



OurSpace: An Investigation into the Mediated Social Networks of Danish Teenagers

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Abstract

In an age of ever increasing online virtual networking, online communities are making their way into everyday social activities. This paper originated from curiosity of the impact these online communities have in young teenagers' social lives. Much research exists on the Internet and its impact on communication and society, but not on these online communities that are becoming a social phenomenon. We surveyed a group of 31 students and selected two for interviews. By means of hand-drawn visualized social network and explanations given to their relations, we analyzed this data on the basis of Stine Gotveds recently introduced model of 'cyber social reality' and a social network analytical approach.

Preface

It is 8 o'clock in the morning, I just made myself a coffee and turned on the computer and the wireless internet connection. First I check e-mails from university and private mailaccounts and then have a glance on my home country news as well as the Danish. Afterwards I log on www.studivz.de (German facebook.com) – an online community for students that actually is trying to export the concept to other European countries and languages. I can see immediately if someone sent me a message via the internal message system, who has visited my profile and whose of my contacts birthday is close. I have 28 “friends” in this community, most of them from my former school including my best friends from that time. I retrieved a lot of them because one made up a special group for all former students. Then there are some friends from my former universities as well as the studying family members. I regularly check my best friends profiles and if they put some new information or pictures online. It is also interesting to see who left a message on my or their message board and who they are friends with. In that way I feel closer to them and can follow their lives and relationships online as well as keeping them informed about what is going on in mine. I think that this community is really helpful and I don't want to miss the communication tools that are bundled on one website and make life a little easier. But recently there were rumours about that the founders intended to sell the whole online community. This was demented later but once in a while I considered to delete my profile because I am afraid they misuse my data for commercial reasons. Then I would go back to writing emails to only my closest friends where I summarize my life for them. But this takes more time and I might forget certain events in my life.

Table of contents

1	<i>Introduction and Motivation</i>	5
2	<i>Research Field</i>	6
2.1	Historical Background of Internet Research	6
2.1.1	Community Lost or Liberated?	8
2.2	Concepts of Community	9
3	<i>Analytical Framework</i>	11
3.1	Theoretical Background	12
3.1.1	The Social Network Approach.....	12
3.1.2	The Triangle of Cyber Social Reality.....	14
3.1.3	Connecting Social Network Approach with the Model of Cyber Social Reality	16
3.2	Application of the model	18
3.2.1	Method 1: The survey – structure and interaction.....	19
3.2.2	Method 2: The visualized social network –structure and culture	19
3.2.3	Method 3: The interview –interaction and culture	19
3.2.4	Synthesis of the two methods (visualized social networks / interview)	20
3.3	Delimitations	21
4	<i>The Case Study</i>	23
4.1	Case Study Design	23
4.2	Survey	24
4.2.1	Survey data.....	24
4.2.2	Reflections about the survey	29
4.2.3	Most important survey findings	30
4.3	Ethnographic inspired Interviews	31
4.3.1	Explicit purpose	31
4.3.2	Ethnographic explanations	31
4.3.3	Ethnographic questions	32
4.3.4	Interview settings	33
4.4	Interview analysis	36
4.4.1	The Interviewees	37
4.4.2	Media use	37
4.4.3	Family relations.....	44
4.4.4	Friendship relations.....	46
4.4.5	Interview Reflections	48
5	<i>Discussion</i>	50
5.1	Reflections	50
5.2	Comparing the results	51
6	<i>Conclusion</i>	55
7	<i>List of references</i>	56

1 Introduction and Motivation

The Internet and its implication on society and vice versa have been and still are the focus of various studies across academic research disciplines. The fact that the Internet has become a networking tool in everyday life for people gaining access to online activities through the required technologies, has been influencing the world.

This project is concentrating on social networking communities and their part in people's social networks. According to Wikipedia, "a social network service is social software specifically focused on the building and verifying of social networks for whatever purpose."¹ We see online communities as partly resembling a telephone listing and partly a personal address book – it provides a space where to upload one's profile and thereby make it available to thousands of people, only by virtue of being listed in the same network. At the same time one's profile can be filled with the data of one's interests etc. and it is possible to list all of one's contacts in it. Technically, using an online social network service equates to having a telephone book, where each and every person has not only a telephone number listed but a whole page with information about the particular person. The additional bonus is that this telephone book will allow one to compile a list of people they prefer to communicate with. As in an address book, the profiles of people are standardized, there are limits to how much one can customize one's personal profile. Yet people listed in a telephone directory or personal address book remain only names until one actually contacts them, so first when the members start using the tools and services for communicating we can consider an online community as mediated social network.

This project originated out of discussions about the trend of becoming a member of online communities such as MySpace and Facebook.com, and using them for maintaining or reestablishing relationships. We feel as if we are falling behind the capabilities of communicative/interactive internet technology, and that teenagers seem much more familiar and adept at embracing the latest trends and tools available online. When it comes to technology, teenagers are often the early adopters. Thus, looking at their experiences would provide us with up-to-date and innovative research material.

¹Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network_service (11.10.2006; 15:43)

Further reflection on these issue leads us to the research question:

How do online communities mediate social networks of teenagers?

This is of course a really broad research question. Yet we figure that the size and scope of the Internet itself allows a certain amount of extravaganza in a research question.

We do not think it necessary to give an in-depth overview of the historical development of the Internet; however, we are going to provide a short introduction to internet research and approaches to the medium in the next chapter. As we are neither the first nor the last to write about issues connected to Internet, it is necessary to position our study within the field and clarify the approaches we are drawing upon. Approaches and concepts for online communities and social networks will be introduced and related to each other in order to position our research question in an appropriate analytical framework.

2 Research Field

In the following part we give a retrospective on research in Internet issues and the changing perspectives on community analysis.

2.1 Historical Background of Internet Research

Barry Wellman, the founder of the International Network for Social Network Analysis and presently the director of NetLab at the University of Toronto, is one of the most well-known researchers in Internet Studies. His study objectives include “overarching interest...in how the Internet affects everyday life: at work, in the community, and among family members.”² In one of his articles, Wellman describes “three ages of Internet studies”³ to refer respectively to the state of research ten years ago, five years ago, and the present:

During the first era, the Internet is still not very widespread; it is viewed as a technological marvel that should enlighten its users. The focus of Internet research is on isolated online phenomena and,

² NetLab is a scholarly network studying computer networks, communication networks, and social networks. Netlab scholars are linked to the Centre for Urban and Community Studies, the Department of Sociology, the Knowledge Media Design Institute, and the Faculty of Information Studies. (<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman>)

³ Wellman, B., 2004: 123-129

as one of the aims of the Net was to transform the world, the research concentrates mainly on finding signs of transformation. The scientists who deal with Internet problems are mostly Information Technology specialists together with a few enthusiastic sociologists. The rest of the scientific community and the media are torn between two extremes, as far as the future of humanity with the Internet is concerned; some say that it is the end, others that it is the beginning.

The second era, according to Wellman, brings a calming message: nothing particular in people's everyday life has actually changed with the introduction of the Internet. More and more people have accepted computers and the Internet into their work and leisure, thereby changing the perception of the internet into something approachable and ordinary. The research focus has moved to a systematic documentation of users and their uses of the Internet, which are mostly measured with surveys and other quantitative methods. Sociologists see the dream of equalizing and democratizing influence of the Internet shatter before their very eyes as the digital divide widens, as business men foresee opportunities and geographers anticipate job changes. However, the pessimists have no reason to cheer either: the Internet obviously has not destroyed the face-to-face contacts as they expected.

The third era is, again according to Wellman, just about to begin. The qualitative analysis takes over from the quantitative data gathering, and the scientific focus, as well as the focus of software, shifts from group interactions to interactions in individualized networks. The Internet has announced its new status as a communication tool and thereby becomes interesting to everyone in the scientific community. The development of the Internet continues at high speed – the ones who do not keep up, are left behind. Wellman supports a sociological and qualitative approach to internet studies.

Despite the sometimes suspicious attitudes towards communication on the Internet, the younger generations seem to be embracing the medium. At the moment the greatest hype is about Myspace, an online community where users create their profiles and decorate them with pictures, videos or texts. There are currently 100 million profiles operated on this service and every day around 230,000 new users sign up. Most of the users are teenagers and generally young people; for instance there are 2.2 million bands, 8000 comedians and thousands of filmmakers and other creative people with operated profiles.⁴ Besides that, there are many more international and nation-centered online communities, but their principles are often similar to those of Myspace⁵.

⁴ Fortune. New York: Sep 4, 2006. Vol. 154, Iss. 5; pg. 66

⁵ See the list of online social networking services on Wikipedia, with approximate user counts on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites

2.1.1 Community Lost or Liberated?

Internet, as any other new medium of communication, has had, and still has, its share of utopias and doomsday prophecies. Critics argue that the communication conducted on the internet can never be as meaningful as face to face communication or, replace it, because it is a simulation. Soukup writes: “In a sense, people are merely ‘pretending’ to be in a ‘real’ place, while they sit at their computer screens, much like people pretend to be in a ‘real’ French café when dining in Disneyland.”⁶ Evolutionary theorist Oliver Curry, foresees that,

"in 10,000 years time humans may have paid a genetic price for relying on technology. Spoiled by gadgets designed to meet their every need, they could come to resemble domesticated animals. Social skills, such as communicating and interacting with others, could be lost, along with emotions such as love, sympathy, trust and respect. People would become less able to care for others, or perform in teams."⁷

Laments about the perceived loss of community are drops of a steady stream of similar complaints that have been put forth by some of the revered thinkers throughout centuries – interestingly there always seems to have existed a better past as far as communities are concerned. One of the supporters of the pastoral past is Ray Oldenburg, who sees nothing positive in technological development, but only the loss of local community⁸. The new media pessimists are usually labeled as representatives of the ‘community lost’ or ‘lost perspective’ view.

On the other hand, one should not forget the optimists, as there have been plenty of scholars who have greeted the Internet with overwhelming enthusiasm. They, in contrast to the dystopians, consider Internet communication as a opportunity to “liberate relationships from the confines of physical locality and thus create opportunities for new, but genuine, interpersonal relationships and communities”⁹. This statement supports the notion that meaningful communities and relationships can exist without physical or geographical constraints existing in a virtual space. Some of the most

⁶ Soukup, C., “Computer-mediated communication as a virtual third place: building Oldenburg’s great good places on the world wide web”, *New media & society*, Vol. 8(3): 421-440, p.426 It must be said that Soukup himself does not belong to the group of Internet dystopians, but is being slightly ironical when referring to their opinions.

⁷ BBC News, 17.10.2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6057734.stm

⁸ Soukup cites Oldenburg in one of his newest articles, who states that “the only predictable social consequence of technological advancement is that they [humans in urban settings] will grow ever more apart from one another”, Oldenburg seems to be very fond of the Habermasian idea of public sphere – men gathering in a local pub or club and discussing the matters of the world.

⁹ Hu, Y, Wood, J.F., Smith, V., Westbrook, N. “Friendships through IM: Examining the relationship between instant messaging and intimacy”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10(1), article 6, November 2004.

cited theorists to support this 'community liberated' or 'liberated perspective' standpoint are Jonathan Rheingold and Ithiel de Sola Pool.

At the moment, the liberated perspective seems to be gaining foothold as new studies keep revealing everyday Internet use of many people, which does not seem to make them social cripples, but rather augment their already existing social ties. Nonetheless, there still exists no consensus about the impact of the Internet on people's social ties. Zhao expresses it as the following: "Three major conflicting findings have been reported: (1) Internet use decreases social ties, (2) Internet use increases social ties, and (3) Internet use neither decreases nor increases social ties."¹⁰ The inconsistencies of the study results could reflect the youth of the discipline of Internet studies; it usually takes time to develop a coherent system of terms, definitions and research methods, which would render different studies actually comparable.

