of other social, historical or cultural forces. He argues that we can neither simply blame nor celebrate these new media and their impact on our conceptions of childhood without understanding their complexity and their potential contradictions.

David Buckingham (2003) raises issues about media education, suggesting that it is not just the new digital media themselves that are different, but also the ways in which young people engage with them. Unlike Tapscott (1998), who optimistically considered the internet to be able to give birth to a new net generation, Buckingham (2000b) refuses to recognize the digital technology as a guarantee for structural changes such as democratization, freedom of choice and expression and social awakening that will overthrow traditional hierarchies of knowledge and power. Tapscott (1998) forecast the birth of a generation who would be different from their parents in many aspects. According to him this new generation will want to change the world.

Through the use of internet, children would get accustomed to empowerment, open discussion and immediacy challenging the bureaucratic governance processes of today. (Tapscott, 1998)

Sonja Livingstone (2002) is as positive as Tapscott, when it comes to the entrance of the internet in the life of children, but not as essentialist as him when it comes to analyses of the impacts of the internet on children. She argues that within the coming decade or so, the internet will doubtless have become taken for granted within our homes, meaningfully embedded in the routines of children’s daily lives in many European western countries. Livingstone (2002) suggests in her review ‘Children’s Use of Internet’ that the three broad assumptions listed below appear to be crucial and that research policy formation should rest on a rigorous empirical base rather than speculation and supposition:

1. Avoiding moral panic, normative or value-laden judgments, to the point where research is heavily descriptive of the nature and contexts of internet use.

2. Contextualize the internet use of children, thus denying the popular opposition between online and offline lives of children. Children’s virtual communication or relationships shapes and are shaped mostly by the practices and routines of their everyday life.

3. Emphasizing the fact that children are to be seen as agents and not victims of internet-related practices. They use both online and offline communication intentionally to sustain their social networks, moving freely between different
communication forms using the online to forge the offline relationships and vice versa. (Livingstone, 2002)

The revival of diaries on the internet

There is an increasing popular interest in reading and writing diaries, both in a traditional way and on the internet, among children and young people in Sweden today. It seems as if the present modern ways of life in Sweden have led to an increased demand and ability among children and young people to tell other people about one’s life. ‘Youngsters’ is a popular web community on the internet where many children write daily in their diaries and create interactive homepages. In this article, I explore the form and nature of the content of some of the diaries written in this web community.

Diaries have long been recognized as valuable historical, pedagogical and biographical material. Previous researchers such as Albert Lilius (1922) and Charlotte Buhler (1939) recognized diaries as a possible arena to search for descriptions and suitable data to map and measure children’s mental development. Nowadays, once again, research recognizes diaries and life stories as a valuable data resource. This time not as an instrument that can measure or map a static phenomenon but as an explorative arena which contains a dynamic and continuous dialogue both between the diary author and her- or himself, and the author and their social and cultural context. Through studying children and young people’s diaries on the internet, one might also study how diverse cultural resources and social conventions are used in the reconstruction of children’s life experiences. My interest in studying diaries online is connected with my intention to understand children’s lives from their own point of view and my aim to describe how diverse cultural resources and social conventions are used in the reconstruction of children’s life experiences.

From private diaries in ink to public digital diaries on the internet?

The difference between private traditional diaries and public digital diaries open to the world is not all that remarkable. Marianne Gullestad (1996) tries to explain the differences between pre-modern and modern societies by reminding us that the difference is not that human beings in modern society possess individuality and self-awareness, whereas human beings in pre-modern society did not. The difference, she argues, is in that with modernity the private self became publicly recognized, problematized and elaborated upon. Topics touched upon by children are still: their family, friends, existential and philosophical questions, popular culture and especially music, leisure and sports. The authors of digital diaries often make self-reflections and write comments about the philosophy of life, the reason to exist and the con-
ditions of their existence at home, school and leisure. Still, I would like to point out two differences between traditional diaries and digital diaries on the internet. One is the public openness of the modern digital diaries and the other is the instant dialogical character of them. Both these characteristics make it easier to establish a horizontal socialization based on a child-to-child relationship. Traditional diaries had an aura of privacy around them and were often hidden in a safe place. Sometimes one would choose special friends or those whom one wanted to read the diaries. The digital diaries on the internet are open-ended and available to a public digital dialogue online, and there is always a chance/risk of receiving comments from a known or unknown friend.

