CONVERSATIONS IN THE DARK: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE MANAGE CHATROOM RELATIONSHIPS\(^1\)

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"We no longer have roots, we have aerials. We no longer have origins, we have terminals."

McKenzie Wark (1994)

Abstract

This paper reports a small number of interviews with young people in Athens about their use of internet chat rooms as a means of meeting people. In the last few years there has been a growing public (adult) concern about the dangers of socialising with strangers in chat rooms, but what do the users themselves think about the risks involved, and what strategies have they adopted to manage these risks? Some of the practices adopted by these young people are surprising and counter to the conventional advice given by official authorities.

The internet – both a public good and a danger to children

For many of us the internet has become an indispensable part of everyday life. It frequently provides our first point of access to information. We use it to check train times, the price of plane tickets, the weather forecast, the availability of books, as a place to leave messages for our children, to make

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contact with people, to announce family news, to exchange photos and music, to apply for jobs, to chat with friends and with strangers, to research, to learn and to teach. The internet has become, for many of us, not only our primary source of information, but has extended and changed our social networks and the pace and intensity with which we interact with people.

In the public imagination, there are two sides to the internet coin. There is a shiny side, celebrated in numerous government policies and programs, which holds out the promise of unlimited information, new and exciting curricula and schooling that will engage children and young people in purposeful and useful activity. And there is dark side of illicit information, criminal activity, dangerous knowledge and harmful content.

Teachers, parents, librarians and others want to encourage children and young people to make maximum use of the positive possibilities, but they also feel, to varying degrees, responsible for steering them away from the dark side. In some cases they will use blocks and filters but these are never fully effective and they know that they need to find other ways of guiding children to safe use. Censorship does not work in cyberspace (or works in only partial and transitory ways) and what it is generally agreed is needed is ‘responsible use’. This includes developing educational strategies that take account of the appeal and attraction of the internet and support young people in reflecting on their own practice as internet users and the consequences of their internet interactions on others.

In this paper we describe a particular set of internet-based interactions that have great appeal to young people but create most anxiety among parents and other adults. During the period 2000-2002 we conducted more than 200 interviews with children and young people and conducted case studies in homes, schools, libraries, cybercafes and other places where the internet is accessed. We did these studies in Spain, Germany, the UK and in Greece. Generally speaking we found that the fears that young people had about the safety of the internet differed from those of adults. In the main they were concerned about security rather than pornography, which they saw as amusing rather than harmful. But it was also clear from our interviews, as a number of other studies have found, that many were more active in chatrooms than their parents and other adults realised. Here, using a small set of these interviews, which were made with students in a tutorial centre in Athens, we will describe how some young people use the internet to make relationships with others, and particularly how young women use the net to meet and talk to men.

**Experiments with identity**
As a place to meet and talk with strangers, one of the appeals of cyberspace lies in its visual silence. Chatrooms, in particular, combine the closeness and
directness of the personal letter with the interactivity of the phone
conversation, so sidestepping the contemporary obsession with personal
appearance and liberating us from the constraints that this imposes. Such
conversations in the dark allow us to be reaffirmed in the images we have of
ourselves rather than being constrained by our consciousness of all the
shortcomings that others might see in us.

Our interviews suggest that part of the appeal of chatrooms for the young lies
in the opportunities that they provide to experiment with extended or
alternative identities. Ricki Goldman Segall (1998) has shown how this use of
computers appeals particularly to teenage girls, who can use the computer to
explore and extend their interests in fashion and appearance in intimate and
novel ways. Many of the girls we have interviewed have told us how their
interests in the internet grew from the web sites which promote pop music
and fashion – at the time of the study this particularly involved sites that
promoted boy bands, many of which contain links that lead them into chat
rooms and related sites.

These chatroom sites provide opportunities to try on alternative ways of
looking and being in interaction with others, who share similar interests and
who appear to take you at ‘face value’; a face you can manipulate for effect
without fear of detection. On the net, you are not restricted to trying on
clothes, but can try on different names, origins, life histories, attitudes and
opinions, different ways of relating to others, different ages and genders. And
you do so knowing that those you are talking with are probably doing the
same. Many of the young people we spoke to said that they found this
continual uncertainty exhilarating and very different from most of their day-
to-day interactions with others (in ‘meat space’), in which role, status and
rules constrain interaction within routine and highly predictable forms.

