

Interviews with Young People using Online Chat

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INTRODUCTION

When we first started using online interviews as a method for qualitative research, we had no thoughts about it being any different from face-to-face interviews. Being naturalized digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), having not used computers and the Internet from childhood but having become accustomed to them over time, we did not give the methodological issues much thought. However, when we started getting questions about our research, we understood that we took too much for granted. The questions that were raised made us question our approaches.

Internet Use among Young People

Sweden has a large number of Internet users, and on a global scale only Iceland had more Internet users per capita in 2004 (ITU, 2006). According to Safety, Awareness, Facts, and Tools (SAFT, 2003), 87% of the Swedish children between ages 9 and 16 have Internet access at home, compared to 85% in Iceland and 80% in Ireland.

The patterns of Internet use among young people have changed since the turn of the century. Private conversation channels, such as text messaging on mobile phones and instant messaging over the Internet, have replaced the open chat rooms that were popular at the end of the 1990s. Net communities have found

their way into every home, having evolved from highly technical systems to applications that are relatively easy to use. This has opened up the Internet for the average user in contrast to the early adopter of new technology. A majority of young Internet users in Sweden are members of at least one Net community and use instant messaging on a daily basis (SAFT, 2003).

BACKGROUND

The focus of this article is online interviews, which we view as a special form of Internet research. There are also other online interrogation methods.

The chat interview is written and synchronous, although there can be different levels of synchronicity; in fact the parties can construct their entire answers before submitting them, making it different from face-to-face conversations. If we need to compare chat interviews to something well known, we might say that it is a combination of the traditional interview and a survey.

Performing research on children's activities on the Internet is an area where ethical codices are not yet fully developed. An ethical dimension is suggested by Hernwall (2001) who claims that communication with him via e-mail offered the children the possibility to act on their own terms and conditions. But it is also important to take into consideration aspects connected

Table 1. Some features of online methods compared with traditional interviewing. The article focuses on the last row: Chat Interview.

	Face-to-Face	Written	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Traditional Interview	X		X	
E-Mail Interview		X		X
Chat Interview		X	X	

to children's limited experiences of life (Enochsson & Löfdahl, 2003), and the younger the respondent the more difficulties she might have in expressing herself in a written medium. In addition to this the online medium demands certain ethical considerations (Ess, 2002).

Davis, Boding, Hart, Sherr, and Elford (2004) claim that online interviews are inexpensive, convenient, and can be more acceptable to people who do not want to or are unable to attend face-to-face interviews. The weaknesses according to Davis et al. (2004) are that online interviews are slow and that follow-up probing can inhibit the flow of the dialogue. The authors also claim that the lack of social and conversational cues present in face-to-face interviews can cause breakdown in turn-taking. Their experience is that these weaknesses make the text ambiguous. Other researchers claim that young people communicating have other ways of expressing those cues and emotions, which are qualitatively different from communicating face-to-face and cannot be regarded as *better* or *worse* (Hernwall, 2001; Hård af Segerstad, 2002).

All research involving humans has to follow certain ethical guidelines to protect the participants from harm (ACHES-MC, 1946; WMA, 1964/2002). The voluntariness of people to participate is particularly emphasized. The participants should be informed of their rights to abstain from participation or to withdraw their consent. Sometimes though, it can be difficult for a participant to tell the researcher that she wants to withdraw. When dealing with children, this matter is even more delicate and requires a lot of sensitivity from the researcher since children sometimes use extra-linguistic markers to signal their withdrawal (Enochsson & Löfdahl, 2003). Backe-Hansen (2002) also emphasizes the researcher's responsibility to make it possible for the children to withdraw throughout the research process.

Holge-Hazelton (2002) and Frankel and Siang (1999) discuss whether the researcher can be sure that the person at the other end really is the one she thinks it is. However, this problem is two sided. Johansson (2000) tried to find participants for her study in a common chat room, and comments she received showed that children online suspected her to be someone else than the researcher she claimed to be.

QUESTIONS

In this article we will discuss our findings concerning method and ethics when conducting online interviews with children and teenagers. The questions we will address are:

- What methodological and ethical issues are specific to online interviews?
- How can our method be developed further?

Method

This article is based on experiences from three different research projects in which children of different ages have been interviewed online (Dunkels, 2005b; Enochsson, 2006). The research projects' aims were not to study the method as such, so this article is based on analyses and reflections written down by the researchers during the process. The analyses are qualitative, and we have been looking at our own methods and the interview transcriptions in light of questions posed to us from colleagues and others interested in our research. When discussing the matter and consulting research articles, different themes emerged. The themes have been discussed, revised, and discussed again.

Online Interviews

The following is an account of the themes that emerged when analyzing our own methods.