Buhler’s (1939) and Lilius’s (1922) collections of diaries reveal the fact that writing diaries has never been an authentic act. Diaries were always written for an imagined reader even when they were locked and hidden in the closets and attics. Children treated their diaries as an imaginary, understanding, affectionate and faithful friend who was always there for them, hidden somewhere in the back of a drawer. They would usually start a new entry saying greetings to their diaries as if it were a real person and taking farewell of it when they had to stop writing. They would also apologize to the diaries for not having written in them for a while or gave various excuses for their absence or indulgence in writing diaries.

My dearest diary, I hope you accept my regrets and apologies for this long absence. It was impossible for me to write my true feelings because I had lost the key to lock the drawer where you belong. But today I found the key, and here I am again. What would have I ever done without you. You are the only one I can trust with my most hidden emotions. (extract from a diary presented in Lilius, 1922)

Karin Widerberg (1995) has been reading her own childhood diaries as an adult professor of sociology in Oslo. In her book, *The Gender of Knowledge*, she writes about her recollections of her childhood. She was a passionate and devoted author to her many diaries all through her childhood. In her recent reading of these diariés she is astonished not to find a trace of the confusion, anxieties and fears she suffered from all through her childhood. She admits then that she never wrote a single line about how she really felt in those days. Instead, she found that she had mostly written the popular phrases, expressions and type of commentary that were usual to write in a girl’s diary in those days: about deep emotions, love affairs and hopes, but not a word about how she really felt or her real worries and fears. She argues that instead of a static focus on the memories of people and events or a retrospective account of the lived experiences, researchers might as well look for the importance of cultural interaction in different situations. According to her, the focus must be moved from the individual to the relations and situations.

It is a method where the ‘I’ is not the main thing, but rather the situation – the
relations in the situation – that make up the experience. This facilitates an interpretation of social relations that form the experiences, rather than looking for the causes in the individual. (Widerberg, 1995: 25)

I intend to study the digital diaries on ‘Youngsters’ as texts that contain social relations, with a focus on child-to-child relationships. My intention is to make the relational aspect of the experience visible and I have chosen to highlight children’s engagement with the construction of their identity and friendship through continuous communication and diary writing on the internet.

‘Youngsters’

‘Youngsters’ is a web community that is privatized and financially dependent on commercial advertisements, and sponsored by many different companies. This web community is populated by a great number of children, teenagers, young people and even adults. On ‘Youngsters’, children and young people can write self-presentations and diaries. They can recruit new friends, write emails, send SMS and chat with people they already know or have never met before.

Who are children?

In this study I adopt the term ‘children’ as introduced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely to include all individuals up to 18 years old. I am going to distinguish the participants in this investigation only in terms of age and gender, as those writing self-presentations choose to do on ‘Youngsters’. I am aware of the importance of not treating children as a homogeneous group and I try to highlight the demographic differences such as gender, class and ethnicity as far as the children themselves have chosen to reveal it in their texts.

Method

I have adapted an ethnographic research method based on children’s perspective. Alanen (1988) argues that if we begin from where children stand and act as subjects in their everyday lives, which in my study is a popular web community, we might be able to achieve an account of society from a child’s standpoint. I intend to develop an understanding of what some children write about their everyday life practices and experiences in their diaries on the internet. I felt like a total stranger in this web community, visiting a new society with a new culture and a new language. My own children and some of my informants introduced me to the special language codes and social rules of this web community. I visited this web community every day, for 6 months, reading different homepages and diaries, watching what
happened, reading what was said, asking questions – in fact collecting whatever data available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of my research. I tried to approach ‘Youngsters’ as an independent, real and ‘offline’ community in which prevailing interaction can be studied.

