

Internet Chatting in the Faroe Islands

New forms of communication among young people

Kjatt á alnetinum í Føroyum

Nýggir samskiftishættir hjá ungdomi

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Úrtak

At nýta alnetið til kjatt hevur seinastu árin vundið størri og størri útbreiðslu millum børn og ung í Føroyum eins og í flest øllum øðrum evropeiskum londum. Kjattmentanin hjá ungum í Føroyum er merkt av heimligari til-laging av alheims kunningar- og samskiftistøkni. Tað almennið, sum serliga verður sett í samband við tað pre-modernaða samfelagið, risur upp aftur í nýggjum hami í cyberspace: kjattsamskiftið verður ikki stýrt av tí borg-arliga almenninum; tað er frælst og beinleiðis samskifti, leyst av teimum mentanarligu og politisku elitunum í samfelagnum. Henda greinin byggir á kanningararbeiði millum føroysk ungfólk 2003-04 og miðar eftir at dag-føra tað heimliga kjakið um miðlar frá 1980'unum og 1990'unum út frá tilvísingum til nýggj granskingarúrslit úr ymsum londum.

Abstract

The use of internet for chatting has during the last years gained extensive popularity among children and young people in the Faroe Islands as in most other European countries. The youth chat culture of the Faroe Islands is characterised by local adaptation of global technologies of information and communication. The revival of the popular public sphere, which used to be associated with pre-modern society, is obvious in cyberspace: chat communication is not ruled by any “bourgeois” public sphere; it is free direct communication uncontrolled by

the cultural or political elites of society. This article is based on fieldwork among Faroese youth 2003-04 and aims to elaborate and update the local media debate of the 1980s and 1990s with reference to new research results from different countries.

Introduction

This article is based on data gathered in 2002-04 as part of my PhD project in anthropology. The material used in the text is a combination of qualitative and quantitative data from many sources but mostly from the internet (websites and chat-channels), semi-structured interviews among young people in Torshavn, questionnaires distributed at lower-secondary schools, and Faroese newspapers. Young people's chat culture and general forms of social communication is a field of research that regularly needs updating, because of the continuous changes in youth cultures and lifestyles as well as technological developments within the communication and information sector. Therefore, this article may seem partly ‘outdated’

already when published as the scene have changed a lot since 2004. Parts of the results presented in this text have been published in Faroese articles in 2005-06.

Modern media in the Faroe Islands

In the early 1980s television was introduced to the Faroe Islands. It started with a small private television company, mostly transmitting Danish emissions recorded on video tapes in Denmark and posted to the islands. The following years several other local private television companies were established before SvF (Sjónvarp Føroya), the Faroese National Television Channel, was established in 1984 (Forchhammer, 1998: 13). At the same time satellite dishes came to the islands, and the people of the Faroe Islands got access to many foreign television channels. SvF was therefore from the very beginning almost driven out by competition. An emotionally charged political debate about television's influence on the Faroese culture and children's everyday lives arose in this context. Articles and reports about the introduction of television in the Faroe Islands were written (e.g. Andreassen, 1981, Poulsen, 1980). The most comprehensive investigation compares children *before* television (1981) with children *after* television (1991-92) and concludes that television has a large influence on children's leisure time activities and culture (Forchhammer, 1998). The media debate in the 1980s in the Faroe Islands belongs to times past, because new technologies of information, including internet and mobile phones, have opened the way for forms of communication unthinkable twenty years ago. The television came

very late to the Faroe Islands, but computers (with internet connection) and mobile phones, on the other hand, came at the same time to the islands as to the rest of the Nordic region. Today almost all children and youths have mobile phones and are active internet users. At the beginning of the third millennium, Faroese youth belongs to the first generation growing up with television, computers and mobile phones.

