NEW WEB PHENOMENA

Government administration and the culture of sharing

TANJA STORSUL, HANS CHRISTIAN ARNSETHER, TAINA BUCHER, GUNN ENLI, MAGNUS HONTVEDT, VIBEKE KLØVSTÅD AND ARNT MAASØ

Department of Media and Communication
Network for IT-Research and Competence in Education (ITU)
Foreword

What characterizes new generation’s use of ICT and media? How can and should government administration respond to new web phenomena? These are the central questions of this project and the report. The project is funded by the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform and carried out in collaboration between the Department of Media and Communication (IMK) and the Network for IT-Research and Competence in Education (ITU) at the University of Oslo. TNS Gallup has collected data for this project.

The project was managed by IMK and the project group consisted of researchers from both IMK and ITU:

Project manager:
Tanja Storsul, associate professor, IMK

Project group (in alphabetical order):
Hans Christian Arnseth, research director, ITU
Taina Bucher, researcher, IMK
Gunn Enli, associate professor, IMK
Magnus Hontvedt, senior executive officer, ITU
Vibeke Kløvstad, head of department, ITU
Arnt Maasø, associate professor, IMK

The project contributes to a new understanding of how Norwegian teenagers use new web phenomena, which we hope will be useful for the Ministry, as well as for other readers of the report.

Oslo, May 2008
Tanja Storsul

Note to the English edition

Norway is small country, yet relatively advanced in terms of diffusion of ICT services. As this study will show, 86% of the population have access to the Internet and 70% use the Internet daily. 61% of the households have a broadband subscription (NPT 2008). These numbers provide some background to understand why in 2008, Norwegians were among the most active Facebook users with more than 1 million Facebook users in a population of 4.7 million.

We hope the findings of this report may be useful outside Norway. Taina Bucher has translated the report into English.
# FOREWORD

Note to the English edition

# SUMMARY

Recommendations

# 1 INTRODUCTION

# 2 ABOUT THE STUDY

Preliminary analysis
Survey
Focus groups

# 3 NEW WEB PHENOMENA AND NEW GENERATIONS

New web phenomena
New generations
Digital literacy
Challenges for government administration

# 4 TEENAGERS ARE MAJOR USERS OF THE INTERNET

The Internet is the largest medium among young people
Everyone has access

# 5 SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ARE A BIG PART OF TEENAGERS INTERNET USAGE

Teenagers use the Internet for communication
Facebook prevails
Many quick visits
Social networking sites are cluster phenomena
Teens move in herds
Non-users
Social networking sites of the future?
6 WHAT ARE THE USES OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES? 33

Social networking sites are meeting places 33

Social Networking Sites are entertaining 36

Social networking sites are useful websites? 37
   Less important for searching information 37
   Not important for self-expression? 40
   Sceptical about mixing social networking sites and government administration 40

What is useful? 42

7 WHAT ARE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES SIMILAR TO? 45

Café 45

Festival 45

Playground 46

The shopping mall 46

8 GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND NEW WEB PHENOMENA 47

Create own social networking sites? 47

Using aspects of social networking sites? 48

Using existing social networking sites? 49

Making public content easy to share? 50

Governmental information sites on the web? 51

9 SHARING NOT CONTROLLING 53

REFERENCES 55

Non-published appendices 56

Social networking sites mentioned in the report 56

FIGURES 58
Summary

Teenagers spend a lot of time on the Internet and social networking sites constitute an important part of their Internet use. Social networking sites are web services that make it easy for the users to create, share and distribute media content. Typical examples include YouTube, Facebook and Nettby. Social networking sites are important for teenagers, as communication channels for establishing social connections, for building networks and for sharing information and experiences. This report is concerned with how teenagers use such new web phenomena and the implications this may have for government administration.

Internet is the medium that teenagers use the most. Internet use has now surpassed television as the medium 16-19 year-olds use the most. The Internet is used all through the day.

Teenagers use the web mostly for communicational purposes. 74% of 16-19 year-olds send and receive e-mail at least once a day, 70% participate in social networking sites at least once a day, and 66% chat via MSN Messenger or related services once or more a day. Teenagers furthermore use the Internet to look for information. 67% use search engines and 64% read online news once or more a day.

Facebook is the most pervasive social networking sites among 16-19 year-olds. 59% use Facebook at least once a day. On a weekly basis 77% use Facebook. By comparison, Nettby, the largest Norwegian social networking site is used daily by 24% of the young people in this study. Along with the weekly users of Nettby, the numbers rise up to 31%. YouTube also has a large numbers of users, but more on a weekly basis. 71% of the young people use YouTube once or more a week. YouTube is seen as a place for entertainment and adventure more than a social networking site.

Most of the people visit social networking sites several times per day, however only for a few minutes each time. The vast majority say they use social networking sites less than half an hour a day. Teenagers move quickly away from social networking sites they get bored off, and they move in herds along with their friends. The main reasons for moving away from social networking sites are that they experience it as boring and that their friends are leaving. Teenagers are attracted by the social networking sites their friends participate in.
The teenagers in this study mainly think that social networking sites are social and entertaining. They are more ambivalent towards imagining social networking sites as being something useful, for instance for finding information. Teenagers meet on social networking sites and chat about a variety of issues whether serious or non-serious. However it is not easy to determine whether social networking sites are arenas facilitating useful or useless activities. Like a café, a festival, or a playground, social networking sites are places where teens meet and share jokes and information a like.

**Recommendations**

Social networking sites are important communication channels for young people. There are no clear-cut boundaries between the social, entertaining and the useful. Many types of activities take place on social networking sites. Government administration should therefore reflect on how these social networking sites are being used and how they might be integrated into public information available online. Our recommendations are summarized briefly:

Public websites such as regjeringen.no are very important. These should keep high quality and be up-to-date and informative. Information on government websites should be easy for users to share and distribute to other websites, like social networking sites. It is important that public information is made available to as many people as possible, rather than only being available on public websites.

Public information campaigns should use social networking sites as information channels and buy advertising space there. It could be useful to use structural aspects from social networking sites on public information websites, like the comments functionalities. This should, however, be limited to specific topics and stipulated time periods like public consultations. General public debate should take place elsewhere. Government administration should not establish social networking sites.
1 Introduction

Web 2.0 and the social web are used as generic terms for a number of new Internet services. Typical web 2.0 phenomena include services like YouTube, Facebook and Nettby. Common to these is that they represent ICT and media phenomena where the users become part of a social community and actively create, develop and sustain the medium. To an ever-greater extent, the use of ICT and new media is becoming interactive, communicative and social.

The move towards the participatory web is described in the Government’s report to the Norwegian parliament [Stortinget] “An information Society for All” (St. meld. nr. 17 (2006-2007)), as playing a key role in the development of the Internet:

We are moving away from a situation in which knowledge is created, stored and developed in more or less closed environments, according to strict rules and procedures. We are entering a new situation in which knowledge is being spread far and wide, is accessible through a couple of keystrokes, just as new knowledge can also be published and publicised at a single keystroke. It is becoming easier to get in touch with others who share the same interests as oneself. This challenges traditional quality assurance and all existing monopolies on knowledge and opinion. (St. meld. nr. 17 (2006-2007) p. 13)

For the public sector, this created the opportunity to target information and services, and to be able to enter into dialogue with the users. At the same time, this also implies new challenges for the public. The Ministry of Government Administration and Reform asked for a study that would focus on the following:

• Who are the users of the new social websites? What are the users doing and why? It is particularly important to gain insight into the ways in which new generations use ICT’s and the media generally.
• How can/should the government administration deal with and take advantage of such web phenomena in order to achieve their communicative and service related purposes, and in order to accomplish its ICT political goals? What are the opportunities and challenges?

This report presents the findings of the study. The study was carried out as collaboration between the Department of Media and Communication (IMK) and the Network for IT-Research and
Competence in Education (ITU). The data material was provided for by TNS Gallup.
2 About the study

We have carried out a three-part study in order to investigate the characteristics of new generations’ ICT- and media use and to come up with suggestions as to how the government should deal with new web phenomena like social networking sites. The study includes a preliminary analysis, a representative survey and focus group interviews. TNS Gallup provided the data material.

