‘I’m a grown up, get me into here’ on-line research with children and young people.

Fiona Hallett Edge Hill University  
Rob Foster Edge Hill University  
Martin Ashley, Edge Hill University


Abstract

Common portrayals of social networking in the media include descriptions of social networking sites as places that help young people to be young and let them “practice” youth. However, recent media reports have attempted to highlight, and arguably entrench, inter-generational barriers to social networking. These include, amongst others, concerns about safety, identity formation and surveillance. This paper seeks to explore the methodological and ethical dilemmas of researching intergenerational social networking by exploring:

- the variations in expectation, and experience, of online intergenerational social networking?
- the variations in the types of concern held by participants?

Concerns relating to autonomy, identity, fear and the unpredictable and ‘risky’ aspects of online communication Brookfield and Preskill (2005) present particular ethical dilemmas. We intend to examine these dilemmas by using Activity Theory to explain how social artefacts and social organisation mediate social action (Engeström, 1987).

Introduction

The social study of childhood, adulthood, and intergenerational communication spans almost limitless philosophical and methodological perspectives from those that maintain an adults-as-oppressors vs children-as-resisters dualism (Ennew, 1994) to those who believe that the ‘diversity of childhoods and adulthoods dissolves the binaries between children and adults’. (Mannion & ‘Ianson, 2004:314). What is accepted, however, across much of the literature, is that the relationships between young people and adults are complex, power-related and difficult to elucidate. Given
that these challenges are articulated with respect to traditional, face-to-face, interactions, the growth of ‘virtual’ communication offers an opportunity to examine intergenerational relationships from a new perspective. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine, via the use of Activity Theory, two case studies of attempted online intergenerational activity in order to analyse the opportunities and threats involved in this form of adult-child engagement. In order to frame our analysis, we intend, firstly, to explore some perspectives on intergenerational relationships, and online environments, that demonstrate particular relevance for the case studies chosen.

**The dynamics of child-adult interactions.**

Any examination of the child-adult relationship requires some conceptualisation of what it is to be a child and what it is to be an adult, though the depiction of either group as a homogeneous entity is, of course, rather arbitrary.

Mannion & l’Anson (2004:314) argue that the bulk of data in the social study of childhood, even those collected as part of the relational research on childhood, appear to support the view that a child’s ‘being’ is often ‘at odds’ with ‘adultist’ and institutional conceptions of what a child should be ‘becoming’. Indeed, Mannion (2007:413) extended this claim to argue that “certain kinds of adults and adulthoods are now only possible because they are defined in a negative relation to children.” This appraisal is interesting given that the aim of the ‘New’ Social Studies of Childhood was to redress the balance by seeing children as present-day ‘beings’ or competent social actors, interpreters of the world and creators of their own life-worlds (Qvortrup,1994). Indeed, whilst much of the literature recognises the fact that
constructions of adulthood and childhood are mutually and inextricably interdependent, there appears to be polarisation across the literature between those that argue that contemporary western society is based upon the commodification of childhood (Giroux, 1999) and those, more optimistic studies, that argue that we have an opportunity to:

“rethink participation in terms of 'spaces for childhood' within which children can exercise their agency to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning-making, which may or may not involve engagement with adults” (Waller, 2006:93).

It could be argued that, here, Waller is proposing something of a “reflexive modernity” approach (Giddens, 1991) by examining differences in the balance between opportunities and risks encountered by different young people and inviting an exploration of the relation between context, lifestyle, moral judgment and identity. Indeed, Giddens proposed, over 15 years ago, that he was witnessing ‘a democratization of the private sphere’ (Giddens 1993:184-5), a historical transformation of intimacy in which children, along with other participants in a relationship, have gained the right to ‘determine and regulate the conditions of their association’. Such notions of participation support the argument that long established and traditionally-significant boundaries between distinct spheres are being blurred or transcended (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2002). That Mannion (2007:410) cites this as being equivocal because these spaces are invariably created out of contested intergenerational knowledge and practice deserves deeper analysis.

