

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANNBRITT ENOCHSSON

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN GIRLS' AND BOYS' INTERNET USE

According to Scandinavian statistics, the gender divide has diminished lately concerning time spent at the computer and on the Internet (Nordicom 2005). This is not only a Nordic phenomenon, American statistics also show the same pattern (Pattillo 2005; Trotter 2003). Sweden's largest community for young people, LunarStorm, has a relatively even gender distribution, even if there is still a small majority of girls – 54-46 (LunarWorks 2006). However, a difference is still reported in what young girls and boys *do* while using the Internet: girls chat or send e-mails and boys play games (e.g. Larsson 2005; Medierådet 2005; Nordicom 2005). Sometimes this is described in terms of communication and amusement (Thulin 2002). In Swedish the English word chat is only used for written, synchronous communication on the Internet, while communicating is a word also used in other contexts.

In my material from different studies concerning children, teenagers and the Internet, there have been signs pointing in other directions and the picture is somewhat contradictory. The first answer to the question about what the teenagers in my study were doing on the Internet was that the boys were gaming and the girls e-mailing, chatting or participating in Internet communities. However, when they were asked if there was any difference between what boys and girls do on the net, a lot of them claimed that there was no difference, and a boy who was one of the most heavy gamers said that gaming is just about communication. This made me interested in looking at this from other angles, since gaming in most reports have been distinguished from communication.

In this chapter I want to show how teenagers from two different groups look at their Internet use in relation to gender. I also want to question the picture created by statistics, which is often given a lot of attention in broadcast media and the press.

When children and young people are interviewed and asked what they do on the Internet, the answers are usually gaming, e-mailing, chatting, visiting

communities, and such things (e.g. Enochsson 2001; Bjørnstad and Ellingsen 2004). This also seems to be the case when children – and adults as well – participate in large quantitative studies, since the answers are usually presented in such categories. Trying to find other kinds of categories can be difficult. In my own studies I was considering themes like school work and pleasure or leisure, which is a common way to sort the answers, but like Elmroth (1999) I found it difficult to find a clear border between the two when analyzing the material. Using the respondents' own words is therefore an easier way to find categories.

Using respondents' own words results in questionnaires often containing the categories gaming, e-mailing etc., and new respondents can just tick off what most resembles what they usually do. Larsson (2005) asked 1145 16 year-olds about their activities on the Internet with help of questionnaires and found that the main reported activity is *surfing on the net*. The difference between boys and girls concerning surfing is not very big: 86% of the boys and 81% of the girls. When it comes to *gaming* the difference is much bigger: 82% and 28% respectively. The only activity the girls claim that they do more than the boys is *e-mailing*. The questions ask how often these activities are done, but not for how long. Comparing the time spent on the Internet (Nordicom 2005), it seems that boys spend a shorter time on each activity. Chatting on game sites is mentioned as a chat activity in Bjørnstad's and Ellingsen's (2004) study, while it is not clear in the statistics that there are different forms of chatting. Even if there are reports like Bjørnstad's and Ellingsen's, which give a more nuanced picture of young people's Internet use, the overall picture in the literature and media is still that boys play games and girls communicate. When using the words gaming and communicating respectively it also means that some activities are describe at a meta-level, but not others.

Gender and technology from different angles

How is it possible to know what people actually do just by asking them? Nordli (2003) found through observation that both men and women chatted a lot. The difference was that in answer to the question about what they were doing, men said that they were doing all sorts of things other than chatting, even when a man could have at least three chat windows open during the researcher's observation. When asked about this, men usually answered that the chatting was something they did in between other, more important, tasks. Whereas the typical woman, who was observed doing the same things, answered that she was chatting and vaguely described something else, which she said that she was not very good at. Nordli remarked that men tend to overestimate their computer use and women tend to underestimate it. Chatting and communication is given low

status as it is something everybody can do, while – as in this case – programming is given high status, since it requires a more specific skill. It has also been noticed in other studies that boys and girls speak differently about the technology itself and also about what they are doing (Enochsson 2005, 2001). As evident from Nordli's (2003) study, it seemed important to the boys to show that they knew enough about the computer to be respected for their specific knowledge and skills. The girls did not act in the same way. Skilful girls never talked about their competence, but boys who did not know very much, tried to give the opposite impression.