Chat rooms provide more than a stage for trying on new selves; the setting
itself can become hyper-real, as all those who participate in it interact in the
knowledge that ‘no-one is quite who they say they are’. It is not unknown for
girls and boys, and even researchers to take on new selves. Sherry Turkle
tells of her shock and surprise at entering a chat room anonymously and
encountering another Professor Turkle who was there doing research. The
fact that in chat-room interactions nothing can be taken for granted, when
taken to an extreme, creates a Wonderland that can be compelling.
Involvement in it can become the most ‘real’ world in which you act, as
Sherry Turtle puts it, quoting one of her informants, ‘RL (‘Real Life’). It’s just
one more window’ (Turkle 1977 p13).

Currently the sites where these experiments with the presentation of self are
most common are in text-based chat rooms, but chat rooms are themselves
changing, being linked to ‘reality TV’, becoming hybridised with SMS (text
messaging) and extending into other forms. One of these that has become
popular in the last few years is ‘blogging’, the keeping of diaries, journals and
log books on line (hence ‘webblogs’) and sometimes linked to web cams,
which link video surveillance to a personal web site. ‘Blogging’ has some of the appeal of soap opera, as vernacular ‘stars’ arise, who keep journals which detail their personal lives, or more insidiously in some of the blogs found on sites that celebrate anorexia. Webcams vary from rather static landscape views (our university has one which is pointed at the sky for weather enthusiasts) to sites apparently managed by young girls who adopt provocative poses and post lists of presents they would like to receive. The trend seems to be increasingly for such sites to become participative and interactive, Anyone can keep a web-log – and anyone can read it and respond. And while some web cams invite voyeurism, others allow you interact – to choose which clothes someone should wear that day from their wardrobe, for instance.

Advancing the argument through case study
Katerina, Rania, Stefanos, Dmitra and Fivos are young people living in Athens. Like many of their generation, communicating through the new media is an integral part of their way of life. By listening to their stories we can make the discussion more concrete and specific. Understanding some of the issues through their experience allows us to identify with them and to understand better their social world as they live it and make their lives within it.

KATERINA’S STORY

Katerina is sixteen, she is from an upper middle class family and attends a private school. She started using chatrooms two years ago and mostly accesses them at home, when she is alone, or sometimes with girlfriends in their homes. She also uses email and SMS. She says she spends about two hours a day (15 hours a week) chatting online.

Katerina has two sisters, one older and one younger, her older sister used to chat but now does so only rarely, but it was her sister who introduced Katerina to chatting online. She generally participates in chatrooms with the label ‘relations’ or other non-conventional labels.

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3 All the cases described here are based on interviews carried out in Athens in October 2001 by Babis Babakoplis. They are presented here as narratives derived from translations made by Babis from his notes of the interviews.
Katerina takes care over her clothes and appearance, has a pleasant manner and good sense of humour. She is popular at school, socialises easily and has many friends. She attracts the attention of boys, dates some of them and also talks with them on the phone.
What appeals to Katerina about chatrooms is that they offer the opportunity to meet unseen with different people of various ages. Because she is physically attractive she feels that men always respond to her appearance, not to her as a person. In chatrooms she feels she is safe to communicate, exchange ideas and flirt.
Currently she chats only to Greek men living in Athens. She never talks with more than one man simultaneously. She knows how to use email to send pictures but did not know that you can use a camera and microphone to communicate with someone else, and would not do so if she could because it would take away the appeal for her of chatrooms. She never wants what she says in chatrooms to be seen by others so she uses 'whisper' - a form of private channel.
Katerina never uses her own name, partly for security reasons but also because she wants to hide her real identity as much as she can. Her main reason for doing so is that she feels this allows her to be very open and honest in expressing herself. She uses the nickname 'V', which does not have any special meaning for her, except that she says she likes the shape of the letter.
In chat, she will often change the way that she describes herself. If men ask her what she looks like she will make some short comment and then quickly change the subject. If her questioner persists, she stops the conversation and leaves. She generally tells the truth about her age except when she is chatting with someone who is quite a bit older than
she is, when she will say she is older. She says that she never gives true information about her family or personal life.

At the start she was struck by the comments that were made to her by men. They immediately came on to her in a very direct way and in almost all conversations their sexual intent soon became clear. She says she was surprised how many men constantly had sex on their minds and says she was not sure if this was because chatrooms attracted men who were like this, or whether the chatroom revealed what all men really thought but did not express in normal daily life.

She tried hard to lead conversations to other subjects in the hope that they would participate in developing serious and interesting conversation and, initially, they would follow her but then suddenly revert to saying something dirty or suggestive. The erotic element is always there, she said, and you just wait for it to come out.

After a while she started participating in these conversations and even deliberately provoking erotic responses and she has found that she has been able to say things to men about her fantasies and feelings that she could not normally say even though there are in her mind all the time.

