

Love in Cyberspace: Swedish Young People with Intellectual Disabilities and the Internet¹

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ABSTRACT *The Internet has become an increasingly common way for people to contact each other, to flirt, fall in love and start relationships. How does this development influence today's young people with intellectual disabilities? The article presents a picture of the Internet experiences of some young adults with intellectual disabilities and discusses how others view this usage. It is based on a qualitative study in Sweden where 10 young people with intellectual disabilities and 12 staff members were interviewed. The interviews show that young people with intellectual disabilities also use the Internet, mainly for social and romantic reasons. They view the Internet as a positive arena where they can be "like everybody else" and therefore generally present themselves without mentioning their disabilities. However, people around them tend to worry considerably and focus mainly on the risks involved in this usage of the Internet.*

Background

In a very brief period of time, social communication patterns among young people have changed and innovative forms of relations have developed through the Internet (Hernwall 2003, Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen & Löfgren-Mårtenson 2003, Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2006). New ways to meet for sexual and romantic purposes have been made possible through the virtual contact arenas and meeting-places that have emerged. On the Swedish website LunarStorm, for instance, four out of five teenagers are members with a personal so-called "Lunar identity" (Enochsson 2003). On the Internet one can flirt, generate others' interest in oneself, and develop romantic and sexual relations of both an anonymous and a more personal nature (Månsson *et al.* 2003). Some of the contacts people make exist exclusively on the Internet, while others are transferred from cyberspace to the "real" world. Certain encounters are exclusively of a brief nature, while other relationships can go on for a longer period of time, so-called "web flirts" and "web relationships" (Bjørnstad & Ellingson 2002).

But alongside the rapid development of the new possibilities presented by the Internet, concerns about the negative aspects of the technology have also

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arisen (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2006). Media attention has focused heavily on the risk of being deceived on the Net and on the easy access to pornography. New problems, such as net dependency and sex addiction, have also been described. The most intense concern has been articulated in relation to how children and adolescents use the Internet. But even as these concerns regularly get ventilated, there has been little research documenting what young people actually do when they use the Internet (Dunkels 2003).

How adolescents and young adults with intellectual disabilities use the Internet is even less known. We do know that among both staff and family members of people with intellectual disabilities there exists a general concern about private spheres such as romance and sexuality (Löfgren-Mårtenson 2004). Many parents today want their children to have the possibility of experiencing the positive aspects of love and sexuality. But at the same time they see their children as particularly exposed and vulnerable, running risks of sexual abuse or unwanted pregnancies. The caring world around young people with intellectual disabilities has a strong feeling of responsibility – a feeling that often is manifested through different forms of control.

We also know that a large number of people with intellectual disabilities lead socially isolated lives and are in need of more community contacts (Löfgren-Mårtenson 2004, Tideman 2000). So a question that arises is: do these new forms of communication on the Internet influence people with intellectual disabilities? In this article I investigate how and why the Internet is being used as a social arena by discussing the experiences of young people with intellectual disabilities and staff members at special schools and care services. How do young adults with intellectual disabilities present themselves on the Net? What are their experiences of entering cyberspace? And, finally, what are the staff members' experiences and opinions on the usage of the Internet by young people with intellectual disabilities?

Method, Selection and Approach

In order to answer these research questions I have used a qualitative and to a certain extent an ethnographic research method. The objective of the study was not generalizability but, instead, to produce in-depth knowledge in order to create a multifaceted picture of this research area. Qualitative studies often have an “insider-perspective” and aim for a focus on the informants own descriptions of their experiences (Henriksson & Månsson 1996). By using qualitative interviews both with young people with intellectual disabilities and with staff members, my aim was to discover, understand and identify different characteristics and significances of the research area.

As a complement, I met two of the informants with intellectual disabilities in their home environment in order to get more details about how the surfing on the Net is carried out in practice. I wanted to see more exactly what they do; for example which websites the informants preferred to visit, if and how they contacted other people, and how they presented themselves on the Net.

