

"Social Network Sites - Challenges for Media Literacy"

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Introduction: Aims and objectives

The social web – particularly social network sites (SNS) – offers children and young people a wide range of opportunities to manage information, identity, and relationships; thus the use of SNS is closely linked to central developmental tasks in adolescence, e.g. young people's identity construction. The enormous success of SNS among young people raises several questions; three of them shall be tackled in this paper:

- 1) How do young people actually make use of SNS within their everyday life – and which types of practices can be generalized?
- 2) Which specific risks do adolescents face when using SNS, also in consideration of the EU Kids Online risk classification?
- 3) Which consequences can be drawn with regard to the development of the social web, the promotion of media literacy, and media regulation?

In order to answer these questions we will present results of a current German study on how young people use the social web and on which meanings they construct with social web applications against the background of current social and technological aspects in the context of socialisation. Relevant selected results will be presented in two steps: Firstly, on the basis of qualitative and quantitative material, we identified different types of cultural practices related to specific affordances of SNS. These will be discussed with regard to potential risks and opportunities regarding issues of identity construction, privacy, and social contacts. Secondly, the findings will be discussed with regard to consequences for media literacy, media regulation, and the development of the social web. It will be shown that the specific characteristics of the social web require particular attention on young people's conduct and on consumer issues.

Theoretical framework¹

Young people are in the process of constructing their identity. They are faced with specific developmental tasks, which require a high degree of competence in daily life. Everyday life environments can be characterised as media environments for the construction of identity (Baacke 1989).

Approaches from developmental psychology (Havighurst 1972) to youth development (Baacke 1989) indicate that young people use media in order to cope with their developmental

¹ See Paus-Haase 2000; Hasebrink & Paus-Hasebrink 2007.

tasks and experiences in daily life in a reasonable manner. A characteristic of youth is the process of defining one's self in dealing with reality. Particularly during the years of adolescence, the construction of identity becomes the central developmental task (Krappmann 1969; Hurrelmann 1990). Young people in particular deal with the question: "Who am I?", a question they increasingly seek to answer with media in diverse variations. This happens against the concrete background of their environment, their experiences in daily life.

These do not as such have an effect on adolescents; young people rather work with their environment, they consider it in their concept of self self-concept, but may just as well choose not to do so. Adolescents develop a sketch of the world and of themselves in this world. Concepts of reality and self-concepts are inseparably linked to each other. Particularly against a background of changed societal conditions today's young people are differently challenged than former generations to shape their biography and consequently their identity.

In a society that is on the one hand characterised by processes of individualisation and relative freedom of choice, but on the other hand by a confusing variety of concepts of life and value systems, it is not an easy task to arrive at a stable self-concept. Adolescents' view of life and, closely connected to this, their lifestyle become an expression of identity; furthermore, young people use these in a peer group context in order to practise social behaviours.

The internet in particular increases the range of options to build – in addition to the strong ties to family, friends and partners – rather weak and sometimes unreliable ties, which refer to common interests (Paus-Hasebrink et al. 2009). Networks have become the dominating social form; networked individualism can be regarded as a guiding principle of today's society and culture. The social form of networks corresponds with the process of networking, i.e. the creation and maintenance of social relations, which is particularly supported by social web applications. These applications provide important symbolic material that allows young people to present themselves in idealised form ideally in their self, social, and material reflection. The social web – particularly social network sites (SNS) – offers children and young people a wide range of opportunities to manage identity, relationships, and information; therefore the use of SNS is closely linked to central developmental tasks in adolescence, e.g. young people's identity construction (ibid).

Table 1: Developmental tasks and related action components

| Developmental task | Core question | Action component |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Self reflection | Who am I? | Identity management |
| Social reflection | What is my position in social networks? | Relation management |
| Material reflection | How do I orient myself in the world? | Information management |

It must be emphasized that young people *actively* work with SNS and relate them to their environment and developmental tasks. In other words, we must focus on young people's perspectives and consider their role as 'agents' in this process. Consequently, the design of our study focused on the subjects' perspective.

Methodological approach

The study had to employ a multi-perspectival approach, in order to understand the role SNS play in the everyday life of young people adequately. Therefore we conducted a study with four modules (see Schmidt et al. 2009). The empirical work has been conducted from summer to autumn 2008.