2.2 Concepts of Community

The idea of community in modern life is often connected to the idea of 'nation-ness', as nations tend to generally be regarded as one of the strongest group identifications in modern period and sometimes even the only 'real' community of this era. However, some modern theories claim that the real communities do not exist as such, and that all communities must be regarded as imagined, as "belief in their presence is their only brick and mortar."¹¹

The concept of 'community' has been used to refer to the group of villagers living next door to each other in a neighborhood. "Definitions of community have usually included three ingredients: interpersonal networks that provide sociability, social support and social capital to their members; Residence in a common locality, such as a village or neighborhood; solidary sentiments and activities (Hillary: 1955)."¹²

Wikipedia defines online community very simply as "a group of people that primarily or initially communicates or interacts via the Internet."¹³ This definition is very broad, but perhaps appropriate when covering this very versatile phenomenon. Refining this definition to something more concise,

¹⁰ Zhao, Shanyang, 2006

¹¹ Anderson in Slevin, p.93

¹² Hillary, G. Jr., 1955 In: Wellman, B., 1998: 9

¹³ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_communities. (04.11.2006, 9:34) We are aware that Wikipedia is not considered to be a scientific source, due to its particular structure, but as the phenomenon we are investigating is very new, we are using this definition as a starting point for further discussion.

Preece explains online communities as: "the *people* who come together for a particular *purpose*, and who are guided by *policies* (including norms and rules) and supported by *software*." ¹⁴

Approaching online communities, clear parallels can be drawn to the definitions proposed in 1955. However, with the emergence of internet communication, geographical location is no longer an issue when discussing the experience of community, as users in different parts of the world can share sentiments, sociability, social support and social capital with people they may have never met in the physical world, but in cyberspace. To investigate online communities, we will employ a network analytical approach, which, "allows the discovery of other forms of community - perhaps sparsely-knit and spatially dispersed - and other forms of organization - perhaps loosely-coupled or virtual."¹⁵

¹⁴ Preece, J., and Maloney-Krichmar, D., 2005

¹⁵ Wellman, 1998: 11

3 Analytical Framework

In the following section we will present an introduction to our theories and why and how we will be using them. The first approach we are introducing is the social network approach which is used as a means of analyzing the construction of social networks. We are primarily drawing on the work of Barry Wellman and his colleagues.

“Network analysts study the patterning of the social connections that link sets of actors. [...] they often look for social groups – collections of actors that are closely linked to one another. Or, alternatively, they look for social positions – sets of actors who are linked into the total social system in similar ways.”¹⁶

Social network analysis is one of the main techniques used in sociology but also in other fields of research, as for example in anthropology or geography. In this project we are only looking at social networks from a sociological point of view and in the tradition of social network approach.

The second theorist we employ is Stine Gotved. Gotved introduces what she calls the triangle of cyber social reality, originally developed by Bourdrou and Newman. We chose to use Gotved’s particular model as both a theory and a method, as she introduces the ‘cyber’ element making it applicable to our field of research. The cyber element incorporates the idea that advanced communication technology coupled with possibility of incorporating computers has impacted the way in which social reality is constructed. The triangle of cyber social reality provides a means of approaching the way that gymnasium students construct their social networks. An examination of the sides of the triangle will allow us to see how the three elements (culture, interaction and structure) that compose the triangle function holistically. They should be understood as interacting fluidly and not as static entities with clearly defined boundaries. This fluid interactivity will provide a glimpse of how our interviewees’ construct their cyber social reality. We use the term glimpse because cyber social reality is not frozen in time, but instead in a constant state of negotiation and change. What it does reflect is a specific context or reality in which our interviewees found themselves in at the point of the survey and interview. Applying the model and using it as a method provides us with a means of approaching their cyber social reality as they have constructed it through the interviews conducted.

¹⁶ Freeman, L.C., 2000

3.1 Theoretical Background

3.1.1 The Social Network Approach

The following section will briefly present the properties of social networks. "The social network approach looks for social relations that transcend groups or localities,"¹⁷ meaning that the world is looked at in networks and not in groups, which Wellman defines as a specific type of social network, densely-knit and tightly bounded. If a community or an online community were approached as a group, boundaries of these groups based on, for example, membership would be in the focus. "By contrast, those who study such entities as social networks can treat membership and boundaries as open questions."¹⁸ It is obvious that a group also can be looked at as a social network.

3.1.1.1 Ties and Relations

According to Wasserman and Faust, social networks consist of individual members, referred to as nodes which are interconnected by sets of ties.¹⁹ Ties connect individuals by relations. This can vary from one to many relations and can vary in strengths from weak to strong, the difference being that "weak ties are generally infrequently maintained, non intimate connections. Strong ties include combinations of intimacy, self disclosure, provision of reciprocal services, frequent contact and kinship, as between close friends or colleagues."²⁰ The exchanges can be, but are not necessarily reciprocal.

Granovetter conceptualizes weak and strong ties with the following comparison to friendship: A strong tie is a direct close friend in ones personal network. A weak tie is an indirect relation, for example an acquaintance.²¹ Weak ties are important as they can serve as connectors, linking two social networks, each with strong internal ties to each other that would otherwise be independent. The advantage of weak ties is that they grant access to other social networks and can facilitate the potential exchange of resources and information. The example of MySpace, which claims to be an

¹⁷ Wellman, B., 1998: 12

¹⁸ Wellman, B., 1998: 13

¹⁹ Wasserman and Faust, 1993

²⁰ *ibid.*:79

²¹ Granovetter, M., 1982: 105

online community that lets you meet your friends' friends,²² provides the technical platform for establishing and maintaining weak ties.

According to Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman, relations can be understood as exchanges of resources, which are characterized by content, direction and strength.²³ The content of exchanged resources in online communities could include emotive or formal messages, organisational information or social support.

The authors further argue that the direction of the relations can be directed or undirected.²⁴ For instance, an online community using Instant Messenger exchanges more directed messages to a specific person, meanwhile an online community such as MySpace, offers the opportunity to address the whole community with information revealed on a profile. Exchanges, however, are not necessarily balanced or equally reciprocated.

The strength aspect of a relation can be understood in several ways. These include the frequency in which messages are exchanged, the content of the information exchanged, amount of information exchanged, and in relation to online communities, social support to strengthen relationships.²⁵ Once again, the exchanges are not necessarily balanced or equally reciprocated.

3.1.1.2 Ego-Centered Networks and Whole Networks

Two approaches that can be utilized to describe social networks are the ego-centered and whole network approach. We choose the ego-centered approach which takes point of departure in a single individual, who is to be viewed as a nexus in connection to the relations he/she is engaged in.

"Ego-centered network analysis can show the range and breadth of connectivity for individuals and identify those who have access to diverse pools of information and resources."²⁶

Relating this to online communities it is clear that the range and breadth of connectivity depends on the individuals preferences. Here it is important to mention that personal networks have to be recognized as dynamic. "Each network is the result of a process of construction and recomposition that takes place over time."²⁷ Recognizing this temporal dimension of a social network analysis, the construction of social networks change and our case study only provides a snapshot of the subjects immediate construction of reality.

²² <http://www.myspace.com/Modules/Common/Pages/AboutUs.aspx> (06.12.2006, 13:25)

²³ Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C., Wellman, B., 1999: 78

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*:79

²⁶ Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C., Wellman, B., 1999: 82

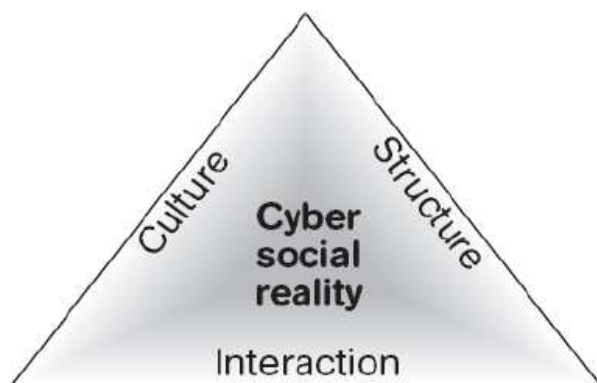
²⁷ Bidart, C., Degenne, A., 2005: 283

The second approach refers to whole networks and "... considers both the occurrence and the non-occurrence of relations among all members of a population. A whole network approach describes the ties that all members of a population maintain with all others in that group."²⁸ One example is Castells macro-sociological work *The Network Society*. However, such a work would go far beyond the scope and resources available to this project.

3.1.2 The Triangle of Cyber Social Reality

In her latest article Stine Gotved is modifies the triangle of social reality introduced by Bourdrou and Newman in 1993.²⁹ She supplements the fact that online communication today plays a role in social reality and so calls the modified model the ‘triangle of cyber social reality’. It is defined in the following:

“From the elements of culture, structure and interaction cyber social reality is constructed by the individual as well as by the collective, in close cooperation with advanced communication technology and the possibility of computer-mediated interactions”³⁰



²⁸ *ibid.*: 82

²⁹ Boudreau and Newman, 1993: 88

³⁰ Gotved, 2006: 472

In comparison to the old model of social reality she takes out the prefixes “social” from the terms interaction and structure. At the same time she adds “cyber” to the social reality because she takes the patterns of human behavior, as well as the possibilities and constraints conditioned by the technology into consideration.³¹

In the following, short overviews of the three sides of the triangle: represent interaction, culture and structure, before the model is applied to our case study and methods.

3.1.2.1 Interaction

Interaction can be understood as exchanges of information between individuals or groups. It is within interaction that meanings are negotiated, constructed and reconstructed. Interaction is related to culture in that agreed upon negotiations create a basis for meanings which can be construed as the foundation for cultural patterns. In discussing the model of cyber social reality, it is important to state that interaction, in the case of online communication, is mediated by computer technology. Technology and interaction are inseparable and are components in the construction of cyber social reality.

3.1.2.2 Culture

Gotved explains the culture side of the triangle as values, sentiments and meanings evoked within a social reality,³² or as ways of doing within a certain context. These ways of doing are negotiations which are constructed and reconstructed through interactions. As they are social constructions, they are subject to change depending upon what framework and context the members of the culture are in.

3.1.2.3 Structure

The structure side of the triangle refers to ongoing, more stable patterns of social reality which provide a means for individuals and groups to understand and communicate with each other. “[...] [T]he social and technological structure together form one side of the triangle, emphasizing the relatively stable features of the construction of cyber social reality.”³³

³¹ *ibid.*

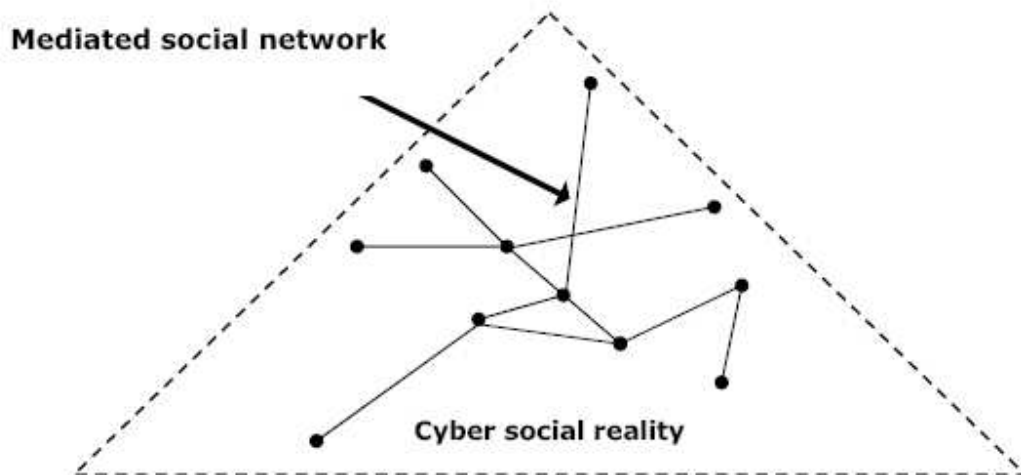
³² Gotved, 2006: 470

³³ *ibid.*

It has to be clarified here that it is unacceptable to look separately at social or technological structure. If one would only focus on a social structure it would easily become what Howard calls organizational determinism which means only seeking for a formal structure and hierarchies within social networks. On the other hand it is also inadequate to “analyze the formal structure of communication tools”³⁴ as it would be technological determinism.