Deception

Children are constantly being exposed to risks, and the Internet is no exception. Media focuses on the risks of being contacted by pedophiles and being exposed to sexual or racist content, among others (Dunkels, 2005a). When contacting children online the researcher must be unambiguous concerning her identity and agenda in order to minimize the risk for the children. The greatest risk is luring children to act in a careless way when contacted by adults. As described above, Johansson (2000) was suspected by the children in the chat room to be someone with dishonest motives.

There may also be a risk that parents suspect that a pedophile posing as a researcher is contacting their child. In some cases the first contacts are better made off-line, making use of the fact that many people trust a telephone or a face-to-face conversation more than an online meeting. This is a way of giving the children and their parents control over the interaction, and when the parents have given their consent, it is time to make the contacts online.

It is difficult to be sure that the person chatting really is the person the researcher thinks they are. Research on chatting from the 1990s showed that it was common to pretend to be someone else and it was easy to stay anonymous (Sjöberg, 2002). Today, when peer-to-peer applications such as MSN are much more common, young people prefer chatting with friends they already know (Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2004). Also in Net communities, most contacts are with friends from real life (Enochsson, 2005; Medierådet, 2005). This implies that patterns of behavior on the Net may have changed. The more used to communication on the Internet we get, the easier it will be to interpret what kind of person has written different messages (Sveningsson, 2006). The fact that the respondent might be another person than the researcher thinks even in face-to-face interviews is rarely discussed. However, when interviewing unknown people this could be a problem in real life, although infinitely small. It is reasonable to assume that the risks connected with the Internet will diminish as we grow accustomed to the technology.

Interpretation

Sundén (1998) claims that the similarity between the computer-mediated written conversation and the traditional text is an illusion, and the fact that the process of saving the conversation is so simple, from a technical point of view, that it deceives us to believe that they are the same. Kroksmark (2005) states that in an e-mail interview the answers are longer, more structured, and that the respondent often discusses with herself. The latter is less likely to be seen in a chat interview, since the chat medium often presupposes immediate responses. As Kroksmark puts it, the interviewee writes down the sentence herself. This means that punctuation marks are placed where the respondent wants them to be, and there are no such comments as inaudible humming and so forth. It is also common

for respondents to use emoticons both in e-mails and in chat interviews. The following is a passage from an interview with Sarah:

Sarah *hiyou :-D*
annbritt *Hello*
Sarah *Sarah here*
annbritt *Shall we begin*
Sarah *yesbox :-)*
annbritt *Just interviewed Laura. We haven't
seen since last spring and it was a bit im
personal just to start directly with the
questions.*
Sarah *haha yes I can understand that*
Sarah *haha I think it will work out fine :-P*

In this passage Sarah uses emoticons several times, and she also writes "haha" to mark that she is in a good mood.

Davis et al. (2004) point out some weaknesses in online interviews such as lack of flow and social cues. However, the respondents in Davis et al.'s (2004) study were adult men. Today's youth have a richer experience of chatting with friends online. This mode of communication has developed its own distinguishing features, such as emoticons (Hernwall, 2001; Hård af Segerstad, 2002) and the upholding of parallel dialogues with the same or other persons.

In one of our interviews, there was a breakdown in turn-taking. There had been technical problems at the school, so in order to help 12-year-old Kim get ready in time for her next class, the interviewer hurried along with the questions, causing not only confusion but also stressing the interviewee:

elza *is that a rule you have, about the time, or
is it something that just happens?*
Kim *yes*
elza *rules?*
Kim *i'm allowed to be on the internet for half
an hour*
elza *ok, what do you usually do by the
computer?*
Kim *rule yes*
elza *(we are a little out of pace, I think I'm
rushing it) :-)*
Kim *yes, a little too fast for me*
elza *ok, I'll calm down... :-)*
elza *what do you usually do by the computer?*

We can see that the conversation becomes meaningless when questions and answers are out of pace. Kim confirms the interviewer's suspicions that the pace is too fast, and the interview can start over again. In a face-to-face situation, it might have been easier to notice the signs Kim displayed, and this breakdown might not have occurred. The problem could, however, be attributed to the interviewer's lack of experience, which then would support Sveningsson's (2006) claim that the problems with extra linguistic markers will lessen over time.

Net Cultures

The younger a child is, the more difficult it can be to carry out an online interview. There can also be children unaccustomed to the online medium. This can lead to children refusing an interview and a bias in the data. In one of the projects, the respondents could choose themselves between face-to-face or online interviews. Some respondents claimed that it was easier to write than to speak. Those respondents were between the ages of 12 and 13. We did not use Web cameras and thus had no eye contact. Eye contact can give you a chance to interpret the respondent's actions, and the lack of eye contact makes it more difficult to know when a respondent does not feel comfortable answering the questions, for example. On the other hand the respondents can think over what they write before submitting their reply.