- Module 1 – Analyses of relevant social web applications (e.g. social communities, instant messaging, video platforms and wikis): This step aimed at reconstructing the communicative characteristics of popular social web applications, i.e. the structure and code of the respective digital tools.
- Module 2 – A qualitative study with regard to the social web use of young people in the context of their everyday lives. Since this module provides the main basis for this paper we will explain the procedure in more detail below.
- Module 3 – A representative telephone survey among young people from twelve to 24 years in Germany who use the internet at least occasionally² (n=650): This module aimed to establish a representative baseline for some basic indicators of the use of the social web within the context of other media and communication services. The survey was conducted in October/November 2008.
- Module 4 – Synthesis of the findings from the three other modules and consequences for media regulation and media literacy.

The *qualitative study* (Paus-Hasebrink et al. 2009) included a series of qualitative focus group discussions (n=12). Out of the participants of these groups discussions 28 young people were selected for semi-structured personal interviews (see Flick 2004). They belonged to three age bands (12 to 14, 15 to 17 and 18 to 24 years) and two educational groups (higher and lower formal education). The group discussions and interviews were conducted at two different locations in Germany, one in a large city, the other in a rural area in order to analyse the consequences of their different infrastructures. The objective of the qualitative study was to analyse and to reconstruct how young people perceive, act upon, and interpret the social web in their everyday lives, how they – while becoming increasingly competent – grow into their life world, cope with the developmental tasks of self, social, and material reflection by using

² At the time of the survey (October/November 2008) almost all (97 %, MPFS 2008) young people in this age group used the internet.

the social web for identity, relation, and information management. The data were analysed in two steps:

- 1) A focused analysis along the main categories of the structured interview guide with special software for qualitative analysis (MaxQda).
- 2) A contextual analysis in which the 28 subjects were treated as individual case studies, which provided a view of concrete social web-related action patterns.

Basic findings on social web use in Germany

As the representative survey shows (see table 2), Instant Messaging (IM) and visiting social network sites (SNS) are the most frequent social web-related activities (see Hasebrink & Rohde 2009). IM is more frequent among boys and young men; the use of SNS is more frequent among girls and young women. IM is particularly popular in the three younger groups, whereas those older than 20 years seem to lose the interest in this service – as other data show, for them e-mails are becoming more important. Social network sites are particularly popular between 15 and 17 years; more than three quarters of this group visit an SNS daily or at least several times per week. Reading wikis is the next popular social web-related activity – this means almost exclusively the use of the German version of *Wikipedia*. Compared to these figures, blogs and other comparatively more productive forms of social web use play a less important role.

Table 2: Frequency of use of different social web-related activities (in percent, “daily or several times per week”)

| | Total | Male | female | 12-14 years | 15-17 years | 18-20 years | 21-24 years |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | <i>n=650</i> | <i>n=332</i> | <i>n=319</i> | <i>n=131</i> | <i>n=148</i> | <i>n=161</i> | <i>n=211</i> |
| Instant-Messaging | 69 | 72 | 67 | 72 | 79 | 75 | 58 |
| Social network sites | 69 | 65 | 72 | 63 | 77 | 66 | 68 |
| Reading wikis | 38 | 39 | 36 | 25 | 41 | 45 | 38 |
| Reading blogs | 8 | 11 | 5 | 6 | 12 | 8 | 7 |
| Uploading music/sound files | 5 | 7 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 6 | 3 |
| Writing blogs | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Writing wikis | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Uploading videos | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

The prominent role of social web services among overall online activities is reflected by young people’s answers to an open question about their three favourite internet websites: 57 percent mention at least one SNS, with girls (67%) and those between 15 and 17 years (70%) reaching even higher figures. In addition, 31 percent name at least one video community

(mostly *YouTube*); these services are most popular within the age bands 12 to 14 years (46%), and 15 to 17 years (42%), and for boys (37%).

Due to the implicit logic of network platforms, which become more attractive the more other young people also use them, social web use is extremely concentrated on very few sites. The German SNS *SchülerVZ* is by far the most popular social network platform: 58 percent of those between 12 and 14 years and a full two thirds of those between 15 and 17 years visit it at least once a week. The older groups move from *SchülerVZ* to the student-oriented SNS *StudiVZ*, which is offered by the same company: 37 percent of those between 18 and 20 and 57 percent of those between 21 and 24 visit it at least once a week. By comparison, international SNS like *MySpace* (14 % of the total group use it at least once a week) or *Facebook* (only 3 %) play a minor role in Germany.