My intention is to describe and to understand how children communicate and interact within the frame of their narratives written in their diaries. According to Spradley (1979), ethnographers should set aside their own definitions of actors, places, times, actions, events and other aspects of everyday life, and identify and describe all these things from the point of view of those people whom they want to understand. In this investigation, I have tried to be invisible as a researcher and use the texts that young people have written to each other, and not for me. The texts I have included in my data are extracts from some of the children’s diaries on ‘Youngsters’ and are arranged so that we can recognize the patterns but not the children.

Ethical dilemmas

I informed my respondents, 10 randomly chosen children, about the goals of my study and got their permission to read five log-ins into each of their diaries. I have tried to leave out all kinds of names and recorded personal information that might lead to an eventual or indirect identification of my respondents. Still, I would like to focus on ethical problems that can present themselves when young people participate in research studies via the internet. Ethical dilemmas when doing research on the internet are discussed at length in a book written by Malin Sveningsson et al. (2003). The authors give a thorough account of various research ethics guidelines for internet research such as NESH and HSFR. They acknowledge that the general ethical demands that apply to research in the social sciences, humanities and law are also applicable to research on the net, while at the same time they intend to explore the distinctiveness and the special character of research on the internet. For example, people may write personal and sensitive information on their homepages, which in principle is accessible for anyone, without thereby having meant their statements could be spread further or used for research projects. As a general rule, such information should therefore not be used for research purposes without the participants’ consent. Even the pseudonyms and nicknames used are subjected to special consideration according to NESH, because they are an important part of interaction on the internet. Many users have an interest in how their digital identity is being treated, thus the researcher should carefully consider the fact that informants do not necessarily consider personal information to be made anonymous if the researcher uses their pseudonyms. In general terms, doing research on the internet is not an easy task. What is even more complicated and difficult seems to be doing research on the internet with children. This kind of research presents special challenges because it is part of children’s activities, which are often outside adult acknowledgement and control, which in turn

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makes the process of obtaining parents’ consent practically impossible. In
spite of all the complexity and obstacles, Sveningsson et al. (2003) insist on
the importance of researchers’ individual judgement with regard to every
special investigation and the validity of common sense. The authors advise
young researchers not to get discouraged by all the prohibitions and to try to
assess relevant considerations and decide whether it is necessary to obtain
consent for a certain research project or not. According to the authors, it is
not always desirable to obtain informed consent. Informants and their identi-
ties have a very short and variable life on the internet and the researcher
must make a personal judgement if the informed consent in relation to par-
ticipatory observation can be destructive for the interaction the researcher
wants to study.

My investigation intends to study an old phenomenon, namely diary
writing among children and young people, but on the internet. Entering
‘Youngsters’, all participants already know that they are logging onto a
forum that is considered a public space and that everyone who has access to
the internet may read their contributions. I have tried to use my common
sense in handling my data and to prevent exposition of any kind of informa-
tion that may possibly lead to the identification of my informants. The data
included in this study are not to be used commercially and for no other pur-
poses than those stated when collecting it. I have tried to make the data
anonymous by giving the participants new pseudonyms and by changing the
dates, numbers and place names.

Assortment process and data collection
‘Youngsters’ is a free web community sponsored, as mentioned, by different
commercial enterprises. Anybody is allowed to become an active member of
this public web community if they submit personal information such as gen-
der, age, citizenship, address and telephone number. All this information is
necessary according to the ‘Youngsters’ owners as they want to create a
secure digital room for children and to be able to locate and pursue those
who spread pornography or illegal racist propaganda. When a new member
fills in all the information required then he or she can create a log-in and
make a self-presentation as long as he or she follows the process of becom-
ing a ‘youngster’, and obliges themselves to acknowledge and follow the
norms and regulations as stated by ‘Youngsters’. These self-presentations
show age and gender variation and contain real or invented information
about the author’s home, ethnicity, appearance, interests, friends, family and
school.