This is also supported by Bjørnstad and Ellingsen's (2004), study where the participants were interviewed and observed. They claim that almost everybody they interviewed had played games on the Internet; the difference was how the participants related to gaming. The researchers noted that at first glance it looked like the boys ran to the computers to play games, while the girls sat chatting. On closer scrutiny, they saw that the girls played a lot, but were talking to a friend sitting beside them while gaming. Girls also gave advice to each other. The majority of girls used gaming as an activity undertaken when bored and something they did not prioritize highly. The girls often said they found it a bit 'childish' to play games when they got older, but they could still be seen playing, often sitting together talking at the same time, while the boys' gaming was an activity they did alone in front of the computer. Mastering the game was also more important to the boys. The boys seemed to appreciate the activity itself, but boys also used gaming for making friends. The girls in one of my studies (Enochsson 2001) also used the word 'childish' when referring to the boys' way of acting and talking so as to give the impression of knowing more than they actually did. The girls' opinion that such behavior is childish could be a reason for not mentioning these activities as regards themselves.

In most studies where the difference between gender is highlighted, virtual communities are mentioned very little or not at all. In Larsson's (2005) study, virtual communities seemed not to be an option, since they are not presented in any table. Even though there are almost as many boys as girls participating in Sweden's largest Internet community, which is visited by more than 80% of Swedish teenagers every week, it can be seen that the girls write two thirds of the messages in the participants' virtual guest book, which is the main communication channel. There is also a difference in how they express themselves. The boys often write just facts, while the girls, in addition to facts, also write something nice about the person they are addressing. Those nice things can also be written alone, and girls' richer content might explain the larger body of text (Enochsson 2006).

But it is not always gender that indicates the greatest variation. Herring and Paolillo (2006) examined men's and women's web blogs from two different

genres. One genre was assumed to be more related to women (diary blogs), and the other to men (filter blogs). There were also more female bloggers writing diaries, and more male filter bloggers. But in this rich statistical material they found that the difference in ways of using the language was less between the genders than between the genres.

Turkle (1984) claimed that Apple's introduction of the desktop on the computer screen in the 80s was a breakthrough, and a first step towards an opening for other users than men interested in technology. The view of Internet technology has slowly changed, and today, for young users, the technology has become transparent, and the main focus is on using the Internet (e.g. Gansmo 2004). This is not only seen when studying Internet use. Among very young computer users, no gender differences are reported even in quantitative studies (e.g. Calvert et al. 2005). Prensky (2001) uses the concepts "digital natives" and 'immigrants' respectively, when talking about young people, for whom the Internet has always been at hand, and their parents, who had to learn it as grown-ups. To the parent generation, the Internet was from the beginning closely related to technology, and since technology was previously considered a male sphere, a lot of women hesitated to use it.

In this text I want to problematize the statistics which say that there is still a difference between the genders, and also what it can mean that young boys say that they play games, and girls that they communicate in different ways like e-mailing, chatting and writing messages in virtual communities. The teenagers themselves use the word 'communicating' for interacting with other people via the Internet. It is therefore not problematized in this article but used as a concept interchangeable with the forms of keeping in touch with friends and others. What is discussed here is what they say they do, what they say they think others do, and how they express this, mainly concerning the commonly used dichotomies, gaming and communicating.

Constructing reality

Gender is seen as a cultural construction, which means that we are not born as boys or girls in a cultural sense. We learn how to become the persons we are through the feedback we get from others throughout our lives (e.g. Säljö 2005, 2000). From this feedback we continue testing ways of behaving, and it is a process that goes in both directions. The categories men and women are likely to be the first we define ourselves in relation to (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). When babies are born in Sweden, it is common that they get a blue or a pink cap indicating their sex to all. Broadcast media and the press seem to favor research where gender differences are clear (Sørensen and Nordli 2005), so the fact that there is a difference and that there ought to be a difference is built into our

beliefs from the start, even if many feminist researchers have advocated a less stereotyped way of understanding gender.