It is important to bear in mind the differences between the Net cultures of the digital natives—the children—and those of digital immigrants, to use Prensky's (2001) terminology. The differences might create situations where the two groups' expectations conflict. As an example, many young people are highly skilled in multitasking: upholding several conversations at the same time, perhaps playing a game or doing homework while chatting in the background. For the adult researcher the interview is expected to be in focus

for both parties and this might cause problems. In one of Enochsson's interviews the interviewer gets worried when discovering that the interviewee is doing other things. This leads to a very confusing dialogue.

Several researchers (e.g., Dunkels, 2006; Sveningsson, 2006) have reported a new kind of openness that computer-mediated communication seems to promote. This might make it possible to study arenas that were hard to approach earlier. This opportunity, however, calls for caution from the researcher, who needs to carefully think through her involvement with the participants. Computers and the Internet have changed our ways of interacting. Among the areas that were highly unlikely to have some years ago and are a reality today, we find online therapy (Grohol, 1999; Holge-Hazelton, 2002), mourning the dead (Dunkels, 2006), and meeting a sexual partner (Löfgren-Mårtensson, 2005).

Security

How the data is gathered and stored are important questions whenever research involves people. This is no different when the Internet is part of the research, but the implementations may have to be altered.

An online interview must pass a server at some point. Depending on what level of security the researcher finds necessary, different solutions may be appropriate. If the research concerns sensitive issues, it may be important that the researcher also is in control of the server. In this case the interview takes place in a forum placed on the researcher's server and the data is also stored there. This method is the most secure, and any risks connected with this method are of a kind found off-line too, for example, negligence of the researcher, illegal attempts to get hold of data, and so forth. Another alternative is using an existing instant message tool. In this case the level of security is lower, since the data can be saved on several other computers. Using MSN Messenger is an example of this method where researchers can take advantage of the fact that

Table 2. The level of security of different technical solutions

Level of Security	Own Server	Instant Message Tool	Net Community	Open Forum
High	X			
Low		X		
Lower			X	
Public				X

most participating children are accustomed to the tool and the positive consequences that follow. This method might not offer the same safety, but it simplifies the procedure for both researcher and children. Yet another method is using an existing Net community, giving the same positive effects for the participants, but lowering the security even further. Finally, researchers might consider interviewing in an open forum, where the conversation is to be regarded as public.

Power Structures

A girl who very openheartedly told the interviewer about her use of the Internet explained why she sometimes preferred online contacts, even with her friends:

Marie You see, in real life, I am pretty shy.

Several children in our studies express that it can be easier to *write* than to *speak* about more delicate matters. This is supported by other studies such as Enochsson (2005) and Hernwall (2001). Hernwall also claims that the children in his study after some months express themselves more freely in relation to him as an adult researcher. This is also supported by different studies where marginalized groups claim that on the Internet they have found a powerful arena from which they can act (e.g., Dahan & Sheffer, 2001; Hall, 2000; Leonardi, 2000; Weinrich, 1997). Enochsson's (2005) informants said that the Internet is a place where everybody can find his or her space independent of their status in the classroom.

When the interview is in text form already, the researcher can easily read the text between sessions and in so doing increase the quality of the following session. This is also an advantage during the actual interview, since it is possible to re-read earlier answers when undertaking follow-up probing. When interviewing face-to-face, it is also possible to let the respondents read and comment upon their own interview transcript, a method Enochsson (2001) used. This is a way of getting a more developed text and hopefully more developed thoughts. In two of the studies, the respondents were asked to read the chat interview afterwards to develop some thoughts, and only one comment was given. This can be due to power relations or simply because there was nothing to add.

Dunkels informed her 12-year-old interviewees of a way of withdrawing from the project. If they wanted to quit the interview but felt uneasy to say so, they could simply shut down the Web browser and blame it on technical problems. The researcher made a promise not to ask any questions, but that she would wait to see if they returned, as there actually might be technical problems. Two of Enochsson's informants did not show up on the Net in spite of reminders. A similar behavior could also be seen in Löfdahl's (2002) study with pre-school children. They turned the light off when they did not want the researcher to use the video camera anymore. It could be seen that the children found it difficult to tell the researcher not to use the camera (Enochsson & Löfdahl, 2003). These examples show that it is very important to be sensitive as a researcher and to let the children use their own expressions for withdrawal, but also that the online interview offers new possibilities to withdraw.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We have discussed the importance of being open concerning identity and agenda when engaging in online communication with children. We also discussed the risk of any of the parties being deceived by the other. The conclusion is that problems connected to identity probably will diminish over time, as users get accustomed to the medium and thereby unveil the extra linguistic markers that are specific to the medium.