I chose 10 random diaries (5 boys and 5 girls) on ‘Youngsters’, written
by children aged between 12 and 18. I followed their diaries for a whole
week. A few children wrote a few times every day, others wrote once or
twice a week. I studied a total of 50 pages of digital diaries.
The empirical study

I intend to explore what children write in their diaries on ‘Youngsters’. The topics covered in the 50 diaries I studied contain topics that are anchored in the personal life and experiences of the authors at home, in their leisure activities and in school. I am aware of the fact that the same reality and similar experiences may have an entirely different meaning to different children. That is why this study does not intend to provide a statistical survey in which demographic variables could be systematically isolated, and the tentative generalizations I make are only valid in terms of my small sample. I have noted that children refer to their age, gender, racial ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, social class, religion, disability and many other topics important to them, openly and freely under their nicknames in their digital diaries. They do not write long essays about these topics but they touch upon them briefly, frequently and directly, which means that they are more at ease discussing complicated social problems such as racism, discrimination, suicidal intentions and dissatisfactions in their life or at school in their digital diaries. My focus is on what they write about time spent at school and about their relations with their friends and family.

Nicknames

Almost every member and diary writer in this web community has a nickname. These nicknames are chosen actively by children and may reveal their knowledge about the social relations within which they live daily. Furthermore, they reveal the material conditions of existence such as age, gender, class and ethnicity in such a way that is normally not accepted from children, and are counted as rude, aggressive and politically incorrect from an adult’s point of view. I can read many of these nicknames as relevant social facts for the children who have chosen them, even though some of them just want to parody a socially constructed category or the asymmetrical consequences inherent in varying positions afforded to various children. I believe that the process of self-positioning in a digital diary starts right at the top of the page when children invent or adapt a nickname:

- Spanish-babyDoll G15
- Hippien-G12
- Getto-smurfenB15
- The Gangster buzz-diary B12
- Da lationo kings diary b14
- Sexy Babiis_ diary G14
- The bitchy babes diary G15
- The Afgan Queen G16
- Usama Bin laden B 12
A proud Turk G 14
The angry-lady G 13

It seems that children create nicknames describing imaginary appearances and characters, which is as important to them as their real names. It is important to recognize that these texts may not constitute descriptions of these children’s real appearance, conditions or preferences, but rather bring about normative ideas about the appropriateness of particular kinds of appearances, conditions and preferences that may reveal how young people position themselves within different social arenas. Children within the same area, school or class usually develop strategies that enable them to describe precisely who they are without writing their names or any other private information. In consequence their friends would be able to recognize them while they stay anonymous to strangers. As the examples of nicknames suggest, they can depend on a complex and variable process of self-positioning that may reveal the social and cultural contexts relevant for the author. According to Buckingham (2000b), the power relationships enacted in such talk are often defined in terms of broader social differences such as gender, age, social class and ethnicity while the language itself offers particular repertoires of stereotypes that are familiarized for these children. Children do not invent their nicknames afresh each time they write a diary. On the contrary, they adopt particular styles to write and talk whose implicit rules they have learned in the past and which they know they can use as an instrument to oppose or negotiate prejudiced stereotyping of their lives while signalling commonalities between peers. Children and young people are capable of constructing and exposing particular parts of their identities according to the expectations and responses they receive from their social environment (Moinian, 2001). The frequent use of nicknames as lady, queen, bitch, babe and little pussy highlight the gender socialization that is still the most fundamental dimension of social differentiation among children in Sweden, followed by matching ethnicity. I have noticed that many young people with other nationalities or cultural backgrounds often use their ethnic identities as part of their nicknames to reach friends from the same nationality or cultural backgrounds. Here, I again found data that emphasized the fact that young people are often not so keen to use the possibility of being anonymous in their self presentations, even when the web communities on the internet generously invite them to be anonymous.

*Where do children write their diaries?*
Children write their diaries at home, at school or sometimes at a friend’s place. Many children state that they write diaries during their school day, when they have breaks or are waiting to receive help from a busy teacher in the computer room. According to Enochsson (2001), many teachers considered children’s eagerness to use the internet as a problem, since the students
prefer communicating with their mates on a special web community instead of searching for information for their school projects while working on the school computers. Diaries written at school might have been created at an opportune moment when the teacher is away or busy with another student. These short diaries, in my opinion, are signs of children’s eagerness for a continuous peer communication that is not encouraged at school. It seems that at school, the children are supposed to lay much stress on the academic activities, while they are most interested in possibilities to communicate and cooperate in informal connections. The enormous interest and eagerness from children’s side to use web communities might also be interpreted as a response to the fact that children’s time and space are increasingly organized by adults, at home and at school. The question to bear in mind is whether adults provide children with enough time for peer communication:

Wednesday 21 nov 12:22
Elin . . . Where are you? I can not wait any longer here.