3.1.3 Connecting Social Network Approach with the Model of Cyber Social Reality

The figure below shows the integration of the mediated social networks into the cyber social reality. The intention is to provide a suitable analytical framework in order to be able to answer the research question of how online communities mediate social networks of teenagers. As previously mentioned, this question is quite broad and for answering it a certain focus is required. This focus is provided through the model: in the section discussing online communities, we argued that the network perspective should be chosen when communities are analyzed. Online communities only represent a part of the mediated social network. Following this, the sides interaction, culture and structure can be connected to how social networks are constructed.



According to Gotved, 'interaction' is understood as exchanges of information and builds the basis for the other two sides of the model. The network approach speaks of relations between individuals that

³⁴ Howard, 2002: 554 ff.

are established through interactions like exchange of resources (information, messages...). The main point is that interaction is the basis for the establishment of relations. Further, it is argued that interactions are mediated by computer technology, thus we can also speak of mediated relations.

Structure and culture are both constructs of individuals. By taking the personal network approach, we get a snapshot of the structure and an insight in the culture of their social networks.

The structure side of the triangle refers to ongoing more stable patterns of social reality³⁵ which provides means for individuals and groups to understand and communicate with each other. These can be understood as social networks and be identified in the subjects' drawn visualized social networks. Gotved says that “[...] the social and technological structure together form [this] side of the triangle, emphasizing the relatively stable features of the construction of cyber social reality.”³⁶ That fact that she speaks of cyber social reality, underlines and legitimizes the fact that we interlink social structure and culture in our project. We understand the structure, including human-computer-hybrids³⁷ as mediated social networks. These networks, along with “technology, especially the internet, have become parts of everyday life - [...]”³⁸ Also the social network approach indicates that social and technological networks are overlapping.

Mediated social networks can consist of both weak and strong ties. One limitation of the hand-drawn constructions of their social networks might not include weak ties. The strength of ties depends on the individual's construction of their social networks and how strongly they value a relation. How much they value a relation is dependent on their own experience and the content of the resources exchanged. Values, sentiments and meanings evoked within cyber social reality are highly dependent on the interaction, but they are also changing in time and space. The construction of the mediated social networks has an influence on the culture.

From now on we refer to our adopted model as "Networked Cyber Social Reality".

In the next section we will argue how we are going to use this model in connection to our methods.

³⁵ Gotved, 2006: 470

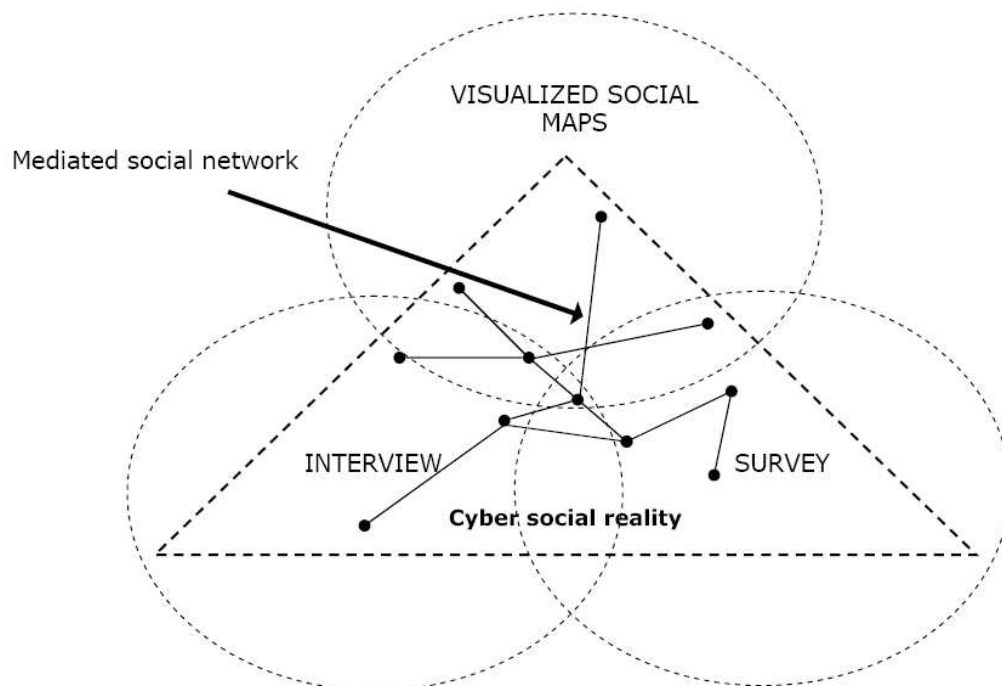
³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Gotved, 2006, 471

³⁸ Wellman, Harthornthwaite, 2002

3.2 Application of the model

Using this model in connection with our research question, “how are online communities mediating social networks,” the 'mediated social networks' can be considered as part of the 'cyber social reality'. This depends on if cyber social reality is seen on a macro level, as for example in Castells' concept of networked society.³⁹ Another way of approaching cyber social reality would be from a meso and micro perspective, as we do it in this project. Practically, it means that we are looking for patterns of use in the whole class [meso level] and also analyze the cyber social reality of two interviewees [micro level]. We are aware that we will not be able to analyze their entire cyber social reality, but approaching the triangle on its different corners (see Figure 2) with different methods will make it possible to find out in which ways online communities mediate the students social networks. We consider the model as a useful tool "for gaining a better understanding of the online part of modern life."⁴⁰ In this report, we do not go beyond the core of the whole 'matrix'⁴¹, which is also including the temporal and spatial conditions in which the cyber social reality is embedded. In her article, Gotved also reveals that the model might not be fully applicable for all kinds of studies.



³⁹ For further readings: Castells, 2000: The network society

⁴⁰ Gotved, 2006: 483

⁴¹ Gotved, 2006: 481

3.2.1 Method 1: The survey – structure and interaction

We start our investigation by asking a class of gymnasium students to fill out a short questionnaire about their use of online communities. The main aim of doing the questionnaire is to select suitable interview subjects, as the people we want to interview have to fulfill certain criteria, such as being registered members of at least one online social network.

The survey can only be connected to the interaction side in the model in a very broad sense: it witnesses that online social interaction *is* taking place in the class. It does not indicate that the individuals in the class necessarily have the interaction with each other, but that each student who reports using online social networks is interacting online. Similar observation can be made for the structures side – the survey witnesses the sheer existence of structures in the students' online networks, shown by their lists of contacts.

3.2.2 Method 2: The visualized social network –structure and culture

We choose to support the interview with the visual tool of hand-drawn social maps. We instructed the interviewees of how a social network could be drawn and let them draw for 10 minutes. After that we use these drawings for asking into the specific relations and media used for the communication. Their maps are the lenses through which we are able to look together with them in their cyber social reality.

3.2.3 Method 3: The interview –interaction and culture

According to Gotved, culture is produced through interaction. Through interaction, human relations acquire values, sentiments and meanings⁴², which are the main constituents of the culture part of the triangle. By doing the interviews, we want to find out how and to what extent our respondents value their relationships and what kind of norms and meanings they carry. As Gotved puts it, “the social interaction consists of humans relating to each other in all manners possible.”⁴³ It is within social

⁴² Gotved, 2006: 470

⁴³ Gotved, 2006: 471

interaction that meanings are negotiated, constructed and reconstructed. Interaction is related to culture in that agreed upon negotiations create a basis for meanings which can be constructed as the foundation for cultural patterns. This part of the triangle also includes different variations of mediated social interaction, meaning that the patterns of social interaction might change because of the mediating technology.

In order to find out what meaning our respondents attach to their social interactions we are conducting ethnographic inspired interviews. The breadth and encompassing features of ethnographic study suit the kind of information we wish to receive from our respondents.

Interviews are providing us with information such as amount of time spent online, general use patterns, and initiating processes, but also about the values and cultural meanings attached to their relationships.

3.2.4 Synthesis of the two methods (visualized social networks / interview)

In the following we will provide an explanation of what network ethnography is and how we intend to use it. Philip Howard's method of network ethnography is a useful tool in approaching our research question and analyzing our empirical data. Network ethnography builds on a specific area of investigation based on a social network analysis; it is a process that uses passive and/or active observation, immersion or in depth interviews conducted at specific sites.

The purpose of using Howard's method was to give our interviewees the opportunity to construct their social realities for us by defining them through interviews. These interviews provided us with a glimpse into what Gotved defines as cyber social reality and provides us with access to their community of practice.

To begin a network ethnography, a perceived community must first be identified.⁴⁴ Taking point of departure in our interest in teenagers and their use of online communities the concept of community becomes twofold. On one hand, we have the physical community which is constituted by the students meeting each day in the classroom where they interact both informally and academically.

44 Howard, 2002: 561

On the other hand there is the less tangible online community. These two communities overlap in reality and can also be called mediated social network.

The second step in network ethnography is to identify a sample. This is initially conducted through our survey. The advantage of preselecting our interviewees is that it “(not only) identifies some of the most significant informants in the network, but may also bring to light other members and roughly illustrate their relationship to the rest of the community.”⁴⁵ This element can be graphically represented in the lower right hand corner of Gotveds triangle of cyber social reality where social structure and social interaction meet.

The third step incorporated the use of in-depth interviews. These interviews allow our respondents to explain the role of different people in their network, how their social networks are held together, and what role online communities play in this. Once again, a connection can be made to Gotveds model where the meanings extracted from interviews can be understood as the angle where social interaction and culture meet to create a part of the cyber social reality.

3.3 Delimitations

In a concentration as broad as communication and a focus as encompassing as the internet, we take this time to limit our areas of concentration, therefore further refining our particular aims. In our research we decided not to concentrate on gender issues. We are aware that gender probably plays a role when it comes to internet usage of teenagers, but that is the angle of the problems we choose not to deal with. The facts that our survey did not include the question about the respondents’ gender and that we only have two interviewees, one girl and one boy, do not validate any conclusions about gender-specific patterns of use of online communities by Danish gymnasium students.

Even though we are taking a point of departure in these two individuals, we are not concentrating on the issues of individuality and the construction of identity through their internet use. We are also not going to discuss the historical development of online communities in depth; nor are we going to make a normative evaluation of their online community practices.

The issues of social class and digital divide are not taken into consideration in our research. We are aware that Charlottenlund, where Ordrup gymnasium is located, is a wealthy suburb; however our

45 Howard, 2002: 562

focus is not on social class but on the social networks. Our results are not representative for all Danish gymnasium students or all upper class teenagers.

We are not doing an ethnographic study, although that was the initial idea, primarily because of lack of time; however, we are taking an ethnographic approach in our interviews.

Another approach for explaining the Internet as a social network is Actor Network Theory (ANT), which assumes that actor-networks do not only consist of people but also non-humans (objects such as computers) and organizations. Its main defenders are Bruno Latour, Michael Callon and John Law. ANT has its merits for things like usability studies, where the interaction is actually happening between a human and the computer screen, but we do not consider ANT an appropriate approach for this project. It does not seem appropriate to make the computer a separate actor if we are studying interaction between people via online social networks.