The surrounding society and common cultural beliefs affect us all – researchers as well as informants. Questions and answers are constructed within these beliefs, but since the teenagers' answers can be somewhat contradictory, my aim has been to question common beliefs and to find other ways of approaching what boys and girls respectively say they do when using the Internet. Even if girls and boys prefer doing other things than what is expected from their gender, it has been seen that in interviews they answer what they think is expected. Johansson (2000), for example, found that the boys and the girls in her study knew exactly what kind of computer games were "girlish" and "boyish" respectively, but they themselves did not follow what they found was the norm. Pripp (1999) calls this the *third present* in the interview, which means that the expectations of society as to how to behave, answer etc., make the respondents say certain things.

Pripp also noticed in his interviews how the respondents answered questions he never posed. This phenomenon he found was due to how certain groups in society were talked about in, for example, the media. It seemed important for respondents from these groups to clarify and to respond to this ascription when being interviewed even if the interviewer never asked about it. What people say in the interview situation is also dependent on the interplay between the interviewer and the interviewee. This means that the interviewer can never be sure that what a respondent says in an interview corresponds with what that person actually means or does. It can be a way of expressing what he or she thinks is expected from him or her. When interviewing I can never be sure about what the person really means or does, just what he or she says, and that is what I can analyze.

It has been important to present the teenagers' perspective to the extent it is possible to do so. What is said in the interviews is of course interpreted by the researcher. As mentioned earlier, the technology is considered transparent, which means that young people's interest tends no longer to be in the technology itself, but in what it is possible to do with it. This is also part of the users' perspective in this study.

Interviews and analyses

In the spring semester 2004, 46 teenagers (26 girls and 20 boys) from 15 to 17 were interviewed about girls' and boys' activities on the Internet. The teenagers belonged to two different classes at different schools. Since part of the aim of the larger study was to look at information seeking on the Internet at school, the interviews took place in small rooms beside the teenagers'

classrooms. Some were interviewed face-to-face and recorded, and others online through the instant messaging application MSN Messenger. The proportion of girls and boys answering face-to-face and online respectively does not differ. In analyses of face-to-face and online interviews, no differences could be seen concerning content (Dunkels and Enochsson 2007; Enochsson 2007). Since the online interviews were conducted as synchronous chats, it can be assumed that there was no more time to think about the answers. The interview transcriptions and logs from the online-chats were analyzed in the light of my theoretical assumptions. In a few face-to-face interviews two respondents were interviewed together, since they wished not to be alone.

Predefined answers in questionnaires as well as short answers in interviews make it difficult to know what the respondent means when giving the answer *chatting*, for example. It is well known that such short answers mean different things to different people. When the phenomenon is relatively new, the differences might be even greater. Chatting can mean taking part in public chat rooms as well as chatting with a well-known friend using an instant messaging tool. In this specific example there might also be a generational aspect, since chatting ten years ago differed a lot from chatting today. This can mean that an adult researcher does not pose the right questions to be able to explore the phenomenon among teenagers. This can make the material skewed.

There can also be a problem to be able to see other possibilities when one theme emerges from the researcher's material. Ethnographical principles tell us to always question the results, and to try other perspectives (Ehn and Löfgren 2001). Once a theme has emerged it is very difficult to change views, but Ehn and Löfgren suggest different techniques to make it easier. These techniques also help the researcher to be more true to the respondents' perspective. What I have done is to question the common categories from which Internet behavior among young people is often viewed, mainly because of the fact that several boys used the word *communication* when talking about their gaming.

The aim of the analyses has been to find out how the teenagers talk about their own activities on the Internet, and if there are any alternative ways to look at this than those presented in common statistics. The questions about what they think boys and girls in general do on the Internet was thought of as a sort of validation in the sense that it would be possible to see if they talked about their own activities as gendered. This became more dominating than was intended, and the results are therefore two-fold and presented in two parts.

