

THE INTERNET GENERATION AND “THE GATHERING”

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A few years ago I initiated a Nordic network named “Culture and New Technology”, directed towards young ethnologists and folklorists working within this field. Because this type of research is not yet quite established within the humanities, some very basic questions have to be discussed regarding analysis of culture and technology. The main questions concerns the nature and consequences of the relations between humans and technology.

In 1999 the Norwegian Research Council announced the funding of a programme focusing on welfare, children and youth. The main angle was to shed light on the implications of modern society for young people growing up today. One of the themes suggested was the consequence of technological development for childhood and adolescence.

The spring 2000 I was granted some support from this funding to a project named “The Internet Generation.” The project focuses on the use of and attitudes towards digital technology among young computer freaks, and on the impact this orientation towards technology has on their daily lives and on their social relations. The aim is to achieve a better understanding of the life style of this group of youths and how their creation of a new youth culture is related to digital technology. The analysis of the computer party “The Gathering” is the main key to several of the central questions of the project. I therefore want to give you both a general presentation of the project “The Internet Generation” and of the computer party “The Gathering”.

This text, found in an advertisement for company Cisco Systems, I have chosen as a motto for the whole project::

The Internet is changing the way we work, live, play and learn in ways we are just beginning to explore.

The introduction of digital technology results in radical changes in the societal framework for playing and learning for the young generation, and in the making of their lifestyle. The point has been made that technological development will change our conditions of life (Lundin and Åkesson 1999) and even our mental development so that in the future new generations may be more able to transcend borders – physical and mental. The project aims at getting insight into the lifestyle of this group of young people and knowledge about how they construct a new youth culture that is related to and even based on digital technology.

The ambitions of my project are above all to obtain new knowledge based on empirical material; the project is not constructed on a theoretical basis. On the other hand, I want to look for possibilities to combine cultural analysis, especially theories of globalisation (Featherstone, Lash and Robertson 1995), with theories of technology. Globalisation will here be understood as “A global modernity constituted by globally organized space, global economy and global frameworks of social relations and cultural flows” (Anttonen, 1999:6).

Extensive use of media is an essential element of life primarily among the young. Hence the globalisation of culture is above all discernible for this segment of the population. The globalisation is intensified when more and more households get wired. And within the households it is above all the young that are Internet users.

Every generation is marked by the medium dominating their adolescence. To young people the recent multimedia machines with the Internet may be characterised as a cool medium rather than a hot (to use McLuhan’s terms). A change in the attitude towards the media in the generations is observed; a transformation from broadcast (hot) to interactive (cool) mentality. (Marshall McLuhan 1964: *Understanding Media*.)

The development of the internet is to a certain degree directed by the users, and by their wishes and visions. In the theory of the school of “Social Construction of Technology” (SCOT) the view of the actor is central, and so is the idea that the users of technology often act as agents of technological change (Williams and Edge 1996, Pinch and Bijker 1984, Kline and Pinch 1996). The users may turn the technology into a means for the construction of identity and the formation of social relations. (Stuedahl 1999).”...it is important to show not only how social groups shape technology, but also how the identity of social groups are reconstituted in the process” (Kline and Pinch 1996: 767).

Empirical material

At the moment I am just finishing the creating of an empirical basis for the project. One of the main sources is an interactive questionnaire designed especially for young computer freaks. It is directed towards young people frequenting milieus that are preoccupied with digital technology and the Internet, that is the participants on the computer party “The Gathering.” This interactive questionnaire was worked out in dialogue with young computer freaks, in order to focus on themes they consider to be of importance. This is a qualitative questionnaire containing 36 questions. The response has been overwhelming, I have received nearly 750 answers. This huge empirical material, consisting of 1850 pages, is at the moment loaded into a database for further analysis.

However, the project consists of various parts. In autumn 2000 I dispatched a traditional questionnaire, on paper, through the institution Norwegian Ethnological Research. (Questionnaire no. 182: “Culture and New Technology”). People were asked a number of questions about their use of personal computers in their homes and the impact of this use on their daily lives. I received 110 answers, 30 of them from people over the age of 70. Everybody can answer parts of the questionnaire, even if they don’t have personal experience of computers. Many of the questions are designed in a way that makes it possible to compare the answers from the two very different groups of informants.

In special youth groups in particular, the use of digital technology is of profound significance both for the organisation of everyday life and for the formation of social relations, even to an orientation towards new attitudes and values. These implications of the intensive use of technology I have tried to detect above all in qualitative research interviews with key persons running “The Gathering”. But observations in the field have been just as important sources for the project, along with the extensive documentation of themselves that many in this milieu present on websites.