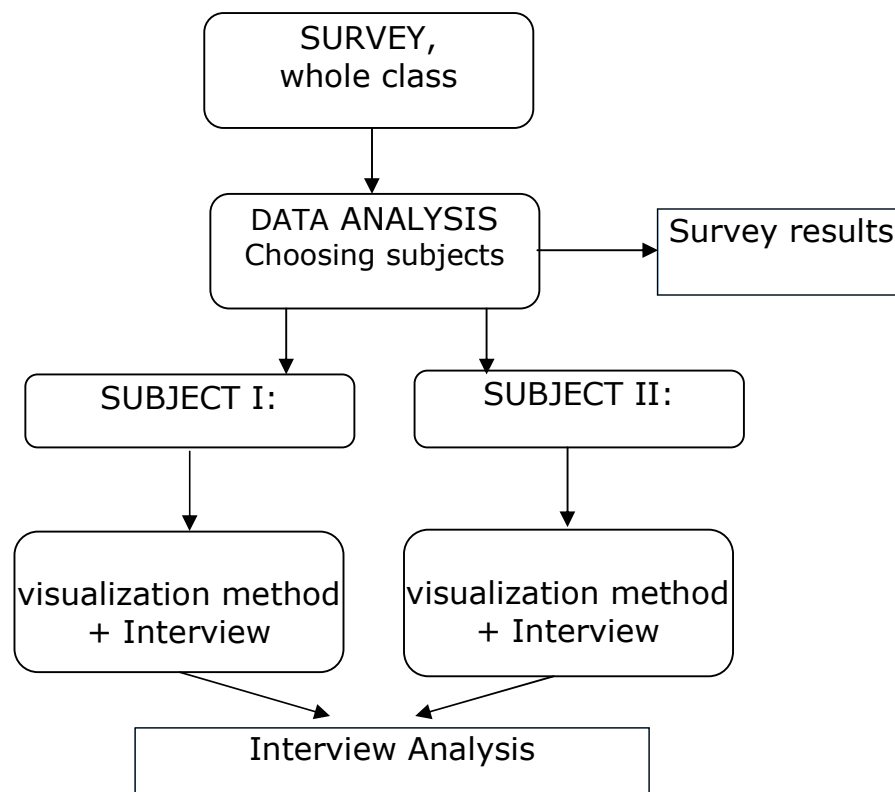
We are aware of that our research is not covering the whole structure side of the triangle. The gap between humans, who are the focus of the visualized social maps, and their use of technologies being the focus of the survey, could have been filled with theory of Human-Computer-Interaction. That analysis would go beyond the sociological scope of this project.

4 The Case Study

According to Silverman, case studies are often chosen, because they allow access. This was also true in our case. While dealing with qualitative methods, one always comes to face the problem of generalizability of the results. So, how to generalize our findings, if we only can conduct few interviews? Peräkylä argues for a rather radical linguistically inspired approach to generalizing case study results. He says that case study results are not generalizable as descriptions what other people do, but they can be generalizable as descriptions what they *can* do, under similar conditions⁴⁶.

The following figure shows the way we designed our case study. As previously mentioned, we had the intention of working with people younger than us. We chose Ordrup Gymnasium due to its international orientation, focus on English, and willingness of an English teacher to accommodate us. The teacher assured us that her pupils had a level of English that would allow us to conduct both the survey and the interview.

4.1 Case Study Design



⁴⁶ Silverman, D., 2005, p. 134

4.2 Survey

We started our investigation by asking a class of gymnasium students to fill out a short questionnaire about their use of online communities, in order to see how widespread the phenomenon was in their class. Although newspapers and other media have given a general impression that ‘everybody has a Myspace profile’ and ‘blogging has exploded on the net’, it is important not to take this kind of statements at face value. The main aim of doing the questionnaire was to identify to what extent our subjects participated in online communities and to select suitable interview subjects. The people we wanted to interview had to fulfill certain criteria, such as being registered members of at least one online social network

Our sample was from a 1st year English class from Ordrup Gymnasium in Charlottenlund, a northern suburb of Copenhagen and residential area for upper and upper middle class Danes. We are aware that the results cannot be generalized to all Danish gymnasium students or to any other age groups.

The questions asked in the survey were following:

- Year of birth

1. How often do you use Internet?
2. Do you use any online social networks or blogging services? (You do not have to be a registered member)
3. Please name the online communities where you have a profile and draw a circle around the approximate time you spend on each. Mark also what language(s) you communicate on each.
4. Who are on you friends list or contacts list in an online social network?
5. Your contacts in online social networks live primarily: ...

The idea was to create a logical flow of questions narrowing in from more general questions to questions that demanded more detailed answers. Generally, we succeeded in doing so, although the way question three was presented did create confusion among some of the survey participants⁴⁷.

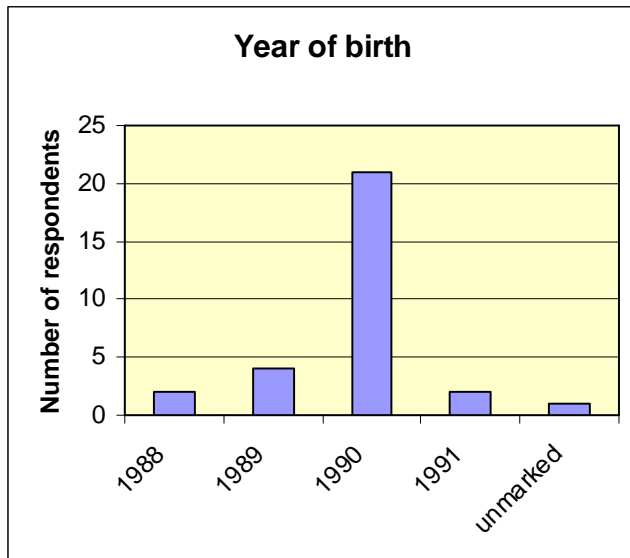
4.2.1 Survey data

We are going to present the answers for each question in a table form, in order to give a quicker and more attractive overview for the readers.

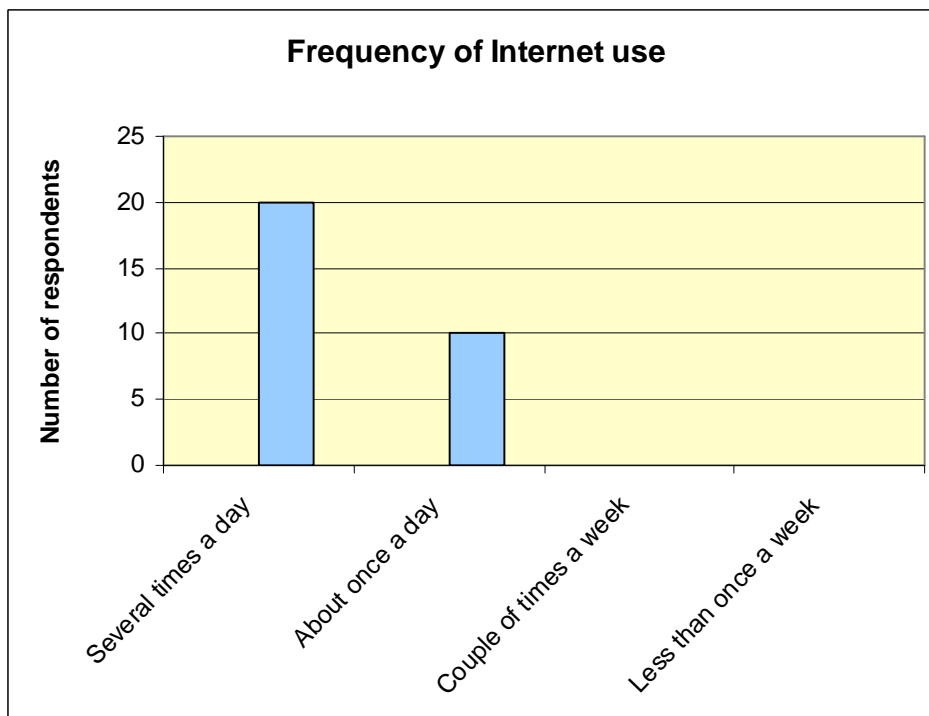
The first question of the survey was not numbered and only asked the respondent to write his/her year of birth. As it shows from the table below, majority of the students were born in 1990, so at the

⁴⁷ The questionnaire is in the appendix.

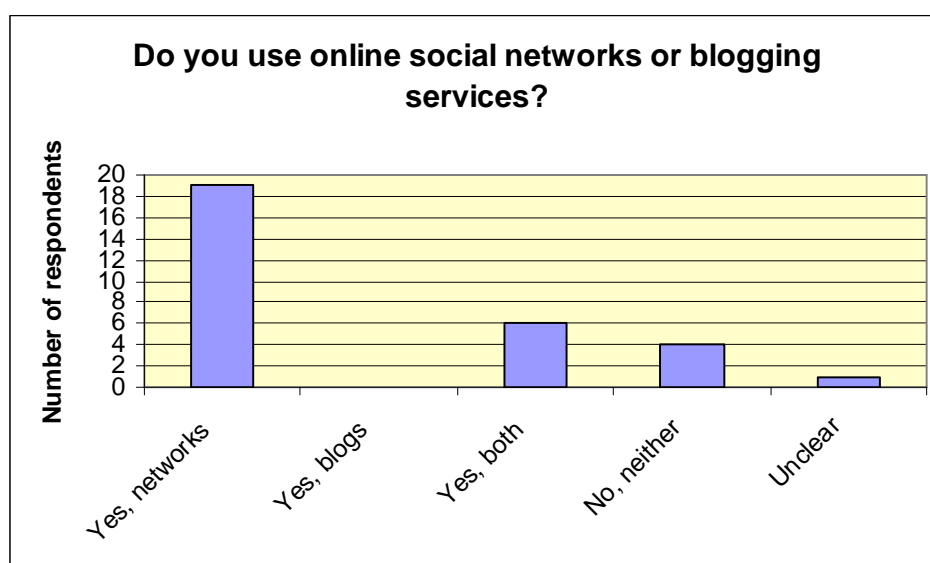
time of the survey they were 15-16 years old. One respondent had left the question answer space blank and is therefore noted in the table as 'unmarked'.



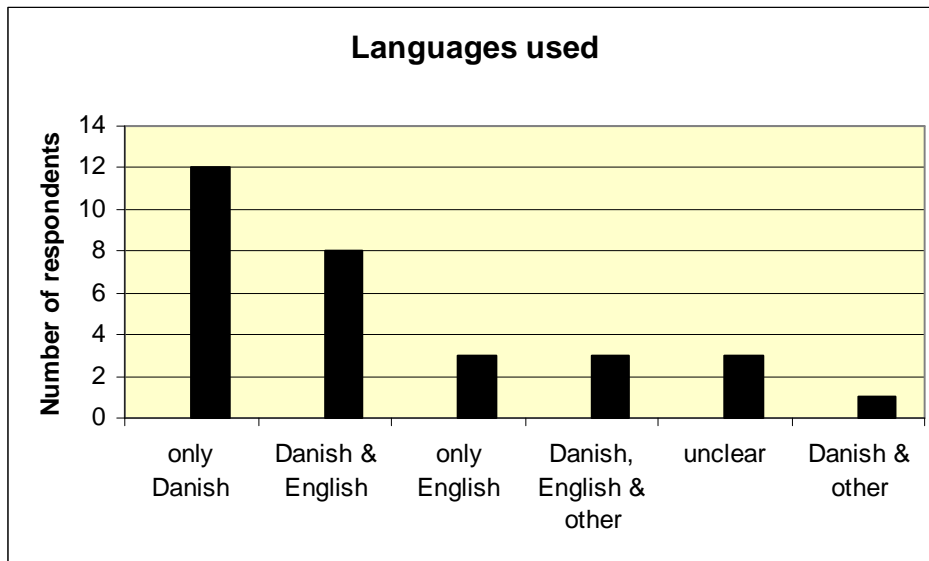
The first numbered question of the survey inquired into the respondents' patterns of internet use, asking how often the students use internet. As it can be seen from the table, only two out of four answer options were used – none of the students reported using internet less than once a day; on the contrary, 2/3 of the respondents claimed to use Internet several times a day.