Thursday 22 nov 12:25
I am at school now but I have to go in . . . my session starts soon
Hugs and kisses for all people on line.

Friday 23 nov 11:30
I have had gymnastics now but I got a ball kicked on my face and I am bleeding at my nose. It is not funny and the school nurse said that I should stay in and do not be naughty again otherwise my nose would start bleeding again!!!
Ush

Monday 26 nov 8:30
I have something very important to tell you. I hope we can eat lunch together

Half of the all the diaries I studied revealed that they were written during the day and at school. One-fifth of all the diaries contained some texts in English or were written entirely in English. Diaries written at school are often very short, sometimes as short as a line or two.

Tuesday 27 nov 8:30
I am sitting in the computer room and waiting for you. Where are you Monda? I can not manage long without you so you’d better come soon. I am so tired today. Didn’t fall asleep until after one o’clock last night. It’s not easy to be in love. Come on now . . . please . . . (Diary written by a girl age 14)

Wednesday 28 nov 9:20
Good morning to everybody . . . What is up today? Nothing special at all. I am going to study math and I am going to tidy up my drawer
And I am longing . . . (Boy, 16)

Thursday 29 nov 14:23
I am so lucky and extremely happy and harmonious today. I am not tired or bored and I just hope everybody knows what it means to be ironic. (Girl, 16)

A few diaries written on this web community contain happy and positive exclamations about the daily life of the author:
Wednesday 17 Oct 12:35
I am so happy today. We are going to have arts now. I just love arts.

Others contain overt expressions of alienation, confusion, dislike, boredom or indifference. In some cases children were quite forceful and bitter:

Monday 25 Oct 14:23
School, school, school and again school
Damn how I hate my school I feel sick as soon as I start thinking about it. But luckily I have my friends there without them I do not know how I could ever survive a day at the school
Thanks for your mere existence my friends!!!

According to my findings many children transgressed the norms and conventions of school life by writing diaries about their problems in a language that they know adults in authority would consider as rude, inappropriate and unacceptable.

Today I have done nothing. Home works. Damned it cause I have always so many of them for my weekends. I hate to wake up early, all my teachers, and pedophiles! I love to be with my friends, to sleep, to watch TV, be on the internet listen to the music.

What do children write in their diaries?
A few children, mostly young boys (12–13) but even two girls, log into their diaries and write just a string of vowels or consonants without intending to convey any meanings or messages to anybody.

Sunday 18 Sep 14:38
Voooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Monday 19 Sep 8:32
Hrrrrrrrr sooooooooozzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

The web community I have studied tries to encourage children to be online as often as possible. ‘Youngsters’ has invented a system to measure merit and status among users by offering different ‘regulations’ for children to be counted as popular and friendly. One way to increase your merit and status on ‘Youngsters’ is by logging on frequently to write in your diary. So the younger children (12–13) try to write as many pages as possible by logging on frequently without really intending to write anything. They can fill in the page with writing nonsense or attaching pictures or links. Those around the age of 14–18 fill the page with name dropping (listing friends’ names to impress) or writing nonsense or jokes. In both cases, their main goal is to achieve higher status or more so-called ‘Youngsters points’.

Some children write about their different activities, emotions and relationships. Some diaries are like a short report to no one in particular or to everybody in the whole world:
Tuesday 18 sep 14:38
I am on my way to my football training. By By

Tuesday 18 sep 16:30
I am so happy today I do not know why?

Wednesday 19 sep 10:30
Today I have bought colour because I am going to paint my room …
Yesterday we had music! It is so wonderful with Felix.

Thursday 20 sep 14:38
Yes
I am longing sooo much for going to our summer house. And on Sunday we are finally going to do this. We are going to stay there a whole week . . . hehe-he! And I am going to fishing . . . That is what I call a wonderful life.