In terms of understanding generations and intergenerational knowledge, Edmunds and Turner (2005) favour a concept of generation that stresses the role of social
relations and processes. However, they do acknowledge that most of the contemporary sociological literature on generations has tended to conceptualize generations as age-cohorts. Such delineation poses questions about intergenerational knowledge and practice and has particular relevance in this paper in terms of the history of cultural anxieties surrounding childhood in which ‘society avows a positive view of children yet systematically devalues, intrudes upon or excludes their needs and experiences’ (Qvortrup 1995:190). Given the media-fuelled moral panics associated with online environments and the fact that ‘paranoid parenting’ (Bennet, 2001; Ferguson 2001; Furedi; 2001, 2000) has led to children’s lives becoming ever more specially restricted and highly supervised, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that Livingstone (2007) found that young people are often cynical and disillusioned regarding adults' interest in their views and experiences, arguing that they “may be invited to “have their say” but nonetheless are unlikely to be listened to properly, resulting in a low political self-efficacy.” (2007:124)

**Online engagement and the child-adult relationship**

When examining the agency and identity of technology users, Seal & Abbott (2007:182) comment upon the ‘essentially temporary and malleable nature of online identity’ and note the blurred distinctions between public and private spaces (2007:183). Indeed, it must be recognised, for the purposes of this paper, that web spaces can feel private and yet are more public than many social interactions and can be both anonymous and detailed in the personal information they contain. In addition, although it has been acknowledged that today’s youth have a critical mass of friends online (Livingston, (2005) it has also been argued that parents are seeking
the means to counter the individualising effects of the internet in order to sustain some degree of common culture within the home. (Subrahmanyam et al, 2001: 47).

Therefore, in much of the literature, any examination of intergenerational online engagement focuses upon the ways in which children engage online and the impact of this engagement on families and society. (Slater, 2001; Gross, et al, 2002; Lee, 2005; Livingstone, 2006). Nevertheless, this, albeit limited, perspective has relevance here; in seeking to explore barriers to intergenerational online communication we must, in the first instance, examine the literature that explores how young people are already using the internet.

In a Norwegian study, Hertzberg et al (2007) who were examining the use of online communication between Norwegian tweens (young teenagers) found that in the public chatrooms, which were visited most often by the youngest of these children, much of the conversation concerned sex and pornographic expression. This mirrors findings in the U.K. where a major evaluation of children’s use of the internet discovered that the internet was being used to manage the “embarrassment, trust and privacy demands” of intimate conversations (Livingstone & Bober, 2004:414).

In a similar study McMillan & Morrison (2006:75) concluded that:

“young people’s online social life mirrors offline relationships: computer activities provide support for offline friendships; are mainly devoted to ordinary yet intimate topics.”

McMillan & Morrison (ibid) commented that most young people described the internet as a place that helped them solidify their offline identities and that they depended upon the internet to help them define themselves and their communities.
Interestingly, in terms of intergenerational online activity, Borgida et al., (2002) argue that community norms can help shape definitions of technology and vice versa. Given that Wilkins (1991:89) also hypothesised that “internet users incorporate linguistic features normally associated with oral conversation in their computer-mediated communication” it could be argued that an examination of intergenerational online communication can afford an insight into wider intergenerational interaction.

It is, perhaps, pertinent to this paper that Mannion & l’Anson (2004) argue that:

“The emphasis on narratives about children’s own spaces and children’s agency in spite of adults’ efforts to control them has meant that we are not offered ideas about how adults might enter into alternative symbiotic if contested partnerships with children.”

It would seem that much of the literature focuses on protecting children’s agency by giving them their own spaces; what such approaches create, however, is an assumption that any adult wishing to enter spaces inhabited by children are seeking to exploit.