I sent a presentation of my research study and a request to participate to a number of professionally active key persons at (a) upper secondary schools

for pupils with intellectual disabilities, and (b) education programmes for adults with learning difficulties and in care services in western and southern Sweden. Through a “snowballing effect”, other informants volunteered spontaneously for the study. In addition, I wanted to get information about how websites are suited for people with disabilities. Therefore, I met two male informants who work with computers and the Internet, one as an IT-assistant and one as an editor-in-chief on a website. The empirical material with teachers, staff members and IT personnel consists of 12 interviews with informants aged between 25 and 62 (10 men and two women).

I sought informants with intellectual disabilities by letters requesting a participation in the study via staff members in day care centres, recreational and school activities. Also, I used advertisements directed to people with intellectual disabilities in the easy-to-read magazine, STEGET, which is published by FUB, the Swedish National Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability. The empirical material with people with intellectual disabilities consists of 12 interviews with six men and four women aged between 18 and 31. Two of the informants (one woman and one man) were interviewed twice during the field observation earlier mentioned.

The selection is not representative regarding different degrees of intellectual disability. Those who are included in the study and who showed an interest in being part of the research turned out to be mainly people with a very mild form of intellectual disability.

The interviews can be characterized as open conversations with support from an interview guide that included themes linked to the aim of the study: (a) the use of computers and the Internet; (b) reasons for using the Internet; (c) experiences of using the Internet; and finally (d) contacts in cyberspace. I used the same interview guide with the staff members, but the topic was their opinions about the use and experiences of the Internet among young adults with intellectual disabilities. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I was looking for patterns and common themes, but also for complexity and different perspectives on the research topic.

Interviewing people with intellectual disabilities is still an unconventional and partly problematic research method (Angrosino 1997, McCarthy 1999). There are many reasons for this. As a researcher, it may be difficult to know which questions to put and how to express oneself in a concrete and easily comprehensible fashion (see Löfgren-Mårtenson 2003/2005). Also, how can the researcher obtain data that demands a certain insight into processes, time and context when one of the characteristics of many intellectual disabilities is difficulty in self-reflexivity? There are, in addition, obstacles involved in interviewing people with intellectual disabilities on a subject that – in general – may be perceived as unfamiliar and embarrassing to discuss. Some tend to answer some of the questions in a particularly monosyllabic or laconic way. When that happens, it is easy as a researcher to “put the words into the informants’ mouths” and fill “the empty spaces” with personal interpretations. Another risk one runs is to present an erroneous significance of the young informants’ declarations on basis of the staff members’ statements.

I have been very aware of these dangers in my choices about both research method and informants and I hope I have managed to avoid some of them.

However, to choose qualitative research methods also has its drawbacks when it comes to interviewing staff members in special schools and care services. In previous research I have emphasized the importance of being conscious about how the results are influenced by the different informants who show an interest in participating in a qualitative interview study (Löfgren-Mårtenson 2003/2005). Are they for example people who already have reflected on norms, values and social events relevant to the research area? Will the informants dare to express “politically incorrect” opinions to a researcher? These are important challenges for a qualitative researcher and I hope that my awareness of these aspects has limited the difficulties in this study.

Finally, as a researcher in humanities and social sciences I am bound by research ethical principles (<http://www.codec.uu.se>) that disallow exposing the informants to any harm, that protect their right to anonymity and that do not permit the violation of an informant’s private life. Furthermore, it is crucial that the researcher makes sure that the informants with intellectual disabilities understand the purpose of the study and the consequences of participating in it. In a study about love and sexuality, protecting an informant’s private life is not always an easy principle to follow. Nevertheless, other studies about sexuality show that informants often value participation in research in positive ways, because participation allows informants to create consistency, reflect on their behaviour, and obtain greater insight into the own conduct (Lewin 1998). The informants in this study have fictive names and I have changed some sociological data to further protect their identity.

