

Taking the Girls’ Room Online: Similarities and Differences Between Traditional Girls’ Rooms and Computer-Mediated Ones

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Previous studies have pointed at the girls’ room’s importance for girls identity work. The “internet generation” is no different in this aspect. Girls still stage performances, where they experiment with roles and styles. The difference is rather that where it used to be done in the girl’s room at home, the identity work is now often found online. The question proposed in this paper is whether Internet communities can be seen as extensions or online versions of the girls’ room. By using results from quantitative content analysis of 250 personal profile sites of female users aged 15-20, this paper discusses the similarities and differences between traditional girls’ rooms and the computer-mediated ones at Lunarstorm.

Even though the activities performed resemble each other, the computer-mediated girls’ room distinguishes itself from the traditional one in at least one important respect: what used to be done in privacy now takes place in public. Here, Erving Goffman’s concepts ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ are used to make sense of the nature of the two forms of girls’ rooms, to show that while the traditional girls’ room correspond to the backstage region, the computer-mediated one rather represents a front stage setting, where performances are made.

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During the last decade we have seen a dramatic growth in the number of users and online places aimed at communication and community. Many of these online arenas have young people as their explicit target group and the largest groups of users are also found among young people (SCB 2004).

In Sweden, one of the most frequented online meeting places is a web community called Lunarstorm (www.lunarstorm.se), which is also the most visited web page in all the Scandinavian countries. It has 1.2 million members, which is quite impressive considering the fact that the entire Swedish population amounts to only 9 million inhabitants. As is true for many other online communities, Lunarstorm too is especially popular among young people. It is the web site where young Swedes spend most time – on average 45 minutes a day. Half of the users are under 18 years old, the single largest group found among 15 to 20 year-olds. Within this age group, 85% of all Swedes visit Lunarstorm on a regular basis (i.e., at least once a week). Out of the same age group, 28% visit Lunarstorm every day.¹ Here, they hang out together, they take part of the content of each other's personal sites, including diaries and photo galleries, they write messages to each other, solve each other's quizzes, and they read and write entries in each other's guest books.

Media has often addressed young people's doings in Lunarstorm and similar online places, and addressed the fact that they spend a considerable amount of time in such places. Lunarstorm has even been called "Sweden's largest youth recreation centre online" (Söderhjelm 2002). As is shown by statistics over use, Lunarstorm is apparently a place where young people hang out together in their everyday interaction. It has come to constitute a room of their own of sorts.

The question proposed in this paper is whether and how Internet communities can be seen as an extension or an online version of the teenagers' room, or more precisely, the girls' room. Here, I will look upon what activities take place and discuss what similarities and differences there may be between the traditional girls' room and the computer-mediated ones at Lunarstorm.

The Importance of Finding a Place of One's Own

The adolescence is a period of exploring and experimenting, and of trying out various alternative identities. Here, modern society confronts individuals with a complex abundance of choices, while at the same time, it offers little guidance as to what they should choose (Giddens 1991). Young people of today are not bound by the constraints of rules and norms of old patterns of life, which implies a freedom to find their own way of life (Ganetz 1992). However, it also implies that they stand without the support that traditions used to be for individuals' life choices. They are expected to make decisions and form identities on their own, in a world where the power of authorities has diminished, and where, at the same time, there is an abundance of different roles and ideals to choose from. The way to an independent identity goes through experiments, and by trying various roles, sometimes alone, but more often in the interaction with others. It is by mirroring oneself in the gaze of others that one develops a sense of who one is and who one wishes to be (Harris 1998). Here, I look upon identity, not as a static entity, but as something that is developed over time in the interaction with other individuals (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959/1990).

1 Statistics according to the managers of Lunarstorm, available at: www.lunarworks.se, November, 2005.

The lives of young people are to a great extent controlled by adults, such as parents, or representatives from institutions such as school and youth recreation centers. Therefore, says Ganetz (1992), one of the distinctive marks of youth culture is the seeking for places where they young people can be on their own with peers, without interventions from parents or representatives of adult authorities. These “free places”, says Ganetz, are absolutely necessary for the individual to seek, experiment with and create her/his own identity. The free places of boys have traditionally been territories set up in streets and other public places. For girls and women, on the other hand, these spaces have often been experienced as dangerous, and therefore, historically, boys and men have been more visible in public (Lewis 1993; Ganetz 1992; McRobbie and Garber 1976). As McRobbie & Garber note (1976: 115), girls have traditionally also had to be careful not to “get into trouble” and “excessive loitering on street corners might be taken as a sexual invitation to the boys”.²