In point of fact, many of the reported concerns about adult-child online relationships concern perceived risks. However, it has been reported that children and parents are motivated to tell rather different stories when it comes to accounting for Internet risks (and therefore the need for domestic regulation), for reasons more to do with the nature of parent–child power relations than the Internet per se (Livingstone & Bober 2006). Nevertheless, in an analysis of the balance between teenagers’ uptake of online opportunities and the risks they encounter online, the UKCGO project found a strong correlation between online opportunities and risks, contrary to the optimistic
assumption that those who have found their way to the opportunities will also have learned to avoid the risks. (Livingstone & Bober 2006:224).

It is our belief that such findings demonstrate the need for studies such as this that seek to explore the threats and opportunities to intergenerational online activity from the perspectives of young people and adults.

**Using Activity Theory to analyse online spaces**

Activity Theory aims to explain how social artefacts and social organization mediate social action (Engeström, 1987) as illustrated in figure 1.

Engeström describes this activity as follows:

“The ‘subject’ refers to the individual whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis, the object refers to the ‘problem space’ at which the activity is directed and which is moulded and transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal mediating instruments. The community comprises multiple individuals who share the same general object and who construct themselves as distinct from other communities. The division of labour refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status. Finally the rules refer to the
explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system.” (Engeström, 1987: 78)

In this instance, we aim to analyse the experience of intergenerational online communication (object) as articulated by young people or adults (subjects) from a range of backgrounds (communities). The power relations within, and between, the young people and adults are defined by a series of ‘rules’ and by ‘divisions of labour’. The term ‘instruments’, often described as ‘tools’ is acknowledged by many, (Bakhurst, 1995; Cole, 1996; Engeström, 200; Ashwin 2009) as limiting and the increasingly popular term ‘mediating artefact’ will be used in this study to recognise that:

the artefact bears a certain significance which it possesses, not by virtue of its physical nature, but because it has been produced for a certain use and incorporated into a system of human ends and purposes. The object thus confronts us as an embodiment of meaning, placed and sustained in it by ‘aimed-oriented’ human activity. (Bakhurst, 1995: 160)

In addition, Activity Theory recognises that in any complex social system there will be competing goals, limited resources, differing values, and a variety of desired outcomes; as such, actions are not fully predictable or rational and the most well-planned and streamlined actions involve failures, disruptions, and unexpected innovations. Such conflicting forces within activities have been termed ‘contradictions’ (Engeström, 1999:32). Through the use of Activity Theory we hope to identify, and analyse, some of the underlying ‘contradictions’ in this instance. In particular, we are interested in the quaternary contradictions (Engeström, 2001), produced when one activity system (for example that of the young people) interacts with, and is influenced by, another (for example that of the adults).
The Case studies

Case 1 - Weirdoes and the Theft of Intellectual Property

This case concerns a fourteen year old boy, culturally middle class, though not from a wealthy home. He had been a full-time chorister, attending a choir school and singing daily and was shortly to record a CD album, capturing his treble voice before it disappeared forever. This was a self-financed venture, incurring significant costs in the hire of a professional studio. In order to raise money to pay off the debt incurred, he had come up with the ingenious idea of creating his own website, from which tracks from the album could be downloaded and donations made. These donations were to be split between paying off the debt to the recording studio and giving to the charities that had supported his musical education. The website was also to be used to communicate to a wide public the benefits and enrichment that a boy could enjoy through singing, and encourage more boys to sing.

He perceived that such a website would be of considerable interest to a wide range of people. Doubts soon surfaced, however, about the degree to which the issue of child internet safety had been considered, particularly when considering some of the “innocent” pictures he had chosen of himself, these concerns were raised with the boy’s mother. An uncomfortable meeting was held between the boy, his mother and a trusted researcher at which he showed some signs of distress at the scale of the problem to be solved and the amount of effort he had put in to date. “Innocence” was clearly evaporating fairly rapidly.
At this stage, the situation could be summarised as:

- The boy recognised that he might be in some kind of (unspecified) danger from “weirdoes” (his word) accessing his website;
- The boy and his mother both recognised that various solutions in the form of controlled access and password protection might be tried;
- Neither the boy nor his mother possessed the technical capability to achieve this and were thus disempowered in a relationship in which those who understood web design were the powerful.