Preliminary analysis

Previous studies carried out by TNS Gallup form the basis for the preliminary analysis. TNS Gallup is a supplier of a range of measurements within the access and use of media and the Internet. Since 1995, TNS Gallup have made measurements of the access and use of the Internet through survey’s like Consumer & Media [Forbruker & Media] and InterBuss. Consumer & Media is Norway’s leading market survey and has been carried out since 1988. Every year 30 000 interviews are conducted with individuals above the age of 12. The Consumer & Media survey provide detailed information about all kinds of media use patterns, making it possible to compare use of the Internet with other media. InterBuss is the largest survey on ICT and Internet use among Norwegian individuals and households. Interbuss was first time carried out in 1995 and has since then been conducted quarterly.

Analyses of this data material provided information on how youth use of the Internet and new media, and access to media technology has developed over time. In addition, this data material gave us useful insights into the ways in which teenagers’ media use patterns differ from those of the rest of the population.

Survey

In order to map teen’s use of social networking sites a nationwide representative survey was carried out. The survey provide an overview of which social networking sites teens use the most, the users of these social networking sites and what people use social networking sites for.

The survey was conducted in December 2007 by TNS Gallup in close collaboration with IMK and ITU. 1000 electronic questionnaires were sent out to people between 16-19 years. The respondents were recruited from the Gallup panel, a panel consisting of 30 500 people above the age of 15 years who have agreed to be on a list over potential respondents with TNS Gallup. 750 respondents, 384 men and 366 women answered the questionnaire. The result is a response rate of 75%, which is regarded as high.
Taking into account that the survey was based on an electronic questionnaire sent out on the Internet, and thus are answered only by people with access to the Internet some bias may occur in the data material. In cases where it can have an impact on the study, we compared the results of our investigation with the latest results from Gallup Consumer & Media surveys. In addition we have incorporated findings from other studies where relevant.

**Focus groups**

A survey provides a good overview of the use of the Internet, though insight about the complex background on how and why teens use social networking sites is rather limited. Such websites are relatively new phenomena. Focus groups were conducted in order to get a deeper understanding about the ways in which these websites are being used, teen’s motivations for using the Internet, how teens search for information and the reasons why teens use some websites and stop using others. In the focus group interviews the teenagers could describe in their own words how they use the Internet and social networking sites. By listening to the participants discussing with each other, focus groups provide the unique opportunity to become aware of phenomena and mechanisms we had not reflected on initially.

The focus groups were carried out February 2008 in the wake of the survey. In all, there were four focus groups. Each focus group had 5-6 participants. Two focus groups were conducted in the capital Oslo, and two in the more rural town Gjøvik. In each place there was one group consisting of girls only and one group consisting of boys only. We decided to divide into girl and boy groups as the survey showed interesting gender differences in the use of social networking sites. In addition, experience shows that it is easier to get a good dialogue with teens when divided into gender specific focus groups.
3 New web phenomena and new generations

New web phenomena

A central feature of media development in recent years is that people, and particularly the young, create, share and distribute information and media content. Media use is increasingly becoming social and participatory. Henry Jenkins (2006) has called this the development of a participatory culture.

This development has been promoted by technology that makes it easier for people to access, use and share media content. A number of new Internet applications and services have been launched in recent years. This new web phenomenon has been referred to by Tim O'Reilly (2005) as the Web 2.0, and includes a variety of Internet applications in which a participatory architecture makes it easier for the user to create, share and distribute information and to interact with their social network. According to Yochai Benkler (2006) such services have led to a decentralization of production and distribution of information. People’s use of the media does not only involve consumption of media content. Media use is active and the users produce their own content by using media.

Illustration 1. Example of information you get when you log on to a social networking site. Facsimile from Facebook. April 2008.

Many of these web services are eminently social and help users to highlight and perform their social networks (Boyd og Ellison 2007). We refer to these webservices as social networking sites. On a social networking site users register themselves by name or a nickname, with a personal picture and any other information they wish to share with others. The users build networks by joining groups and networks, or to state who they are friends with. They can send each other messages, show pictures and videos to their friends, and to tell about their current status. The possibilities are many, and the users themselves contribute to the development of the social networking sites by using them in new ways.
During a short amount of time social networking sites have turned into important social arenas. They work in part as communication channels, networks and entertainment. Teenagers in particular have taken such social networking sites in use as part of their everyday life.

Although social networking sites have been in existence for many years, only in recent years they have become a mass phenomenon, something that most young people are involved in (and an increasing number of adults too). Most studies on social networking sites and similar services have up to now, naturally enough, focused on the early users, those that stand out by using such services extensively. Now that social networking sites have become more common, it is important to also investigate what the typical usage of social networking sites is. What characterizes the general use of social networking sites? Some studies have already done this (Pew 2006, Ofcom 2008). Our study is a contribution to the development of knowledge about how and why social networking sites are being used.

**New generations**

Our study focuses on how teenagers in Norway aged 16-19 years use social networking sites. They are representatives of what Howe and Strauss (2000) call the Millennials, Tapscott has called the web generation, and the OECD calls the New Millennium Learners. This is a generation that has grown up with digital technologies as a crucial part of everyday life. They are not familiar with a life without the Internet or mobile phones. Their use of ICT and media is therefore particularly interesting.

These young people account for the part of the population that uses the most digital media. They make use of new media first and they use them the most. They are active, both in terms of use and creation of culture. Many of them increasingly lead a public life on the Internet, publish and eternalising (possibly without much consideration) their thoughts, photos and relationships online.

Teenagers are interesting as they develop their identities, competence and culture in interaction with ICT. They will therefore pick up and to a large extent begin to use new services before the rest of the population. This may seem to be the case with social networking sites as well, as they were mostly youth phenomena to begin with, but which are now expanding to older age groups. There is also reason to believe that some of the media use patterns teenagers establish will be maintained into adulthood.
**Digital literacy**

Through the use of social networking sites, among others things, teenagers develop digital literacies - they learn how to use technology to pursue their interests and realize their goals. The concept of digital literacy has gained a strong position in the Norwegian educational system, since “to be able to use digital tools” has been integrated into the new curricula following the Knowledge promotion reform (2006) as a basic skill. All students should be able to master and to take advantage of digital tools in all subjects and at every stage along with reading, calculating, writing and expressing themselves orally. The use of social networking sites does not however require advanced technical skills, so that everybody may participate. Therefore it might not be the development of more technical skills that is the most interesting in this context.

That said, it can be argued that social networking sites like Facebook encourage and stimulate creativity in terms of developing content and applications which demand competences in programming and design. In terms of developing digital literacies, however, it is as important to gain more knowledge about the ways in which children and teenagers learn to master the interactional norms and the genres of communication and self-representation that characterise social networking sites.

The concept of digital literacy contains various dimensions, and includes both the skills and competences that are developed during leisure time and those that are developed at school and in work life. The connection or the transfer value between these contexts, however, is not clear. Based on Eshet-Alkalais’ (2004) definition we can say that digital literacy is about the competence to; interpret multimodal texts, use and reproduce existing texts, interpret non-linear texts, practice source criticism and the ability to master the norms and rules that exist in for instance social networking sites. These skills are important prerequisites for being a successful participant in both formal and informal networks – for being able to be active and critical participants in society.

Teenagers build their digital literacy, among other things, through using social networking sites. As we will see, they create texts along with others on the social networking sites, they share pictures and further develop other media expressions. By creating their own media expressions and sharing these with others, new forms of digital literacy may be developed – for instance a competence to interpret multimodal texts and to represent oneself in new and creative ways. The greater focus on participation and production create new potentials opportunities for reflecting about one’s role
and competence in relation to other members of social networking sites. Young people’s activities on social networking sites therefore become a possible arena for building competence that exceeds the more consumption oriented use of media. In this way, the use of social networking sites contribute to young people developing important skills for participation in the network society.

**Challenges for government administration**

The starting point of this report is the fact that more and more people use the Internet to create, share and distribute information, and to interact with their social networks. Among other things this takes place on social networking sites. As this report will show the young people are very active users of social networking sites. Social networking sites are an essential part of teenagers’ Internet use and through the social networking sites they establish and develop networks. Using social networking sites contribute to developing digital literacy which is useful both for participating in society and social networks.