Previous studies have pointed at the girls’ room’s importance for girls’ identity work. Instead of working with identities in the street, as the boys, girls have instead often mainly sought their free spaces in the home, at shopping malls, or in other places that offer some security (but on the other hand are also more controlled and supervised by adults). It is in the girls’ room, or within the “culture of the bedroom” (McRobbie and Garber 1976: 213) that girls have gathered together in cliques to engage in identity work. Typical activities have been to chat, read magazines, and listen to records. The consumption of media and popular culture thus constitutes an important part of the activities. Through the media, the girls gather information on what different identities may be available for them to choose between, but media consumption is also a way to gather information about the value and status of various identities and identity markers. Thus media can perhaps be said to replace the authorities of old times. But the media and their products are also identity markers per se, as is the case with for example music subcultures: what kind of music you listen to is an important marker of what group or subculture you identify with.

The social aspects of the “bedroom culture” should not be neglected. Along with being a room for working on identity, the girls’ room is also a room for working with relationships. It is here that the young women get together and share their most intimate thoughts, hopes and dreams, and where they compare and scrutinize ideals, and chisel out their identities together (see also Ganetz 1992).

Finally, one of the perhaps most important activities in relation to the young women’s identity work concern the production of style. Here girls are involved in the “rituals of trying on clothes, and experimenting with hair-styles and make-up” (McRobbie and Garber 1997: 115). The identity work takes a concrete form in the experimentation with styles, involving trying on different clothes, accessories and other items. This may be done in solitude, but is perhaps more often done together with friends, and in dialogue with the media. Even though the production of style may be done in various settings, such as for example clothes shops and fitting rooms, the perhaps most important part of this experimentation goes on within the frames of the girls’ room, which can be seen as a free space in its being protected from public view and control.

The Internet as a Room of One’s Own

As was said in the introduction, during the last decade, the internet has come to constitute an important place for social interaction. It has sometimes been seen as specifically important

2 As several authors have noted, however (c.f. Drotner 1991/1996; Göthlund 1997), to the extent that this dichotomy really existed, during the last decades it has decreased, as girls have come to take an increasing part of public places, thus becoming more visible, and boys have come to spend more time in the boys’ room at home, alone or with friends, for example in front of the computer, TV-games or, more recently, playing poker.

for women and girls, being a public, unsupervised arena – but visited from secure places like the home, the school or the library (Sveningsson Elm 2006). Even though researchers and media alike have pointed at the prevalence of harassment and inequalities online (Cherny and Reba Weise 1996; Herring 1993, 1994), the internet has also frequently been called a “safe haven” for women, as well as for girls engaging in identity work (Stern 1999, 2004; Thiel 2005; Grisso and Weiss 2005).³ According to Stern (1999: 23) rather than using their home pages to merely “publish information”, authors use their pages to construct identity. Here, they can try out various roles and identities, in safety at home, while at the same time the medium provides them with an audience in which to mirror themselves. As Thiel (2005: 197) puts it:

/.../IM provides a ripe landscape for a girl to shift from identity to identity (for example, student to sexpot), and from moment to moment /.../. This is an opportunity for a girl to better understand who she is and *play* with who she wants to be in the future- an opportunity not afforded to past generations (and to lower classes now).

Entering the Field

Web communities are a kind of Internet arena where several types of activities may take place. They may provide opportunities for users to create their own web pages, take part in discussion groups and chat rooms, but they may also contain search engines and links to further sites. However, the point of web communities is often for users to seek for contact and community, where the opportunity of sharing experiences, knowledge, values and outlooks is an important reason for users to join (Sveningsson, Lövheim, and Bergquist 2003). Some web communities are directed towards specific groups of users, while others, such as Lunarstorm, are more loosely organized with respect to interest or demographics, and have social interaction as their main or only goal. Web communities also vary with respect to openness: whereas some web communities are open for all Internet users, others (e.g. Lunarstorm) demand that users first register as members, and provide offline name, address and social security number in order to take part of the content.