Persistence and determination eventually resulted in some form of password protection, but this appeared to be unreliable with regard to who could and could not access the site. The degree to which the boy understands the homoerotic interest in his voice and image and interprets it as a threat to his safety is encapsulated in this interview.

Researcher - When I heard you were doing this, I thought it was great, but I did raise a few issues of concern, with your Mum, didn’t I?

Boy - Yes, well, we’ve looked at the issues of concern and we’ve worked on them.

Researcher - What do you understand the issues of concern to be?

Boy - Well the main one, obviously, is to keep weirdoes out. We don’t want any strange fifty year olds with beards wanting nice cool, not cool as in, cute
fourteen year old boys, I’m not saying anything but, um, (pause) just to keep weirdoes out.

Elsewhere in the interview, a brief reference is made to “setting the weirdoes pulses racing” at the sight of the fourteen year old recognising that “fifty year olds with beards” might “want a cute fourteen year old”. That is clearly distasteful to him.

During the course of the case study, a new problem rapidly emerged. A Google search by the boy and his mother revealed that certain agencies had been downloading some of his songs, creating fake album covers from images pirated off the website and passing the work off as their own intellectual property. Various commercial companies (including some surprising well known ones) had apparently been charging 99p a download as though these were legal.

The final part of this case occurred when he was invited to give a presentation on his website experience to a university symposium on inter-generational relationships, at which dialogue between young people and adults was facilitated. Also presenting in this symposium was a male police officer specialising in child protection and internet safety. The researcher received the following thank you letter from the boy

…it was also very useful to me, both for the website, and for life skills in general, hearing everyone’s point of view was extremely interesting, and the truth that the police man (sic) showed was very scary
The “scary truth” presented by this police officer to this “choirboy” is that he is indeed right to assume that the sex of “weirdoes” is male, but that the “weirdo” threat is considerably worse than he had imagined.

**Activity Theory Analysis**

As mentioned, earlier, we now intend to use the contradictions (failures, disruptions, and unexpected innovations) that emerge across this case to analyse the ways in which activity systems interact, and the power differentiation between interacting systems.

The systems, in this instance, are generated by three parties: the boy; commercial music companies; and unknown ‘visitors’ of indeterminable age or motivation. The contradictions described above demonstrate conflicting perceptions around the ‘object’, that is, “the problem space at which the activity is directed” (Engeström, 1987: 78). For this particular example, the problem space can be defined as intergenerational online communication, however, the motivation to engage in such communication, as one might expect, varies between each of the three parties. What is interesting, however, is the realisation that these varying motivations result in the creation of different mediating artefacts, or “symbolic external or internal instruments” (Engeström, 1987: 78), which mould the outcome.

Figure 2, below, models the intersection of the ‘object’ node for the three activity systems with a green activity triangle representing the boy, a blue activity triangle representing music companies and a brown activity triangle representing visitors to the website.
It is clear, from the unfolding events of this case that the motivation behind the object of this activity, for the boy, is to repay debts and to act as a young, male, ambassador for singing. In order to achieve this he created a new mediating artefact; his web-site. It would seem that the boy is seeking to achieve a personal goal whilst offering a commercial product to a fan base and, at the same time, reward the charities that had supported his musical education. In addition, the boy intended the website to also be used to communicate the benefits and enrichment that young men can enjoy through singing and encourage more boys to sing.
When analysing the motivation behind the object of this activity from the point of view of the music companies, it is clear that, once again, the object is to make money but, in this case, the mediating artefact created by the activity is a purely commercial product; one that exploits the young man in question.