This means that government administration is facing some new challenges and we will here point out three of the main challenges:

First of all, government has to reach young people with information and services today. It is therefore important to understand young people’s media habits and communication patterns in order to know how the state can best reach the youth.

Secondly, government has to reach people with information and service providers in the future. Today’s young people will soon become adults and will face the government as adult citizens on a whole range of issues. Moreover, we see that even today’s adults change their media use habits and adopt social networking media. It is, therefore, not only teenagers’ media habits and communication patterns that are changing. In order to reach the entire population in the future it becomes important to understand new web phenomena.

And third, there has long been a goal for the government to open up for more dialogue and user interaction. ICT's are often thought of as tools that can contribute to this (see for instance St. meld. nr. 17 (2006-2007) *An information society for all*). In order to evaluate the extent to which and in what ways new web phenomena, like social networking sites, can help realize this, it is necessary to know more about how these are used.
Following this we will look at how today’s 16-19 year-olds use the Internet and particularly social networking sites, before going on to discuss the possible consequences this could have for the government.
4 Teenagers are major users of the Internet

The Internet is the largest medium among young people

The use of the Internet has grown in the entire population but mostly among young people. Among the 16-19 year-olds, the Internet is the largest medium.

Figure 1. Percentage of daily support for newspaper, TV, radio, Internet and mobile media content between 1960-2007. Data from TNS Gallup Consumer & Media [Forbruker & Media] from 1994; Lundby og Futsæter 1993; Futsæter 1998.

Figure 1 shows that Internet use in the society has increased significantly over the past decade. TNS Gallup’s Consumer & Media-surveys from 1961-2007 shows a strong growth in Internet use. At the beginning of 2007, 70% of the population were using the Internet daily.
Consumer & Media surveys show that young people use the Internet far more than the population on average. As illustrated in Figure 2, 84% of the 16-19 year-olds used the Internet daily in 2007. As a result, the Internet is the medium that has the greatest daily prevalence among young people. Background figures show that the boys in this age group are using the Internet slightly more than girls on a daily basis. The differences here however are not large. 88% of boys are using the Internet daily next to 81% of the girls. Older age groups demonstrate a significant bigger gender difference in use. This is also confirmed by other studies (see for instance SSB 2008, Smihily 2007).

Generational gaps in Internet use also applies to the rest of Europe, where recent Eurostat statistics demonstrating major differences in generations when it comes to Internet use (Smihily 2007). Figures from the Eurostat study shows that 78% of young people in the age group of 16-24 years are using the Internet on weekly basis, while only 25% of the Europeans between 55-74 years do the same.

Our survey among 16-19 year-olds was carried out at the end of 2007. This survey reports that 96% are using the Internet on a daily basis. This is higher than the figures appearing in the Consumer & Media survey. This is probably due to the fact that our survey was solely carried out via the Internet. This may result in
some bias in terms of the findings. As will be shown below almost all young people between 16-19 years have access to the Internet, making such bias not due to unequal access. An Internet based survey may nevertheless provide the highest response among those who use the Internet frequently. Anyway, the overall trends in the survey are obvious. The Internet has experienced a powerful growth and for the 16-19 year-olds it has become the medium with the greatest daily prevalence.

Internet is an integral part of young people’s everyday life and they use it throughout the day. Our survey shows that 76% of the teenagers between 16 and 19 years are using the Internet several times a day (see Figure 3).

Teenagers use the Internet all through the day. This is also evident in the focus groups. Here the teenagers give a fairly coherent account of the fact that they use the Internet several times during the school day. As one of the teens expressed it:

“When I’m close to a computer I’m always logged on, even if I may sit and watch TV.”
This statement is typical for what the participants in the focus groups say. When they come home from school they turn on the computer and have the Internet accessible at all times. They rarely sit in front of the computer an entire evening, but do other things, while going to the computer from time to time to check whether something has happened on Facebook or Nettby. The boys also say that they usually have some downloads going on in the background. The teens say they can quickly spend several hours in the evening on the Internet, and if they are bored may easily spend the entire evening on the Internet. During the weekends, however, they are not on the Internet that much. Then they mainly use the Internet to coordinate where to meet.

**Everyone has access**

Teenagers are the age group where nearly everyone has access to the Internet. Almost all young people have access to the Internet at school, and most have access to the Internet from home.

![Figure 4. Access to the Internet among various youth groups. Percent. Source: Consumer & Media. July 2007.](image)
Nearly all teenagers have access to the Internet. TNS Gallup Consumer & Media-survey shows that in 2007 99% of 16-19 year-olds had access to the Internet. 95% had access at home. This is higher than in the population as a whole in which 86% have access to the Internet (see figure 4). Teenagers are the part of the population in which almost everyone has access and uses the Internet.

**Figure 5. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who have the possibility to use the Internet from their home and school. Percent. Answers to the question: Do you have the possibility to use the Internet at school/home when you wish to? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.**

Our study supports this. 98% of the respondents in our survey state they have the possibility to use the Internet at home whenever they wish, and 83% may use the Internet at school if they need to do so (see figure 5).
Figure 6. Access to equipment among 16-19 year-olds. Percent. Answers to the question: Do you have any of the following? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.

In addition young people have access to digital equipment. Figure 6 shows that a total of 91% state having their own computer with access to the Internet. 97% own a mobile phone and 87% have their own MP3-player. Many also have digital equipment they can use to share their own content on the web. 65% own a digital camera and 53% have a computer with a webcam. The youth are very well equipped to use and produce digital media expressions.
5 Social networking sites are a big part of teenagers Internet usage

**Teenagers use the Internet for communication**

Generally teenagers use the Internet to communicate with others. They participate in social networking sites several times a day. The girls are slightly more active on social networking sites than the boys.

![Figure 7. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who do the following activities on the Internet once or more a day. Percent. Answers to the question: How often do you do the following on the Internet? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.](chart)

Teenagers use the Internet primarily to communicate with each other. As figure 7 shows, e-mail and social networking sites top the chart over daily activities on the Internet among youth. 74% use e-mail once or more per day and 70% visit social networking sites once or more a day. Search engines are also very important and are used by 67% once or more a day. Moreover, 66% state they use chat services like MSN Messenger and Skype once or more per day. News rank not until fifth place. This also shows how teenagers
Internet usage is different from adults. Previous studies suggest that adults’ to a greater degree use the Internet for news and banking services in addition to e-mail (TNS Gallup Consumer & Media 2007, SSB 2008).

Teenagers also read news and search for information online, but it is still for communication purposes they use the Internet the most. It is worth noting that blogging constitutes a relatively marginal phenomenon, with only 3% stating that they blog and 8% stating they read blogs on a daily basis. Young people primarily communicate with each other through e-mail, social networking sites and MSN.

There is a difference in the amount of time girls and boys use on social networking sites. Both girls and boys are major users of social networking sites, but girls use social networking sites even more than boys. While a total of 79% of the girls are using social networking sites once or more a day, 62% of the boys do the same. When it comes to chat services like MSN Messenger in which one communicates one to one, boys tend to use it more than girls. 69% of the boys use MSN Messenger once or more a day while 64% of the girls do the same. There are no gender differences regarding e-mail use.

The focus groups reinforce this impression. Here the girls describe how they mainly use the Internet to maintain contact with their friends and to look at other people’s profiles and pictures. The boys also do this, but in addition they use the Internet to a larger degree for entertainment like games and for sharing funny videos. The strongest gender difference therefore concerns the use of social networking sites. It must be stressed that even here the main tendency shows that a large majority of young people, both boys and girls, are active users of social networking sites, and that their common main activity is to maintain contact with friends.

This corresponds with previous studies. Ofcom’s study Social Networking for instance (Ofcom 2008) suggest that the use of social networking sites differs between girls and boys. Girls are more communicative and social than boys. At the same time they show that other factors like age, social class and leisure time activities also have an impact on the frequency of use and the type of social networking site they choose. In their study, Ofcom distinguishes between different users profiles of social networking sites; Alpha Socialisers who use social networking sites intensively during specific periods; Attention Seekers who are seeking attention; Followers who keep track on what their friends are doing; Faithfuls who use social networking sites to resume contact with old friends.
and acquaintances; and Functionals who use social networking sites for a specific reason. This reflects a complex picture of why people use social networking sites. The user profiles that occur the most are Followers or/and Faithfuls. The findings of our study support this, showing how the majority of users first and foremost wish to keep track on what friends do and to maintain friendships.