Lunarstorm can be described as a platform hosting several different modes of communication.⁴ It has discussion groups on hundreds of different topics. There are public arenas where users can communicate and/or exhibit their creative work such as photos, paintings and texts. Users also have personal pages (called “krypin” or “nests” in English) where they present themselves to others, write diaries and gather resources they wish to share with others. The units of analysis were 500 nests – 250 maintained by male and 250 by female users aged 15-20. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the 250 nests of the female users⁵

3 The aspect of security is important not only for women – men who display alternative gender identities may also profit from the absence of physical reprisals as a consequence of their performances.

4 Lunarstorm is managed by a limited company, and includes some commercial elements. Membership is free of charge for the users, but is instead financed by commercial advertising and by market research. There are also additional pay services, offering for example more disk space and more advanced communication tools.

5 I have the permission of the managers of Lunarstorm to do this study. However, I did not seek informed consent of the 500 users whose nests were subject to quantitative analyses. Here, I followed the recommendations of Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and Jones 2003), according to which material from the Internet can be collected and analyzed without informed consent, on condition that the arena that is studied is public, and that the studied material is not sensitive (see also Sveningsson 2001, 2001, 2003; Sveningsson, Lövheim, and Bergquist 2003; Sveningsson Elm forthcoming). All names and other information in the nests that may lead to the identification of users, or people referred to in their nests, have been altered.

Lunarstorm has a friend finder facility where users can specify the characteristics of other users they wish to find. To get a sample of users, I used this friend finder facility, specifying age and gender, while letting city of residence vary with users. This was done in turn for female users 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 years old, and for male users of the same age groups (users are classified as being 15 from their 15th to their 16th birthday, and 19 from their 19th to their 20th birthday, hence the users in the sample are between 15 and 20 years old even though the age group 20 was not included in the search). This resulted in a sample of 50 users from each age and gender group, i.e., 500 in total.⁶

At the time I collected my data (2004-2005), nests could have 13 sub-pages: pres, guest book, diary, friends, clubs, roots, hot, quiz, lists, collage, stuff, party and status. In this study, I chose to delimit the scope of study to three sub-pages: pres, stuff and collage pages.

All users have a “pres” or presentation page. The pres is the starting point where visitors arrive when clicking other users’ name links. It is here that first impressions are created, and where visitors decide whether to proceed to look at the other sub-pages, sign the guest book or take other initiatives to contact. Pres pages vary greatly in how much information users provide. Some do not give any information at all, besides the user name (which appears automatically as soon as the user has registered as a member). Others write detailed descriptions about themselves, their background, interests and relationships to other people. On “stuff” pages, users publish material such as photos, texts, drawings, sound files, video clips, links to web sites and other material. “Collage” pages work like photo albums. The main difference from the stuff page is that the material is more clearly organized and that users have more disk space at their disposal and can thus publish more material.⁷

A quantitative content analysis was made of the “pres”, “stuff” and “collage” pages of all 500 nests. Quantitative content analysis has been described as the objective, systematic and quantitative presentation of the manifest content of a message (Østbye et al. 2003). As other quantitative methods, it is supposed to be independent of who is doing the analysis, and so the units of analysis (i.e., what parts of the content are to be counted) are usually decided and fixed before the analysis takes its start. In other words, content analyses are usually deductive. However, in this study, the approach was inductive. In the analysis, I looked for what aspects of self the young people expressed in their nests, but I did not know beforehand which aspects these would turn out to be. I therefore let the data gradually give rise to the categories for analysis. The method used could thus be described as a hybrid – quantitative content analysis with streaks of thematic analysis or grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990), or the other way around: a thematic analysis where the resulting categories became subject to a statistical analysis.

The analysis started with the pres page of each nest. There, all components such as texts, links, pictures and other graphical elements, as well as the graphic design were described. Similar inventories were made for the stuff and collage folders. I wrote brief descriptions of 50-250 words of each nest, and classified them according to what aspects of self each user emphasized. These aspects of self will in the following text be referred to as “themes”. I chose not to limit myself to a certain number of themes, but all themes that were expressed were included. The number of themes per nest therefore ranges from 0 to 23, with a mean of 4,28 and a median of 4. When classifying the themes, no consideration was taken into how large extent a certain theme was stressed, but data were treated on a nominal scale where all cases

6 Information about age and gender is acquired automatically by Lunarstorm’s software in the registration process, i.e. when the users provide their social security number. Even if this decreases the risk of gender crossing, it is of course still possible that some of the users have provided fake social security numbers to appear to be of another gender or age than is actually the case.