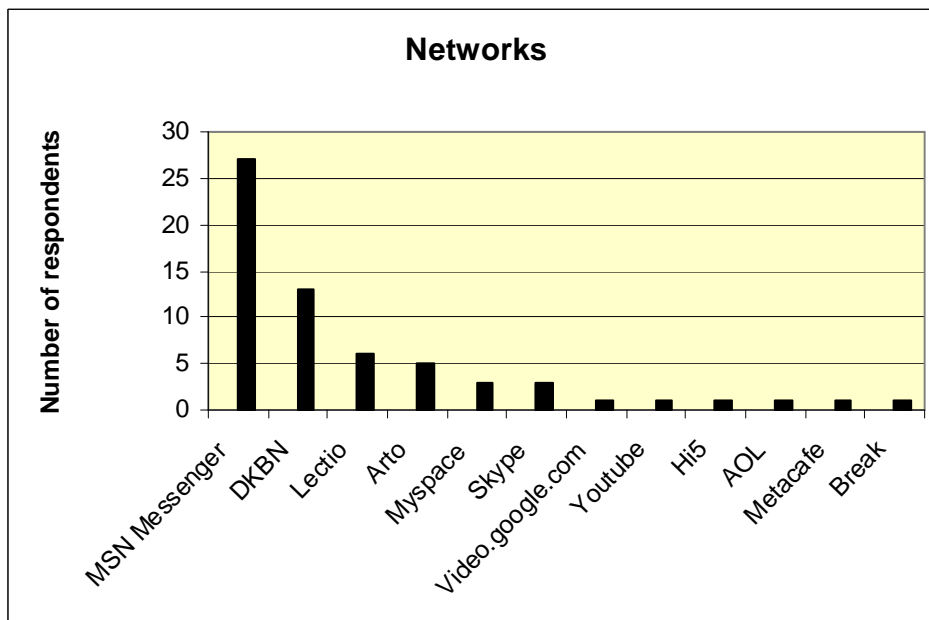
The second question asked whether the students use online social networks or blogging services. Most students stated that they use online social networks, none of the students used only blogging services. One respondent had ticked ‘Yes, I blog’ first and then changed his/her mind afterwards, ticking, ‘Yes, I do both’ and circling his/her answer. We considered it safer to mark this particular answer as ‘unclear’ in the table.



Question three provided multiple answering options and its flaws are discussed in the chapter ‘Survey shortcomings’. We chose to present the two sets of data that proved to be the best extractable from the answers – the particular networks the students use and the languages they use on the online networks they participate in. As far as languages are concerned, it was evident that a majority of students used Danish exclusively when communicating on online networks. However, there were also students that claimed to use both Danish and English and a small number of students who solely used English or used a third language besides Danish and English. These results were unexpected and somewhat strengthen our doubts concerning the representativeness of the survey sample. The three survey subjects whose answers were marked ‘unclear’ in the table, had made several mistakes in filling out the answer space, so we considered that adding their answers to any clearly defined columns in the table, would be more our interpretation than their answer.

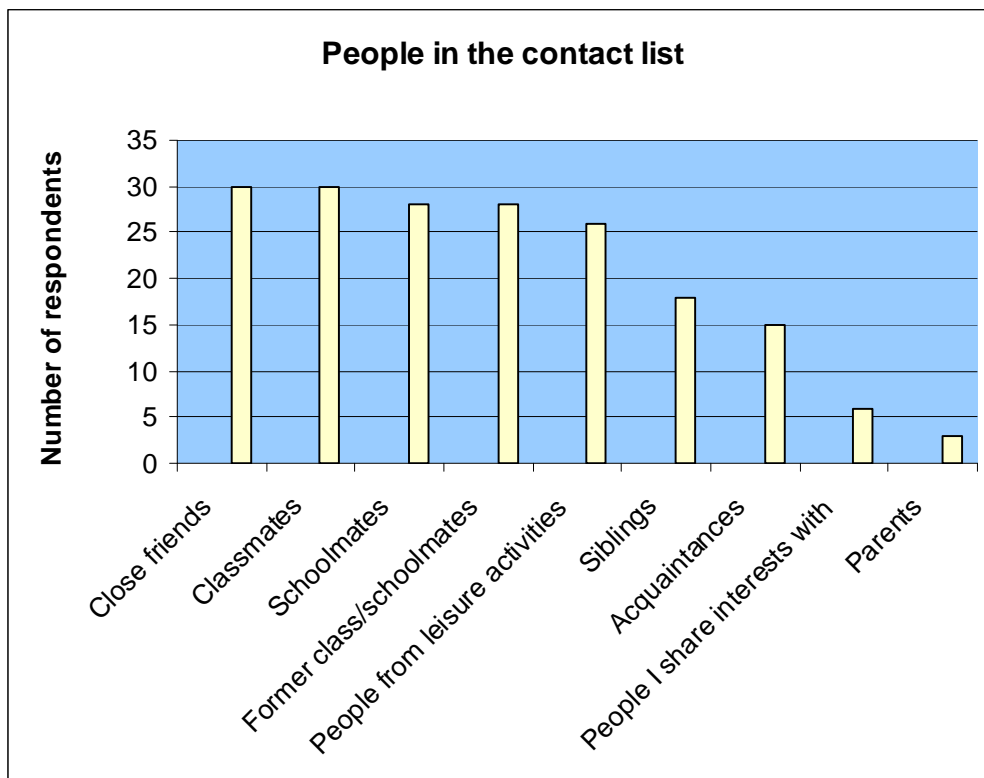


The second table (Networks) lists the networks that the students stated they were using. Most of them wrote MSN Messenger as their first choice in the answer space. We discussed whether it could be considered an online social network on the same basis as e.g. Myspace. Several of our survey subjects defined did define MSN as an online social network. After closer examination we concluded that it did meet the criteria to be considered an online social network.



Question four asked the survey subjects to specify the people in their contact lists on different online networks. The inquiry did not separate different networks, which provided a general picture of the respondents' contacts. All students listed their close friends and classmates to be on their contact

list, whereas only three respondents mentioned that their parents are listed. We assume that it might be that their parents do not live in Denmark at the moment, as all of them used other languages as well as Danish in their online networks. One of them wrote on the survey that his parents were living abroad and another one that he had lived abroad most of his life. Siblings were mentioned more seldom than we expected, but statements from one of our interview subjects revealed that all his siblings had moved out of their parents home and led their own lives in a different part of Denmark. Brothers and sisters, as well as parents (referring to the previous example) do appear on the respondents' contact lists, when they are not physically present in their everyday life.



Question five was aimed at specifying where the people the students had listed in their contact list live. However, in the course of the project we decided not to focus on spatial matters and therefore the results from this question will not be analyzed. For a discussion about the way, the question was presented and whether that could have led to misleading answers, see the chapter 'Reflections about the survey'.

The last question was also unnumbered, only asking the respondents to write their e-mail address and mobile number if they did not mind to be interviewed and tick the box if they did not wish to be interviewed. We found it interesting that people who had ticked the box, stating they did not want to be interviewed, still provided us with their e-mail and mobile number. Seven respondents had neither ticked the box nor provided the contact information.

4.2.2 Reflections about the survey

Our survey was compiled with the of selecting the interview subjects, so the survey design got less attention than it perhaps deserved. In the light of our findings that were interesting, it shows that some questions could have been more clearly stated, so that we could have extracted more usable data from them.

In the following we reflect on some questions that created most confusion amongst the respondents. In question no. 2 – *‘Do you use any online social networks or blogging services?’* The term ‘blog’ seemed to create uncertainty among the students. One possible reason could be that they are not yet in the age group, where blogging is most popular, The other reason could be that the question stated: *‘You do not have to be a registered member’* and the possible answer stated: *‘Yes, I blog’*. In order to blog, meaning to post messages on one’s own blog site, one has to be registered on a particular site, and *‘Yes, I blog’* refers to active posting of writings. In retrospect, the answer could have been, *‘Yes, I blog and/or read other people’s blogs’* or three different answer options could have been provided: *‘Yes, I blog’*, *‘Yes, I read other people’s blogs’* and *‘Yes, I blog and read others’ blogs’*.

Question three seems to have posed problems for the respondents and also posed problems for us in analyzing the results, due to its particular structure. The question read as follows: *‘Please name the online networks where you have a profile and draw a circle around the approximate amount of time you spend on each. Mark also what language(s) you communicate in on each.’* Technically, the question itself contains three separate questions in one: *‘On which networks do you have a profile?’*, *‘How much time do you spend on each network?’* and *‘Which language do you use on each network?’*. The way the question was presented on the survey paper it actually posed four separate questions: *‘Which network do you use?’*, *‘How often do you use it?’*, *‘How much time do you usually spend on it when you log on?’* and *‘Which language do you use on it?’* The inconsistency between the actual question and the presentation of the question probably created confusion in the respondents, as no other question in the survey had so many mistakes in the answers. Mistakes in

this case are considered to be leaving part of question unanswered and writing answers in the wrong places. A particular failure in this question was leaving the example on a different page than the rest of the question and filling it out with a pencil, because several students thought it to be an answer space and erased our example in order to write their own answer in it.

Question four, which listed the possible contacts on the students' contact lists on online social networks had categories that overlapped each other, such as '*close friends*', '*classmates*', '*schoolmates*', '*former classmates/schoolmates*', '*people I know from leisure activities*' and '*people I share interests with*'. One's close friends can be one's classmates and also per definition people one shares interests with. Classmates are also, per definition, schoolmates. Yet, the respondents seem to have understood the underlying categorisation, meaning that classmates are not the close friends, schoolmates are not classmates, people one knows from leisure activities are not schoolmates. We meant the category, '*people one shares interests with*' to signify online contacts⁴⁸, but have to admit that the formulation turned out to be both an all-signifier and non-signifier, meaning that it can technically cover all the former categories and at the same time not signify any connection with Internet. It can be one reason why we did not get particularly many answers noting '*people I share interests with*', the other might be that the respondents simply did not have people in their lists who they bond with purely on basis of interest.

In question 5 ('Your contacts in online social networks live primarily:'), the same problem of overlap occurred, as all the answer options were presented according to the *matrjoshka*-principle⁴⁹, where the following answer always included the previous, with the exception of 'other'. Again, most students seemed to intuitively grasp the logic of the answers, but some only ticked e.g. 'in Denmark', leaving us guessing if they actually considered the answer to be all-inclusive or they actually do not have any contacts living in the neighborhood or Great Copenhagen area.

4.2.3 Most important survey findings

- all students used internet at least once a day
- most respondents reported using online social networks
- the most popular network was MSN Messenger, followed by DKBN and Lectio
- the most used language was Danish, English was reasonably common

⁴⁸ People whom one has met online and first later or never in person

⁴⁹ Referring to the Russian dolls, where a bigger doll hides a smaller one and the smaller one again a smaller one and so on.

- all students had close friends and classmates in their contact list

4.3 Ethnographic inspired Interviews

Ethnographic studies can last anywhere from two weeks to many years. We understand that the limited time of a semester will not result in as broad of insight into the people's lives and that tracking them over time would be beneficial; however, an ethnographic inspired interview may provide a glimpse into how their social networks are mediated by their participation in online communities. The broad and encompassing features of ethnographic inspired interviews suit the kind of information we wish to extract from our respondents.

Ethnographic interview in general shares many features with an ordinary friendly conversation. The conversation takes place between an ethnographer (an interviewer) and an informant (interviewee). It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations between the two. The three most important elements in an ethnographic interview are

4.3.1 Explicit purpose

The ethnographer should have a clear idea about the purpose of the conversation. It is important that the ethnographer explains this to the informant, as he/she should also know where the conversation is supposed to go. This is the difference between the ordinary, friendly conversation and the ethnographic interview. The ethnographer should, without being authoritarian, gradually take control of the conversation, direct it and lead in order to get the relevant information. In a friendly conversation, this task would be equally divided between the two parties involved in the conversation.

We are interested in the relationship between forming of social networks, frequency of use, personal meaning, and interaction between online and offline communication.

4.3.2 Ethnographic explanations

The ethnographic interview can be a learning process for the informant as well. It is important therefore to repeatedly offer explanations to the informant about the process of ethnographic interview. The informant must understand that the ethnographer is explicitly interested in their

personal experiences and therefore the whole purpose of doing the ethnographic research must be explained to the informant in terms he/she can easily understand. Since we, as ethnographers, are interested in informant's knowledge and experience in the uses of online communication, we shall therefore explain to them that we want to know about everything they do when they use the online community services. We shall therefore tell them that we are interested in hearing what that particular online community has to offer, how does one become a member, what does it mean to be a member, how does one communicate with the other members.