But not every diary is a short report about a future or achieved activity. There are children who chose to write longer diaries, describing their feelings and state of mind:

Saturday 15 oct 17:25
Ah today I am so happy. I do not know why, I am just happy.
Maybe because Sara is going to arrive next week.
Maybe because it is a beautiful sunny day today.
Maybe because I received a sms from Sandra saying that she is thinking about me.
Maybe because I feel that I love my younger brother for the moment. And the rest of my family too.
Maybe because I listened to Nicola Dunger and Mando Diao.
Maybe because I sat last night and talked about our old nursery memories with Mike and Sten. We laughed all night long. It sounds weird to be able to have so much fun with your younger brother who is just ten.
Maybe because I have just discovered that life is beautiful.
Maybe because I am going to buy that lime colored jacket.

Different styles of writing
According to my data drawn from the study of the texts written in these 50 digital diary pages, children and young people choose different ways to write a digital diary, like being serious, reflective, funny or bitter. Some write a detailed report on important happenings, others write parodies and sarcastic reviews of what adults assume children do:

Little qtes diary G 14, Tuesday
Moving
Today we started late at 11.15, had an English lesson about 40 minutes, and afterwards a long break up to 14.30 and finished 15.30 . . . This is what I call a soft day! I am going to move, and my brother has got a driving license now so I CAN ENJOY A PRIVATE CHAUFFEUR . . . Nothing more to write at the moment. I am longing for Nick.
Take care or something like that . . . Hug

Flazhs diary, B 16, Monday 10/09
Everything is damned fucked up!
That is how everything is for me . . . and I can not stand it anymore . . . It is so
difficult...you have to be sad but still happy. I change moods all the time and I have to take out my aggression on something else than this computer. I have already damaged one...poor people who come in my way today. It must be PMS!

Hugs

Often it seems that in many of the diaries a hybrid of two kinds of texts or discourse exists. On the one hand, the writer’s personal feelings and logical reflections are discussed with accuracy and objectivity, while, on the other hand, there are texts that provide information on a social discussion or a discourse among young people going to a certain school or living in a certain area. This language is often playful, sarcastic and not always meant to be taken literally. A few children have made a clear decision to introduce themselves in contradictory terms. They apparently self-consciously violate the norms of ‘political correctness’ by parodic representations of terrorists, paedophiles, drunkards and other criminals, while they are aware that it would make adults reading them uncomfortable and worried.

Da -gangster buzz living in xxxxxxx B15 Monday
Today I am going to rob a bank. And to you all sweet blond whores I want to say just come to me if you want to get raped. I would do all I can for you. Who do you think you really are walking around and pretending to be somebody.

In a few diaries, I found children referring to crime and violence with a feeling of powerlessness to improve the situation. These children referred openly to their homes and schools being located in stigmatized areas, places associated with poverty and discrimination. By applying Buckingham’s (2000a) notion of parody to my investigation, I argue that children see their digital diaries as a space that gives them the opportunity to speak the unspeakable and to talk about the unpopular and subversive things that are normally avoided by the school institution. Behind some of these statements lie diverse and sometimes contradictory images that can be read as a protest to the ‘politically correct’ teaching of the school. At school, things are often ‘good’ or ‘bad’, correct or incorrect, and seldom seen as ‘situated’ in a time and place. Children describe situations they like and dislike in a situated and ambiguous way. They seek a space for play, where meaning could not be fixed once and for all. I share Buckingham’s (2000a) argument that it is simple minded not to recognize these words as something more than a harmless subversion or transgression of dominant norms, ignoring the risk that they can also reinforce existing inequalities and forms of oppression. It is therefore crucial for schools to teach the children how to think critically.

Wednesday 8 sep 15:35
Wild parties last night. Woke up with a headache, too many drinks again. I hate the art teacher and my brother is stupid and hairy. I hate Wednesdays. They are sooo long and the lessons never ends.

Buckingham (2000a) writes that parody might thus be seen as an example of postmodern phenomena. It rests on a kind of rejection of the
fixity of meaning, and of the seriousness of authorship. It seems to be a matter of the author’s intention, but it also depends to some extent on the judgement of the reader. And if the reader does not recognize the signals of the parodic intention, or the difference between the original and the parody, this may have problematic consequences. Parody potentially offers a freedom in which nobody can be held to account for what they say.