Theoretical Framework

Guiding the analysis was an interactionist perspective. I was interested in the interaction between the young people with intellectual disabilities and their contacts on the Internet, but also in the interaction between their surrounding world (i.e. mainly teachers and staff members in this case) and the young adults. The latter aspect is of a particular importance since other research shows consequences of the dependency situation in social life (e.g. Löfgren-Mårtenson 2004).

All sexual behaviour, as well as all other human behaviour, is symbolic and exists in a world consisting of symbols (Plummer 1982, Longmore 1998). It is together with our fellow human beings that we learn to discern the rules in different social contexts. In the same way that people learn other behaviours, sexuality is learnt through an interaction with others. I employ the classical sexual script theory of Gagnon and Simon (Gagnon & Simon 1973, Simon & Gagnon 1999). The scripts are used as a way to understand how sexual patterns, norms and behaviour have been learnt through social and cultural processes. What is considered to be “normal sexual behaviour” is something that changes over time. Simon and Gagnon (1999) subdivide the scripts into cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels. The cultural level concerns

general social norm systems and the interpersonal level organizes relationships between people. The intrapsychic level concerns the way an individual should act and react in a specific situation; for example, how, when and where you flirt.

The scripts are never static, nor immutable. The Internet, for example, can act as a catalyst for steadily faster changes of sexual patterns, cultures and behaviour norms (Månsson *et al.* 2003). By using script theory, the results from the interviews may be placed in a cultural, social and temporal context. How do you behave “normally” on the Net when it comes to romance and sexuality? What are the prevailing “rules” and “guidelines” to follow when you try to make contacts and flirt with people? How do you present yourself in cyberspace? In other words; is it possible to talk about a “cyber-script”?

It is also important to place research on disabilities in a social context where the living conditions for young people with intellectual disabilities are considered in relation to how other adolescents and young adults live their lives and deal with different social phenomena. The Internet is an example of a technology that has influenced forms of communication and social relations in revolutionary ways (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2006). Concepts such as “Net generation”, “Cyber Swedish”, “Net culture”, “Internet smartness” and “Netiquette rules” (Bergman 1999, Dunkels 2003, Hård af Segerstad 2002, Parker, Aldridge & Measham 1998, Tapscott 1998) have great relevance for understanding the behaviour and thoughts of the people I discuss here.

Results

“I Have Some Learning Difficulties”. About the Internet Users

The young interviewees in this study all belong to the “Net generation” (Tapscott 1998). That means that they have grown up with the Internet and they use computers on a daily basis. Often they have brothers and sisters who also use the Internet. Staff informants report that both young women and men with mild intellectual disabilities are frequent Net users today. They want to be like “everybody else”. They do not want to categorize themselves as belonging to the “group of intellectually disabled”; instead they want to get away from the stigmatization they feel is associated with their disability. Anders, 27, attended a special school when he was younger. Now he works in a clothing store. Anders describes himself:

I have some learning difficulties, but I do not have an intellectual disability.

The majority of the young Net users say that they present themselves in cyberspace without mentioning their intellectual disability. Instead they inform others about their age, interests and purposes of using the Internet. Part of Internet culture is the creation of new roles when contacting strangers (see Bjørnstad & Ellingsen 2002, Dunkels 2003). But the informants with intellectual disabilities point out that they are instead anxious to give a sincere and accurate impression. It is important to tell the truth, even though this

does not include the “whole truth”. Helena, 19, who lives with her parents and two brothers, describes her way of presenting herself on the Net:

I write that I love horses, in what town I live ... and what I like to do ... being together with my friends and so on.