**Facebook prevails**

Three out of four young people use Facebook. No other social networking site is as large.

![Figure 8. Proportion of young people using the following social networking sites several times a day/daily, and weekly. Procent. Answers to the question: How often do you use the following social networking sites? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.](image)

If we take a look at which social networking sites young people are using, Facebook clearly stands on its own. By the end of 2007, 59% of 16-19 year-olds stated they use Facebook up to once or several times a day (see figure 8). If we supplement those who are weekly users of Facebook, 77% of young people are Facebook-users. By comparison, Nettby is Norway’s largest social networking site among this age group. 24% of the teenagers use Nettby once or more a day, rising to 31% if adding the weekly users.
YouTube also has many users, but more on a weekly basis. 71% of the young people use YouTube once or more a week. The focus groups show that YouTube to a lesser extent is seen as social networking site one has to visit every day, but more as a venue for events and entertainment.

Other social networking sites are very marginal among the teenagers. MySpace has only a daily support of 4% and Biip advertising to be the biggest Norwegian social networking site has only a daily support of 1% within this age group. Secondlife, a virtual world where people meet through their constructed avatars has received a great deal of attention in Norway, though barely any of the 16-19 year-olds are using it.

![Figure 9. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who say they are members of a number of social networking sites. Percent. Answers to the question: Approximately how many social networking sites are you a member of? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.](image)

Most of the teenagers are members of more than one social networking site (see figure 9). On average teenagers in this age group are members of 3.4 social networking sites. The number of social networking sites they participate in decreases with increased age. 16-17 year-olds often participate in four or more social networking sites, while 18-19 year-olds often participate in one to three social networking sites.

In the focus groups the teenagers reported that they use different social networking sites when these seem to complement each other. For instance many say they use both Facebook and YouTube, and
MSN chat service. These sites are being used for different purposes: Facebook is being used to look at other people’s profiles and pictures and to keep track on what is going on, MSN is being used to talk directly with each other, while YouTube is used to watch “snips” and videos. In cases where the social networking sites have relatively equal areas of use like Facebook and Nettby, people prefer to use one of them rather than both. Many who have moved away from a social networking site to another have kept their account in the old social networking site even if it is largely passive. The following conversation from one of the focus groups illustrates this:

-“I don’t use anything that is similar to Facebook at the same time.”
-“I don’t think you are using two things that are very similar at the same time.”
-“It’s too much work.”
-“As long as everybody is on the same social networking site there is no need for it.”

Because people use different social networking sites that complement each other, they often have them on the screen simultaneously when they are on the Internet. Thus, one can easily see if something new has happened. This is particularly the case with MSN which is used in conjunction with social networking sites.
Many quick visits

Social networking sites are used several times a day, but only in short sequences.

![Bar chart showing the amount of minutes that 16-19 year-olds use on different social networking sites per day.](image)

Figure 10. Amount of minutes that 16-19 year-olds provide that they use on different social networking sites per day. Percent. Answers to the question: Approximately how much time did you spend on the following social networking sites yesterday? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.

The teenagers visit social networking sites several times a day, but only for a short amount of time measured in minutes. Figure 10 shows that most people use social networking sites less than 30 minutes a day. 70% of the Facebook-users claim they use the social networking site less than 30 minutes. A large proportion of these were using Facebook less than 15 minutes. Only 14% of Nettby and Facebook-users provided that they participate in social networking sites more than one hour a day.

There are age and gender differences concerning the use of social networking sites. First of all, the amount of time one uses decreases with increased age. Secondly, girls use slightly more time on Facebook and Nettby, while the boys use slightly more time on YouTube than the girls. This is consistent with that girls are more active on social networking sites than boys and to a greater extent use social networking sites to communicate, while the boys to a
greater extent seek companionship in the joint use of entertainment.

**Social networking sites are cluster phenomena**

Social networking sites are used all over the country. However, there are regional differences in terms of which social networking sites young people are using. A good example of this are differences between the neighbouring counties Hedmark and Oppland. The background figures in this survey show that by the end of 2007, 74% of the young people in Hedmark were using Facebook once or more per day, to 57% of young people in Oppland. At the same time, 22% of the young people in Hedmark were using Nettby once or more a day, while 40% of young people in Oppland were using Nettby daily. Thus at the 2007-2008 transition, Facebook was more popular in Hedmark than in Oppland, while Nettby was more popular in Oppland. Such regional differences are also evident between other districts.

These differences, however, do not suggest that Facebook is more suitable for people living in Hedmark and Nettby better suited for people living in Oppland. Such differences suggest that social networking sites are cluster phenomena. Teenagers are part of the social networking site they find their friends in - and they have most of their friends in their local community. If everyone at school is on Nettby it is likely to be the most relevant social networking site to be part of – until another social networking site takes over.

**Teens move in herds**

Teens move in herds from one social networking site to the next. When a new social networking site becomes popular it only takes a short time until older social networking sites lose support.

At the time of this study Facebook was the prevailing social networking site. However, a number of social networking sites had been popular before that. This applies for instance, to Blink. Less than 1% of the young people replied that they use Blink once or more a day, but up to 29% stated that they had used Blink previously. Similarly, we see that while only about 1% uses Biip once or more a day, 21% replied that they had used Biip before.

Hamarungdom.no which was a local and regionally-based social networking site is another example. For several years it had a lot of activity, but was closed down in December 2007. This illustrates that young people move quickly and that they move in herds.
We know this type of herd behaviour from other social arenas, both on and off line. For example, in multi-player games on the Internet, it is a well-known phenomenon that whole groups of friends or 'guilds' sometimes emigrate to another game at the same time (Taylor 2006). Similarly in nightlife, popular and crowded cafes or bars may suddenly lose their appeal and new places quickly emerge as the new meeting place.

Figure 11 shows that the primary reason why users stop using some social networking sites is that they experience the network as boring and that their friends move. As many as 85% reply have stopped using a social networking site because it became boring. The second most important reason, which is often linked to the first, is that friends move over to another social networking site.

This was clearly illustrated in the focus group discussions. The participants told that they had been users of several social networking sites, such Biip, Blink, Bamse Mums and Jippi. In Gjøvik most of the teenagers had been using the local social networking sites Gjøvikungdom [Gjøvik youth] and Hamarungdom [Hamar youth] previously. When Nettby and Facebook took off, activity on
Gjøvikungdom and Hamarungdom sank dramatically so that they had to close down.

In the discussion the teenagers highlight three main reasons for stopping to use some social networking sites. The first reason illustrates the social significance of social networking sites. Young people are involved in those social networking sites that their friends are part of. If their friends move from one social networking site to another, the others will soon follow. The second reason is related to the fact that they are concerned about which group they belong to. The teenagers say they have grown out of some of the social networking sites. They experience a social networking site negatively if it is perceived as childish and when there are too many “14 year-olds” there. The 17-18 year-olds have left Bamsemums and Jippi which they perceive as childish social networking sites, and some also think that Nettby has too many young users and perceive Facebook as being a little bit more grown up. The third main reason to stop using social networking sites is when there ceases to be introduced something new to the social networking site (such as new games and the like). Then people get tired of it, and move over to a new and more exciting social networking site. In short, you have to be able to do new things in the social networking site.

**Non-users**

Lack of time and interest are the main reasons for not to participate.

There are also those who do not use social networking sites. In our survey 8% state that they never use social networking sites. If we add those who state they use social networking sites monthly or less, 14% of 16-19 year-olds rarely or never use social networking sites. Gender differences are evident here too. 20% of the boys state they rarely or never use social networking sites, while only 8% of the girls say the same.
Figure 12. Reasons that 16-19 year-olds provide for not using social networking sites. Proportion of those who do not use social networking sites. Percent. Answers to the question: Why do you not use social networking sites? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.

The most important reason for some not to use social networking sites is lack of time and interest. Figure 12 shows that 59% of those who do not use social networking sites state that they are not interested and 43% reply they do not have the time. Some of those who do not use social networking sites also state that this is the case due to information being open to everyone and that they want to be anonymous. Very few people, only 4% of those who do not use social networking sites, state that they are afraid of bullying and harassment.