In the two years she has been chatting she has met seven men who she first got to know in chatrooms. She arranges a meeting somewhere public at a certain time, sits close to the meeting point and phones on her mobile phone to check that she likes the look of them, or to see if they had told severe lies about their age or appearance. In five cases she said they had lied, but this did not put her off since she said she had done the same and she thinks to do so is a natural thing to do in an online chat and even 'part of the 'magic' of chatrooms.

In each case she wanted to meet these men as friends but did not exclude the possibility of a relationship but at no time was she afraid for
her safety. She said that she knew that the most they would want would be to have sex with her and she knew ways to prevent this. She says that if she met someone 'subnormal', she would soon know and she would not go out with them again. She says that she wants to enjoy life and that enjoyment without risk is not possible. If something really goes wrong she believes that her parents would protect her.

Her most memorable experience was 8 months ago. She was travelling on the Metro when she noticed a man standing near her. He was about 23, very good looking and attractive. During the half hour of the journey they looked at each other continuously and she was sure he liked her, but he did not speak. As he left the train he handed her a business card with his phone number and email.

Next day she sent him an email asking him to join her in a chat room, she also sent him her mobile number. They started writing to one another by email, an exchange that continued for three months, though in this time they did not meet or speak to one another. At the start she said she did not want to meet him but after a month she did, but they kept making arrangements to meet and then making excuses not to. She had the feeling that perhaps he already had a relationship or was married, but after three months, they had talked so much that she felt she was in love with him.

In the end they met in a café, which they did several times. Katerina says he was always a gentleman and never did anything to offend her, but somehow he was not quite the same person that she had got to know and love. He talked in a different way and the tone and content of their conversations was different. She felt that many of the things he had said that he believed in, seemed suddenly ‘theoretical’, and he did not really apply them to his life or his relationships. Katerina became very
afraid, not for her safety, but for her feelings. She felt that she had fallen in love with a man who pretended to be someone else and who only existed in the chatroom, not in the real world. Her fear was that she might have had an affair with him without realising this when she did.

For weeks later she was depressed and afraid to meet new people. She started having doubts about what was real and what was not. She still chats online, but not in the way she did before.

RANIA’S STORY

Rania is fifteen, from a very rich family and attends a private school. She has a younger brother and her parents divorced when she was nine years old. Rania has been chatting online for about two years and spends about an hour a day chatting, usually in rooms labelled ‘relations’ or ‘art’ and ‘music’. She recently bought a mobile phone and also uses SMS.

Rania is tall for her age, thin and good looking. She has a pleasant manner but does not make friends easily.

She first started chatting when she saw a sign on top of the computer in her school library that said ‘Chatting is not permitted’. This sparked her curiosity, and having started she got hooked. She always chats alone and only uses text. She would not use a microphone or camera and says she would give up chatting if she had to. She does not want her messages to be seen by anyone other than the person she is talking to, so she uses a private channel.

Rania does not use her real name, partly for security reasons but also because she does not want to be recognised by her friends. She tells the truth about her age but calls herself ‘Rain’, and pretends that she is
French. She often makes dramatic changes to the way she describes herself because she likes to see people’s reactions. She has found that pretending to be French has attracted a number of Arab men from around the world.

Despite this disguise, she has often revealed true information about herself and her family, though she does not disclose her telephone number, except once, when she reached the point where she was dying to talk to the man on the phone and to hear his voice.

When she first began, she was struck by how direct most people were, immediately talking to her about sex. She learnt to respond by following the lead of her co-chatter. She says that it is a daily occurrence to be invited to engage in cybersex, or to talk dirty, but she rejects these offers without hesitation.

Over the two years Rania has dated two boys she first met in chatrooms. She says that she met them with sexual adventure in mind. She was not afraid for her safety but more about what would happen if her mother knew what she was doing. She was excited and knew that doing this involved some risk, but says there is a risk in doing anything, flying in a plane or even walking down the street. Why is it safer to go out with someone you might meet in a bar or a café, and who is more of a stranger? She asks.

Rania believes strongly that she is part of a generation who intend to make their life pleasurable and who have grown up with risk and prepared for it and are able to cope, unlike her parents, who have struggled with the fear of HIV/AIDS.

Both times she met boys from the chatroom, she felt embarrassed, but never afraid. She took a friend along with her and they went to a cinema. She told the boys her real name, her address and her phone number,
thinking that this would make them reluctant to call at her family home or act indecently.