To a large extent, my informants have managed to learn by themselves or through siblings how to use computers and the Internet, even if several among them also have been taught at school. Motivation seems to be an important factor in the learning process. A male teacher at a special school describes that students ask him how to spell the word “beautiful” because they want to write love letters on the Net. He thinks that it is important to learn how to use the Internet in order to get in contact with other people and additionally, it is also good way of learning spelling. However, many people on the Net spell wrongly or differently. That is why the young informants say that the usage of the so called “cyber language” (Hård af Segerstad 2002) has many advantages for people with intellectual disabilities. It demands neither correct spelling nor grammatical reference. Feelings, needs and wishes may instead be expressed through symbols and so-called “emoticons”. Mattias is a 25-year-old man with some speech difficulties. He depicts the advantages of communicating on the Internet:

The only problem I have on the Net is with spelling. But that doesn't matter, because the girls understand me anyway. That shows how kind they are to me.

But cyber-language also contains subtle codes and allusions that can be hard to understand and catch. To have an intellectual disability means to have a variable predisposition to assimilate this form of social interaction (e.g. Tideman 2000). That could be one reason why most of the informants prefer e-mail contact instead of chat. The communication by chat on the Net is synchronic in time, while with email, you can communicate at your own rate.

“Cyberspace Is The Right Place If You Want To Shag A Partner!” Virtual Meeting Places and Net Culture

The majority of the young informants use the Internet mainly for social and romance purposes. They want to make new friends and above all they want to find potential partners via the Net, preferably with the aim of creating a relationship in “real life”. Josefine is a 21-year-old woman who often uses the Internet. She says while laughing:

When I was 17 I decided to get a boyfriend through the Internet. That's the right place if you want to shag a partner!

The interviewees say that they primarily resort to the popular virtual meeting-place called LunarStorm (www.lunarstorm.se). Here the young people of today meet and keep in contact with their peers and their girlfriends and boyfriends. This is also where adolescents and young adults share the “latest fads” and where they learn how to act and behave according

to the prevailing youth culture (Hernwall 2002, Enochsson 2003). Several of the informants told me that they wanted to have friends and partners who do not have an intellectual disability. They wanted to attend meeting places that are geared toward young people in general, and not just to the ones that are specifically targeted at people with intellectual disabilities.

When the informants seek contact with others they flirt by creating their own personal profile pages, and also by visiting other people's personal pages. It is an advantage if the other party presents a photo of him/herself on the profile page. It is also important to update the pages and to make them interesting for others. Anna, 24, lives alone in an apartment and has previously lived together with a boyfriend. Anna showed me her presentation pages when I visited her during an Internet session:

Here you can read about my favourite food, best movie, my favourite stars and some of the love poems that I like.

At another Internet session, Anders told me how he flirts on the Internet by ticking requests and choosing from different alternatives about civil status, age and personality. On this website it is also possible to look at other people's choices and preferences. Anders has tried to find a partner on the Net several times and says while smiling:

But you better not have too high expectations.

Sometimes the informants contact people they already know, but do not dare contact in "real life". And again, most frequently, the young people I interviewed look for a partner who does not go or who has never went to special schools. Josefine says:

I rather have a boyfriend that hasn't attended a special school . . . I want one that has a steady job and a driver's license. Because I can't drive a car myself, I have a bad heart condition.

It is rare that the young informants express themselves in a sexually explicit manner with their Internet contacts. Instead, the communication is primarily about where they live, how old they are and what their interests are. However, some do show their interest explicitly and also express their attraction to the other person. Net flirts between young people are generally considered to be of a more concrete, expressive and daring nature (Bjørnstad & Ellingsen 2002, Månsson *et al.* 2003). One reason for this is that these Net-relations often stay on the Internet, and therefore continue to be anonymous in character.

In this study, it seems that the young women with intellectual disabilities are more likely to focus on finding relationships on the Net, with people who they subsequently may meet IRL (in real life). The young men, on the other hand, tend more to adhere to their fantasies about ideal women on the Net. This gender-related difference is also likely to be based on a more traditional division between romance and sexuality, especially since some of the men show a tendency to be more interested in using the Net for sexual purposes (cf. Månsson *et al.* 2003). However, only a few of the men with

intellectual disabilities spontaneously admit they use the Internet to gain access to pornographic images and films, even if the staff members have understood that this is relatively frequent among the men. Mats is a 31-year-old man and a taciturn person, who uses the Internet now and then. During the interview he says that he sometimes looks at girls on the Net. Other research shows that the easy accessibility and anonymity are important factors behind the use of the Internet for sexual purposes (cf. Månsson *et al.* 2003). Anders also uses the Internet to look at erotic pictures and explains:

That is the main reason that I use the Internet ... to be able to do it. I don't want to get in contact with them. Just look at them. It is very exciting to enter the "underworld" and to see what they are doing!