**Name dropping rather than writing a diary**

Many children choose to create a display of famous or popular poems or pronounce maxims, cite slogans or recite funny stories, ballads and well-known love songs and love stories instead of writing a diary. These people choose to express themselves using other people’s voices making their diaries an exhibition of other people’s ideas. The fact that they have chosen these idioms, proverbs, bands, artists and sport champions and not others could still reveal something about them. Many children do choose to introduce themselves in contradictory terms choosing different parts of their identity from different cultures and backgrounds (Moinian, 2001), but sooner or later they will reflect on these contradictions, on their own or with their peers’ collaboration. This is in line with how Vivien Burr (1995) defines and localizes identities from a social constructionist’s point of view: our identity does not originate from inside, but from the social realm, where people swim in a sea of language and other signs, a sea that is invisible to us because it is the very medium of our existence as social beings.

It is very common to name drop in diaries by attaching a list of friends and their email addresses. Children regard their friends and their style and choice of consumption as a good enough marker to represent themselves in their diaries. To introduce yourself by naming your friends and popular digital links might be more comprehensible in the light of David Buckingham’s (2003) theoretical model of media pedagogy, where he has drawn attention to the increasing mobility and diversity of modern societies and makes a series of useful proposals for our understanding of postmodern identities. He suggests that the ways people form and construct their identities have changed in our times. Rather than identity being a kind of ‘birthright’, something determined by one’s social position and conditions of life, identities have now become much more diverse and fluid. Your mobile phone, your taste in music and your friends are all parts of your identity. I share Buckingham’s (2003) idea that our consumer culture is able to provide a very diverse range of ‘symbolic resources’: images and signs that individuals can use to construct their own identities and to define their lifestyles. In these diaries, I have noted that children put together different pieces of their identities from many different situations in their daily life. Some write about their brand of mobile telephone, others discuss existential and moral questions. There is a clear gender difference in terms of boys’ pages highlighting
the technical gadgets they use and the lack of enthusiasm about these things in girls’ diaries.

**Anonymity**

Young people’s activities on the internet should be seen as activities among others in their life and not as independent activities created in a social and cultural vacuum. While anonymity, role play and changing identities might be vital to childhood, not all young people dedicate their internet diaries to this. I share AnnBritt Enochsson’s (2001) argument that many young children in Sweden may use a particular web community instead of calling or visiting each other. According to her, children communicate mostly with their classmates and other friends and seldom with total strangers.

My study confirms this, that children write their diaries on the internet mostly in order to communicate with people they know and because they want to be popular among their old friends and to find new friends.

My parents do not like me going out, hanging around with my friends in the evenings. Youngster’s is great. Spares me lots of unpleasant disputes and yelling. (Girl, 12)

Thus even if anonymity or creating false identities is apparently possible, it is not readily appreciated by the young people in this web community. Here I propose reliable hypotheses about the reason underlying this trend towards children’s reluctance to remain anonymous on this web community. Interviewing some of my informants after visiting their homepages confirmed my notion that the online activities of children and young people are closely interwoven with their real life. The self-presentations my informants create on this web community are connected with other activities they do in their everyday life and are in a dialogue with their social life, both at home and in school. So in order to understand the nature of the content of children’s communication on the internet, we need to be aware of the social conditions of children and young people’s life in Sweden. One possible hypothesis is that the consequence of a lack of freedom to play outside influences the nature and content of children’s activity in this web community and the formation of their homepages. Livingstone and Bovill (2001) explain the growing protectionist practices in the UK towards children that serve to restrict their access to public spaces. For example, in many countries children are no longer allowed to walk to school, go to a friend’s or play in the streets as freely as they once did. Priscilla Alderson (2000) writes that many children in modern western societies today are denied these simple freedoms because of dangerous traffic, fear of strangers exaggerated by media panic, because crowded built-up areas have no safe or clean outdoor spaces in which to play. Children are, according to her, imprisoned in their own homes. In my study, even if the communication online gives children an exciting opportunity to play with identities or stay anonymous, their main
goal is only to meet and talk to their regular friends. The main impact of web communities is the fast, frequent, cheap and easy access to their friends.