Her most memorable experience was last summer. After three months chatting with a boy online and on the telephone, she decided to meet him. She said that there had been a difference in their conversations; in the chatroom, their conversations were more direct, more erotic and more playful. On the phone they were very humorous but also became involved in serious discussions and exchange of ideas. He was 17 and came alone. They sat next to each other at the cinema and during the film they were laughing and commenting on the film. She liked his humour and way of flirting with her. At the interval they kept laughing and enjoying themselves. They talked about school and holidays and the burden of the exams that at last were over. At the end of the movie they mutually decided to go to a nearby bar to have a drink. They started drinking and dancing. After a couple of drinks he tried to hug her and touch her. They kissed each other and she was happy with this. At some point he started to touch her in various parts of her body. She pushed him back and then pushed him back hard and told him to stop it or she would leave. She then left to go to the toilet but to her surprise he followed her and dropped his pants and underwear. She was shocked and started screaming. He left and called her the next morning. He told her that he was very surprised that she reacted like that. During their conversations in the chatroom he had the idea that she was a very liberated girl who is dying to have sex and had done it before. In her mind, she went through all their conversations and agreed that it was possible from her comments that he might get the idea that she wanted more than just a kiss. This was definitely a bad experience for her but she does not regret it, on the contrary she enjoyed telling it to her friends. This experience didn’t
put her off from continuing chatting or dating people from the chatroom,
neither has it changed her way of talking and the words she chooses.
Rania says that one of the attractions of the chatroom for her is that it
gives her the chance to pretend to be different people, but particularly
that she can talk in a direct way about sex, something that is strictly
prohibited by her family, who she feels expect her to be like a well
behaved doll, a nicely dressed young lady who is waiting for her prince to
come. But she wants more action, and for her chat is the door to the real
world. She says that it is like being able to walk through the streets of
the city, by night and by day, meeting all sorts of people and enjoying
talking to them. She loves the experience of being able to talk with
people who might be getting up when you go to bed, or someone who is
skiing when you are sunbathing. Talking to people form different cultures
is like being there, or being part of a wild team.

STEFANOS’ STORY

Stefanos is fifteen, from an upper class family, has one older sister and
attends a private school. He has been chatting for a bit less than a year,
sometimes alone and sometimes with friends, either from home or from
his friends’ houses. He spends 2 to 3 hours a day chatting.

He is a nice looking boy with a sense of humour and many interests and he
has many friends, boys and girls.

Stefanos uses chat rooms to talk to men and women of different ages
and different nationalities, always people who he does not know. He likes
exchanging ideas and opinions on music and sport and how to solve
problems he has encountered with computer programs and games. He
found out about chat rooms by surfing the net and seeing chat sites advertised. He only uses conventional text, though he has tried using a microphone and camera. He says he was not thrilled by the experience and found it a poor substitute for talking over the phone or meeting someone.

He never uses his name, for security reasons. He is afraid that, because he is from a rich family, someone may publish what he has said or may blackmail him. For the same reason he never gives information about himself or his family, in fact he often deliberately misleads people. He has tried different names but usually calls himself 'Mad', after MadTV, his favourite TV channel. The chat rooms he normally goes to are ones labelled music, sport or computers. When he talks to girls he always describes himself differently, saying he is older than he really is. He does not set out to date girls but he does not exclude the possibility that this could happen.

Now he sometimes gets bored with chatting, though he didn't for the first few months when he was excited to find that, day or night, he could log in with any idea or question and find people to discuss it with. He says that part of the excitement is that you feel that you could be all over the world at any minute, 24 hours a day. He says it is a very alive medium and probably the cheapest, and safest way for communicating with people from around the world.

But in the last few months he has become more suspicious, both about the credibility of some of the information he has been given (about computers) and the motives of some of the people who have been chatting with him. He says that you can't always rely on what you are told and that some people claim to be experts when they don't really know
very much. They might give you a lot of information but it may not have any value.

Stefanos says that he has learnt to be suspicious, and not always believe everything he is told. Moreover, he has found that sometimes you can find men who are very helpful and friendly but after a while they start asking personal questions and ask to meet you. He says there are people in chat rooms who always want to talk about sex, but when you get into more specialised chat rooms this reduces this possibility. He thinks it is OK to talk this way with your peers, but not when it is with an older man. Recently he has started to worry that it may be possible for people to find out who you are, or that the ISP might identify you.

