Committee for the Future of the Parliament of Finland

Technology Assessment 22

Social capital
Information and communication technology and the development of the social capital of children and adolescents

TA 22 Final Project Summary

The development of the information society is altering the social interaction of families. While parents are spending less time with their children, children are using the new information and communication technology more and more. An increasing share of children's initial social capital is being created at the computer screen. How does this affect their social development? What measures does the change require from society?

From concept definition to practical proposals

In 2001 the Parliament's Committee for the Future decided to study what social capital actually means and how the new information and communication technologies affect the development of social capital among children and adolescents. The Committee for the Future commissioned three reports from a research group led by Professor *Lea Pulkkinen* of the *Agora Center* at the University of Jyväskylä. Steering committees, into which members of other parliamentary committees were also invited, were appointed for each report.

The preliminary assessment report, completed in 2002, analysed the concept of social capital and noted that the impact of technology on the life of a child or adolescent depends on the social support provided by the child's environment. The final report, finished in 2003, pondered how more pleasure and benefit could be attained from information technology and how risks specific to it could be prevented. In addition, a follow-on report was drawn up that provided practical examples of the opportunities for employing information technology in the development of social capital.

During the autumn of 2004 the Committee for the Future organised a symposium in which the reports' findings were presented and which provided an opportunity for researchers, public authorities and Members of Parliament interested in the development of social capital to meet. The symposium produced a number of recommendations, which form the basis for the proposals of this summary.

❖ The impact of technology on the life of a child or adolescent depends on the social support provided by the child's environment

The social capital of children and adolescents and the new information and communication technology

The concept of social capital has a dual heritage, owing to different definitions in the French and American schools of sociology. The American approach emphasises communitarianism and the functioning of democratic society. According to the French school, however, social capital has the tendency to accumulate in certain individuals or groups.

The American point of view proved more fruitful as a starting point: a human being possesses **social capital** when he or she is a trusted member of a community and capable of interacting with the other members of the community.

Since social capital was studied from the viewpoint of children and adolescents, the concept of **initial social capital** was taken into use. It refers to the values and norms that a child gets from his/her parents and other early human contacts as well as to community support, social networks and trust.

New information and communication technology has a significant impact on human interaction and the accumulation of the initial social capital of children and adolescents. As much as the new tools can create new social networks, they can also alter the content and quality of social interaction. In a rapidly changing environment children and adolescents need new types of technical and social skills.

Opportunities and threat scenarios

Information technology has changed the everyday life of families. A lot of time is being spent on using IT, but the time families spend together has decreased. Therefore, the initial social capital of children is increasingly accumulating through interaction with the media.

The development of the information society has shortened the time that parents can spend daily with their children. And, as children and adolescents embrace new information and communication technology faster than their parents, the parents' chances of controlling the external influences on their children decrease.

It is challenging to be a parent to your children when they live in a media world alien to you. It has, however, been observed that children crave shared media experiences, especially with their parents. Parenthood is also needed in the information society and, hence,


Boys interested in information technology spend an average of 33 hours each week at the computer. The corresponding figure for girls is 25 hours. (*Kari Kumpulainen*: Portrait of a computer geek, 2004)

❖ The development of the information society has decreased the time parents spend daily with their children

particularly parents need media education so as to be able raise their children. Not all of the phenomena in the new media culture are suitable for children and they may be confusing to many adults as well.

Web communications requires and develops different social skills than real world human relations do. Furthermore, children and adolescents encounter new types of threats on the web, such as malicious software trying to enter their computer or criminals attempting to obtain their personal information details.