7 Collage is an additional pay service, but is frequently enough used to be included in the analysis. 279 of the 500 users in the sample had a “stuff” page, and 225 had “collage” pages. In both cases, there were slightly more women than men, however not as to make the difference significant.

of occurrence were given the value one and the rest of the cases the value zero. A survey of the material resulted in 94 different themes. In order to make the material more manageable, the themes were grouped into 20 overarching categories.

What Young Women Seem to do at Lunarstorm

By looking at the results from the quantitative study, we get an idea of what kind of material and what activities are frequently occurring among the young women in their nests at Lunarstorm (see table 1). The table below shows the frequency with which different categories occurred in the material – i.e., what kind of material the young women display in their presentations of self. I will here focus on the categories that are represented by more than 20% of the female users, i.e., the six most frequently occurring categories.

Table 1. What young women display - categories

	Rank	Sum	%
	Young women	Young women	Young women
Relationships	1	196	78.4
Cultural interest	2	118	47.2
Feelings	3	76	30.4
Animals	4	73	29.2
Party	5	52	20.8
Exposure of body	5	52	20.8
Work & Education	7	46	18.4
Sport	8	45	18
Humor	9	36	14.4
Motorvehicles	10	19	7.6
Technology	11	15	6
Political interest	12	14	5.6
Exposure of status	13	13	5.2
Cooking	13	13	5.2
Ethnic origin	15	9	3.6
Heterosexual desires	16	7	2.8

The kind of material that tops the list above all concerns social relationships. The category ‘relationships’ is the one with most occurrences among the young women, where as many as 78.4% present or put emphasis on their social relationships in their nests. Within the category, there are 3 themes, or different types of relationships: friendships, romantic relationships and family relationships. All three score high in comparison with other themes in the material, but it is above all friendships and romantic relationships that are stressed (among the young women, 65.6% present friendships, 42% present romantic relationships and 28% present family relationships).⁸

The kind of material that occurred second most often are found in the category ‘cultural interests’, which are stressed by as many as 47.2% of the users. This category is constituted by the themes music, literature, poetry, theatre, film and TV, and can thus be said to correspond to the consumption of media and popular culture. For some of the themes within the category, there is also a division of whether the interest is as a fan or as practitioner of the activity. The most frequently occurring theme is music/fan (28% of the girls), but poetry/practice (12%) and art/practice (7.6%) ranks quite high too. Other references to the consumption (and production) of media or popular culture occur: movie/fan (5.2%),

8 See also Sveningsson Elm 2007.

literature/fan (3.2%), art/fan (2.8%), tv/soapopera, music/practice and dance/practice (all 2.4%), anime/manga/cartoon (1.6%), theatre/practice and literature/practice (both 0.8%). The fact that cultural interests seem to be so widespread among young people have been notified by authors such as Kirsten Drotner (1991/1996), who explains this interest with the assistance that young people often can get from aesthetic practices in their identity work.

The third most frequent category is ‘feelings’, where as much as 30.4% of the young women in various ways express and discuss feelings and emotions in their nests. Also this is something that may be typical for the “culture of the bedroom” or for “girl culture”, where a considerable amount of time is often dedicated to discussing feelings and relationships, especially romantic ones (see for example Ambjörnsson 2004).

Something that I have not seen mentioned anywhere else in accounts of typical girls’ room activities, but that was frequent at Lunarstorm, is references to domestic animals. I do not know how this should be interpreted, but there is a clear difference between the nests of men and women here, where as much as 29.2% of the young women, but only 7.6% of the young men make references to their animals.

Something that *is* typical for youth culture, however, is talking about parties – both those that have already occurred and planned ones. This is also obvious in the nests of the young women, where as much as 20.8% address such issues, typically in the form of published pictures, or in references to specific parties as especially enjoyable occasions. The publishing of such material can, of course, also be seen as a way to further strengthen the ties within the group of friends, and to create a sense of group membership.