4.3.3 Ethnographic questions

There are many different kinds of ethnographic questions; however Spradley states that the three most important ones are descriptive, structural and contrast questions.⁵⁰ We found the descriptive questions to be of most use for our aim. These types of questions are intended to encourage the informant to talk about a particular cultural scene. The typical descriptive questions are: 'Could you describe your day?' or 'could you describe a typical evening on your work?' Sometimes a single descriptive question can keep the informant talking for an hour or so. **Grand tour questions** ask the informant to give a detailed description of what occurs in one instance of logging on to the specified online community.

Whether the ethnographer uses space, time, events, people, activities or objects, the end result of grand tour questions should be a verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene.

Since we are interested in social networks of our informants, online and offline, we shall therefore ask them to visually draw them; placing themselves in the centre, and connected persons as they have meaningful relationships with. After the drawing is conducted, we will ask them to take us on **grand tour** of their relationships, explaining to us who the single person is and most importantly how does he/she usually communicates with them.

⁵⁰ Spradley, James. *The Ethnographic Interview*

4.3.4 Interview settings

In the following the interview setting choice of subjects, time and location, structure, language and course of the interviews are introduced.

4.3.4.1 The choice of interview subjects

After careful consideration of the survey results, we chose our interview subjects because of their seemingly active internet use and their enthusiastic responses: for our purposes, we need people who will speak reflectively. After exchanging SMS with these two, N and K, we agreed to meet in the city center of Copenhagen mid-afternoon, two days apart from each other. We decided that two group members would attend each interview so as not to be too intimidating, yet still have one person to guide the interview and another to take notes and return the conversation to relevancy if it were to stray from the main point. Once again, we intentionally designed these interviews to be guided, yet informal friendly conversation to let the informants speak about their experiences in their own terms. Another criteria for the informants was a good command of English, yet both times there was a group member fluent in Danish to translate particular words and phrases. To provide consistency in the two interviews, one group member attended both.

It must also be mentioned that participation in the interviews was voluntary. All survey participants were given the choice to mark on the survey if they did not wish to be interviewed, and some students also used that option.

4.3.4.2 Time and location of the interviews

The chosen interview subjects were also given the possibility to choose the interview location, as we wanted them to feel as comfortable as possible. However, we reasoned that as the interview subjects did not participate in the survey because of personal interest, but as a favour to us, it would be unreasonable to leave the choice of the location completely up to them. That would in essence mean having the students do our work, which would be unacceptable. Thus, when we contacted the interviewees by e-mail, we offered them three possible options for an interview location – their school, a café of their choice or their home. Thereby we left the subjects freedom to choose the

option most comfortable and acceptable for them and at the same time freed them from the task of deciding the interview location completely by themselves.

K met us at the Illum Cafe, where the three of us sat around a quiet table in the corner. We began the interview by explaining our project aim and more specifically, our interview aims: simply to hear her experience in terms of a map she would draw of her social network. We retrieved beverages while she drew and when we returned, switched on the tape recorder and began asking her about the different nodes on her map, and then about the means of communication between her and these significant others. A comfortable setting made it easy to relax and just chat.

N met us on a Saturday afternoon and it was difficult to find an uncrowded cafe. We went to Baresso coffee and sat in a cramped corner with people nearby and lots of surrounding activity. It made the interview more difficult to begin but did not seem to hinder the progression throughout.

Interviews took place a few days after the survey, Thursday 16th and Saturday 18th November, 2006.

4.3.4.3 The structure of the interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that the interviewer was equipped with an interview guide stating the themes and examples of possible questions, but he or she did not have to follow the guide *verbatim*. That allowed certain flexibility in the interview, allowing us to follow interesting leads presented in the answers of interviewees. The interviews were not supposed to be compared, but to serve as separate case studies to illustrate the user motivations and use patterns of two Danish gymnasium students. The gymnasium, where the survey was conducted, was on the other hand not an ‘average’ or ‘representative’ of Danish gymnasiums in general, being situated in an upper-class living area and the particular class having no students with non-Western background.

4.3.4.4 The interview language

The language of the interviews turned out to be a matter of serious debate. Our research subjects were Danish and we were not – so in which language should the interviews be conducted? We weighed the pros and cons of both options and decided to conduct the interviews in English. We are aware that this decision might have compromised the data of our interviews, with interview subjects not being able to express their opinions and experiences in their mother tongue. Yet the benefits of conducting the interviews in English seemed strongly to outweigh the shortcomings. Our group

being international, the closest we have to a native Danish speaker is a half-Danish, half-American member, one member cannot speak Danish at all and the rest speak it, but as a third language. Asking the interviewees to speak in Danish would tilt the power balance of the interview to their favour, leaving the interviewer into a linguistically weaker position. That might mean that the interviewee might not understand the particular question posed to him or her in Danish due to our faulty expression or peculiar accent. The transcription would pose another challenge, with a great chance of making mistakes in writing down the data or misunderstanding particular expressions like student slang or idioms. The interviewer might also become a linguistic hostage in the interview situation, if e.g. asked to specify a question and finding him- or herself not being able to express the essence of the question clearly enough. Moreover, one of our chosen interview subjects has spent considerable periods of time in Great Britain, and the other seems to be quite confident in English as well. Conducting the surveys in English has already delivered an underlying expectation for the interviews being in English as well, and giving the students an opportunity to decline the interview has possibly sorted out the students who would not feel linguistically adequate to answer to interview questions in English. Last, but not the least, carrying out the interviews in Danish would have completely handicapped our group member who cannot speak Danish, allowing her not to participate in doing, transcribing or analyzing the interviews and generally relying only on our translations of the text. As the report is to be written in English, translating the excerpts from Danish to English would also be problematic, as the translation will more likely than not be flawed and thus change the thoughts and experiences of the interviewee.

4.3.4.5 Course of the interviews

After careful consideration of the survey results, we chose our interview subjects because of their seemingly active internet use and their enthusiastic responses: for our purposes, we need people who will speak reflectively. After exchanging emails and SMS with these two, N and K, we agreed to meet in the city center of Copenhagen mid-afternoon, two days apart from each other. We decided that two group members would attend each interview so as not to be too intimidating, yet still have one person to guide the interview and another to take notes and return the conversation to relevancy if it were to stray from the main point. Once again, we intentionally designed these interviews to be guided, yet informal friendly conversation to let the informants speak about their experiences in their own terms. Another criteria for the informants was a good command of English, yet both times there was a group member fluent in Danish to translate particular words and phrases. To provide

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4.4 Interview analysis

In order to get a deeper insight in the cyber social reality of our respondents we decided to conduct interviews with two students from the class we carried out the survey.⁵¹ In this chapter we are going to analyze the interview data connecting it with Stine Gotved's model and the social network approach. In order to do that we shall first concentrate on extracting the respondents' statements, concerning values and cultural norms of their relationships. To put it very simple, we shall find out more about the unwritten rules and ways of communication on the online communities they are involved in. The way we approach the interviewees cyber social reality is by looking for their constructed mediated social networks. During the interview they give meaning to their relationships consisting of weak and strong ties and forming their social network. The formation of the relationships happens through interaction, which can be characterized by exchange of resources as for example specific messages or information.

Kvale suggests that there are five main forms of interview analysis: condensation, categorization, narrative, interpretation and ad hoc method⁵². All these methods can be used as a separate tool for interview analysis, yet the most common way according to Kvale, is the ad hoc method that allows free combination of other methods. Ad hoc analysis is also the most suitable for this project, because it gives us most flexibility while processing our data. Our particular ad hoc method combines all the previously named forms of analysis. Categorization method is going to be implied throughout the

⁵¹ For more insight into interview settings see the chapter 'Interview settings', p. 33

⁵² Kvale, Steinar, 1996: 189

whole chapter to give structure to the analysis, so each subchapter denotes one category. We shall also filter more compact meanings out of longer sequences of interview data, as we are going to use the condensation method. Interpretation of the statements will follow each extract of the interviews, thereby clarifying the meaning(s) of the particular statement in context.

4.4.1 The Interviewees

K is a 16-year-old girl, who goes to first year at Ordrup Gymnasium. We experienced her to be quite a talkative and open person who obviously has a very wide social network. At the same time the Internet and online communities, especially MSN messenger, seems to be playing a rather important role in her social interaction.

N is a 17-year-old boy, who goes to the same class and school as **K**. He also has a wide social network but personality wise he came off as a shy and less talkative person. He is also a bit more sceptical towards online communities. Same as **K**, MSN messenger is important for his social interaction. Both of them are also members of other online communities, but in **N**'s case it's a matter of a closed, private community, while **K** is a member of one of the most popular online communities in Denmark (DKBN, Denmark by Night) and ex-member of another (Arto).

4.4.2 Media use

When we started this project, we had an assumption that Myspace would prove to be the most popular online community amongst the teenagers. However, it is the local online communities, like DKBN and Arto that showed out to be much trendier with this age group.

I: So is this sort of similar as Myspace, do you know Myspace?

K: Yeah, I've heard about it. But DKBN I think it's really popular at my age.⁵³

I: Yeah. Why do you think it's so... there's such a hype about it, what is so cool about it. Why is everybody like: oh you have a profile... ?

N: Everyone likes it and it's uh, 'moden'

[...]

N: Yes, fashion... trendy, yes... and everyone have it and everyone wants to be a part of the trend so they can talk about it in school.

4.4.2.1 DKBN - Denmark By Night

K is a registered member of DKBN (Denmark By Night), while N is a member of a private online community built by a former classmate and connecting the entire class. Both of our interviewees consider DKBN to be one of the most popular online communities for their age group. Even though N is not currently a member of DKBN, he is not denying the possibility of becoming one. His reason for avoiding it at the moment, despite the trend, is that it would be too time-consuming, considering his already packed schedule. K uses the community for getting information about parties and looking for pictures. She regards DKBN as a flirt and ‘nothing private’, a place where one is supposed to ‘sell oneself’ and as such more superficial. N has a similar viewpoint, as he states that the site is overrated. The sheer popularity of the site is not something that would motivate him to sign up.

K’s view on Arto is quite different, though. Although she used to be a member herself, she now considers it to be outside her age group. She generally talks about Arto in quite a negative manner, saying that ‘it’s for stupid girls’ and that the pictures have become too revealing. She also reflected on the experience that she had had, while being a member, as she had found a boyfriend there. They wrote to each other for a few months then moved the conversation to MSN and about month after met in person. When they got together, K deleted her Arto profile, but when the couple broke up after nine months, she made a new one ‘to have him look at my site and see that I was over him’. Soon after she also deleted that profile, commenting that it was a difficult thing to do as she was almost addicted to it. In general she does not consider Arto community to be cool or relevant for her age group. This is a view also shared by her friend, a schoolmate that accompanied K to the interview, as she also used to be a member of Arto.

I: ...But you... how do you talk to this people still or do you?

K: It’s not often but when I do it’s on sms or msn. It’s never on dkbn. I think dkbn is more 'overfladisk'.

[...]

K: It's it's like, you can say DKBN is like a flirt

I: A flirt?

K: A flirt. You flirt with new girlfriends and you flirt with new boys, you flirt with everyone. It's like bling bling all the time.

N: Overvurderet, det er svært at sige... everyone has it and... Ahhhh. Denmark by night is so nice and ahhhh...

I: You just don't want to follow the trend?

N: No, no, exactly...

I: How did you find this site [Arto], why did you sign up for it?

K: Ohh, hmm. I can't remember.

I: Just to meet people or?

K: I think it was because my friend had that site and I just thought, okay, then.

I: I'll try it.

K: Yeah, I'll try it... and then I thought it was fun.

Based on this subchapter we can conclude that local online networks are much more popular among gymnasium students in Denmark than international services such as Myspace. At least one of the reasons for this seems to be that local online networks also allow a real possibility for face-to-face meeting if that is desired, whereas that option is quite marginal for international networks. Both interviewees expressed awareness for the downsides of communicating through online social networks. The online communities are obviously used for different purposes: some mostly for acquiring information (DKBN) and possibly also establishing oneself as 'cool', others are used for getting into contact with new people (Arto) and some again as a simple communication tool for keeping in touch with old friends (N's private online community). For interviewee K, changing the online community she was a part of, seems to have been similar to a rite of passage into a more 'grown-up' world. As well as within people's other social networks, it is possible to have both weak and strong ties to people within online communities.