Unfolding an Easter ritual

In Norway one of our most important Easter rituals is the symbolic trip to the mountains, and it is a must to bring skis in the luggage. However, in one of the biggest national symbols of Norway, the Viking Ship Hall, built for the Olympic Winter Games in 1994 in the town of Hamar, every Easter a very different Easter ritual unfolds – a ritual that is strikingly different from the traditional Norwegian Easter traditions that celebrate winter sports and families being together. In Easter about 4500 youths bring their personal computers with them to the Viking Ship Hall and a spectacular party of high technology. Here they link together in a gigantic network, in 1999 in fact the biggest temporary computer network in the world.

For five days and four nights they play, compete, eat, sleep and socialise within the walls of the huge hall and celebrate high technology. They are participants in The Gathering – an Easter ritual that has grown out of smaller computer parties in the early nineties.

This year their self representation on the web was presented by the following text . A text that clearly demonstrates the core values of their culture [italics by me]:

The Gathering

This is a presentation of an unique opportunity to be involved with one of the largest cyberfestivals *of the future*. Unlike other events, it's created from *the roots of the computeryouth* and already has a track record to show for it. Go for the real thing and accept no fakes. This is where the technoid youth is! There is a *new world* out there, consisting of whizzing electrons and glowing, electrifying photons that whirl in a dazzling, almost hypnotic dance of the mind. *The world extends* through cables in all sort of colours taken from the rainbow, *speeding* thru switches at the speed of light, sometimes being only light. The people and beings inhabiting this realm is the *young and unafraid*. Young at heart or age, where their desire to go *beyond what has been done before* is the proof of their courage. They will be caretakers and rulers of the electronic world we're entering where *information* is the highest currency and *knowledge* is both the key and the lock. Every once in a while these people and the ones that aspire to be like them, come together in the physical realm.

One of these places of haven for the ones that live the future is computer festivals (demo parties), being the largest playground to meet, play with and even discuss serious matters at hand with your fellow travellers on *the path to the future* of bits and bytes.

Here exists no skin colour, no nationalities, no political or religious bias. The way you live, say and think is the way others judge you, not only by the knowledge you possess, but what knowledge you seek and how you seek to gain it. So far their self representation.

Many Norwegian youngsters devoted to the use of computers regard the most faithful participants and the persons in charge of the arrangement as those who set the tone. Among such actors and in such gatherings a new culture of communication is constructed and new cultural forms are created. The Gathering may be seen as the most important catalyst of the computer culture of Norwegian youth. (Se also Nordli 1999.)

Observations

I experienced TG for the first time in 1999, and at that time I was more than busy trying to orient myself. The first impression was overwhelming. The hall was huge, the level of the noise a challenge, and all of a sudden I realised that this was not at all some sort of a computer fair but a party – a gigantic youth party and a high-technology celebration. Next year I wrote the following report of the atmosphere:

The hall is buzzing. All the main lights have been switched off. Four thousand personal computers give the darkened hall a bluish light; in addition, some of the participants have mounted flashing lights in red or orange, or laser lights. Many of the computers are decorated with toy pets, dolls from South Park, towers built of boxes of coke, small Christmas trees with flashing lights, and so on.

Some of them are sitting under banners. I observe the following inscriptions: Wonderland, Real Time, Underworld, Natural Born Hackers, Next Generation.

Some stroll around in the hall, but most of them are sitting by their computers on their very limited space. They usually let their computer stay turned on, even if they are away, which contributes to the special light in the huge hall and the atmosphere of the ongoing party.

Everybody has a big personal computer; everybody has a mobile phone. Some of them have big music racks on top of the computer. Some have video cameras or digital photo cameras. As the night goes on, the atmosphere becomes more intense. But it is in no way aggressive; the hall is crowded with young people who are obviously having a great time.

So much for my impressions.

Motivations

TG has become an enormous success; the tickets are sold out far in advance. What motivates young people to participate in a high-tech celebration of Easter like this – to sleep on the concrete floor and stay inside the hall for five days and four nights?

What do the participants themselves say about TG? Here are some samples from answers to the interactive questionnaire about why they go, or will return, to TG:

- Because it is the Mecca for a person interested in computers. Here we meet, talk, discuss and exchange experiences and the like.
- Everyone with any self-respect interested in computers goes there.
- Meeting friends, establishing a network of contacts and learning a LOT of new things.
- Because it is hell of a good arrangement. I am returning in order to feel “the TG

atmosphere” and to watch the year’s competitions.