The last category that is expressed by more than 20% of the young women is ‘exposure of the body’, where 20.8% of the young women put focus on displaying their physical appearances (Sveningsson Elm 2006). Much of the content in this category can be interpreted as manifestations of a women’s production of style. The girls experiment with various outfits, accessories, hair-styles, make-ups, postures and facial expressions. They then take photographs, alone and/or together with friends, and the photographs are then published in the nests. The purpose of these photographs may be multifaceted. First, it can be seen as a will to show off one’s physical appearance, and to display oneself as beautiful or sexy. This is also the interpretation most often being done, by popular media and by the users themselves. However, it can also be interpreted as a search, and an exploration of a feminine gender identity. It may very well be another manifestation of the same phenomenon as Ganetz describes in the activities going on in the fitting rooms of clothes shops, where young women squeeze themselves in together, in order to try various styles and combinations of clothes and accessories. The purpose of such activities can be summarized as a quest to see “Could this be me?” The question being explored is then the teenager’s eternal “Who am I?”. However, it here gets yet one more dimension in that the young woman also has to ask herself and position herself in relation to the question “Who am I *as a woman*?” (Ganetz 1992).

In this survey of the material we can thus conclude that the kind of activities going on in the young women’s nests at Lunarstorm coincide very well with the activities that have been described as typical for the “bedroom culture”. To a great extent, it concerns social interaction and social relationships – to engage in them, but also to discuss relationships to other individuals – be it friends, romantic partners or family members. The consumption of media and popular culture, too, such as popular music, movie, TV etc, is another aspect typical for the “bedroom culture”, which seem to take up much space in the young women’s nests. Finally, the production of style, which is often occurring in the nests of the young women, is one of the activities that have been pointed out as one of the most typical for the “bedroom culture”.

Mediation Making a Difference?

Having stated the similarities, we should perhaps also ask ourselves what are the differences. danah boyd (2007) lists four specific properties that she sees as unique for (computer)mediated public sites in comparison with un-mediated ones: persistence (what is written online may be accessible for a long time afterwards), searchability (people and their online activities can be found online), replicability (conversations can be copied and pasted into other contexts) and invisible audiences (online communicators do not know who may overhear conversations or observe their online actions). The last of these properties is closely related to what I see as the perhaps most obvious difference between the traditional girls' room and the computer-mediated girls' room at Lunarstorm, namely the relationship between the private and the public.⁹

The activities of the girls' room as we know them have traditionally been performed in the private room, as Thompson (Thompson 1994: 38) puts it: "in privacy, secrecy or among a restricted circle of people". This has both its advantages and drawbacks. The advantage associated with doing identity work in the private room is of course that one is protected. One can freely experiment, alone or in the company of close and trusted friends, and try out new roles, in the safety it means to know that one will not be judged or scrutinized until one is prepared to step out of the room. In other words, one is in full control of the situation. However, the very same properties at the same time also constitute the drawbacks. One has less opportunity to be seen by other individuals; and thus has less opportunities of trying different roles against an audience to see what different reactions result from them, and in this way to develop one's identity in dialogue with others. It may also be that the specific friends who are included in the restricted circle of people of the girls' room may be constraining and exert more social control than other people would. Hence, the privacy of the traditional girls' room, making the young women invisible, at the same time brings them both freedom and limitations.¹⁰

In the computer-mediated girls' room of Lunarstorm, on the other hand, one has a potentially huge audience. What, then, does it mean that what used to be a private affaire now has thousands or even millions of potential spectators? On the one hand it means that one gets to be seen. One can try different roles against a real audience and not merely an imagined one, as in the girls' room. On the other hand, the fact that the audience is real also means that consequences of the experimentation will be real. The internet has been depicted as a safe haven, and it is true that repercussions will in most cases be less serious than in real life. Sanctions, both immediate and physical ones may of course result, but typically not as often and not as serious as in "real life". But still, there may be consequences. One can get bullied online, and one can get a bad reputation at school or encounter problems at work as a result of one's online actions and interactions (boyd and Heer 2006). And one can get into contact with people who may harass or abuse others. This is something that popular media has often focused on, pointing out that while parents believe their children to be in safety at home, in fact, through their computers they may be in even greater danger than out in the streets of their local community, being exposed to millions of strangers with dishonest intentions (Olsson 2006).

9 Although 'public' has sometimes also been used to denote issues relating to the state or to politics, I will here understand "public" in a more general sense: as being 'open' or 'available' to the public. What is public is then "what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear about. What is private, then, by contrast, is what is hidden from view, what is said or done in privacy or secrecy or among a restricted circle of people" (Thompson, 1994:38).