**DIMITRA'S STORY**

Dimitra is seventeen, the only child in an upper middle class family and she attends a private school. Her parents recently divorced, she says she wanted them to divorce and had encouraged them to do so. She started chatting four years ago at the instigation of her best friend, who said it was fun and she mainly accesses chatrooms alone from home or sometimes with her girlfriend at her home. She does not use any other chat methods. When she started she says she spent about two hours a day in chat rooms, now she spends about half that time. She says she was motivated by the need to find an alternative to watching TV and as an escape from her mother's 'boring friends'. Dimitra is a good looking girl who dresses well and is slightly over-weight. She is a pleasant girl who socialises easily and has many friends, boys and girls. In the chatroom she talks only to Greek men who live in Athens and she may talk with two or three men simultaneously. She only uses text, has never used a camera
or a microphone and would not do so. She does not want her messages to be seen by anyone else and so uses ‘whisper’, a form of private channel. Dimitra never uses her own name, not so much for security reasons but because she likes to see the reactions she gets from using different names, though mostly she uses the name Phaedra because this is a name that immediately attracts invitations from men and seems to invite stimulating and erotic messages.

She nearly always gives her real age to people, except when she is chatting to men who are quite a bit older when she says she is fourteen (which she says she does to see if they are put off). She says no-one seems to care about her age. She more or less describes herself as she is (though a few kilos lighter). She never gives true information about her family and personal life and often misleads people about her wishes and interests. The chat groups she participates in are mostly those labelled ‘relations’ or ‘alternative’, and sometimes ‘music’, ‘books’ or ‘art’.

When she began she was surprised at the way men talked to her. They were very direct, sometimes in a humorous way, sometimes more serious, but almost always saying they wanted to meet her. She responded to their messages by following the lead they gave, not by initiating or leading the conversation, but sex was the main topic and she was often invited to engage in cybersex.

Over four years she has agreed to meet eleven men with whom she has chatted online. She wanted to meet them out of sexual interest rather than ‘just as friends’. She was not afraid for her safety but more concerned about what the men might look like. Her parents and teachers had told her and her friends numerous times, and in different ways, about the dangers of meeting strangers, but she did not believe anything would happen to her. She says that everybody (parents and teachers)
always focused on the dangers and did not mention the magic and attraction involved in meeting someone with whom you have exchanged so many written messages. She says she is from a generation that want to have fun and want life to be happy and enjoyable.

When she first meets someone she does so in public and takes her friend with her. She says that she never feels fearful but that she does feel embarrassed. She does not disclose her real name, address or phone number so that when she wants to stop seeing them she can. She does though give them her mobile phone number.

Her most memorable experience was five months ago. She had been chatting with a man of 22 for two weeks and decided she would meet him. For the first time she went alone and did not take her friend, and rather than meet in a coffee bar she arranged to meet him outside her school. He came in his car and said he would take her somewhere for coffee. She said she got in the car without a second thought. Later he took her to a deserted part of the city to enjoy the view. He wanted to kiss her, but she didn’t want to. He was persistent and she did not want to make him sad or angry so she kissed him. He became more persistent and she did not resist him because she began to wonder how she was going to get home.

She did not want to see him again but he was very insistent and followed her home one day from school. She reported him to the police and he then disappeared. She described this as a bad experience but said that at no time did she think that her life was in danger. The experience did not put her off chatting, or from meeting men she met in chatrooms. Dimitra says that what attracts her about being in online chatrooms is the opportunity that it gives her to be someone other than herself. She finds the challenge of presenting herself as someone unconstrained by
her actual appearance exciting and during the four years she has tried
many roles, from being a shy girl to being a whore and being a lesbian.
She says she gets tremendous enjoyment from being able to take
different roles, being able to speak differently and relate differently to
people and see their reactions as they respond to what she says, without
them actually being able to see her.

FIVOS' STORY

Fivos is seventeen, a high school student from a lower middle class family
who is training to become a car mechanic. He accesses chatrooms from
home and from a friend's home but always alone. He has been doing so for
a year and also uses a mobile phone chat space called 'free-to-date'. He
reckons he spends about 25 hours a week ion chatrooms and up to 5
hours a day.
He is a tall boy, not particularly good-looking whose records show him to
have a below average measured intelligence. Talking with him it is obvious
that he finds conversation difficult and though he has many friends he
knows few girls and does not have a girlfriend. He has a sister and his
mother experiences similar problems with conversational interaction.
Fivos learned about chatrooms through reading computer magazines, he
chats only with Greek girls who are living in Athens using conventional
text and his mobile phone. He is extremely negative about using a camera
and says he would stop chatting if he had to use one. He asks girls to call
him on his mobile phone so as to be sure he is really chatting to a girl and
he also believes that by listening to her voice he can tell what kind of
person she is. Knowing that he is really chatting to a girl is important to
him and he is fearful of encountering boys posing as girls in chatrooms.
He never uses his real surname and does not intend to do so. This is not for security reasons but so that he can chat simultaneously with the same person using different names and different attitudes and see what their reactions are. He never describes himself as he is but always as older, richer and good looking. Depending on the girls, he sometimes pretends to be an intelligent businessman working for a well-known company or having his own business. The chatrooms he participates in are those described as 'relations'.