Personal relations

The introduction of the internet to the Faroe Islands is an interesting development, because this electronic media doesn't have as is shown exactly the same function and character in small close societies as has been in larger societies. The Faroese folklorist Eyðun Andreassen says in his doctoral dissertation *Folkelig Offentlighed* (Popular Public Sphere) (1992: 296) that "in a small society like the Faroese the personal relations play if not a more important role then at least a clearer role than in large societies. The personal affects the debate on all levels, also the historical debate." Even if Andreassen refers to the debate in society before the introduction of television, the personal relations are relevant in relation to young people's use of internet e.g. chat and email. It is difficult to keep a potential anonymity as a chatter in the Faroe Islands, at least if you are chatting frequently, because most visitors on Faroese chat channels know or have heard of each other. In that way communication often turns out to be personal, even if its content doesn't necessarily reflect "ordinary" face-to-face communication. The visitors on the chat chan-

nels are from all villages and islands in the Faroe Islands even the most remote and isolated village communities, and therefore chatters can get in touch with people from all regions. Chatters in the Faroe Islands have very different motives and aims, but most of them are under 30, the majority are aged 16-24.

Birgitte Holm Sørensen, a Danish youth researcher, has defined chat as synchronous communication taking place on the internet; chat is also, she says, typically many-to-many communication, even if chat also goes on in closed “rooms” with one-to-one communication or few-to-few communication (Sørensen, 2001: 11). Faroese chat culture is widespread with hundreds of children and youths chatting every evening or several times a week.. To turn your computer on and enter a chat channel is, says Sørensen (*ibid*), “like entering a room where many talking people are placed, and where many conversations are crossing each other and at play.” There are many codes in the chat culture and a youth introducing himself/herself for the first time in a chat room can hardly hide that she/he is a novice.

Text

There are many common abbreviations in local and global variations used in order to save space and time in chat communication. Besides, chatters can shorten all long and complex words in their own fashion; generally, chatters just drop the endings of words if they expect that the counterpart will catch the meaning; or they choose to write words in phonetic script – as they are pronounced. Many of the youngest chatters,

aged 10-12, do obviously not spell correctly. Weak writing proficiency may disclose a young chatter pretending to be older than he really is. The youngest chatters therefore try to write correctly in order to hide their age.

A common abbreviation in Faroese chat is e.g. “klax” which means “Klaksvik” (a town). When a chatter tells that he is from klax, everybody knows what he means. Similar abbreviations are used about other towns and villages. Those wanting to appear as skilled and experienced chatters by using long English abbreviations have lists with so-called chat language at their disposition on Faroese chat channel homepages. These abbreviations are, however, with a few exceptions, so advanced that they seem comical and are almost never used. IMNSHO is for instance “In My Not So Humble Opinion” while ROFL is the abbreviation for “Rolling On Floor Laughing”. There are also many sign compositions supposed to express bodily expressions, movements and things. The most famous are the countless versions of smileys used to visualise the communication. Many English sentences and expressions, not least the vulgar ones, from films and music are used in Faroese chat. New slang is continuously developing, which every teenager on the internet has to be familiar with to be up-to-date in the chat culture. However, I have to emphasize, there are big differences in the language according to the age group or chat channel in question. Some of the new chat channels were established by grown-ups annoyed by children contacting them to chat about skateboarding, Eminem or next weekend’s local

children's disco. On the homepage of a popular chat channel people have been discussing the establishment of a new channel for the youngest chatters. The 16-20 year olds want to get rid of the 10-12 year olds "disturbing" them on the internet.

Communication

The first impression is always important, also when discussing chat. You measure the stranger through the content of the text and sometimes the linguistic level. Concerning one-to-one chat (private chat) there is a dialogue where the chatters start with some polite standard questions before finding out if they should aim at this conversation and continue or just say "bye, it was fun..." and then move on to the next person. Persons chatting with the whole channel, i.e. all the chatters can see and read their text messages, are often experienced chatters logging on every night and knowing most people on the channel. Some of the first information that chatters ask for are age, sex and location - the international abbreviation of the question being ASL. However it may seem quite aggressive or even desperate to confront your counterpart with ASL in the very first text line. Many chatters have nicknames (nicks) that identify their sex, age and location. A girl's name can be "Female20" or "Man Havn". These nicknames are very simple and clear, but some experienced chatters choose to use more complex and cryptic nicknames appearing totally incomprehensible to the outsider. On the Faroese chat there is e.g. a chatter named SyDrOnX. The youngest chatters often use, as also mentioned by Sørensen and Olesen (2000: 57),