What do boys and girls do?

The first part of the results shows what activities the teenagers mentioned when asked about what they were using the Internet for. The second part shows

the teenagers' reflections about what they think boys and girls usually use the Internet for.

I: The activities

Almost everybody said that they used the Internet to be in contact with other people, apart from a few boys. They used different ways of saying this, from the word *communication* to the specific applications used: *MSN Messenger*, *LunarStorm* etc, or simply *E-mailing*, *chatting*. Chatting in this sense was not in public chat rooms, but using instant messaging applications. So communication to these teenagers means mainly keeping in touch with friends. Today it is possible to talk via MSN Messenger, but at the time of the interviews all the participants used MSN Messenger for chatting.

About half of the boys and a few girls stated that they played *games* on the Internet, and the game all those boys – but no girl – mentioned was Counter-Strike (C-S).

Information seeking was the third major category mentioned when talking about activities on the Net. Some called it *schoolwork*, some just *information seeking* and others talked about how they found information about their specific interests. Almost all of the girls mentioned this, and about half of the boys. Other activities were only mentioned by a few people; in this material it included for instance, *shopping*, *banking*, and *listening to music*.

Chatting can encompass different activities. Chatting in public chat rooms is quite a different activity from chatting with friends with the help of instant messaging applications. In the 90s, the most common way of chatting was in public chat rooms, where the participants did not know the others. Common among young people was to add a couple of years to their age and to pretend they were someone else. Today chatting is mostly carried out with already known friends, and the point of pretending to be someone else is lost, and the communication the interviewees talked about in this material was the latter. Some girls said they went home, connected to the Internet and started chatting with the friends they had just left at school.

Statistics show that girls use e-mail more often than boys, and that the proportion of chatting for both genders is quite low – 30% and 45% respectively (Larsson 2005) – compared to e.g. surfing and gaming mentioned earlier. In the interviews the boys first used the word *communication* and did not specify how this was done without being questioned further. A few girls said they chatted first, but the most common answer was that they mentioned using the application MSN Messenger. In the statistics virtual communities were not an option, but in the interviews it was clear that this was a very common way of communicating with friends. There is a possibility that even if the respondents

know they are chatting, chatting is not the first thing that comes to their mind, if the technology has become transparent as several researchers have claimed (e.g. Gansmo 2004; Prensky 2001; Tapscott 1997; Turkle 1984).

It could be seen that the boys who did not mention chat, communities or e-mail as activities, played Counter-Strike instead, and thus had a membership in a community where a chat function is built in. To be able to play C-S the player has to buy an application for the computer. The players belong to a worldwide community, and the activities of the gamers interviewed varied between playing with already known friends and playing with unknown players who might be on the other side of the world. There is world championship in C-S, but none of the interviewed teenagers competed. When competing, the players play in teams, which are called *clans*. When playing for fun, the players communicated via a built-in chat function with written or spoken words. When playing with friends, the phone was also used. Some of the boys also commented that playing Counter-Strike is all about communication.

Some girls just answered that they participated in communities where the main activity was communicating with friends, but some communities mentioned also offer opportunities to play solitary games. Questions about these games were not specifically asked, so we do not know how many girls might be playing games. Girls did not mention games to the same extent, and those who did said they visited sites with solitary games. Solitary games can often be found on websites connected to big media companies (e.g. www.blip.se, www.funplanet.se). The games are made to be played by one player at a time and some are well known from the physical world, like Memory and solitary card games, but also from the virtual world, like Tetris and the Snake. Some games are new, like Throwing Eggs at the Prime Minister. It is also possible to play games like Couronne and Yatzi with other unknown players directly over the Internet.

Like when talking about chatting, the answers about gaming can reflect the value given to the activity, and not the activity per se. Bjørnstad and Ellingsen (2004) reported that almost everybody played games on the Internet, the difference between girls and boys in their study were their different approaches to gaming. The boys saw the game as the main activity and it was important to master it, while the girls said they used games for killing time. The boys used the games to make friends, while the girls used the games when talking to friends they already had.