10 A parallel to this can be seen in ethnologist Lena Gerholm's account on Muslim-Arabic body practices (Gerholm 1998).

When looking at the differences between the traditional girls' room and the computer-mediated girls' room, Erving Goffman's concepts of 'front stage' and 'back stage' may be useful (Goffman 1959/1990). Goffman made use of dramaturgical metaphors to describe the interaction between individuals, notably their presentations of self. Whenever individuals seek to make a certain impression on others (which they do most of the time), this is seen as a 'performance'. The person who is seeking to form the impression is an 'actor', and the people in front of whom the actor performs is an 'audience' (Goffman 1959/1990).

'Front stage' refers to when the actor is involved in doing a performance. The concept can be divided into two aspects: the 'setting', which is the place where the performance takes place, and the 'personal front', which can refer either to the equipment or items needed to perform, or to the personal characteristics of the actor.

'Back stage', on the other hand, is when the performing person, the actor, is present but the audience is not. The actor is either alone, or in a group in which the members cooperate around the performance - a team. Back stage is a place or a situation in which the actor can relax and step out of character, and it can be used for preparing and rehearsing the role until it is time to step out before the audience again.

My (and Goffman's) use of the term 'audience' is clearly different from traditions within media studies, aiming at describing the consumption of media content. According to those traditions, 'audiences' are generally seen as related to the private sphere, whereas the 'public' is seen as related to the public sphere (even though Livingstone (2005) seeks to challenge this dichotomous view and points to the ways audiences and publics are increasingly intertwined). Goffman, on the other hand, does not place the audience in either of the categories, because performances (in his sense of the concept) can take place in both public and private settings. However, it may still be more likely, or at least more common, for front stage regions to be found, for performances to take place, and thus also for audiences to be present, in public places, where there is more chance that there will be people present who can be part of the audience. At the same time, it is more likely that the back stage region, where the actor can step out of character and relax, is found in a private setting, where the actor is alone or among close friends and/or relatives.¹¹

Applying these concepts to the girls' room and the computer-mediated girls' room, we see how things are being turned on their head. The activities that were earlier described as typical for the "bedroom culture" seem to fit perfectly into the description of back stage, being primarily aimed at rehearsing before performances: either girls would dress up for going out, try out different combinations that would be suitable for future occasions, or they would educate themselves in dialogue with friends and popular media as to how to look and behave.¹²

While boys could spend a lot of time 'hanging about' in the territory, the pattern for girls was probably more firmly structured between being at home, preparing (often with other girls) to go out on a date, and going out. (McRobbie and Garber 1976: 213)

In the opposite manner, the activities that take place in the computer-mediated girls' room at Lunarstorm – the social activities, the consumption of media and popular culture, and the

11 On the other hand one may very well put on performances for these people too. It should be noted that 'back stage' is a relative term and exists only in relation to a *specific* audience. Whenever performers are not alone, they are in a performance, says Goffman. In the back region, another performance may be given before the other team members, although typically, the roles that the actor performs before different audiences will differ slightly.

12 Although as Ganetz (1992) points out, the production of style should not be seen as merely a preparation, but also as a pleasurable activity and an aesthetic practice in its own right.

production of style – take place in public. What used to be done back stage, as a preparation, has turned into a performance in its own right. And the front stage that is made up of places like Lunarstorm is not merely any little street corner with a few potential spectators – the audience is potentially huge. So, instead of being able to, as in the girls’ room, hang around and relax, either alone or with other team members (i.e., one’s friends), the computer-mediated girls’ room has become yet a front stage setting – an arena in which the young women perform in front of others and thus have to think about how to look and how to act, even before going online. So much for that safe haven. The question is thus if the computer-mediated girls’ room can be described as a room of one’s own at all. Despite its similarities in terms of what activities take place, I would say not. Perhaps it should rather be compared to the fitting room. In the same way as Ganetz (1992: 225) describes the fitting room, the computer-mediated room provides the girls with a tempting mixture of the public and the private:

It is a close and intimate place protected from public view and control, while at the same time, it lies outside of the walls of the home and in a public area, which makes it more exciting and gives a feeling of freedom.

Changing Views on Public and Private?