With regard to what young people do with social network sites, eleven per cent of the total group do not use these services at all, and 13 per cent only occasionally visit them without being registered with their own profile. This means that more than 75 per cent have their profile on at least one SNS, almost half of them on two or more SNS at the same time. As noted above, those between 15 and 17 years are particularly active in the social web: 86 per cent of them are maintaining a profile on at least one SNS. Thus, among young people between 12 and 24 years, creating one's own profile on a social network site is a fairly common practice.

On the basis of a couple of questions regarding concrete activities on SNS, two independent dimensions were identified according to which young people differ in how they use their profiles. The first dimension can be called "interest in social relationships"; it includes activities linked to the creation of new contacts and the maintenance of existing relationships. The second dimension is called "self-presentation"; it refers to frequent work on one's own profile and a strong interest in providing an innovative and interesting profile. The relationship-oriented dimension shows (only marginally significantly) higher values for girls than for boys, whereas boys reach significantly higher figures for self-representation. Younger respondents have higher values on both dimensions; together with other indicators, which cannot be presented here, this provides evidence that younger groups have high expectations regarding the social web as a tool for coping with current developmental tasks, particularly self reflection, whereas older groups use it simply as a standard tool for maintaining social relations.

Regarding risks and risky behaviours, 28 percent of the respondents reported that they had already been harassed on the internet; this figure is slightly higher for girls (30%) than for boys (27%). 13 percent had made the experience that somebody else had uploaded a photo or some information about them without their approval. Nine percent admitted that they had already uploaded content about which others had complained; this figure was higher for boys (12%) than for girls (5%).

Social web-related action patterns

Young people display a wide range of practices in dealing with the social web (see Paus-Hasebrink et al. 2009). These practices differ with regard to the following dimensions: Creativity, intensity, reflexivity, relevance, initiative, and innovation (see table 2 for an explanation of these dimensions).

Table 2: Interpretive dimensions of social web use

| Dimension | Core question | Examples |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Creativity | Do subjects create new content? | Publishing their own videos on <i>YouTube</i> , writing a blog |
| Intensity | For how long do they use social web services? | Being online for a long time |
| Reflexivity | Do they reflect on their social web-related activities? | Careful reading of official licence conditions; reflecting on risks; comparing risks and opportunities of social web applications |
| Initiative | Do they take the initiative in communicative situations? | Founding their own groups on an SNS; initiating communication via IM or SNS |
| Relevance | How relevant are social web services for in their every day life? | Attributing high relevance to the social web in relation to information, relation, and identity management |
| Innovation | Do they enhance the range of communicative options provided by social web applications? | Enhancing or re-interpreting social web applications beyond their intended range |

On the basis of these ‘interpretive dimensions’ we identified six social web-related patterns of action which show what young people actually do with social web services, and for which purposes they use it. The six patterns are briefly outlined in table 3. Since this paper sets out to discuss risk-related issues, we will focus on those patterns (pattern 3 and 6) which are most likely to lead to negative consequences of social web usage. Regarding the role of formal education, the first result is that these two groups are exclusively composed of young people with lower educational levels (see table 3). However, it must be emphasised that young people with higher formal education encounter possible risks, too. The difference is that they are more reflective of possible risks and thus are more likely to be able to cope with them.

Table 3: Overview of action patterns related to the social web

| No. | Brief description | Demographics |
|-----|---|--|
| 1) | Creative and intensive social web use on different levels; self-confident, explorative and competent usage. | 5 boys, 1 girl between 11 and 18 years, 4 higher educated, 2 lower educated; only 1 boy and 1 girl used the social web in an innovative way. |

| | | |
|----|--|--|
| 2) | Intensive, initiative, and critical but conventional usage with strong focus on relation management; in addition, the internet is used intensively for information management. | 3 higher educated girls between 12 and 18 years. |
| 3) | Intensive, initiative usage for the maintenance of social relations and self-presentation. | 4 boys, 1 girl between 12 and 19 years, all of them lower educated. |
| 4) | “It is important just to be there“: social web usage mainly for relation management; beyond this unspecific usage. | 4 girls, 2 boys between 14 and 19 years; 5 lower educated, 1 higher. |
| 5) | Critical, selective usage in order to maintain social relations and to manage information. | 3 boys, 3 girls between 16 and 22 years, 6 higher educated. |
| 6) | Social web usage to compensate for social challenges: Intensive, initiative usage with high relevance to a challenging every day life. | 2 lower educated boys, both 17 years old. |

Action pattern (3):

This pattern was attributed to five subjects: four boys between 12 and 19 years, one 13-year-old girl. Their social web use is characterised by intensity, initiative, and relevance. In this respect it is similar to pattern (2), however members of pattern (3) are more curious and explorative, and less careful. Regarding social network platforms they are not only interested in maintaining relationships, but also in active forms of self-presentation. Beyond social network platforms these young people also use *YouTube* and *MySpace* (as a source for music). Depending on their respective interests and competences they take communicative initiative, e.g. by founding new groups on social network platforms, or by posting comments and recommendations on videos or any other topic.