"The Biggest Risk Is That Nothing Will Ever Happen To Me!" Experiences of Using the Net

A majority of the interviewed young people consider the Internet to be an arena that has given them many positive experiences and adventures, especially because it provides them with the possibility of one day meeting a partner. Nevertheless, it is difficult to realize those possibilities, and only a few of the informants have met a partner through the Internet. Likewise, most of the informants declare that they in fact only have contacts with people on the Net that they already know from their special schools, jobs or other parts of their "real life". But a few of the young informants describe that they have created and developed relationships with people outside the sphere of those already known, and that these interactions only exist in cyberspace. Discussing his Net-contacts Mattias says:

I have my best friends on the Net ... and a girlfriend. But I have never met them.

Another positive aspect about the Internet that is mentioned by informants is the possibility for the young adults to decide for themselves when, where and how to meet others. Jacob, 22, says:

They don't know who you are ... what school you are attending. They don't really know you at all.

The Internet is not only merely another way to meet people. It is considered to be a unique way to meet other people, both friends and potential partners, for the informants. On the Internet, a young person can socialize with others beyond the control of staff and family members and they can also organize, plan and decide by themselves how to arrange these meetings. Also, through the Internet, possibilities are created for a secret parallel world where the informants can have a private life, something all the young people I spoke to very much appreciated. They feel that through the Net they escape the control of the surrounding world. Without having to ask permission, they are, all by themselves, capable of deciding which sites they want to visit and with whom they want to communicate. Anders says:

That is what is so nice with the Internet . . . I have my own time and I can do whatever I want to, whenever I want.

The young adults in the study state that they are conscious about the risks involved with using the Internet. They mention everything from the danger of being defrauded of money to the risk of becoming addicted if you spend too much time in cyberspace. However, most of them focus on the risks involved in dating strangers and describe different strategies that should be followed to avoid getting into trouble. Cecilia explains:

It could happen that you meet guys that want to cheat you . . . They say that they are nineteen and then they are fifty, or something.

Overall, the young informants seem to have assimilated a sort of “Internet smartness”, i.e. knowledge about handling risks on an intellectual level. Despite this, some of the young women behave in actual situations exactly contrary to their verbal statements. They have, for instance, arranged dates with perfect strangers in their own apartments, or they have disclosed information of a more personal nature on the Internet. A reason for this is the longing for a partner that makes some of them set aside the security strategies on the spur of the moment. A male staff member tells a story about a female student that got cheated of money at a date:

She went away once to meet this guy and then she stayed there during the weekend! And I mean . . . now she is doing it again, even though she surely learned a lesson last time.

Another explanation is that there are different ways to appreciate an element of risk depending on the social and cultural context one finds oneself in (Breck 2002). I will discuss this further at the end of the article. Generally speaking, the young adults do not assess the risk of getting into trouble as seriously as they assess the risk of not having anything at all ever happen to them. However, to get permission from their caregivers to go on using the Internet, it is important that they reassure those caregivers by declaring themselves to be aware of the different risk strategies they need to use on the Internet. Let us therefore proceed to examine the staff members’ attitude towards the Internet usage among young people with intellectual disabilities.