It is really exciting to be anonymous in the beginning, but it gets tiresome and boring after a while. (Girl, 13)

It takes time to invent personalities, and I often forget what I wrote or who I was. It is much easier to be myself all the time. (Boy, 14)

The fact that children are reluctant to remain anonymous, and that they attach real pictures of themselves and even their friends, and reveal the real names of their teachers, schools, areas and home towns certainly cause new crises within issues of ethical values. The internet gives children a platform to express their views, enabling them to speak directly in their own terms about their own life and about adults’ values. Once children have expressed their standpoints and views about their place in the family, in school and in society, ethical challenges arise in deciding how to interpret and respond to them.

Discussion

The purpose of this article has been twofold. In the first place, it has aimed to elicit children’s perspective and point of view on their own life through studying the digital diaries they write on a web community on the internet. Second, it has discussed the advantages of using the internet as a research tool that encourages the engagement with children’s cultures of communication while seeking to understand the complexity of children’s lives. The importance of these diaries, I want to emphasize, is in the fact that they are written by children for other children, and not written to fulfill any adult or researcher’s request.

One way to increase respect for children’s views and feelings involves shifting public and professional thinking towards more realistic appreciation of children’s intentions, aspirations and abilities. An empirical study of children’s diaries on the internet may be counted as a new step towards adults’ engagement with children’s perspective on their own life. The fact that children express their notions of life and feelings on the internet and are reluctant towards anonymity, attaching actual pictures of themselves and their friends, and revealing the real names of their teachers, schools, hometowns, etc. certainly gives rise to new crises to do with issues of ethical values. Internet gives children a platform to express their views enabling them to speak directly in their own terms about their own life and about the adult’s values.

I read these diaries in the light of Mayall’s (2002) argument for the implementation of children’s standpoints in social and pedagogical research. She builds her reasoning upon Jaggar’s (1983) ideas that children’s point of view is necessary if we intend to understand the ‘disjunctions, flaws, injust-
tices and gaps in conceptual schemes of dominant institutions, where adults’ accounts fit too closely with them’ (Jaggar, 1983, cited in Mayall, 2002). I have tried to observe and explain children’s life from children’s point of view not because it is the only valid point of view but because it is as valid as any other point of view. Once children have expressed their standpoints and views about their place in the family, in school and in society, ethical challenges arise in deciding how to interpret and respond to them.

The relationship between children and the internet has been the focus of concern in current popular debates in Sweden. The potential risks of the relatively unregulated nature of web communities worry adults that children can encounter unsuitable materials online or engage with dangerous strangers in cyberspace. Previous research on children and their use of the internet presented in this article has pointed out that it would be a mistake to regard children’s online activity as separate from their real life (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001). It has also been emphasized that it is a mistake to see children as passive objects to be acted upon by web designers and, as an example, the results here highlight that many children have ignored the opportunity offered to be anonymous by signalling clearly who they are, by their nicknames or by attaching real pictures of themselves in their diaries. Previous research (see Alderson, 2000; Buckingham, 2003; Christensen and O’Brien, 2003; Enochsson, 2001; Livingstone, 2002; Sørby, 1998) has stated that children have become more institutionalized and driven away from the public places they once shared with adults. I share their argument and use it to explain why children use web communities daily, trying to continue their offline friendships online, which may be more convenient than meeting face to face, especially in a big city like Stockholm where children’s homes can be spatially dispersed and they must wait for parents to come home and drive them to their friends. The enormous interest and eagerness from children’s side to use web communities might also be interpreted as a response to the fact that children’s time and space are increasingly organized by adults, at home and at school, and children’s right to a spontaneous peer communication is ignored. Many children expressed their powerlessness, alienation and boredom when they wrote about the organization of these institutions. I read these expressions in the light of Mayall’s (2002) argument, that children’s daily lives are still structured by social policies that are formulated and implemented without consulting them, for they still have no voice to speak up for their interests. That why children’s digital diaries, like their traditional ancestors, are filled with self-reflections and contemplations but lack expressions of participation.
Notes
1. ‘Youngsters’ is not the real name of a web community. In order to protect my informants’ identity I have chosen to invent an imaginary name for a popular web community in Sweden.

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