Action pattern (6):

The two boys with a migrant background who were classed as belonging to this group show similarities with pattern (3) regarding the dimensions intensity, initiative, and relevance. They use the social web intensively (but in a largely unreflected and uncritical way); this activity is highly relevant for their everyday life, and they cannot even imagine how to spend their days without the options provided by social web services. However, different from pattern (3), their use of the social web is most obviously linked to specific life-world challenges. For them, social web services serve as a crucial tool with which they try to cope with particularly challenging conditions. In order to demonstrate this, we will briefly describe the case study of Hassan³.

Hassan, 17 years old, is Kurdish and considers himself to be insufficiently integrated into German society. In order to cope with this problematic and partly even hostile environment, he often reacts in an aggressive way. For him the social web enjoys an extraordinary position:

³ All names have been changed for the analysis.

It serves as a means to compensate for needs which cannot be fulfilled in real life. Hassan is eager to present himself as a heroic and strong Kurd and as a proud Muslim. From time to time he is mobbed and bullied by some of his classmates – maybe in reaction to his own behaviour. In the interview he said: “I am not the boy who talks, but the boy who beats.” Within the social web he acts in the same way; he often mobs and bullies others and regards this as normal behaviour. Due to his misbehaviour he has been excluded from the particular social network platform several times. He would like to get some explicit feedback from the administrators and moderators on why they decided to do so, in order to let them know why he acts like this. He always re-registers on the network platform and carefully reinstalls his list of contacts. Since the maintenance of his relationships is highly important to him, he definitely wants to stay registered on this platform.

The risk potential of Social Networking Sites

Social Web and especially Social Networking Sites offer many opportunities to adolescents to communicate, interact, present themselves, participate, create, and share online content and information, and the youngsters deal with all these possibilities and make their experiences – as the social networking types presented above have shown. Utilization of the social web does not only offer new opportunities, but also comes with new challenges regarding the management of information, identity, and social relationships (Schmidt 1996).

In the EU Kids online context, a matrix of online risks and opportunities has been developed which considers *how* a child may be exposed to online risks, either by using problematic content (e.g. illegal content, violence, pornography etc.), by being contacted by others who have access to problematic content (e.g. being harassed, stalked or bullied) or by creating or providing undesirable content or misusing online applications for bullying or harassing somebody else (Hasebrink, Livingstone & Haddon 2008). In the context of the social web, the dimensions of ‘contact’ and ‘conduct’ have become especially relevant, emphasizing the active role of the so called ‘produser’ (Bruns 2008). As the results of this study indicate, one third of adolescents and young adults have already had negative experiences e.g. with cyber mobbing (see above).

Against the background of this matrix and the results of our study, we want to expand the perspective regarding risks associated with social web applications, and especially social networking sites. Apart from the risk potentials mentioned, it became obvious that online risks may also result from mistaken estimations of either the proliferation of communication acts and the size of public resulting from it, from a misinterpretation of the longevity and the dynamics of social web applications, from ignorance about either the implications of posting personal data even in apparently private context the data mining practices of e.g. providers (see table 4). Many of the users of social network sites consider themselves to be part of closed or private communities and do not anticipate the potential impact and consequences of

their online behaviours. Private photos or (supposedly funny) pictures of parties are posted and shared carelessly, often without consideration of what others (strangers) may think about them. As the interviews have shown, adolescents worry less about people they do not know than about “known but inappropriate others” (Livingstone 2008: 405) like parents and teachers. Adolescents do not appreciate if the latter enter the social network sites (sometimes by ignoring the business conditions) and feel that this threatens their privacy.

Apart from such ‘social spread’, ‘time spread’ or longevity can become a problem. People often underestimate the persistence and the searchability of databases. ‘Youthful follies’ like personal photos or thoughtless, spontaneous statements may become problematic at a later date. Additionally, the dynamic or momentum of the dissemination of information or rumours is often underestimated. Information can be transmitted very quickly and simply, with or without considering the original context, and the sender may easily lose control over the dissemination process. Especially in the context of negative and undesirable behaviour, e.g. self-destructive behaviour (eating disorders, cutting, etc.), such dynamics or momentum of communication can exacerbate undesirable and risky behaviour.