As we have seen, the presence of friends is the primary reason for young people to be on social networking sites. After a while, being on the outside isn’t that easy. The focus groups confirm that when a lot of communication between young people takes place on social networking sites many think they don’t have a choice. One of the girls told that:

"My friend didn’t want to be on Facebook. Then she began to study and so much was being planned via Facebook. It became crucial to join, in order to be updated on things that were happening."
This shows that social networking sites have become very important as people who might have preferred not to participate feel they have to in order not to miss out socially.

**Social networking sites of the future?**

It is difficult to predict the future, and young people do not really know which social networking sites they are going to use in the future. Most people believe in stability when it comes to their own future use of the Internet.

![Figure 13 Use of social networking sites among 16-19 year-olds in 12 month time. Percent. Answers to the question: Do you think you are going to use the following social networking sites more, less, or as often/rarely in 12 month time? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.](image)

Most of the respondents believe they are going to use the websites they use as often or rarely as they do today. As for the smaller social networking sites, approximately 1/3 believe they are going to use these even less than they do today. They have very little faith in the growth of social networking sites with few users.

Again, Facebook and YouTube stand out. As illustrated in Figure 13, a proportion of 22-26% think that they are going to use Facebook and YouTube more in about one years time. Here, however, we find
age differences and the study shows that the younger have the greatest faith in that the use will increase.

In the focus groups, it is primarily Facebook and YouTube that are mentioned as social networking sites on the way up. Nettby is described as being on the top and will according to these teens not be growing any further. They mention that more and more 8-9 year-olds have joined lately. They are very concerned with the fact that they grow out of some websites and have other preferences as 18 year-olds than they had as 14 year-olds.

"Many were on Biip and Nettby and the likes when they were 14, but now they feel that Facebook is a little bit more serious."

The teenagers name Biip and Blink as social networking sites that are out. These are places for younger teenagers, and the teens think that few new things are added. According to the teenagers, Myspace is also on its way down, and they think the reason for this is because Facebook has taken over. Deiligst [Norwegian equivalent of Hottest.com] is mentioned by the girls who think and hope that this social networking site is on its way down. "Deiligst is the worst site! That it isn’t being closed down!" one of the girls said, accompanied by eager nodding from the others.

The teenagers’ assumptions about which social networking sites that are on the way up and which are on the way down largely correspond with the general picture about which social networking sites that are in growth and which the young people have stopped using. This suggests that young people are observing the general trends in the use of social networking sites and that they expect these trends to continue.

However, there is good reason to assume that new social networking sites will emerge. To what extent these will take over for some of those that are popular today, or whether the social networking sites of today will be further developed and maintain their popularity cannot be predicted by neither the young nor by researchers. We therefore want to stress that despite Facebook and YouTube prevailing today they may quickly lose their popularity if new websites emerge that are perceived as more exciting and easier to use.
6 What are the uses of social networking sites?

Social networking sites are meeting places

For young people social networking sites are primarily social meeting places. They use social networking sites to meet their friends and to keep up with what is happening.

Teenagers use social networking sites to meet their friends. They are attracted to those social networking sites which their friends are on, and share photos and videos and keep track of what is happening.

![Figure 14](image)

**Figure 14. Reasons that 16-19 year-olds prefer the social networking sites that they use. Procent. Answers to the question: What is the reason you prefer the social networking sites you use? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.**

When 16-19 year-olds are asked about why they prefer the social networking sites they use, they stress that social networking sites primarily are social meeting places. Figure 14 shows that young people believe it is important to be where their friends are, to share things with friends and to stay up to date on what is happening. In
addition they appreciate it being easy to create their own profiles and to get new friends. This is especially true of the younger who tell us that it is important to make new friends.

This picture is confirmed by the focus group discussions. As one of the teens puts it:

“If it gets complicated it somewhat loses its purpose. I guess the idea is to be able to acquire information and get in touch with people easily and quickly. So that’s maybe the common denominator of the social networking sites that are being used the most.”

Young people like social networking sites that are easy to use, and that their friends are there and that they can keep up with what happens, especially on weekends. In addition they can look at other people’s photos and keep in touch with people they otherwise are not that easily in contact with.

Figure 15. What 16-19 year-olds report that they do when they are on a social networking site. Procent. Answers to the question: How often do you do the following when you use social networking sites? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.

The social side of social networking sites is also reflected in relation to what teenagers do when they use social networking sites (see
figure 15). 50% report browsing on other peoples profiles, photos and videos once or more a day. 41% meet their friends on social networking sites on a daily basis. Other common activities include writing messages and comments on other people’s profiles, and to check/change one’s own profile. On a weekly basis teens comment on other people’s pictures or texts and make appointments to meet their friends.


This is emphasized by what the young people consider to carry status and prestige on social networking sites. Having many friends, to be active on commenting or leaving messages on other people’s profiles, and to get a lot of response and to share photos, videos or texts with others carries status and prestige (see figure 16). YouTube however is perceived, as previously mentioned, as not a social networking site per se. YouTube is frequently used as a “videobank” or a storage place where teenagers can obtain videos, while the sharing of these takes place through social networking sites like Facebook.
**Social Networking Sites are entertaining**

Social networking sites are entertaining and free fun.

Social networking sites are social meeting places. 85% completely or somewhat agree that social networking sites inform them about what their friends are doing. However, social networking sites are also places for entertainment. As shown in figure 17, 80% of social networking site users believe that social networking sites are good entertainment.

![Figure 17. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who completely or somewhat agree with statements about social networking sites. Percent. Answers to the question: To what extent to you agree/somewhat agree or disagree/somewhat disagree with the following statements? N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.](image)

The teenagers use social networking sites to show each other videos and pictures. All the social networking sites are used for these purposes, but YouTube distinguishes itself here. YouTube is used entirely for entertainment and for pastime when people are bored. In the focus groups the teenagers tell how they find “everything possible” on YouTube. From funny movie snips, to snips from TV shows they keeps track of, and much more. One of the boys told he had found guitar lessons on YouTube:

“I have really learned to play the guitar through the Internet. There are nice tabs and stuff [...] I could just have learned it from my father, but rather wanted to do it myself.”
It is in particular, the boys who talk about how they like to use YouTube together. When they want to have fun they like to sit together in front of the screen and search for funny videos.

**Social networking sites are useful websites?**

The teenagers do not think that social networking sites are important for finding information. They are ambivalent to using social networking sites for other things than for entertainment and social purposes.

The question is whether social networking sites are solely social and entertaining meeting places or whether people also do something else there? Do teenagers use social networking sites when they are wondering about something or when they are to make decisions? These are complex questions to answer, in part because there is a gradual transition between the social, the entertaining and the useful. For instance, people often exchange a lot of useful information while socializing and having fun. These gradual transitions are important and will be touched upon in the next chapter. In the following we will first have a look at what the young people themselves report.

**Less important for searching information**

The teenagers think that social networking sites are not particularly useful for finding information. Social networking sites are primarily social and amusing and not something one uses in order for it to be useful or sensible. Figure 17 shows that 85% of users think that social networking sites are important for keeping informed about what their friends are doing and 80% hold that it is good entertainment. By comparison only 24% believe that social networking sites assist them with school work and 27% agree that social networking sites provide useful advice and tips on education and 34% who think that they receive useful advice on health, relationships, and sex.

Now it can be argued that when a total of 24-34% agree or somewhat agree that social networking sites are useful for school work or for finding advice and tips on education or health, relationships and sex, this is by no means insignificant. Although most of these teenagers only partly agree on such statements, this suggests that many young people feel they combine the useful with the social and entertaining.

The focus groups however strengthen the impression that social networking sites are primarily social and entertaining. Young people use the Internet in general to search for information for school
work, projects and essay’s, they use e-mail for more serious inquires about school- or work related issues, but when they are on social networking sites they are there to have fun.

Social networking sites are not the first place young people want to go when they wonder about something. On the contrary. In the survey young people were asked how they would go about if they had to find information in two different cases. One situation dealt with finding out more about education possibilities, and the other concerned travel vaccines. The teenagers’ answers are shown in figures 18 and 19.