He enjoys chatting. He says his main intention and purpose is to communicate with girls. He feels the need to associate with girls but he finds this very difficult to do directly. He says he is very direct in his conversations and reveals at the beginning his purpose in chatting. He wants to get acquainted with girls. During the past two years he has talked daily with different girls and older women, he also arranges to meet them and have coffee and in the last two months he has found a girlfriend who he met through chat, however, he has not stopped flirting in chatrooms with other girls and has continued chatting.

He believes that chatrooms are a very important way of communicating with girls. He feels that if he did not chat he would not have been able to talk with or meet girls. He is very shy and cannot reveal his character and so be attractive to girls. He does not normally feel confident even to go near them and speak to them but in the chatroom he is a completely different person.

MARY’S (DAFNI’S MOTHER) STORY
Dafni’s mother Mary is 43, a middle class mother of two children. Mary first heard about chatrooms in a newspaper article two years ago but she did not pay it much attention since they had no computer in the home. A couple of months later they bought a computer but at the time it did not cross her mind that there was any potential danger, apart from exposure to radiation from sitting too long in front of the screen.

The family was introduced to the internet by a friend and she remembers that at the beginning there were many times when the whole family was surfing to find information about books and about holidays.

A year ago, Dafni, the older daughter asked for a personal computer as a birthday present. Her grandparents bought one for her and everyone was happy. After a few weeks Mary observed Dafni going to her room and being on the internet for hours. At first she was not all suspicious but she started worrying about her daughter being exposed to radiation, so she walked in suddenly one evening and was surprised to she that Dafnis was chatting. Dafni immediately tried to hide what she was doing and this made Mary suspicious.

The same night Mary logged in and searched for ‘safety on the internet’ and then discovered the great range of dangers to which her daughter might be exposed. She discussed this with her husband and family friends and discovered that chatting was a common activity among teenagers. Next day she talked with Dafni, who reassured her mother that she was only using chat in a limited way, mainly to discuss music and girly matters, not with strangers but with friends she had made on holiday and with people living in foreign countries.

Mary was not sure that Dafni was telling her the truth so she used her computer to access the chatroom and to her surprise discovered that
her daughter was talking with strangers using dirty language and that she
did not seem reluctant or afraid to meet them.
Later Mary talked with Dafni about on-line safety and they even did chat
together so that she could show why she was concerned. She encouraged
Dafni to talk to her is she encountered problems but she did not manage
to reassure her that whatever happened she would not take away the
internet or other privileges.
Mary tried to talk to Dafni about the dangers of meeting someone she
might have spoken with in chatrooms but Mary said, how can you talk to
her about this when her reply is 'what dangers, there aren't any'.
She was amazed that even though Dafni agreed that it was risky to
disclose personal information, and said that she did not give her name,
phone number or address, she would readily agree to meet with someone,
and in some cases this person did have this information about her.
Mary says that she is not worried about the possibility that Dafni might
disappear in order to meet someone miles away, or that she might be
molested as a result of an online contact. She is, however, afraid that
something might happen that would be a bad experience for Dafni as a
result of trusting someone and meeting them. Her most serious worry is
that in discussing the risks with Dafni she had discovered how far apart
their views were, and as a result Mary worried a lot about Dafni's poor
judgement about what was safe and what was not. Mary believes that
meeting an 'online' man has a 90% possibility of turning out to be nasty,
whereas Dafni thinks that the risk is only 5%.
After these conversations about chat safety, Dafni was careful to hide
her chat friends from Mary and from her other friends who might
disapprove.
Mary kept monitoring Dafni’s conversations as best as she could and saw that Dafni was still often engaged in risky conversations but she did not say anything because she thought that if Dafni was aware of what she was doing then her reaction would probably be absolute rejection of her mother.

Mary does not believe that there is a serious danger from online pornography, though she is afraid of the possibility that to be introduced to peculiar sex habits before even making love in the ‘normal’ way might affect Dafni. Mary has observed Dafni’s self-esteem changing after a long chat session and that she often attempts to pass issues to her family which are unfiltered and unprocessed that she seems to have heard from her friends in the chatroom. She thinks that Dafni’s low level of resistance to ideas and views from outsiders is her worst enemy that her parents have. She is afraid of the fact that she often seems possessed by the attitudes of an older man and that she seems to need this to make her feel secure.

Mary feels quite powerless to protect her own daughter and to influence where she is going and what she is doing online. She does not know ways of protecting her or stopping her online activities. She attempted to move the computer into the living room of the house but this led Dafni to accuse her of not trusting her and not giving her privacy.