In one way the interview answers reflect what the teenagers do. If they say they play games or send e-mails, there is no reason to believe they do not play games or send e-mails, but the activities can tell us more than this. There are different ways of playing games and chatting or communicating. If a person says he or she plays games on the Internet, it can mean playing Tetris by

yourself, either as an activity to train your skills or to kill time. It can also mean playing against or together with others. Thus communicating is expressed in different ways and can also mean different things – even gaming. Depending on the approach to the activity there are different expressions for the same activity or different meanings for the same expression. The following describes how the teenagers talk about these activities in relation to gender.

II: Activities in relation to gender

The interviewed teenagers had various ways of talking about activities on the Internet in relation to gender. Some said there was no difference, others that there was. Some of those who said there was a gender difference explained that it was not related to the Internet but reflected the society we live in. There was also a difference between how the boys and the girls expressed this in the study.

Some examples from the interviews will help to elucidate the young people's views. A lot of the respondents said there is no difference at all between what boys respectively girls do on the Internet.

Nadia: I think both genders visit some type of forum for communication most of the time while surfing.

Andreas: I don't think it has to do with being a girl or a boy. I think it has to do with your interests.

Some referred to different interests like Andreas, while others talked about people's age or where they lived as a reason for choosing Internet sites. On further analysis, it could be seen that claiming that there were no gender differences was most frequent among the girls, although some boys also held this view, which was the most common way of comprehending the relation between gender and the Internet in this material. More boys than girls perceived a difference between the genders' use of the Internet, and they almost all stated that boys played games and girls communicated:

Simon: I think there are fewer girls using the Internet to play games and download music and films, at the same time there are probably fewer boys using LunarStorm and similar communities.

Tobias: I don't think girls play that much, because there are not so many girls gaming. I don't think games that boys often play are that interesting for girls. Like war games and stuff like that is not much fun, I think they'd say.

About half of the boys in this material thought there is a difference; some of them motivated this with not knowing any girls who play Counter Strike, for example. A few mentioned that only boys were interested in pornographic material. The reason was probably that pornographic sites on the net were mainly designed for men and boys.

Rasmus: Some boys maybe surf on porn sites, but I don't think girls do it that much; they are in different communities like LunarStorm and others.

Interviewer: Well, why are boys more interested in porn than girls? A lot of you tell me that.

R: I don't know.

I: You don't have to answer if you don't want to...

R: Well, I think it's like that in general. I'm not an expert, but boys might be more interested in sex than girls.

I: Or there are not enough good-looking boys in the pictures...?

R: No, and then most of the porn is slanted for boys.

The activities on the net are just a reflection of how it works in the rest of society:

Ronia: I think there is a difference in what sites you visit and probably also how you search for things, mostly. Unfortunately, I can't explain it, but there's usually a difference in how boys and girls solve a situation mostly, so....

Interviewer: How do you mean?

Ronia: That boys and girls think and act differently and that's why, probably on the Internet too, not only in real life.

Some answered that the difference in real life is not mainly between genders but between different types of persons, and because of that there was no difference on the Internet. Some also stated that they didn't know – a reply which is not surprising when asking people about anything. The interesting thing in this material was the reason, which was the same for all those who answered in this way: activities on the Internet are something you do on your own.

Sophie: Maybe there is [a difference], but I prefer sitting at the Internet alone, so I'm not there while I'm with boys, so I don't know. And I don't want to have a preconceived notion about anything.

Some interviewees started by saying that they didn't know, and then continued with a guess. Their uncertainty was obvious when they gave the answers: "*I think...*", "*I guess...*", "*I'm not sure, but...*" were common phrases. This seemed to be due to what is expressed in the example above, that the

interviewees do not want to claim anything they are not absolutely sure of. There are several examples of this.