“You Can Easily See The Bad Part Of It!” Opinions and Conducts by Staff Members

The interviews show a discrepancy between the young people’s and the staff members’ views on the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet. On the whole, the young adults are much more positive than the staff. The staff members have a very pessimistic view, even if some of them express an ambivalent attitude and that a few of them find it positive. However, a majority of the staff has the opinion that the Internet is an altogether unsuitable medium for people with intellectual disabilities. A female staff member says:

I think you can see the bad part of it . . . with broken hearts and everything . . . And that they get addicted to the Internet . . . No, I have a rather negative approach to the Net.

The staff members' view on the risks involved in Internet usage is based on how the Internet is presented in the media, and on preconceptions about people with intellectual disabilities. They are considered to belong to a vulnerable and exposed group, which is also characterized as gullible (Löfgren-Mårtenson 2004). Keeping this in mind, the staff members have a feeling of responsibility and they uphold to varying degrees a controlling and protective attitude towards the young people by teaching them "Netiquette rules" (see also Bergman 1999). An example of this is how the staff members fix timeframes, ban sites with pornographic and violent content, and control which sites the young and adults visit.

The staff members also believe that the Internet is an unsuitable way for the young people with intellectual disabilities to find a potential partner. They are very sceptical towards fixing dates with strangers via the Net. This is why some staff members try to offer alternative ways of making social contacts, for example by organizing dances for persons with intellectual disabilities. A male staff member repeats the advice he gives to the youth:

You have to be clean, wear nice clothes, and learn how to dance and so on . . . I think this is how you meet people in a more proper way.

Several staff members argue that the Internet can be an excellent tool to practice reading comprehension. A few of the staff also belong to a younger generation of experienced Net users, and perhaps for that reason, they focus also on the social advantages of the Internet. They stress that young people with intellectual disabilities also has the possibility of leading a life that is as "normal" as possible, which means that they should be able to chat and socialize with others on the Net.

People who work with computers and technology emphasize that the Internet is a medium that lends itself to easy use by people with different backgrounds, experiences and abilities. An editor of a website says that the option of anonymity allows connection between people who might not meet in other circumstances. David, who works as an IT assistant, also points out the positive aspects with computers. He thinks it is easy to understand why websites as LunarStorm are so popular also among young people with intellectual disabilities:

The site is very easy to use . . . and yes, you meet lots of people there. Everyone who WANTS to use it CAN use it. That is how the site is built.

Learning the "Cyber-Script" – Conclusions

The interviews and observations I conducted clearly show that the young interviewees with intellectual disabilities belong to the Net Generation and that they use cyberspace as a social arena, just like other teenagers and young adults of today. They describe many advantages to cyberculture. An aspect that emerges is that the Internet contributes to the creation of more space for

private life and a free zone, beyond the surrounding world's control. Outside of Internet activity, meetings and meeting-places between people with intellectual disabilities are otherwise, in general, often organized by others. Holm, Holst, Back Olsen and Pertl (1997) use the concept of "created communities" to denote communities that are organized by others and not by those whom the activities are intended for. As a result, this community with others contributes to maintaining the participants in a care-receiving role (Gustavsson 1998). Here, the Internet can be a supporting tool for young people with intellectual disabilities to create a new kind of community where the Net users include their own needs and aspirations. Instead of meeting up as a result of the staff members' prearranged organizing, the young people meet on the Internet whenever and wherever they wish.

This study also shows that the informants with intellectual disabilities are highly motivated to learn about norms and codes in cyberspace. The rationale for this is their longing for social contacts; primarily girlfriends and boyfriends. Another important reason is the aim of not being automatically "classified" as being part of the same groups with whom they normally socialize or meet at school or at work. This is why several of the informants present themselves on the Net without mentioning their intellectual disabilities. Instead, they express their personalities by telling about hobbies, favourite music and movies, likes and dislikes etc.