Mary has tried to persuade Dafni that she should go with her when she goes to meet someone but Dafni rejects this suggestion because she does not like the idea and also because she strongly believes that her mother is seeing danger where it does not exist. Mary feels unable to make Dafni see and understand the dangers for herself.
Mary's worst worry is the fact that Dafni is so hooked on the chatroom that she neglects many other activities. She is meeting new friends from all over the world in the chatroom but at the expense of friendships in the 'real world'. She is also neglecting her study time. Mary often puzzles over where the limits between Dafni's privacy and her parental responsibility should lie. She is not sure how much she should respect Dafni's privacy and seek to maintain their relationship and not try to restrict her activities. She is not sure which is most important and which makes her a good parent. The fact is that as time passes, her fears for Dafni's safety are growing and she is getting closer to acting to restrict Dafni's online activities much more.

Discussion
The advice generally given to young people by adult authorities is never to meet people they have contacted in chatrooms. For example, the Department for Education and Skills in England and Wales advises parents:

Ensure your child knows NEVER to arrange to meet anyone met via the Internet, because not everyone is who they say they are.

If your child has his/her own email address it is best if it does not give any indication of their age or gender.

Find child-friendly chatrooms with full-time, trained moderators for your children to use.

Encourage your child to know that it is safe to tell you about anything found via the Internet.


The advice is sensible. You cannot believe what people you encounter on the net say to you, whether they are who they say they are, or whether their motives are as transparent as they seem. It is well known that paedophiles and others engage in ‘grooming’; in leading their targets/victims into situations from which they cannot easily retreat.
Contrary to adult wisdom, these young people see chatrooms as ‘safe’ places in which to initiate relationships. Here they can move at their own speed, retreat if they wants to, control the way their identity is presented and perceived. Meeting men or girls in the chatroom is almost the opposite of meeting them in clubs and bars, where communication is multi-dimensional, fast and irreversible and where misreadings can be deliberately made and turned against you. Add the often overwhelming sensory context of clubs and bars, fuelled not just by peer pressures but by alcohol and other drugs, and we can see what they mean.

But in the story Katerina tells about her ‘most memorable experience’ she learns that the relationship she developed through the chatroom, which was intense and meaningful, in the end could not withstand the press of ‘reality’. Despite the care and consideration she gave to assessing this experience of love, she found herself disappointed. The promise and the reality diverged, the actual could not match an ideal that she thought she had discovered. A moral that could be taken from her story is that Katerina becomes, in the end, a victim of the chatroom, not through the malice of a perpetrator, but as a consequence of the gaps between fantasy and reality that are implicit in the medium. Compared to actuality, relationships conducted on the internet are relationships that are ‘cool’ as opposed to ‘hot’ (to use Marshall McLuhan’s typology of the media). This is to say that the character of internet communications is that they require us to bring to them a great deal of interpretation and interpolation. They give us relatively simple signals stripped of paralinguistic and other adjunct features. It is this very limited mode of communication that holds power, for it requires the user to bring an active and reflective presence to it if it is to be meaningful and be sustained.

It can be argued that Katerina’s story reveals, not someone being taken advantage of, but of a young woman growing in emotional maturity and self-awareness and learning from a significant experience. In Katerina’s use of the internet, it becomes an extension of her social world, an addition to the means of contact, communication and reflection available to her, another facet of her identity and of her life, another place and another way to learn.

Each of the stories these young people tell (and we cannot be sure where the boundaries between fantasy and reality actually lie) shows them trying to remain in control but still putting themselves at risk. At this point we face decisions about how best to manage access. The official advice is sensible but does not appear to reach those areas that we need to reach to be effective. Which educational models are most appropriate in the context? Should we attempt to ban certain sites and activities? Should we talk to children about what they find? Should we turn a blind eye and wait for them to ask us questions if they need to? The dilemmas that Mary faces in trying to manage Dafni’s internet behaviours show that these questions are difficult
to resolve in context and even harder to implement. There are risks both ways, risks in allowing young people freedom and risks in restricting it.

Perhaps surprisingly, we believe that there are valuable lessons to be learnt from the experience and achievements of drug education. Drug use, like the internet, has an appeal to the young not always recognised or understood by those in authority, and drug educators, like internet-educators, have often found themselves caught between the demands of politicians, governments and others for simple solutions, when they know that the issues are complex, (‘Just Say No’ was Nancy Reagan’s answer to drug abuse, but seemed only to work for those who had said no anyway).