![Figure 18: Choice of education. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who answer that these sources are very important in the following situation: You are in your last year of high school. You are uncertain about which school to apply for after high school. What would be most important for finding out more about which possibilities that exist? Percent. N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.](image-url)
Figur 19. Vaccine advice. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who provide these sources to be important in the following situation: You are going to travel and need vaccine. What would be most important in finding out more about this? Procent. N=750 Source: TNS Gallup’s, IMK’s and ITU’s survey. December 2007.

In both of these situations, social networking sites ended up at the bottom or second-bottom of the list of possible information sources. Only 2-3% believed it would be very important to participate in social networking sites to find out more about either higher education or vaccines. The teenagers would generally search the Internet or see a professional (consultant/doctor) and they would speak to family and friends, but very few perceive social networking sites as relevant.

The answers are so clear that even though the cases and topics are very different to begin with, we can assume that the trends in principle may also apply to information gathered in other areas.

But how do they speak with family and friends? And where on the Internet do they find the information? As we will come back to, a lot of this can take place on social networking sites and it is not certain that the boundaries between what one does on social networking sites and other places on the Internet are as clear as they first may seem.
Not important for self-expression?
The teenagers don’t have a coherent view on whether social networking sites are important for expressing opinions. Figure 17 shows that 65% of those who use social networking sites completely or somewhat agree that they support individual cases or groups on social networking sites and 80% completely or somewhat agree that social networking sites inform them about what their friends think about different issues.

At the same time the participants in the focus group emphasize that the groups they belong to largely are fan-groups, groups belonging to the place where they live and go to school, and groups that are just for fun, such as “If 500 people join this group, I will walk naked down the main street” or “Damn how cold it is”. They call these groups “joke-groups.”

In addition, some are members of groups related to opinions about different issues, such as homosexuality, and various interest groups like against violence or political parties. Basically, they are serious groups. The teenagers in the focus groups however point out that even such groups and issues are perceived as less serious when they establish themselves on Facebook or Nettby. But, if important people contribute, they are taken more seriously.

“SOS racism has a group on Facebook which is very convenient as they send messages through Facebook. That group is serious despite being on Facebook. I know that one of those sitting high up in the SOS racism system is managing it.”

Clearly young people express themselves and in that way create an identity on the social networking sites. Although the teenagers in our survey perceive a lot of this as just for fun, they come up with examples through the conversations on ways that social networking sites can be used for many purposes, including political.

Sceptical about mixing social networking sites and government administration
An important question in this study is how government administration can and should respond to social networking sites. This question was taken up directly with the young people in the focus groups. Initially the participants typically state that “it is important that the public remains public”. In this context public seems to mean serious and formal. Facebook is private and informal, and the teenagers do not have a coherent answer as to how government administration should respond to this.
The teenagers discussed whether the government for instance should get involved in social networking sites that young people are already using. The teens had different views about this. On the other side some think that public information is about other things than what they use social networking sites for today. They believe that the “public should remain public” and that it would be wrong if such information would emerge in the same place as where they snook around on their friends:

“You go to Facebook to snook around on your friends’ pictures; I can’t really see the connection between the two”.

Others pointed out that it would be positive if public information was distributed through the social networking sites young people already use. As an example, one of the focus groups discussed that the Directorate of Health had a promotional campaign on mental health on Nettby and that it was a good thing. At the same time, teenagers warn government administration in going to far in adding a youthful style. They think it is easy to see when someone is “trying to hard”. According to the teens that is rarely successful.

The focus groups also discussed whether it would be sensible for government administration to establish their own social networking sites. They were more critical towards this and thought that “It sounds very boring”. The teenagers note that the most natural alternative to public social networking sites are the individual agencies’ own home pages: “If it applied to important things, I would rather go to their home page.”

However, what they seem to agree on is the fact that information should be easily accessible, public information as well. They are not that concerned about what kind of sites these are, only that they are easy to use. It is difficult for young people (as it is for adults) to describe web sites that do not exist today. They say it would be great with a place where all information is collected. Some say it would be great if they had a place with all kinds of information services, a kind of google-wikipedia-site. When they are to describe such a place they describe a web sites for different topics (education, job, health etc.), where they can ask questions as well as search for information. One of the teens point out that this could be useful when deciding on further education.

“If you want to become an industrial mechanic you could go there and talk to someone who actually is just that.”

What the teenagers delineate, however, to a large degree resembles thematic information portals with the opportunity to ask
questions, rather than typical social networking sites where users create profiles and interact with each other.

**What is useful?**

In other words we see that it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between the social, entertaining and the utility values of social networking sites. This is consistent with previous research on digital media and interactive forms of media use. Several studies point out that the distinction between the useful, entertainment, and social purposes are becoming increasingly difficult to draw because media usage no longer just is about the passive acceptance of content, but also about production and participation (Livingstone 2002, Enli 2007). Hence, conceptualizing what is useful is complex, and must be related to the appropriate skills and competences needed in society.

Here, we will highlight three main areas where we can see the usefulness of social networking sites. Social networking sites are useful for socializing purposes in the network society, for information exchange, and as learning arenas.

Firstly, there is the tendency that media use is becoming increasingly important to our social lives. Postmodern societies are characterized by an individualisation where community oriented institutions such as family and the church have lost their authority (Giddens 1991, Rasmussen 2002). One consequence of the increased individual freedom, is that individuals have become more dependent on communicating with the society, in which media usage plays a key role (Bauman 2000). Thus, social networking sites can have a socializing utility value by forming an arena for affinity and communication. In one of the focus groups the word ‘useful’ was used about the ability to communicate with friends without the cost of money:

“It is useful to have contact with people you know without the cost of money like with mobile phones, but I also use Facebook for entertainment, like looking at pictures and clicking around for pastime”.

Secondly, social networking sites may function as an arena for knowledge transfer and information exchange. Digital media forms are characterized by a strong culture of sharing, where the users themselves produce the content (Jenkins 2006). Our study shows that user friendliness above all is the reason why some social networking sites are preferred over others. Like one of the participants in the focus groups expressed it: ”Facebook is brilliantly simple and lucid”. A user friendly interface would be able to arrange
for a participatory culture where the users can download and recirculate media content. This means that state information to some extent could be redistributed and shared through social networking sites. Hence, the information would form part of a circulation outside the sender's control, because users customize the information in relation to their own needs and interests. Some of these needs can be related to utility (the desire to share useful information with others), while other needs may be entertainment related (the desire to ironize or sabotage the content). A common feature of information exchange in the digital participatory culture is that the users put their personal touch on the content they share, either by adding personal comments, or select out certain parts of it and put it back together in new ways.

A third area in which social networking sites posses a utility value is as an arena for learning. Here, we will emphasize two types of learning that takes place on social networking sites. First, the training of participation, and second the developing of digital literacy.

One form of learning is related to the fact that users develop a competence in democratic participation. In Carol Pateman’s (1970) much-quoted theory of democracy, she argues that political participation is contingent on practice, and that this often is achieved through experience gained from other arenas. Following this perspective, the use of social networking sites may contribute to making users competent as political citizens. Users would be able to develop skills for expressing themselves through digital resources, such as publicising photos, establish groups, participate in discussions etc. This contributes to raise awareness about their own opinions and to reflect on their identity in relation to the world. One of the participants in the focus groups said that they use groups on social networking sites to signal what they are interested in:

“I’m member of a group against hyphenation mistakes, and through that I show what I’m interested in and can get in touch with others who are interested in the same.”

In this way young people build interest communities through social networking sites. As such social networking sites become a new type of public at the intersection between the entertaining and the more political. Examples of such activities are groups like “Amnesty”, “No to nuclear weapons”, or more spontaneous groups in support of Tibet, or in the fight against “the pocket man” [a paedophile sought by the police at the time of the interviews].
It is nevertheless worth noting that social networking sites are primarily arenas for free play and social participation, and that the value of these sites for other purposes may be limited. The users’ fascination with social networking sites is really constituted by this temporary and non-committal. One of the participants in the focus groups described Facebook as “unbelievably uncommitted”. This, and similar statements in the data material, show that users to a large extent are aware of the fact that the time used on social networking sites cannot be legitimized in terms of a traditional utility value, as it is primarily about ‘passing time’ and ‘entertainment’. This playful use of new media, however, implies that young people strengthen their digital literacy.