In contrast the motivation behind the object of this activity for ‘visitors’ is, presumably, to appreciate the young man in question. This appreciation result in the creation of a community, or fan base, as the primary mediating artefact of this activity. That this appreciation may not intersect with the intention of the young man, or his mother, poses challenges.

Indeed, it is noted that that the object motivation, and resulting mediating artefacts, of two of the activity systems (Music Companies and Visitors) have the potential to exploit the subject of a third system (The Boy).

**Case 2**

*There’s probably more Martins than Cooky Monsters*

This case emerged from a belief that inter-generational chat sounded like a good idea in principle. The theory was that there has been a progressive break-down in communication between the old and the young, resulting in a growing gulf of mistrust. Less time is spent in conversation at the family meal table. Teachers are portrayed in the popular media as inept in a world of youth culture. Fewer adults come forward as voluntary leaders or mentors of young people in the community; those who do have to surround themselves with child protection bureaucracy, a necessary defensive armament in the world of ‘paedo’-hysteria.
It was our belief that new communications technologies such as social networking have exacerbated this. The young are the web 2, techno-literate generation. They will not be beaten at this game, but a certain logic dictated that they might be played at it; thus might the ebbing tide of inter-generational relationships begin to turn. It was within this context that case study 2 is situated.

A local scout troop had been invited by the BBC to make some short films in the Video Nation series – the direct result of a press release made by a research colleague that had sounded good at the time: “Is Facebook replacing parents?” The films were duly made. The boys talked enthusiastically about Scouting, making friends, camping, going on big hikes. The girls talked dejectedly about the lack of things for young people to do in their boring little town. This aroused our interest immediately. Was there manipulation by the film producers? Had the boys been set up for the ritual humiliation of ‘dib dib dib’? Why were the girls portrayed as incapable of entertaining themselves as in the good old days? These were not questions we would have put to our own children at the meal table a few years earlier. One just didn’t. It wasn’t “cool”, and we did not see ourselves as latter day Piagetians; experimenting on one’s own children is no longer ethical.

A new way of relating beckoned. He didn’t realize it at the time, but the research colleague, who had connections with the Scout group, was proposing to become “friends” with these young people. Would he have had an eleven year old boy or a thirteen year old girl as a “friend” twenty years ago? Decidedly not. But the meaning
of “friend” has changed and changed radically. As Debora Rogers pointed out recently\(^1\), it’s the number of “friends” you have that counts. There are means of boosting the number, such as “boarding a friend-whore train”. Dead people remain your friends and are still automatically poked (apparently).

So a “friend” can have any identity you like. Our colleague tried out four by creating a dummy Facebook page. There was Muppetman, created with Wee Mee, and Recycled Teenage Superman, created with Zwinky. The” Prof” was created with software that turns a real photograph into a sketch and finally, rather lamely, “Martin” was a real photograph of the man himself.

One theory suggests that the virtual world eliminates the traditional power structures of identity, - gender, ethnicity, social class and of course age, all fall to the choice of avatar. Children and adults thus meet as equals. Not quite, it seems. Recycled Teenage Superman’s cover was blown in about ten seconds:

Boy - He’d be quite old because he doesn’t use text.

M.A. - Ah, quite old because they don’t use text talk, there’s a good point.
OK.

Boy - Yeah.

Doubtless, were he a seasoned predatory male after these young girls, he’d have been wise to that and txtd 2 thm. He wouldn’t have managed to entice a boy, however:

M.A. (to girls): You don’t know who teenage recycled superman is. Does that, does that matter?

Boy 1 (interrupting): Yeh…

Girl 1: If your avatar…

Boy 2 (interrupting): Yeh cos you just <keep > hacking into you and could get your e-mail address. He could try and get you into his car or everything, or kidnap you or something.

Martin just felt, perhaps, that this might be the “right answer”. It was not the best interview he had done with young people. The two boys were, however, genuinely enlightening over the questions of avatars v. real people – once they had got over the patronizing bit about Martin thinking that he needed to tell them that if it was a real photograph, you would know the person’s real identity. Apparently not.