4.4.2.2 MSN Messenger

The by far most popular online network amongst the survey subjects was MSN Messenger (Microsoft Network messenger). This is a private chat program that allows the person using it to list his or her contacts and chat with them by clicking on the respective user name (if the person is online). The program allows one to choose among different status settings, e.g. one can choose between 'Online', 'Busy', 'Away', 'Be right back', 'At lunch', 'On the phone' or even 'Show as offline'. It is available in different languages and also allows avatars and provides a reasonable selection of emotions. Its major difference from any online chat site is the amount of control that the user can exercise – one chooses the contacts, which appear in one's list and one also chooses the program setting and thus determines whether one wishes to be available for chatting.

According to our two interviewees, MSN is an online community that to a great extent has replaced the telephone. Both of them confirmed that they see MSN as a tool they are using in order to be in touch with people they know, which also is something they use telephones and text messaging for. Since MSN is also used by people outside Denmark, it helps them to be in contact with people they met years ago while vacationing in different countries. In case that these people did not have MSN, our interviewees were very doubtful if they would still be in touch with them, simply because they consider MSN to be very convenient and others ways of communicating (writing letters, e.g.) too complicated and time consuming. MSN provides a way of instant communication, without doing much besides turning their computer on.

MSN also seems to be very convenient when it comes to keeping in touch with old class mates and friends one does not see so often anymore. K confirmed that she has around 400 people on her MSN list, and the list contains a great number of people from her previous classes. Had there not been for MSN, she doubts that she would still be in contact with these people, since she would hardly make an effort of calling them and catching up that way. She sees MSN as a much better way of doing that: she can see on her list when they are online and available for conversation, so she can be sure that she is not bothering them or interrupting in doing something. In this sense, MSN is considered to be even more convenient than telephone. N also considers MSN to be a very good way of communicating with his friends. He confirmed that he was very sceptical towards it in the beginning, but after he tried it he liked it very much and decided to continue using it. Unlike other online communities, he sees MSN as a less superficial way of communicating, as it allows one to carry all kinds of conversations with people one already knows.

K: Yeah, and when you're tired MSN is nice. Because you don't have to be on all the time. You can sit like this and write.

[...]

I: Do you think sometimes that MSN almost replaced telephone? That if you didn't have MSN, would you call these people?

K: No, not at all. It replaces.

I:... but since you've been on it, do you think it's made any of your relationships more shallow or more... not personal...

N: Well Messenger it's not like Denmark By Night... it's not .. you can communicate with people and that's it... there is no... well you have display picture of yourself, but there is no pictures ...and it's just a site to communicate with and I think it's not unpersonal. You have your friends that you know very well and it's just like making a phone call or writing an sms.

K: [...] And MSN is more like... it's more deep and it's more comfortable and it's more like, ohhh, how are you, are you alright, do you want me to call, and stuff like that... and you can write problems with your friends at msn, because on DKBN, you can see it or people can see it what they are on the site. MSN is more deep.

I: Personal?

K: Yeah.

By choosing one's own contacts, one also escapes the discomfort of unwanted contacts which are otherwise considered to be the bad part of being a member of online social networks.

K: [...] and of course, on DKBN and Arto, there are also many bad guys

[...]

K: Oh, many disgusting guys you know, that writes to you, oh, you're lovely, you're just sexy, blah, blah. That's not comfortable, that's just .. urgh.

I: Where is that, on Arto you said?

K: and DKBN, but you just have to ignore it because its everywhere, just see on television now there are so many um.. there are so many fools about it right now.

The interviews create an impression that being added to one's MSN Messenger contact list is like crossing the threshold into another person's closer circle – this point emerges especially clearly from the story K told us about meeting her ex-boyfriend online. K and her ex-boyfriend wrote to each other for a few months on Arto and then “one day he got my msn and I saw him on webcam and I thought oh my god, he looks lovely...”. In this case the relationship proceeded as follows:

Arto → MSN → telephone call → sms → face-to-face meeting.

This is a great example of a weak tie growing stronger. The strengthening of the tie between K and her ex-boyfriend also brought along a change of their medium of communication, as can be seen above. That can perhaps be explained by them changing the meaning they gave to their relationship. As K explained, she did not take the relationships seriously in the beginning, regarding it as another weak tie, but then after moving their communication to MSN, the meaning of their interaction obviously changed as the tie grew stronger.

Both interview persons noted some downsides of communicating on MSN Messenger, such as a high chance of misunderstanding the other person and that the communication could be somewhat impersonal, especially if serious issues are discussed.

K: No, if you don't have MSN or Arto you do, you don't misforstå

[...]

K: misunderstand each other, on MSN you misunderstand each other so fast. It's it's like when we wrote hi... hi then some people think if you don't write 'hi sweetie' or something they just think 'oh my god, what's happening, now she angry'. It's you get misunderstood, .. understand? Understood?

[...]

K: each other really fast, and that's the negative thing about MSN and Arto. [...]

As previously noted, MSN is considered to be a very convenient way of communicating with one's friends and the interviewees were greatly in favor of MSN and the way of communication it allows. Yet at the same time they appeared to be quite well aware of a set of unwritten rules on how to behave there. Even though Messenger allows them to have a kind of 'extended' relationship with their friends, some things are simply not to be discussed over it. N, as previously stated, considers MSN to be a tool for conveying deeper and more meaningful way of communication, but at the same time he feels that some things and issues are far too personal to be discussed that way. The value of the subject and the message one wants to send, might very easily be diminished if one does it over MSN, than if it was done face to face. He admitted that so far he did not have any negative or strange experiences on MSN, but considered several topics and issues that would be inconvenient to discuss over MSN:

N: Yes, maybe if... well, I didn't have an experience with that but I can imagine maybe if someone is having a relationship and one of that parts, ah:... doesn't want to go on, then they say it in messenger, that's very unpersonal and I think that's not nice, ah... you hide behind the screen and you not take responsible for your actions.

Also, when it comes to fighting or having an argument MSN is certainly not considered to be a place to do it. The fact that one is behind the screen plays a big role, since one unquestionably dares more as 'he can't be touched' and in that sense one dares to say more and perhaps insult the other person more then if they were face to face. There is no danger for instant consequences for one's words and therefore, MSN is not deemed a convenient communication tool for this kind of interaction.

N: Also, if you have a fight with another guy, for example, then you dare more...

I: ...online then offline...

N: Yes if you are behind a screen and can't be touched ,maybe if you are face to face you could get beat up or stuff like that.

I: But do you think that you can say more and be more honest, because you're not sitting with him like this? [face-to-face]

K: Of course you are more .. more open and you .. du tør mere

I: You say, you know... you dare more

K: You're not afraid to say something.. but still, I know still that it can be so awful and ...

There are other types of behavior that are considered to be unusual and not normal on MSN community. The fact that the interaction on MSN is conveyed by chatting, meaning that persons engaged in conversation cannot see or hear each other opens up the possibility of counterfeiting ones identity. This is certainly not something that is appreciated in MSN community.

K: [...]so everytime he's with Christian online, and he sees I'm online he writes to me: 'hello K, and then he pretends like it's Christian but then it's himself.

I: Oh..

K: Yeah, he's a little bit weird...

In general, MSN is used for maintaining relationships with friends one might not see so often, reinforcing the relationships with people one sees face-to-face on a daily basis (like classmates) and people one has met e.g. abroad or on vacation. It is considered a convenient tool by the teenagers as it is inexpensive, instant and easy to use, while it also allows for a more flexible use pattern than e.g. a telephone. However, it was not regarded as an appropriate tool for conducting serious conversations or having conflicts on. Playing with one's identity, which is always a possibility on the Internet was not looked kindly upon either.

4.4.3 Family relations

Both of our respondents still live at home with parents. N has three grown up sisters who have already moved out from home, while K is an only child. The primary medium for communication with their parents seems to be text messaging (SMS), especially in the case of K. and her parents, who travel a lot. Neither of them uses MSN to communicate to their parents, but N does use MSN to communicate with his sisters, who live across Denmark, and cousins.

I: What about family? Do you talk to anyone of your family members?

K: On the internet?

I: Yes.

K: No

I: Never?

K: Never. Only sms. But that's not the internet.

N: yes. That's my family with my .. of course, my mom, my dad and my sisters but also my cousins and uncles and aunts. Erm, some of them I communicate with on MSN messenger, but not all of them.

I: What's, your aunts and cousins and ty-ty-ty? Your aunts and your cousins you connect with on messenger?

N: em, no, not my aunts but my cousins.

I: yeah?

N: I think my aunts is too old for that.

[...]

N: well, erm my three sisters have all moved away from home, so I'm the last one ..

I: oh

I: oh

N: .. living at home, but i communicate with them on messenger too.

I: [...]and your family? Just face to face?

K: Yeah. my mom, I sms with her a lot... everyday .

[...]

I: When you are in school?

K: Yeah, when I'm in school, when.. she smses me, she writes to me when I'm asleep 'cos she travels a lot and I sms with my dad too 'cos he travels a lot too and when they are outside the country, they write to me goodnight my dear, or hello my dear, what are you doing. and if my mam is bored, she writes to me. That's nice 'cos now we have much more close relationship. And when I'm at parties or to parties we chat or we sms because she wants to know where I am, and where I'm going to sleep.

What we can conclude, on the basis of the statements of our interviewees, is that one can be considered 'too old' for using MSN messenger, as N's aunts. MSN Messenger does not seem to be used for interaction inside the family, at least when the family is sharing a living space. However, brothers and sisters are likely to move into the MSN contact lists when they move out of the parental home. The surveys indicate that it might be a similar case with parents – if they are abroad on a more permanent basis, the parent-child communication seems to be often conducted via MSN Messenger.

Relating this to the model of networked cyber social reality, the family ties between the relatives are strong. The interviewees' insight into their families' social network and revealed that they are occasionally mediated by an online community (MSN) but also another medium plays a significant role, namely the mobile phone and SMS services.

4.4.4 Friendship relations

N is using a private online community site that he shares with his former class mates from boarding school. He explains how he uses this community:

I: and then what happens, do you check your messages, or update your pictures or what would you do?

N: I would check... we are having a Christmas lunch here uhh:: next weekend, on the 25th of november, and then I can see news about it, how, when it is, and how i can come there by bus and stuff like that. or i can go and check if there are new pictures from, well, every time we have a party together, the pictures from the party is..is.. put on the Internet. or i can check, uhh,, there is a calendar too... is that a right word, 'calendar'?

[...]

I: and do you think it would be harder to keep in contact with these people without this website?

N: yes I do, it's very nice. Helps to keep in touch, it's very good, there is also news if someone heard something, heard some stories from the new pupils of the boarding school, you can write it under news, and you can make a, a...you can write something down and people can make comments and things like that.

This example tells us that he uses this specific online community for maintaining former strong ties to school friends. It is a small version of the much bigger communities like Facebook. The formerly

strong ties due to physical proximity in the school are weakened, as every pupil goes his own way after having finished. The online community is a means for maintaining and keeping up the old strong relations. This is done through exchange of resources which can be identified as the messages and pictures, news announced and exchanged online between the members of this community. They construct their social network through this specific medium, and online community does mediate their social network by maintaining a link which might be otherwise severed.

I: is there anybody that you have met online, maybe a friend of a friend, that you have never met, but you talk to on messenger?

N: yes, there is. I... I had... one day I needed some information and I had a friend who had a friend that could give me that information. and 'oh you can have his messenger and you can speak to him'. and I got that and... he is from Jylland so now we can speak that way.
, so we can speak that way.

This statement from the interview is a good example for what Granovetter understands as weak tie. The “friend of the friend” is a member of the closer social network of the interviewees friend, thus an acquaintance to him. This weak tie becomes significant in a situation where a resource (specific information) is needed. The interaction which creates a relation between the interviewee and his acquaintance is conducted online with the help of MSN Messenger. The fact that he didn't call him, nor wrote a letter or an e-mail again shows the role of online communities in the mediation of social networks.