Technology has enormous consequences for human culture and social relations because above all their social networks are changed by new technology. The Swedish ethnologist Jan Garnert, for example, has described how new technology such as electric light changed our way of life (Garnert 1993). When it comes to the group of computer freaks I am concerned with, the impact of technology on their lives is a fact. I want to shed light on the consequences for frequent users of their interest in and use of computers – the consequences for their social relations, their forms of interaction, their humour, their wishes and imaginations about the future.

In research about the social construction of technology, it is pointed out that “relevant social groups” play a special part in the creation of new technology. [1] Therefore it has been important to me to collect information especially from the members of the crew. The Gathering is very well organised, a lot of people (this year maybe 100?) work voluntarily for weeks, some for months, to run it. The volunteer, “The Crew”, who run the whole party mostly belong to a group of young people who might characterise themselves as nerds or computer freaks.[2] But their presentation of themselves and their formation of group identity is strongly in opposition to the media-created picture of young computer freaks as socially disabled.[3] When people from the crew describe their culture themselves, they deliberately underline their appreciation of values such as co-operation, social relations and friendship, quite contrary to the general picture of the nerd in the rest of society.

The milieu has a strong ideology of taking care of each other. A female leader of one of the divisions of the crew holds that everybody can join the party, and that is what is important to her. “People come here to meet each other and to learn. TG is the best of schools. This is our life”, she says.

Humour is used actively in their dialogue with the rest of society. In this the organisation Norwegian Nerds is central. One of the members underlines that this is an organisation created only for fun.

Many of the participants and especially they who work as the crew at TG set the tone and belong to the trendsetters of Norwegian computer youth culture. They are not young people who just play games and chat, “gamers and lamers”, as they are called.

Their perspective of time and their making of traditions and tendency to ritualise The Gathering is of special interest to cultural analysis. On the one hand they have an extremely compressed experience of time; the very quick development of digital technology strengthens the perspective of time that youth in general have, which means that one year is felt to be “a long time”. To those who live in the computer milieu, radical changes happen at a very high speed. They talk about “the good old days”, “in the old

days” and so on when their perspective in fact is 1996 or something like it. And their myths of origin can be traced back to 1992. (It all started with Crusaders...). They also take much care to present “History” on their web sites.

Tradition is a legitimate state of reason for actions in this milieu. It is tradition that TG should be arranged at Easter, “Easter time is TG time” and it should traditionally start on Wednesday and last until Sunday. Even when they cause problems, traditions are kept going. Many of the participants bring big music racks with them, and this often causes power failures. But because it has become a tradition, they hesitate to prohibit this technical equipment at TG.

The technical development and TG

One unsolved problem of the milieu today might in fact originate from the changes of their culture caused by the changes of their technology. The older ones have grown up with a genuine interest of computer technology, both software and hardware, even programming, but today a lot of youngsters who are not especially interested in technology, but could be characterised as competent users, join the party. This leads to some differences and discussions. Some of the older boys are not interested in communicating with young people who are not genuinely interested in computers, while others find it necessary to have a mental renewal and to be accommodating towards the younger participants in order to secure new recruits to the group.

A revolution in communication technology will always shape a generation and its world. [4] Few technologies are free of values. In its childhood television was linear and manipulating, and it carried strong messages that formed the world-view of former generations. The new medium of the Internet is more neutral because of its distributed, interactive and many-to-many nature. Therefore the Internet generation gets other values (See Tapscott 1998). They believe in individual rights, privacy, and the right to information. Many of them might be characterised as creative entrepreneurs. The Internet generation is a generation that uses digital technology to change the way individuals and society interact.

Annotations

- 1) “In SCOT, ‘relevant social groups’ who play a role in the development of a technological artefact are defined as those groups who share a meaning of the artefact.” (Kline and Pinch 1996: 765).
- 2) Hege Nordli comments on this: Sherry Turkle argues in “The Second Self” that hackers have fears of relationships with people and therefore have relationships with machines instead (Turkle 1984). As a contrast, Tove Håpnes (1996) found in her study of Norwegian hackers that they did not consider their relationship to their machine to be personal or close (See Nordli 1999).
- 3) Hege Nordli writes: “One of the first one to write about hackers was Joseph Weizenbaum. In 1976 he

described the hackers or the compulsory programmers as he called them as; Bright young men of dishevelled appearance, often with sunken glowing eyes, can be seen seated at computer consoles, their arms tensed and waiting to fire their fingers, already poised to strike, at the buttons and keys [...] Their rumpled clothes, their unwashed and unshaven faces, and their uncombed hair all testify that they are oblivious to their bodies and to the world around them. They exist, at least when so engaged, only through and for computers (See Nordli 1999).

4) Bausinger holds that television and other media do not only affect a "slice of reality". Han writes: "The content of television radiates out into the rest of reality, which therefore cannot be separated from it" (Bausinger 1984:350).

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