M.A. - So you know me now, and you know that the Scouts trust me, so if my picture came on line you’d go, Ah that’s Martin…

Boy No.

M.A. No?
Boy It could be anyone, with your picture. They could’ve stolen your picture … When you see the electricity man with his ID, you see the man and the picture…

In spite of this wisdom, the two boys were divided over the name to call him on-line:

MA: Why Martin?

Boy 1: ‘cos it’s your real name.

MA: Why Muppetman?

Boy 2: I’d have more assurance it was you. I’d feel more confident it was you. Because there’s thousands of Martins in the world. My friend’s the Cooky Monster. There’s probably more Martins than Cooky Monsters.

**Activity Theory Analysis**

The systems, in this case, are generated by two parties: the Scouts and Martin.

The contradictions described above demonstrate conflicting perceptions around the “rules” of engagement across two different communities.

Figure 3, below, models the intersection of the ‘rule’ node for the activity systems with a blue activity triangle representing the scouts and a green activity triangle representing Martin.
From the discussions that took place between Martin and the scouts, it would appear that whilst both parties were interested in the same ‘object’ and had similar motivation to engage, each was influenced by the ‘rules’ of their peer group community which influenced their interpretation of the mediating artefacts created; in this case avatars.

For Martin, the concept of being “friends” with young people was obviously challenging and his concerns about the views of his peer group made him cautious. As a result, he designed four mediating artefacts (avatars) to test the reactions of the young people, two of which were cartoon characters: “Muppetman” and “Recycled Teenage Superman”, one a sketch; “The Prof” and one “Martin” a real photograph of
the man, himself. It was clear, from discussions with Martin, that he considered the real photograph to be the most authentic and trustworthy of the avatars.

For the Scouts the concept of being “friends” with Martin was unproblematic but the rules of engagement for their community of peers resulted in some strong reactions to the avatars. They considered the photograph to be the least trustworthy of the images, clearly having experienced people using a “stolen” photograph online. Indeed, it was language, rather than image, that the Scouts used to determine the age group of the person behind the avatar.

In addition, it is interesting, to us, that the young people expressed more confidence in the name “Muppetman” than in the name “Martin” stating, as a reason that “there’s thousands of Martins in the world”. It would seem that a unique ‘code’ that relates your avatar to your interests or background was part of the shared understanding of the young person’s community that dictated rules of engagement.

It is clear, to us, that such peer influenced interpretation of names and images has profound implications for intergenerational online engagement.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This paper set out with two principal aims:

1) To identify and explore some of the methodological and ethical challenges linked to attempting to research inter-generational dimensions of the social networking environment;
2) To evaluate the extent to which Activity Theory could be a useful tool in analysing these social interactions and the factors that mediate them.

What emerges is a complex and rapidly-evolving landscape in which issues of autonomy, identity, fear and perceived risk have both ethical and methodological implications for researchers. The tension between the wish to allow young people space to ‘do their own thing’ and concerns over safety and supervision is evident, and the underlying context of this is not encouraging; the UNICEF Innocenti Report placed the UK 21st out of 21 countries on two crucial measures of ‘Family and Peer Relationships’ and ‘Behaviour and Risk’. On these measures, it appears that British adults are not very good at getting the balance right between empowering and protecting, space and supervision.

However, the picture emerging from the case studies illustrated, and other similar investigations, currently being undertaken by the authors, is by no means all ‘doom and gloom’. In some respects, the case studies suggest that, in terms of contact between the generations, the virtual world is not so different from the real world, except that it is being played out in an environment of new technology. For example, a lot of intergenerational dialogue in the virtual world is between young people and adults who already know each other; the ‘stranger danger’ element, whilst real, needs to be kept in proportion, as in the physical environment. In case study 1, the young person showed great ability and initiative in developing his online site; from an adult perspective, there was arguably a naivety that exposed him to certain risks, and these were mediated by the addition of some adult experience and ‘wisdom’.