The overall result shows that girls to a greater extent than boys say that there is no difference, and a lot of boys claim that there is a difference between genders with regard to Internet activities. Observation studies have shown that the difference is not that large, but that it rather has to do with approaches to the activities (e.g. Nordli 2003; Bjørnstad and Ellingsen 2004). This is confirmed by what they said they did, since they sometimes seem to express the same activities in quite different ways. Expressing themselves in different ways about gender and the Internet can be due to the fact that a lot of boys for example really think there is a difference. This can be related to their own experience of what they have seen girls doing or heard girls talking about what they do. It can also be related to what they have read in newspapers about gender differences on the Net. A third reason can be what has been described above vis à vis the expectations of society but also the putative expectations of the interviewer, which makes the respondent answer in a certain way. But these things do not explain why the girls claim that there is no gender difference regarding Internet activities.

Concerning mobile phones, Sørensen and Nordli (2005) discuss whether girls' and boys' approaches are due to gender or whether the technology itself is gendered. Their conclusion is that the mobile phone is neither masculine nor feminine but androgynous, and that differences between genders are related to the content of the communication – as is the case in most communication within our culture. This might also apply to the Internet. Saying that there is no difference in what boys and girls do may be a way of expressing the fact that the Internet has become transparent and the question does not make sense.

What is really gendered?

My aim in this text has been to present the teenagers' views of gender differences regarding Internet use as they themselves expressed them through interviews with me. In this study it is clear that both gaming and communicating, which are frequently used conceptions, can encompass a lot of different activities. It is also clear that gaming sometimes also can be included in the conception communicating. I found that follow-up questions to short answers can give a more complete picture than just a questionnaire. The picture given in statistics has its value, of course, but it has to be complemented in various ways. Some researchers have used observations in addition to interviews and questionnaires, which deepens the picture and helps us to gain more understanding of young people's Internet activities. There can be problems with statistical studies if the choices are not clear enough, which has been shown

here, but there is also a problem with the way the media often focus on the dichotomies boys and girls, men and women, as well as gaming and communication. And the question is whether it is possible – or when it will be possible – for a different view presented by gender researchers to receive any attention.

Even if boys and girls seem to choose different activities on the Internet, there are obviously similarities. But why do boys talk more about differences between the genders? And why do girls talk more about similarities? Larsson (2005) also noticed that the boys emphasized the gender differences to a greater extent than the girls did. Is this a way for the boys to say that it is not socially acceptable for them to show that they do the same things as girls? For the girls this does not seem to be a problem. It could be a way of indicating that what can be counted as male activities have a higher status. Indicating that activities are gender-distinguished and that boys do boys' activities can be a way for the boys to show they belong to this high-status group. The fact that the girls say there is no difference can be due to the same reason. This is a well-known discussion.

Like Sørensen and Nordli (2005), I think it is relevant to pose the question of what is really gendered? Is the difference due to the technology, i.e. is the technology gendered? Or is their Internet use and the way the teenagers talk about it just a reflection of gender roles and the expectations of society? It is interesting that even if girls do play games, for example, they do not mention it to the same extent or even in the same way as do boys. Most of the teenagers do a lot of different things when using the Internet but when asked about their activities, they only choose to mention some of them. Does this choice have anything to do with gender? Sørensen and Nordli state that technology is also part of the gender construction of individuals, and that mobile phones – the technology they are studying – interact with men and women in such a way that there could be a possible change of gender roles. Maybe that is also what is happening with the Internet; the technology makes it possible to experiment more.

What could be interesting to study would be how other age groups talk about their use of the Internet. Differences in use among Prensky's (2001) digital natives and immigrants could be one example. How do people in general approach the Internet? What is also obvious in my material is that the teenagers do not talk at all about the technology, but rather what they use it for, which was previously said to be typical for females. Saying that there is no difference in what boys and girls respectively do can be another way of saying that the difference simply reflects society – it has nothing to do with the Internet. There may be a changing view in society as a whole, but the change can also be about teenagers being digital natives who perceive the Internet in a different way than digital immigrants do.

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