The development of digital literacy is the other way that learning can be strengthened through the use of social networking sites. The information society creates new challenges in terms of the skills and competences that have become central and relevant. At school, source criticism and critical assessment of content and messages are portrayed as particularly important elements, as these are competences that are highly valued in the school curricula. In other contexts, such as social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace or private blogs, playing with genres, identities and truths are more accepted and prominent.

Such a creative and innovative practice can be a positive and constructive way to develop digital literacy (Buckingham 2006, Jenkins 2006, ITU 2007). Future demands on competence is not just about having acquired a certain amount of knowledge, but to be able to produce media expressions, navigate in a community of knowledge and to be able to utilize the available information. Digital literacy on social networking sites is about being able to participate in social communities, and not the least to be able to recontextualize what you have learned in new situations (Østerud 2007, Jenkins, m.fl. 2006).

Svein Østerud highlights that the education of today’s youth should always be open to changes, that it should be transformative. This perspective is important to the understanding of digital literacy in terms of social networking sites. It is not just about what young people can do, but also about the extent to which they are able to utilize this in other contexts – such as in a future profession and as active participants in the development of society (Østerud 2007, Pateman 1970). But, the ability to reflect on this is not automatically transferred from children and youths’ participation in social networking sites.
7 What are social networking sites similar to?

There are no clear boundaries between the useful, the social and the entertaining on social networking sites. This is not something that is particular to social networking sites. We mix the useful with the entertaining in various situations. We share information, substantial as insubstantial, with each other, and we comment on and personalize information and narratives within our social communities.

We have taken some offline social arenas as a starting point for finding metaphors which can help us to better understand the characteristics of social networking sites’ usage. The four main metaphors we have chosen to use include going to a café with friends, participate on a big festival, being on the playground and hanging out in the shopping mall.

Café

Social networking sites can be compared to a café or a nightclub. People meet friends and acquaintances on social networking sites in the same way as they do in a café. This metaphor signifies that what goes on is voluntary and non-committal social interaction among friends or acquaintances. The utility value is here subordinate to the social, and will to a large extent emerge indirectly or unexpected through a conversation that provides useful information.

People rarely go to a café with the intent to gain new knowledge. People talk about this and that, and sometimes also about politics or educational choices or health related questions. If someone you did not know from a public office would sit down at the table and provide information about their activities this would be perceived as inappropriate and disturbing. However, people would like to read a brochure they find, and pass it on, or tell their friends about its content.

Festival

Social networking sites are characterized by the fact that many people with different points of contact and belonging have come together in one common place. This can be compared to a festival where people wander freely around from one activity to the next, meet people they know, and meet friends of friends and others they just share their taste in music with. Here too people talk about this and that, share information about the music and other kinds of issues. The social setting is more open
on a festival than in a café. On a festival you can distribute brochures and make information freely available. Here too, however, one is depending on whether the participants decides to read and maybe even pass the information on to others.

**Playground**

Social networking sites are also characterized by being a venue for showing photos, videos, design and text that expresses the sender’s identity and skills. People have the opportunity to show each other tricks and stuff, in the same way as on a soccer playground. You watch video clips together, or send each other the clips and thereby establish a community around your own creative contributions, and what others achieve.

Bits and pieces of the information others have produced can be used as raw material that is further refined and redistributed in new forms. It is difficult to control how information is used in such a context.

**The shopping mall**

Social networking sites are also arenas where young people hang out and keep track of things happening. This may also remind about shopping malls where teenagers gather, talk with each other, shop once in a while, but first and foremost catch up on the latest trends. They are in a commercial context, but in the public nonetheless. In the shopping mall as well as on social networking sites a great deal revolves around presenting oneself, talking to friends and sharing and passing on information.
8 Government administration and new web phenomena

The populations’ media usage is changing. Internet use has increased strongly in all age groups and young people adopt new web phenomena with the greatest matter of course. This implies that government administration have to think in new ways if they want to reach the entire population. Teenagers are not targeted primarily through newspapers or brochures, but through the Internet. To an ever-increasing extent this also applies to older age groups.

The question is to what extent and in what ways government administration should use new web phenomena like social networking sites to inform on the one side, and to open up for more dialogue and participation on the other side. In the following, we will suggest some possible approaches.

Create own social networking sites?

A radical step for the state to proceed would be to establish own social networking sites. Through own social networking sites government administration can create arenas for debate and the sharing of information about those topics they wish to reach out with. This may seem simple and tempting. The government would then maintain control of which topics that are brought up and they can implement non-commercial social networking sites without advertising.

However, it is very difficult to establish a social networking site. Communities require participants, and we have seen in this study how social networking sites are cluster phenomena. If a social networking site does not get many users it will quickly fade. Regional social networking sites like Hamarungdom were closed down when the users moved on to Nettby and Facebook. This means that it is hard enough to succeed for social networking sites that offer young people what they expect of a social networking site, namely entertainment and social services. For public administration, this will hardly be easier. This calls for the state not to try to establish their own governmental social networking sites for the population.

However, there are some exceptions where it may be appropriate that colleges or other public institutions establish their own more specialized social networking sites on selected topics. The University of Tromso for instance, has established the social networking site Kaskjer.no. Kaskjer.no is described as a social networking site that
offers student counselling to students at high schools. The website contains no advertising, but information about the University of Tromsø and student life and the student organization. On kaskjær.no the members can participate in web meetings with employers and students. In March 2008 the website had 868 members.

One may also imagine that health information can be provided through social networking sites where experts answer questions by registered users. There are a number of commercial social networking sites of this kind. To what extent it is desirable with public commercial-free and websites for free where people can discuss and get health related questions answered is a political question.

Any public social networking site, however, faces the same challenges as private ones. If the social networking site is to function it has to be established with sufficient activity and quality in order to be used. There are many examples on well intentioned and interesting initiatives that never got enough users. In 2007 for instance, Buskerud public library established the website Fanfiction.no where users were to collaborate on further developing fantasy stories. In April 2008 the website had only 23 members. Fanfiction in that way is an exciting effort – with very few users.

To the extent that the public wishes to establish a social networking site, one should firstly be thinking very selectively about which instances and topics that may be suitable, and secondly there needs to be put a lot of resources into the maintenance and renewal of the social networking site. In most cases, it would be difficult to create a public social networking site that would receive a large enough volume of users and a high enough activity that it would be a significant contribution to achieving the goal of better reaching the population.

**Using aspects of social networking sites?**

A less ambitious approach would be for government websites to make use of aspects of social networking sites. We have seen that young people’s use of the Internet is in rapid development. These can be elements like a forum, chat, comment columns, or other possibilities to submit photos or texts to government websites. By using aspects of social networking sites on government websites the state may try to create more interactivity and more dialogue with the public within a framework the they define.

However, this is neither easy to realize. Many state and local government websites have opened up for comments, without any particular response. One example of this is the Ministry of
Government Administration and Reform that established a place for comments on the St.meld.nr. 17 (2006-2007) “An information Society for All”. About a year after the launch of the report to the parliament there had not been more than four comments, three of which were about the language variant in use.

This illustrates that even though it is technically easy to use the Internet to open up for dialogue, technological solutions are not enough. The discussions need to be perceived as relevant, and it must seem likely that one is being heard if expressing oneself. Hence, as a general rule the users will ignore the opportunities to comment.

It is however possible to organize time bound popular meetings about particular issues to inform and listen to the population. Similar to the popular meetings in community centres, popular meetings on the Internet will require a lot, both in terms of information in advance, and in the active participation of the administration during the popular meeting, and in the processing of the received advice. This is therefore a strategy that will only work in selected cases.

**Using existing social networking sites?**

While the first two strategies dealt with letting government administration establish their own social networking sites, or use elements from social networking sites on their websites, a quite different strategy is to let the state and public administration use those social networking sites that are already in use. Instead of luring young people to their own websites, they can seek out to the websites that young people already use.

By using already popular social networking sites the state can reach a lot more people than if they were to lure users to own websites. However, there are challenges here as well. Among other things government administration will not be able to control the context in which the information appears on other social networking sites. Moreover, the teenagers perceive social networking sites primarily as social and entertaining, and it may be challenging to cut across with other forms of messages. How then may public authorities put into use already existing social networking sites?