There are surely some positive messages here about the potential for inter-
generational collaboration, combining youthful initiative and creativity with adult experience?

Case study 2 highlights some interesting issues about online identities and avatars. Much seems to depend on the nature of the online activity. Where the online environment is clearly topic-based, the choice of identity is often influenced by the topic. Ongoing research by the authors into football supporters’ websites, for example, suggests that few participants use their real identity; most choose something such as a nickname or name of a past or present player. The topic is what brings people into contact and matters of generation (or age, gender, class, ethnicity) are irrelevant and will only emerge incidentally through discussions and debate (‘I’ve been supporting this club since 1968…’). Where the online forum is clearly people-based rather than topic-based, for example, Facebook or Bebo, participants are much more likely to use their own, real-life identity. The response of the scouts was to suggest to their ‘adult guest’ that they would prefer a created identity to his real one. Was this just their perception of online conventions – ‘it’s what you do’? Was it to ensure a unique identity for this adult who had asked permission to come into ‘their’ space? (Most of the scouts used their real-life identity on this forum).

What shows through in both exemplar case studies is that young people are capable of being competent social actors who can make sense of and actively contribute to their environment; this has significant implications for researchers, in terms of ethical and methodological considerations such as the power relationship between children and adults (and the relative powerlessness of children) and the use of methodologies that are more participatory and child-centred.
In terms of utilising Activity Theory to analyse these case studies, we would contest that this approach has two distinct strengths. Firstly, whilst it could be claimed that any objective analysis of the case studies in question would produce similar conclusions as those presented here, we would argue that the present context of media-fuelled moral panics and “paranoid parenting” (Bennet, 2001; Ferguson 2001; Furedi; 2001, 2000) might serve to narrow this analysis to a focus upon the young man in question and the perceived threat of “fifty year olds with beards who might want a cute fourteen year old”. Likewise, a study focussing upon the ethics of the music industry might focus on the issue of property theft which could result in a narrowed analysis around the vulnerability of the young man in question. Activity Theory, on the other hand, whilst highlighting the conflicts between the perceived object of ‘visitors’ to the web-site, and the clear object of music companies, also encourages questions about the ‘communities’ to which each subject is aligned, the historical development of the ‘rules’ of activity, the divisions of labour inherent to activity and the mediating artefacts produced by actors. In this way, the conflict between visitors to the web-site that were perceived as potential “Weirdos” and the young man in question can be viewed in light of the respective communities of practice involved and the ‘rules’ of such practice. Similarly, an examination of clear tensions between the young man under study and music companies can be enriched by some consideration of the importance of the mediating artefacts produced. In this way, Activity Theory allows us to consider tensions within the historical, social and material contexts of activity. This leads us to what we consider to be the second advantage of Activity Theory, which relates to the way in which activity systems can be used to identify under-researched aspects of activity.
As such, whilst the tensions inherent in the interacting activity systems described in Case Study 1 were, somewhat, self evident, further consideration of our lack of understanding about the ‘rules’ to which different ‘communities’ conform resulted in the creation of a second case study. As a result, Case Study 2 was designed in order to address some of the questions raised by Case Study 1 regarding the ways in which a “fifty year old man with a beard” would be perceived by children and how, if at all, these perceptions could be adjusted via the use of mediating artefacts in the form of “avatars”. In this way, each version of Activity Theory analysis can inform, and produce, further consideration of the features of activity and the relationships between each facet of the social context. This becomes a natural feature of Activity Theory, as the approach requires analysis of all ‘nodes’ within an activity system rather than those of particular interest to the researcher.

Therefore, we suggest that Activity Theory can be used as a heuristic device to provide a theoretical framework within which collective social engagement can be analysed in order to examine the ways in which “adults might enter into alternative symbiotic partnerships with children (Mannion & I’Anson, 2004) and the complexities of researching the inter-generational dimensions of the social networking environment.

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