Does the researcher need any Internet-related competence to engage in a chat conversation? Our experience seems to indicate that you do not need any particular skills, though some practice is required.

We have found that online interviews can be very useful, as they simplify the interview situation in many ways. The time- and money-saving aspects, making it possible to carry out interviews without a lot of traveling, are not unimportant.

A strong point of online interviews might be that it can promote creating an arena also for marginalized people, people whose voices are seldom heard for different reasons: social, ethnical, gender related. The possibility for the respondent to write his or her own text is positive, but this is dependent on her ability to use the written language.

Gender perspectives in Internet use among young people need to be investigated further. There is reason to suspect that access to technology is partly dependent on gender and social, ethnic, and cultural differences, a situation which makes these perspectives essential to studies concerning social life on the Internet in particular and online studies in general.

It is important to bear in mind that all methods have their limitations, and as always it is necessary to choose a method accordingly. Choice of the method sometimes depends on the topic of the interviews. However, in this matter it is essential to keep an open mind; sometimes the least likely subjects are suitable for computer-mediated communication.

Considerations

The same methodological and ethical questions become apparent when conducting online and real-life interviews, and any differences are mostly in appearance. Researchers getting accustomed to the medium will probably become aware of the differences and find ways of solving methodological and ethical problems. Until then every situation must be carefully considered in order to secure the quality of the research and the personal integrity of the participants.

We must be careful to ascertain who the other party is in a chat conversation, but on the other hand to not overrate the problems of possible deception. Being open with our identity and agenda as researchers is essential to safeguard the reliability of the study and the security for children in particular.

Finding ways of interpreting the written conversation that an online interview constitutes is important, taking into account the different Net cultures of digital natives and immigrants.

Also, we must carefully consider what technical solutions are appropriate for the interview in question: how much security it requires, what the demands on access to computers and the Internet are, and what technical skills can be expected from the researcher and participants.

And finally, we must take responsibility for the relative advantage we have as researchers and carefully try to even out power levels. Possibly, computer-mediated communication can be of help in this important pursuit.

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KEY TERMS

Chat: A computer-mediated, real-time written conversation. It has the characteristics of a casual conversation and is usually not stored. A chat can be Web based or software based. The first means that it can be accessed from any computer with a Web connection, the latter that certain software needs to be

installed on the computer. There are open chat forums that anyone can visit to chat, to find new acquaintances or information. Just as often, people prefer to chat with friends, using chat tools that require authentication before allowed chatting. Examples of software chat tools are Irc and Mirc.

Digital Native: Somebody who has never experienced life before the Internet. Prensky (2001) uses the term to describe the first generation that grew up with the Internet as a part of their childhood, which is the sense of the word used in this article. Persons who are not used to computers and the Internet from childhood are consequently digital immigrants.

Emoticon: Probably derived from the words emotion and icon, suggesting that emoticons are icons, or images, expressing emotions. In written conversations, such as chats, instant messages, or post-it notes, the lack of visual and aural support often needs to be compensated. Hård af Segerstad (2002, p. 131) expresses this: "Cyber communicators use emoticons to convey non-verbal signals."

In Real Life (IRL): Used here to distinguish between the Net on the one hand and real life on the other. This does not mean that we are involved in the discussion regarding the Net's relationship to reality, it is simply a practical way to distinguish between something happening in the world that we can see and touch, and something happening on the Internet.

Instant Message (IM): Written message, synchronous or asynchronous, sent via an IM tool. The IM tool allows the user to see which pre-defined contacts are online and send *synchronous* messages, the conversation taking the character of a chat, or *asynchronous*, leaving the message until the contact goes online. Examples of IM tools are Icq and MSN. These kinds of applications, creating private conversation channels, are increasingly becoming popular.

Net Community: A virtual meeting place accessible through the Internet. To get a picture of what a Net community is, one can imagine a mixture of the school yearbook, a showroom, a trendy café, a telephone, mail, and walking down High Street on a Saturday afternoon. It is a virtual place for communication, providing tools for presenting yourself and observing others. Most Net communities are Web based—that is, you can access them via a Web site. As a member you log in and get admittance to your personal space where you can publish information about yourself, true or untrue, as much as you choose. All members can view each other's information and communicate.

Net Culture: Activities on the Internet and the cultures that evolve around these activities. Examples are chatting; searching on the Internet; playing games; downloading and distributing music, films, software, and other digital material; the unwritten rules concerning e-mail and other written conversations; and patterns of interaction in the new media environment.

Safe Use Guide: A set of rules to help Internet users avoid dangers and unpleasant situations. Examples can be found on many major Web sites particularly aimed at children and teenagers. Among these you often find tips like the ones SafeKids.com (2006) list:

- I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' permission.
- I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.