K speaks about a similar occasion in her interview:

K: Yep. he writes me sometimes on sms, and sometimes on MSN, erm... and in Arto he saw, his friends saw or knew that he had a girlfriend so their friend or his friend they look at my Arto profile and then I got friends with his best friend and his ex.

[...]

K: [...] and I met them face to face.

[...]

K: but not anymore, because its weird that it is my ex's best friend and this is my ex's boyfriend, so we don't talk anymore.

When K met her ex-boyfriend on Arto, their relation could be characterized as a weak tie, which connected two different nodes within two social networks. That corresponds very well with Granovetter's idea of weak ties connecting separate networks and allowing access to new resources. During her relationship with him, she also developed ties to some nodes in his network, namely his ex-girlfriend and his best friend. K communicated with them until her relationship with her ex-boyfriend lasted, but after they split up, she soon broke her ties to his social network. She felt that she could not keep the ties to his network, as the meaning of the relationship with his friends had changed because of the split and "it became weird" to see them. Her reasons for breaking the relations with the weak ties in his social network is that her interactions with ex-boyfriend's friends were dependent on her relationship with him.

4.4.5 Interview Reflections

There are a few elements of the interviews that if done differently, could have produced stronger results. The tape recorder was intermittently shut off and on when the conversation would get to a slow point, and thus, the beginnings of some of the questions were cut out from the recording. Additionally, and as anticipated, there were a few points in both interviews where the informants did not know the English word, and quickly, the group member would translate it into Danish. This did not slow the interview down or eliminate any information, but gave off the impression that maybe the descriptions of their thoughts or experiences were slightly limited to expressions such as "yes, it's nice" and "no, it's not good." It is possible that the informants would have been more elaborate had it been in Danish. Despite prior structure and map of social networks- guided interview, the questions asked in each interview differed. This is due to different interviewers having different approaches towards how to extract information for the aim of the project.

The interviews focused too heavily on the mediums of use, while this was an initial interest of ours: the way mediums inform the content of communication. Because we began the interviews by asking with whom and how they communicate, drawn on their social network maps, their responses turned more towards this focus. But this is because we changed our research question, going from focus on users and culture to the networks and connections.

Another advantage would have been to conduct multiple interviews: one to set a foundation, and then after time to analyze and consolidate the data, conduct a more structured, guided interview,

producing more specific information. This would also achieve our goal of conducting an ethnographic focused study.

5 Discussion

In this part we first reflect about the choice of our analytical framework and the course of the interview and then compare our results to the findings of similar studies.

5.1 Reflections

Using Gotved's model in combination with the social network approach provided solid analytical framework from which to analyze mediated social networks in cyber social reality. It was a good choice to look for more tangible structures inside cyber social reality. The operationability of the model of networked cyber social reality is better than just looking for culture, structure basing on social interaction. The perspective of personal networks and the concept of strong and weak ties provided us with a better understanding of the construction of mediated social networks including online communities. Looking for networks in cyber social reality kept us from running into the trap of the duality of on- and offline reality.

The exclusion of the temporal and spatial dimension already gained on us during the analysis. We realized that it was not possible to analyze without taking the context, time and space issues, into consideration.

"The matrix is a theoretically grounded and empirically informed tool for studies of online interactions; it allows descriptive as well as comparative and in-depth analytical studies of the construction of cyber social reality; with special regard to the changed circumstances guiding our interpretations of online time and space."⁵⁴

The fact that interactions, structure and culture in a mediated social network are influencing each other reciprocally can be linked to the argument that personal networks have to be realized as dynamic. The individual constructions are underlying constant changes as time goes by and the world is turning. Our attempt to understand the subjects mediated social network with the hand-drawn structures and the interview only gave us a static snapshot of how online communities are mediating social networks. Anyhow we can say that online communities *do* mediate the social network of these two teenagers.

⁵⁴ Gotved, S. 2006: 469

An interesting enhancement of our case study would have been a second interview with the same subjects at a later point. In that way the changes in their social networks in time and space would have been the focus. This would also correspond more to Howard's network ethnography.

5.2 Comparing the results

Online relationships, which are generally less strong than offline relationships, could provide adolescents with increased information and may enlarge their perspective on the world around them. This, of course, could be both a positive and a negative experience. A lot has already been said about the way the Internet and especially the online communities are influencing lives of the youth today. It has been discussed in the past how SITs can save youth from social isolation and depression and on the other hand how it might foster anti-social behavior. (Turow, 1999)⁵⁵. In the chapter 'Community lost or community liberated,' we started discussing the different trenches of Internet approaches and various answers to the crucial question: does the Internet increase or decrease social networks? The enthusiasts hoped that Internet would "restore the community by providing a meeting space for people with common interests and overcoming limitations of space and time"⁵⁶. Social networks are not restricted to one medium, as we already established, and computer networks are simply one of many methods of maintaining ties.⁵⁷ Our own results showed that the teenagers mostly used online communities for cultivating the already existing relationships and hardly ever use SITs for establishing new friendships. That correlates well with the results brought forth in article by Hu, Wood, Smith and Westbrook (2004), as well as with the research conducted by Bryant, Sanders - Jackson and Smallwood (2006).

On the other hand, over the years there have been those with dystopian outlook concerning the perspectives of online communities and their impacts on social networks. The ties created within online communities are weak and in their opinion they will never replace the true intimacy of face-to-face relationships. The day only has 24 hours, and the time spent online must come at the expense of something else which might be a physical interaction. This view is strongly supported by Norman Nie and Ray Oldenburg (see chapter 'Community lost or community liberated'), who argue that Internet as well as all modern technology contributes to the downfall of the traditional

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Wellman, B., Haase, A. Q., Witte, J., Hampton, K., 2001: 438

⁵⁷ Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C., Wellman, B., 1999: 88

community values and engagement in local affairs. This perspective, which was rather prevalent during the end of 1990s, has been criticized for its glorification and romanticizing of the past, which is somewhat lacking historical accuracy. Nie, for instance, argues that modern means of transport and communication are destroying the long-term relationships: "[...]Moreover, much of this decline in social connectedness has been the unintended consequence of technological change. [...] All of these innovations had unintended negative effects on lifelong family, extended family, and friendship ties. Siblings, parents, children, aunts, cousins, and grade school and high school friends are no longer present daily, and they no longer form the lifelong support and friendship groups they once did."⁵⁸

Both sides certainly have valid arguments to support their statements, but the truth is probably somewhere in between. Optimists and pessimists mutually agree that the SITs are redefining people's social networks; however, they disagree about the nature of these changes. The pessimists say that developing Internet relationships often means trading quality for quantity, as one can hardly have a deep meaningful relationship with everyone one communicates with on the Internet. The optimists, contrarily, say that on the Internet the quality of the relationships is developed by the frequent interaction even though one might not talk about important issues. That again is not convincing enough for the other side, who cannot see a possible quality improvement in a relationship if people do not speak about deep personal issues.

One thing what the two sides agree upon is that the age group most affected by these changes is young people and especially teenagers. Teenagers are also, according to several scholars, often the early adopters of new technologies such as SITs⁵⁹. Today's youth does not necessarily feel that using the Internet and instant messaging is taking time away from their friendships. Instead, many confirmed that they consciously use SITs to influence their peer networks. By offering an inexpensive and instant possibility for communication, SITs allow their social networks to form and evolve.⁶⁰ This is something that we also got confirmed by our respondents, as they too consider the online communities, and MSN in particular, to influence the way they correspond with their friends. Online communities are used for several different purposes, to keep in touch, to organize parties, to see and exchange pictures, to meet new people and so on. This was certainly the presumption we had in mind prior to the writing the project. We expected the teenagers to be very well informed

⁵⁸ Nie, N.,H, 2001: 420-437

⁵⁹ McMillan, S., & Morrison, M., 2006: 75

⁶⁰ Ibid.

about the most recent trends in online communities and we also expected them to be more or less heavy users of them. Some of our expectations were met by their responses. On the other hand, knowing that at the moment MySpace is the online community that is at the moment the most hyped and talked about, we assumed that most of our respondents would be members of it, which certainly proved not to be the case. According to Hu⁶¹ instant messaging is by far the most popular online application among teenagers. Bryant⁶² also supports this statement by saying that aside from e-mail, instant messaging is the Internet tool that is most often used for peer communication. By interviewing our respondents we quickly realized that MSN indeed is the online community most frequently used. Our interviewees confirmed that MSN is very convenient and cheap way to communicate with their friends. The surveys we conducted showed that 27 out of 30 people in the class use MSN on daily basis. The class also often gathers on MSN to discuss various issues, mainly homework assignments and school related issues. It certainly seems that there are many advantages of using MSN which in a way explains its widespread popularity among teenagers in particular.

There are two functions unique to computer-mediated communication (CMC) that instant messaging is offering: one is the ability to know who is connected to the shared space between or among friends and the other is the ability to conduct a text based conversation in real time.⁶³ Having this in mind it has been argued (e.g. Walther, 1992)⁶⁴ that communication technologies are not replacing face-to-face interactions, but they are instead certainly influencing the already existing relationships in many different ways. Generally, this is especially the case in the lives of students and teenagers as they are the ones who are using these online communities the most and the Internet has already become an important part of their lives. Certainly the young people using technology in order to communicate with each other is not a new phenomenon by any means. What had changed though is the form that communication takes, as it has been argued that the new based technologies are picking up where the telephones left off.⁶⁵ The research conducted by Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis conducted in 2001⁶⁶ suggests that the teenagers do not feel that the Internet and online communities such as instant messaging are particularly helpful when it comes to meeting new friends. In contrast, majority of them confirmed that they use the Internet to improve relationships with their friends.

⁶¹ Hu, Y., Wood, J., Smith, V., and Westbrook, N. 2004: article 6

⁶² Bryant, J.A., Sanders - Jackson, A., Smallwood, A.M.K 2006: article 10

⁶³ Hu, Y., Wood, J., Smith, V., and Westbrook, N., 2004: article 6

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Bryant, J.A., Sanders - Jackson, A., Smallwood, A.M.K. 2006: article 10

⁶⁶ Ibid.

This research corresponds very well with our results, as our interview subjects did only report a few cases, where they had contacted people through MSN Messenger, that they did not know beforehand.

As it seems, online social life mirrors the offline one; students who played football together in the daytime might chat about the game on MSN in the evening, classmates (like in our research) could discuss school matters and homework, teenage girls might chat about boys. In fact these two networks, the online networks and the offline social and friendship networks are so much immersed that it does not seem to make any sense to make any clear distinction between them anymore.

6 Conclusion

Beginning as places that virtually join people with special interests, online communities have grown to be widespread networks with open membership for people with nothing in common except desire to communicate.

Initially we argued amongst ourselves about Gotved's model assuming that cyber social realities depict entire realities because of the technology being so integrated into our daily routines and habits. However, our research shows that online communities are an alleged part of these teenagers' lives. Technologies, such as SITs have been adopted by teens relatively quickly because they are more convenient, less expensive, and faster than traditional technologies of communication. Teenagers access them for homework, entertainment, dating, social support, and in general, an important communication source. When asked if online communities are a passing trend, just like any popular culture element, one of our interviewees firmly stated that he thinks they will only become larger and more connected. It can also be argued that these communities provide a sense of belonging or identification.

The informants did not appear fearful that their online communication will replace face to face interaction. Research shows that online communities do play mediating roles in their social networks by maintaining relationships, but seldomly introducing new relationships into their lives. However, both informants keep contact with people in different countries, and admit that without MSN it would be unlikely. The efficiency of communicating online opens up social opportunities, just as it does business opportunities and ease of travel. At the same time, online community might strengthen social ties of members and serve to make weak ties stronger.

Even though the communication might appear to be more frequent, deep and personal issues are still reserved for face to face communication, reflecting that they see a difference in the two kinds of communication (on and offline).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between online and offline communities anymore. In fact they are merging together and creating one big cyber social reality.

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