Drug use, like the web, involves risks and dangers that are often exacerbated by the involvement of powerful vested interests, the certainty of politicians and the uncertainty of those in the professions and confounded by the difficulties of communication between the generations and within families. But, with the concepts of ‘harm reduction’ and ‘harm minimisation’ as a guiding principle, drug educators have developed practical ideas and positive actions that have been tested and appear generalisable.

Given the nature of the internet as a space that is difficult to regulate or filter, are there parallels we might apply to the problem of internet education? Is the notion of harm minimisation a more appropriate concept for internet safety awareness than a combination of censorship and scare messages?

The internet and the young

Despite significant government commitment, and widespread public support, for the use of computers in education, in recent years we have seen the rise of a parallel public concern about the dangers of the internet as a place for children and young people. This is reflected in press reports of increased paedophile activity on the net, in the extensive and uncontrolled expansion of pornographic content available and in the concerns of many parents, and other adults, who feel that their internet-knowledge and skills are inadequate, clumsy and inept when compared to those of their children.

An analysis of press stories\(^4\) suggests that the internet, like other technologies, presents two different faces to the world. There is a bright side, that emphasises prosperity and progress, and a dark side that sees the web as a place of uncertain danger. These images are not stable, which is part of their appeal, for they set up a narrative structure that carries heavy moral traffic across which individual stories tread a precarious line. Today’s sports star, supermodel or pop star is tomorrow’s tragic victim.

\(^4\) During 2001 we collected internet and technology stories from the press over two sample months. Our colleagues at the University of Cadiz collected stories from the Spanish press over similar periods.
The sense of moral panic that drives many of the press stories about young people and the internet is familiar to those who have studied the way that the media report other aspects of youth culture, but particularly the way that drugs issues are reported. Some years ago, Philip Bell (Bell 1982, 1983), analysed the reporting of drug issues by the Sydney media and suggested that stories were driven by a narrative structure in which the key roles of ‘villains’, ‘victims’ and ‘heroes’ were each clearly identifiable. Our analysis of press reporting in the UK and Spain in relation to internet-related stories, suggests that, when stories are sensationalised, a similar structure pertains.

- A similar sense of moral panic drives the stories, particularly the implication that all young people are at risk,
- Powerful and unscrupulous interests appear are depicted to take advantage of innocent youthful experimentation.
- Villains (paedophiles, for example) are reviled, the innocent are presented as tragic victims,
- Selfless heroes may figure at some point in the story (sometimes the newspaper presents itself in this role),
- Large financial interests are involved.
- The issues are globalised and heavily politicised.
- Policing is difficult and demanding.

In comparing drug stories and internet stories, it seems that public discussion is frequently polarised and a clear ideological wedge is driven by many commentators between negative and positive use, between legal and illicit, safe use/binge or obsessional use. The effect is to establish and reinforce boundaries that have a strongly moral character and to see schools and families as the key agencies that should police these boundaries. An archetypal educational story and a familiar curriculum imperative, one we have known in the past in relation to moral issues as diverse as religious belief, sex education and attitudes to war.

**Drugs and technology**

There is a further parallel between the educational problem of the internet and issues in drug education. The compelling attraction that some have towards their use of the internet is often described in terms of addiction. The image is frequently presented of young people who spend many hours at the computer, losing sense of ‘reality’, neglecting other aspects of their lives and of the ‘normal’ routines of eating and sleeping. This especially true of those who are involved in game playing, and in chat rooms, who are described as living in fantasy worlds in which they take on new identities and explore new aspects of themselves in relation to others (Turkle 1997). Here is another conjunction between drug and internet worlds for, in the plasticity of identity and in the chance to enter novel realms of experience there seems to be overlap between the two phenomena. Some commentators on drug issues see drugs as ‘ingestible technologies’, that is as ways of changing the self, at least temporarily, which appear parallel to the way that Sherry Turkle and
others describe the appeal of the internet.

**Harm minimisation and internet safety?**

Recognising some parallels between the problem of chatroom safety and the work done by drug educators, can we identify parallels in the ways that we might respond? Specifically, what can we learn from drug educators and those who work in health promotion about:

- The high levels of investment that change in attitudes and behaviour requires,
- The length of time needed between initiation of a program and noticeable outcomes,
- The unintended effects and consequences of well-meaning interventions,
- The adoption of multiple and diffused strategies as opposed to focused programs,
- The kinds and levels of inter-agency co-operation and alliance that are needed and these can be realised.

Above all, the key message is that these are not simple problems with simple solutions and that often, what adults see as the problem is what young people see as a solution. As teachers, parents or other responsible adults these are issues we need to understand and manage within the limits of our own capacity to control the lives of young people.

**References**


Bell, P. (1983) 'Drugs as news: defining the social' *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* Volume 1 Number pp102-120