their idols or fancy words e.g. "HotBabe" or "Shakira". These nicknames seem attractive to other young chatters, especially those of the opposite sex. Some chatters have several nicknames that they use on different occasions. The nickname may even contain explicit messages to the others on the chat channel; the chatter may when he for example takes a break from the computer to eat dinner but doesn't want to log out change from the name "Klax Girl" to "Klax Girl Away", thereby telling everybody that he or she is not reachable at the moment.

If you are not starting the communication with the ASL question then you write e.g. "hello, how are you?" or "hello, where in the Faroe Islands are you?" If you get an answer to your question, then the dialogue continues perhaps until the chatters know each other concerning age, sex and location as well as other facts. Chat sequences may be very short: two persons meet (on chat channels), exchange some personal information and end the dialogue. Chatters knowing each other well are also often having very short conversations and jump from one to the next the whole evening. As regards the youngest chatters, chatting is, for most of them, simply a pastime like playing PlayStation or watching DVD.

Categories

Chatters are as different as other people, even if they have common interests relating to the chat culture. They have basic technical knowledge of how to get access to the chat channels, which programmes to download and install on your computer (if you are chatting at home), and a social knowledge

of how to behave on the channels. Chat channels usually have – not only the Faroese channels – some “guards” supervising and controlling the communication, and chatters breaking the rules and customs are kicked out of the channels. It is e.g. not allowed to chat with nicknames that may seem offensive to other chatters. On the chat channel homepage novices find all the practical information necessary to start a venture as a chatter.

Many chatters aim at finding new friends or even a boyfriend/girlfriend on the chat channel. They hope to find people they can meet in real life. There are many so-called chat couples, and on the Faroese_chat homepage people often discuss who is going to be the chat couple of the year. There are many suggestions, often with both the nicknames and real names of the couple revealed! It is clear from this that many chatters are close friends in real life and therefore use the real names on the net without even reflecting about the anonymity of the persons in question. Many of the young chatters are from different islands and villages and would probably not have known each other without the chat communication. Through a combination of chat communication, meetings at concerts and night clubs, a large network of youths from the whole country is established.

Those trying to find a girlfriend/ boyfriend or sexpartner on the internet are often using weeks and months of chat communication before the first meeting in real life takes place. Typically the contact starts with chat contact once or a couple of times a week. When the partners feel relatively safe

and confident about each other, they may exchange email addresses; thereafter maybe digital personal pictures; and then the first big transition: phone numbers are exchanged (usually mobile phone numbers) and they start talking to each other. It may start with sms communication before they have gained the courage to call the other one. Now the planning of the place and time of the first meeting comes on the agenda. Many chatters have made hotmail addresses for this purpose; they can exchange email addresses without disclosing their real name. This email address belongs to the chat person and is in general not used for other daily communication.

More than chat

Every day there are new contributions in the debate on the chat channel homepages. Everyone visiting the Faroese_chat homepage is free to write his opinion in a contribution to one of the many parallel debates on the internet. It is also easy to start a new debate by establishing a new subject for discussion. Most contributions are from teenagers and very local in content. The chatters discuss school, villages, regions, sex, love, drugs, violence, religion, politics, specific persons, chat, etc.

It is very interesting to follow the lively discussions on the net, because Faroese youth is an almost invisible group in the societal debate of the Faroese media. The newspapers, radio and television don't give any priority to youth issues; young people feel excluded from the public space and take advantage of the possibilities of the new free media: the internet. On many youth sites on

the internet, not just the chat channel home-pages, young people can express their feelings and opinions freely and without adult intervention. It is a unique free zone for young people. The Faroese “popular public sphere” (Andreassen, 1992) is flourishing on the internet, hence didn’t – as usually argued – disappear with the premodern peasant society. The discussions on the internet are obviously independent from the rest of the public sphere, even if the youth is indeed influenced by Faroese television, radio and printed press. The difference is that on the net they have their own voice – without any censorship. Barbro Johansson says (in *Träffpunkt Cyberspace*, 1997: 48) regarding freedom and anonymity on the internet:

Here you can just be yourself and go home if you are tired...no excuses etc. because you just say bye and thanks for the day. Nobody sees how you look, you can saunter down to the chat in a track suit and twenty kg overweight and who cares? It is about talking dirty or airing something that happened during the day to which you want a clever comment, a little bit anonymous, you know.