What, then, does it mean that what used to be done in the safety of the back stage region now takes place in public, and how do the young people handle the publicity of their online interactions? It is not only that the computer-mediated girls’ room *is* public, with the consequences this may imply, but the young people at Lunarstorm are in most cases also very well aware of the public nature of the place, and of the risk, or opportunity, as it may sometimes seem, of being observed. The users’ practices suggest that they do not consider their personal pages, including personal profiles, diaries and photo albums as specifically private – quite the contrary. For example, they often put out ‘ads’ in the more publicly visited spots of the web community, where they urge people to come visit their personal pages, to watch and comment upon their photos and diaries and sign their guest books. Not only do the users seem to be aware of the risk of having their material observed by others – the attention from others is often what in effect is sought for. Thus, there are indications that the users tend to see the web community as an opportunity of public exposure, something that is further supported by social welfare secretaries who have been doing field work among young people at the web community in question (Englund 2005). According to these social secretaries, users often seem to see online environments as their chance of getting their 15 minutes of fame, and they are often influenced by the content of reality TV and docu-soaps, where extremely intimate matters are often at display. We thus see how the ideas surrounding private matters seem to have changed, and the tolerance towards both exposing and being exposed to intimate matters in public spaces have been heightened. As I have suggested elsewhere (Sveningsson Elm forthcoming), we may not even expect any privacy online anymore.

This may be part of a larger picture. During the last decade, we have come to see what was once private made increasingly public. What started as talk show confessions, reality TV and docu-soaps, where ordinary people’s private lives became the subject of TV entertainment, broadcast in prime time national TV, has developed into a formidable universe of confessions and exposures of intimate matters in public. In personal web pages, personal profiles at web communities and social network web sites, and blogs, we see a good deal of personal information being exposed in public. People write and publish their online diaries, accessible for anyone with internet access, they provide personal information, including full

name and real life address, and they even share pornographic pictures of themselves with people they meet online (Daneback 2006).

In his book 'Liquid modernity', sociologist Zygmunt Bauman suggests that, while theorists such as Jürgen Habermas feared that the public would colonize the private sphere, what we see in today's society is in effect an inversed process where it is rather the private that is colonizing the public sphere:

The 'public' is colonized by the 'private'; 'public interest' is reduced to curiosity about the private lives of public figures, and the art of public life is narrowed to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better). 'Public issues' which resist such reduction become all but incomprehensible. (Bauman 2000: 37).

The colonization of the public, says Bauman, is due to a process in which individuals to an increasing extent are made responsible for their lives – in short, individuals have no one else but themselves to count on to make decisions and choices to make their lives more successful and satisfactory.¹³ And should anything in their lives turn out to fail, they have no one else but themselves to blame. This concerns all aspects of life, from matters of career and wealth to fitness and health. Media and other public surfaces are filled with individuals, speaking as private persons about their private matters. These individuals, says Bauman, offer themselves as examples, although they do not take the role of counsellors who can advise others. Rather, by watching them the audience can on the one hand get a sense of not being alone with their private problems, while on the other hand also getting some guidance on how to deal (or some times rather not to deal!) with their own life situations.

The exposure of private matters in public space has doubtlessly made people think differently on intimate matters, where much suggests that the opinions of what kind of material and information should be kept private, have changed. People do expose more intimate matters now than they used to do just a few decades ago. But the exposure of private matters also seems to have made people think differently about the way public space is to be used. As Bauman (2000: 40) puts it:

For the individual, public space is not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without ceasing to be private or acquiring new collective qualities in the course of magnification: public space is where public confession of private secrets and intimacies is made.

As the private is colonizing the public, the public to an increasing extent has come to display properties that we have traditionally associated with the private sphere and its activities. The aspect discussed throughout this paper, activities that used to be performed in the girls' room now taking place online, in public, may be seen as yet one example of the same overarching phenomenon.

However, the fact that some activities are moved from the private to the public does not necessarily mean that the nature of impression management and presentation of self is fundamentally changed. To return to Goffman's terminology: even though the tolerance may increase, the limits being stretched for how much intimacy we show in public, and even though our opinions of how public space is to be used may change, there are still certain things that actors will most likely want to do in privacy also in the future. Among them, we find people's need to draw back between performances, be they on- or offline, to relax, to

13 This should be seen in relation to what was said in the introduction, about the uncertainty and confusion that abundance of possible roles to choose between, combined with the lack of authorities, gives rise to.

rehearse performances, and to chisel out and explore new possible roles and identities. Even though an increasing part of people's everyday lives may be exposed in public, I believe there will always be a need for back stage regions in which to do this. It is likely that for the young women of today, these activities will still be done in the privacy of the traditional girls' room. However, they will probably not take place until the computer is safely turned off.

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