The young informants themselves consider cyberlanguage to be advantageous for people who have difficulties with spelling and reading. And the results show that the young interviewees do have several contacts on the Net, both with already-known friends and partners, and with new acquaintances. The Net enables these young people to practise how to flirt and contact potential partners. In this sense, it is possible to talk about learning a "cyber-script" according to Gagnon and Simon's theory about sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon 1973, Simon & Gagnon 1999). The young informants gain knowledge about what is considered to be "normal sexual behaviour" on the Net and about how an individual should act and react in a specific situation, e.g. how, when and where you flirt. In cyberspace, the young adults with intellectual disabilities also can find role models for flirting and practice the skill with others.

Even though it seems like the young men and women with intellectual disabilities have learned a cyber-script, it is still quite unusual for any of them to find a partner in real life through the Internet. Some of the women have managed to do so, but the young men declare that they are most interested in looking at women on the Internet and fantasizing about them. Other research shows that it is very common for teenagers and young adults to consume pornography on the Net (e.g. Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2006). There is a general feeling among young people that this is nothing to be ashamed of or feel guilty about. In this study, this seems to be a more delicate topic. Most of the young men and women informants with intellectual disabilities do not want to talk openly about pornography. One reason for this is that their use of computers and the Internet is more controlled than that of other teenagers

and young adults. Therefore, pornography consumption could lead to a situation where they are forbidden to be in cyberspace.

Finally, the study also shows a discrepancy between the staff members' and the young people's views about the Internet. While the young people in general have a positive view of the Internet and its possibilities, staff members worry that the young people could come in contact with pornography or meet strangers who delude them financially or abuse them sexually. The young people themselves, on the contrary, perceive the risks for disappointments or unfulfilled expectations in a partner as the more serious risk. Only a few of the interviewed staff members point out positive aspects of using the Internet, such as more social contacts and practising communication and spelling.

Discussion

Risks and Hopes on the Net

To conclude, let us look more closely at the social construction of risk. Thomas Breck (2002:56) argues that the way one defines "risk" is always the result of a *social process* and that it therefore always is a question of *negotiation*. How people view risk is determined in a large part by their social position. The young people and the staff members are differently placed in terms of social and institutional hierarchy and context; therefore, it is not surprising that they have differing views on the kinds of situations that constitute risk. Both groups have created their view in a way that includes both rational and irrational parts in the assessment of Internet risks. The young people base their view on their longing for a partner. Staff members, in turn, base their view on their feeling of responsibility towards the young people.

The question about which Internet risks are worth our concern cannot be solved once and for all, but must be discussed publicly on a regular basis (Breck 2002:62). Is this a matter that is discussed with the young people with intellectual disabilities? Does a negotiation take place regarding the opinion and the handling of risks on the Internet? This study shows that it is the staff members' view on risk that is predominant and controlling. This is manifest in the set of rules of conduct, "Netiquette rules" that have been stipulated in relation to the young people's usage of Internet. So far it seems that a majority among the young people with intellectual disabilities also respect these rules. However, some individuals do not. As the results in this study show, the longing for love and relationships is often very strong. Therefore, factors related to sexuality, recognition and love – and not only factors related to disability – have to be taken into consideration and discussed.

In the same way that Breck (2002) argues that "risk" is a social construction, "participation" is also a social construction based on the context a person finds her- or himself in. Moreover, disability in itself is also to a high degree a social construction and a marker to which the surrounding world attaches certain preconceptions and views (Barron 2004). By choosing not always to reveal their disabilities, young people create new behavioural

and communication patterns which entail new experiences and feelings of participation. However, the new development can also result in a gap between people with different degrees of intellectual disabilities. Individuals with a milder intellectual disability can be included as part of the so-called “normal population” via the Internet. Nevertheless, marginalization will still befall those young people who do not have the ability to express themselves in writing and to use the new channels of communication and interaction. By making the Internet more accessible and adapted to all, the possibility for participation based on different levels of abilities and life conditions increases. Usage of the Internet is here to stay, so let us instead find out more about its advantages and disadvantages, and provide young people with intellectual disabilities with better tools to handle the complex reality that exists in cyberspace.

Note

¹ This article summarizes the results of a larger study published in Swedish (Löfgren-Mårtenson 2005).

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