Risks pertaining to the advances in IT particularly apply to the development of a person's social and emotional life. Especially when it comes to adolescents with social problems, virtual interaction can be more rewarding than real-world human contacts.
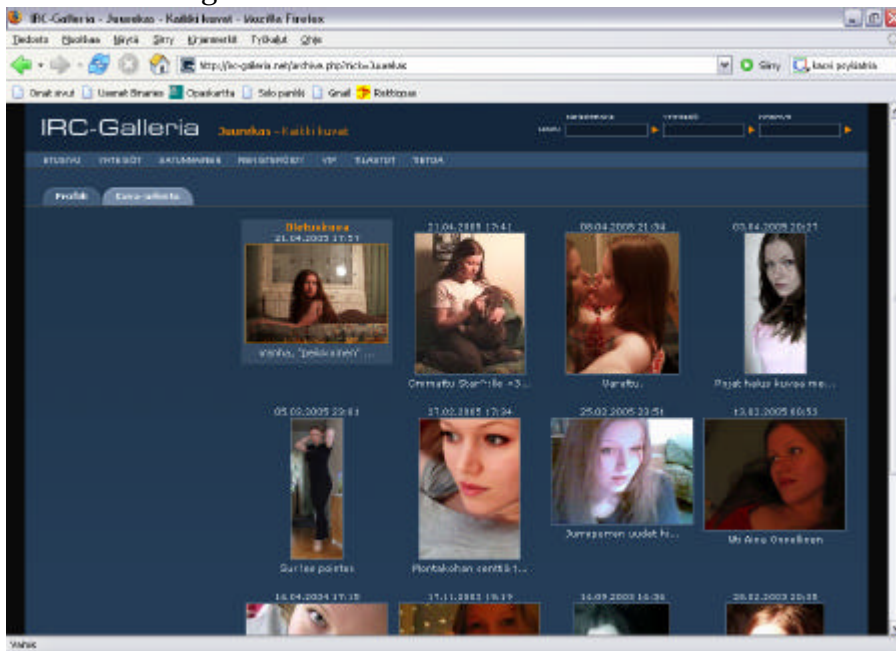
For the time being the information society best serves the youngish, educated male population, for whom it has been the easiest to embrace the new technologies. Development has proceeded in such a way that computers at home have been easier for boys to access than for girls. Correspondingly, girls are more interested in using mobile telephones. Girls also use information technology in a more interactive manner. Boys, on the other hand, are more computer game-oriented than girls. Equal opportunity for being able to use the new media plays a central role in equality development. Regardless of their social background or gender, all children must be taught the basic skills of information technology and the opportunities for using information technology for social and information-seeking purposes must be provided for all of them.

The IRC gallery is a good example of the new kind of virtual community that the young favour, which can also have ramifications in the real world. http://irc-galleria.net/

❖ New media provides new opportunities for children to create virtual communities alongside traditional ones

Many threat scenarios are connected to computer and video games but games can also provide the accumulation of social capital as well as networking with other children, once the contents of the games are so constructed.

The new interactive media also presents opportunities for children and adolescents to create new kinds of virtual communities alongside the traditional ones. To them, information networks principally constitute a forum for communication and for exchanging ideas. Collective phenomena such as IRC galleries, blogs and P2P-piratism form a central part of their generational identity. That is why public discussion, focusing on information and communication technology should be turned towards this new media culture that the young have created for themselves.

Proposals

- Guarantee **enough time for parents** to spend time on the new media with their children.
- Provide **media education** to children, parent and educators financed by, for instance, the Finnish National Lottery *Veikkaus Oy*.
- Develop **peer-to-peer support** in media education and provide expert assistance to parents and educators in, for example, Parent Teacher Association meetings and networks.
- Include more media culture and media education competence in **teacher training** and in continuing education.
- Support research, development and promulgation of **social innovations** through the National Technology Agency of Finland *TEKES*, for instance.
- Increase the social and cognitive dimensions of the way children and adolescents use information technology in, for instance, schools.
- Develop electronic services for dyslexic children and adolescents as well as the distribution of these services.
- Remove the value-added tax from media products that are suitable for children.

Follow-on research is needed

As the project went on, the need for further research was highlighted. For example, the significance of social capital to a person's innovativeness should be established. In addition, research is required on the media culture of the young such as, for instance, the effect of virtual communities on adolescents' social networks and the impact of the new media on the gender roles of the youth.

Protective factors

Individual:
- Parental guidance and supervision
- Media skills: the medium and analysis skills
- Transcending the limits of a gaming machine: cognitive and social ways of computer usage
- Moderation in use
- Practicing ego-related, self-control and emotional skills
- Value education and ethical upbringing.

Societal:
- Digital balance and equality: Equal opportunities for usage and skills regardless of gender, socio-economic status or regional background
- Arranging media education for children, parents and educators
- Content education, content ratings.

❖ The new interactive media strengthens the generation identity of children and adolescents.

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