(my translation)

Everybody can participate in the discussions on the internet, no matter what you look like or which position you have in society, and the language is in general youthful and rather vulgar – it reminds one of informal spoken language and slang. Even if the discussions on youth sites on the internet in general are open and free, they seem private and secret in content, because most young people would never have expressed themselves in a similar way in newspapers or in the physical presence of adults. Enter-

ing a discussion forum on the internet feels like listening to somebody’s private phone calls. The debates obviously touch relatively sensible subjects like homosexuality, violence or religion but also people e.g. a named teacher or chatter. Discussions may be too personal and ethically unacceptable as when two persons are spiting and harassing each other even if everybody has free access to the forum.

Latemodern society

Children and young people from the whole world are using the chat functions of the internet to experiment with their identities. A lot of research about identity work in cyberspace has been done: the game where people play that they are of the opposite sex in e.g. chat communication. Sherry Turkle (1995: 216) writes about a man that has changed sex on the net. He says:

...I wanted to experiment with the other side...I wanted to be collaborative and helpful, and I thought it would be easier as a female...As a man I was brought up to be territorial and competitive. I wanted to try something new.

Not only sex can be changed on the internet; you can also change ethnicity or age. In principle everything is possible on the internet; everything has a degree of coincidence (Lalander and Johansson, 2002: 91).

Young people are testing and turning down different identities, they acquire experience and choose what they feel fits best to their personality. Identity work is taking place on the internet but not exclusively on the net, because young people of today live in a society where they have to “create them-

selves” as cultural and social beings. Individuals are choosing identities and lifestyles from among many offers.

The reflexive identity work has got a new dimension on the internet. The internet gives you the opportunity to find information about anything you are searching knowledge about. Also, you can become a part of a network or club involving people from all parts of the world, no matter where you are located – geographically and socially. Travelling on the internet is easy, fast and effective, and the virtual voyage often leads to real travelling later in time (Lalander and Johansson, 2002: 94). The internet is connecting local and global, private and public, in interplay, and has in the Faroe Islands, e.g. through chat, changed the culture and forms of communication of children and young people.

Johansson says that “meetings in cyberspace are in many ways paradoxical events. Anonymity meets intimacy, closeness distance, authenticity construction, freedom responsibility” (in Sørensen and Olesen, 2000: 80). It is, most chatters say, exciting and non-committal to chat with strangers; it gives a special sense of freedom and creativity and opens for unique opportunities to experiment radically with identities. Some Faroese chatters live in small remote villages where there are almost only old people, and to these people the chat communication represents a way out of the local peripheral community to a community covering all the islands and villages. Young people are always searching for new contacts, impulses and experiences, and they avoid committing themselves to anyone or anything before they

have evaluated the consequences of the decision thoroughly. Gitte Stahl (2001: 32) says about Danish youth living under a bit different conditions than Faroese youth, that

It looks like an eternal search for new relations and new communities is taking place. Every time you enter a chat room or homepage and say hello, you say hello to new acquaintances. The superficial meetings may maybe for a short while become relations – friendly, sexual, confident – but these are easy to quit, without leaving any traces.