There may be reason to start with pointing out to some kinds of use of social networking sites that should be avoided. State employees should not be doing executive work with sensitive information through open social networking sites. It should neither be expected that cabinet ministers should use a significant amount of their time on social networking sites. Politicians must feel free to sign up with
profiles on various social networking sites. But they should be guarding their authority when doing this and be cautious on how they present themselves. It will also be important to find a balance so they do not appear as young in a forced way. Young people are as previously described sceptical about authorities that “try too hard”, as they put it...

Illustration 2. Example of an advertising space on a social networking site. Facsimile from Facebook. April 2008.

More significantly the state should put social networking sites in use as one of several information channels. If one is to reach teenagers, it is hardly most effective to advertise in the big regional papers. The Internet would be a better option, and a significant part of youth Internet usage takes place on social networking sites. Government administration should therefore be more flexible about their choices of information channels. An important source of revenue for social networking sites, as it is for newspapers and magazines, is the selling of advertising space. Government administration can buy advertising space on social networking sites in the same way as they buy advertising space in newspapers for public information campaigns. An example of this is the Directorate of Health campaign on Nettby that the young people mentioned as being positive.

Another use of social networking site would be to more actively publish government information on social networking sites. For instance may official photos of cabinet ministers be put on Flickr, a website for sharing photos, and public information videos may be uploaded on YouTube and Snutter. This is free and would make photos and videos more accessible to more people.

Making public content easy to share?

A fourth strategy is to make government information easier to share. There is no reason for only finding public information when being on a public website. Young people use social networking sites to a large extent to share things. They share videos and photos that
they find other places, and tip each other about news articles or other media publicity. They should also be able to do this with public information.


One instance doing this is UngInfo [YoungInfo] in Oslo. Beneath some of the articles on this website there is a “share on Facebook”-button. By pressing this button a reader may easily publicize the article for their friends on Facebook. Media institutions like Aftenposten, Dagbladet and VG have placed corresponding buttons underneath their articles, and on the public broadcaster NRK’s web-tv you can share NRK’s videos by means of similar sharing functions. In this way these media institutions let the users take the content with them and share it with others on those social networking sites they are members of, or on other websites.

It is difficult to find instances of public websites with similar sharing functions. The exception is Unginfo in Oslo, which is an information office for teenagers financed by the local authorities of Oslo and which is part of the Children and Youth Council of Oslo. Information and press releases from the government only exist on Regeringen.no and it is not provided for that the information easily can be shared. The campaign “Du bestemmer” [You Decide] is a typical example of how state institutions have been thinking about this matter until now. This is a campaign by the Data Inspectorate, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, and the Norwegian Board of Technology and is concerned with the considerations young people should take when sharing information and pictures on the Internet. The primary means in this campaign are informational videos. It may appear somewhat paradoxical that one has to go to the campaigns webpage in order to watch the videos, or have a teacher who orders a class set. If the objective was for as many as possible to see the videos they should have been posted with a share-function, so people could have shared them on YouTube, on the schools websites or on the students’ blogs.

**Governmental information sites on the web?**

The last strategy would be the strategy that is prevailing today, which is to go in for governmental information sites on the web where the state controls what is published and how the information is presented. Through public portals the information is presented in
a structure and context that is carefully thought through.


Regjeringen.no is a good example of this, and such governmental sites and portals are important. Like one of the teens stated” If it concerned something important I would rather visit their homepage.” It is therefore decisive that public homepages are good, informative, updated and easy to navigate.

However, this is not a strategy that should stand on its own. If one is to reach out to those who are not familiar with the governmental sites this strategy must be supplemented. First and foremost the content on public websites must be made easier to share. In addition, some content is welcomed to be posted more actively on social networking sites. Moreover, it may also be considered if there are some issues or questions where is would be well suited to use elements from social networking sites on the public sites.
9 Sharing not controlling

This report has shown how young people use new web phenomena like social networking sites. The report documents the shift from a situation in which the sender controls the information that is being sent out, to a situation in which user contributions through sharing and dialogue to an ever greater extent becomes important. This is a general characteristic of young people’s use of ICT and media and should be incorporated into governmental strategies of information and communication.

More specifically, this implies that government administration should put more emphasis on *sharing* information and less weight on *controlling* the context in which the information occurs. A brief summary of our recommendations is consequently that:

Public websites such as regjeringen.no are very important. These should keep high quality and be up-to-date and informative. Information on government websites should be easy for users to share and distribute to other websites, like social networking sites. It is important that public information is made available to as many people as possible, rather than only being available on public websites.

Public information campaigns should use social networking sites as information channels and buy advertising space there. It could be useful to use structural aspects from social networking sites on public information websites, like the comments functionalities. This should, however, be limited to specific topics and stipulated time periods like public consultations. General public debate should take place elsewhere.

Government administration should not establish social networking sites.

These may seem like simple and cautious conclusions. Maybe they are. Nonetheless, these conclusions imply two key changes in the way in which public information is conceived. First of all, the recommendations implies that the focus of public information needs to change from emphasizing control and the quality assurance of information and the context in which the information occurs, to emphasizing that the information should be made shareable. Public information sites should be proper and quality assured, but it should be possible to take the information to other arenas and use it in a new context. Information should be floating freely around in young people’s social settings where it can be commented upon and further edited. Government administration
should not control how information is being used, but stress that young people should share it.

Secondly, this implies a greater flexibility in terms of which information channels government administration may use. We know that teenagers are on the Internet, and we know they use social networking sites when they are there. This means that social websites/networking sites are crucial if one wants to reach young people. Information campaigns should therefore also be targeted through new web phenomena like social networking sites.
References


Non-published appendices


Social networking sites mentioned in the report

Biip: [http://www.biip.no]
Blink: [http://www.blink.no]
Deiligst: [http://www.deiligst.no]
Facebook: [http://www.facebook.com]
Fanfiction: [http://www.fanfiction.no]
Flickr: [http://www.flickr.com]
Jippii: [http://www.jippii.no]
Kaskjer: [http://www.kaskjer.no]
Meside: [http://www.meside.no]
Myspace: [http://www.myspace.com]
Nettby: [http://www.nettby.no]
Regjeringen: [http://www.regjeringen.no]
Second Life: [http://www.secondlife.com]
Snutter: [http://www.snutter.no]
Figures

Figure 1. Percentage of daily support for newspaper, TV, radio, Internet and mobile media content between 1960-2007 .................................................15
Figure 2. Daily support for the Internet, TV, newspaper and radio among the 16-19 year-olds, 2007 ..............................................................16
Figure 3. Internet use among 16-19 year-olds ...........................................17
Figure 4. Access to the Internet among various youth groups ..................18
Figure 5. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who have the possibility to use the Internet from their home and school ..............................................19
Figure 6. Access to equipment among 16-19 year-olds ..............................20
Figure 7. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who do the following activities on the Internet once or more a day ..................................................21
Figure 8. Proportion of young people using the following social networking sites several times a day/daily, and weekly .................................23
Figure 9. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who say they are members of a number of social networking sites .......................................................24
Figure 10. Amount of minutes that 16-19 year-olds provide that they use on different social networking sites per day ......................................26
Figure 11. Reasons for 16-19 year-olds to stop using a social networking site .................................................................................................28
Figure 12. Reasons that 16-19 year-olds provide for not using social networking sites. Proportion of those who do not use social networking sites .............................................................................................................30
Figure 13 Use of social networking sites among 16-19 year-olds in 12 month time .........................................................................................31
Figure 14. Reasons that 16-19 year-olds prefer the social networking sites that they use ..................................................................................33
Figure 15. What 16-19 year-olds report that they do when they are on a social networking site ...............................................................34
Figure 16. Overview on what 16-19 year-olds report that gives status and recognition on their favourite social networking site .........................35
Figure 17. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who completely or somewhat agree with statements about social networking sites .......................36
Figure 18. Choice of education. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who answer that these sources are very important in the following situation: You are in your last year of high school. You are uncertain about which school to apply for after high school. What would be most important for finding out more about which possibilities that exist? ..................38
Figure 19. Vaccine advice. Proportion of 16-19 year-olds who provide these sources to be important in the following situation: You are going to travel and need vaccine. What would be most important in finding out more about this? .....................................................39