Furthermore, a significant problem seems to be an ignorance of data collection and transfer processes. Very few of the users worried about their data, especially about those data which are not provided consciously. While transparency regarding the code of practice of the providers is very low, problems may result from a misuse of data, e.g. for commercial purposes.

Finally, a further risk, which was already considered on the sidelines of the EU Kids Online risk matrix, can be seen in the amount of time which is invested by users, especially if online usage is not ‘complementary’ to, but ‘compensatory’ for other parts of life (Misek-Schneider 2008: 179). Without dramatising the current discussion about online dependency and addiction, it can be assumed that the management of information, identity, and relations requires a lot of time even if it seems that different online activities are carried out simultaneously.

Table 4: Potential risks in connection with the social web

| A risk may emerge from ... | Example |
|---|---|
| ... the content | Problematic content (violence, pornography, self-destructive behaviour etc.). |
| ... underestimating the proliferation of communicative acts | Users consider themselves to be part of closed communities and underestimate the size of their audience (For example: human resources staff may access personal profiles in social networking sites) |
| ... underestimating the longevity of communication | “Youthful virtual follies”, e.g. presenting distressing photos, thoughtless utterances, participation in special (nonsense) groups (e.g. with sexual or political allusions). Problems evolving from an inadequate understanding of public communication. |

| | |
|---|---|
| ... underestimating the dynamics of the communication process | Fast dissemination of information on different online platforms and to different publics; unintentional linkage by others. |
| ... data collection/ data mining | Data mining practices of e.g. providers or third parties; intransparent collection and storage of personal data misuse of personal data by third parties. |
| ... invested time | Increasing time investment as a result of using more online applications: the larger the social network, the more time has to be invested for fostering relationships and contacts. |

The risks identified here are located on different levels: Some of them are related to the content, some to the code of the social web application, and especially the social network site, while others are related more to the users themselves. Therefore, recommendations for reducing the risk potential should be addressed to providers, users, and media regulators alike. In the following we consider mainly the challenges for media education and media literacy.

Challenges for media literacy

Regarding media or digital literacy, necessary competencies and skills for the use of Web 2.0 applications and social network sites have to be discussed. Social web literacy can be generalised as the competency to manage information, identity, and relationships successfully, and to anticipate the intended and unintended impacts (Schmidt, Lampert & Schwinge 2009, Neuss 2008). Especially for adolescents, who are likely to explore their limits (also online), suitable approaches have to be developed to minimize the risk potential. But a solely risk-oriented approach is not sufficient, especially for the social web which offers a large number of opportunities for creativity and participation. In the qualitative interviews, there were many references to the fact that adolescents want to utilise the potential inherent in the social web, but need support regarding ideas, technical equipment, and personal skills. Therefore, they must be supported in improving their media literacy, e.g. in the context of media projects through which they can acquire experience and knowledge regarding social web-related opportunities and pitfalls.

Interesting for a discussion of necessary media literacy is the concept of “new media literacies”, developed by Henry Jenkins (2006). According to this concept, “new media literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom” (ibid.: 19f.). Jenkins has identified eleven skills which are suitable for multimedia and different modalities of media use (e.g. networking, multitasking etc.). Necessary skills for a ‘respectful use’ of the social web are considered in the Harvard “GoodPlay Project” (James et al. 2008), and seem to be a good addition to the “new media literacies” concept. Both concepts should be enhanced and transferred into practice. But both approaches also make clear that the promotion of media literacy has to be considered as a networking task which can only succeed with the assistance of providers, parents, and teachers (Jenkins 2006: 4). Especially the latter rarely have contact

or experience with the social web and need support regarding their own media literacy and their competencies for media education. Accordingly, media education initiatives should also include potential disseminators and multipliers of media literacy.

For media regulation⁴, social web and social network sites present a special challenge, because the behaviour of users can not be regulated entirely. Starting can be the responsibility of the provider and social web-specific measures of regulated self regulation. For the social web in particular, social rules become more important than formal rules.

Questions of both media literacy and media regulation indicate that the social web represents a great challenge in relation to the changing role of the user to a 'produser' (Bruns 2008). In light of this, approaches to media education, media literacy, regulation etc. will succeed only if the users themselves are involved in further discussions.

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⁴ In this context, only some questions of the Protection of Minors can be touched upon. Questions of copyright, data protection, or of general personal rights can not be considered. For deeper insights (regarding German legislation) see Lampert, Schulz & Schmidt (in press).

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