Local context

Faroese chat culture is based on the utilization of global technologies of information, the internet being the virtual youth community’s form of communication. The technology creates new possibilities, but it is adapted to local conditions by its users (Sørensen and Olesen, 2000). The individuals shape and domesticize the technology and are at the same time influenced by the same technology which frames and conditions the communication. Faroese chat is therefore not the same as Swedish or Icelandic chat; and even if we talk primarily about a virtual imagined community, Faroese chatters have their social community where arenas like concerts and youth clubs represent some of the physical meeting places. Partly, the social is connected to the virtual because of the close social ties in the Faroe Islands; since there are so few clubs and meeting places for young people, they can hardly avoid meeting each other sometimes in real life. Also, the social network is often connected to the chat culture,

not just in the Faroe Islands, because chat communication, according to several investigations, is primarily going on between friends and acquaintances (ibid). Those trying to be totally anonymous chatters do not participate in the community's social activities.

In many respects the virtual community reflects the real social society. As mentioned earlier, the personal relations are very important in the Faroe Islands, also after the introduction of internet and mobile phones. The chatters are very interested in knowing who they are chatting with and ask in detail where you come from, where you live, what you are doing, who you know, etc., until it becomes an almost impossible task to hide behind a mask. If you don't tell a lot about your real identity, the other chatters become impatient and end the dialogue. People want to know who they are chatting with. If you are from Torshavn, the capital with 18 000 inhabitants, then it is obviously easier to hide your name than it is if you live in a small village with 40-80 inhabitants. The personal relations – family, friends, colleagues – that define the Faroe Islander's role and status in society, and which are characterised by being close (emotionally and geographically) and strong can be interpreted as a contrast to the abstract and distant relations that connect a person to a national or international community or a community of interests. Chat is fascinating because you can get in touch with individuals located outside your geographical, social and cultural boundaries; chat can also be characterised as a limitless dangerous venture, an expedition into unknown territories.

Public sphere

The bourgeois public sphere, which Eyðun Andreassen relates to the twentieth century modern Faroese society, has with the new forms of interaction and communication that the technologies of information of today make possible (primarily the internet), lost its opinion-forming power on the cultural discourses in society. The popular public sphere, says Andreassen (1992: 117), is

...a part of the bourgeois public sphere, but it expresses itself outside this public sphere's primal fora, i.e. fora where the authorities and state control lie, and fora usually considered to present the cultural public in the bourgeois society.

During the twentieth century, especially after 1945, the Faroese society became increasingly centralised. Local variations in culture and traditions disappeared, Andreassen argues, as the development of the centralised state apparatus, based on bourgeois ideals, took shape and the nationalisation of the culture was completed. The popular public sphere is a local public sphere attached to a local culture. There was a fierce battle between the popular and bourgeois cultures, says Andreassen, up through the twentieth century, and televisions and satellite dishes, which were introduced to the islands in the 1980s, symbolised the death of Faroese popular culture. But in the 1990s the internet emerged which I think, is incompatible with the bourgeois cultural communication process, as this process goes from a central "sender" to "receivers" (all citizens) through a "medium" like e.g. television or radio (Andreassen, 1992: 120). The

internet is characterised by non-hierarchical collective forms of communication. In popular cultural communication “the whole process takes place in the ‘collective’, there is an immediate and direct connection between ‘sender’ and ‘receivers’ [...] and all communication in this ‘collective’ is based on immediate feedback” (Andreassen, 1992: 285). Dance and festival traditions are typical examples of popular culture in the pre-modern peasant community. All the involved persons take part in the creation and communication of the culture, and “the popular ‘collective’ creates its own art/culture” (Andreassen, 1992: 120)

Naturally, the communication in the old peasant community was not identical with the internet communication of the latemodern society. Chat communication is not physical, it goes on through advanced computer technologies, i.e. you are dependent on a computer to be able to chat. Many other limitations are at play in chat communication, where you use text and cannot observe the people you communicate with (except when you use a webcam). Internet is, anyway, a much more “popular” medium than television and radio, which communicate culture in a structured style and context and which is communication “taken out of the hands of people and handed over to professionals” (Andreassen, 1992: 15). The internet is not centrally directed and professionals are not controlling the interaction. The informal forum where people gathered to make community-related decisions was maybe starting to disappear when television and video were introduced to the Faroe Islands, but they flourish today on the inter-

net, not least regarding the chat communication of children and young people in the Faroe Islands.

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