The following is an overview of the results of a larger qualitative empirical research project on “adolescents and computers”. It shows that adolescent computer usage has much deeper implications than just having specific technical skills. Dimensions of individual identity-formation, self-formation and of “fluid” forms of religion concerning adolescent computer usage have to be brought out. The qualitative empirical research project on “adolescents and computers” leads to paradigmatic insights on the structure of empirical theology and on the notion of religious praxis, which will be presented at the end of the paper.

Introduction

“It is thinking…that I am better than the computer. And also that it is even more difficult…there are several grades of difficulty. And that it is difficult to win, that you have always new forms of strategy and so on…Also being in a network it is fun”.¹ This quote from 16-year-old Peter shows how fascinating computers are for adolescents. Peter is part of an adolescent elite that has adequate forms of hard- and software and its own internet-access. This elite is able to operate the multiple forms of usage offered by the computer in an adequate way and has the competence and the financial resources to do so. Adolescents like Peter decide in a sovereign way about their chosen virtual relationships and have global relationships operated through the medium computer. Peter plays internet-based role plays, where he uses the opportunities of identity-simulation and gender-switching. He also designs web-sites for commercial purposes. As can be seen in the case of Peter, computers

¹ See also articles published on this project (in German) in 2003 and 2004 (e.g. Dinter 2003a; 2004a). Statements by adolescents in this paper have been translated from German.
and computer-based new media\(^2\) play an important role in adolescent lives at the beginning of the 21st century. Adolescents have integrated multiple dimensions of computer-usage like playing computer games, programming and designing both commercial and individual web-sites, chatting, writing emails, participating in newsgroups and mailing-lists, shopping within virtual\(^3\) platforms like e-Bay, using the internet as an information-tool and a lot more other forms of computer usage in their everyday life. These forms of adolescent computer usage have much deeper implications than just having specific technical skills and being able to use this medium in a certain way. Dimensions of individual identity-formation, self-formation and of “fluid” forms of religion concerning adolescent computer-usage have to be focused on when reflecting on the relation of adolescent subjects with the computer. But what is still missing—from a perspective of theological research—is a differentiated analysis of these phenomena of individual identity-formation, self-formation\(^4\) and of “fluid” forms of religion concerning the relation of adolescent subjects with the computer.

So there is some focus on issues related to computers and new media within theology and Religious Education, that will emphasize practical applications of thematic content through new media (Brenner 2003).\(^5\) One can also find contributions from media ethics and media critique concerning the computer (Beuscher 1999). The possibilities of biblical learning with computers are discussed (Brenner 2003; Vogel 1997) and computer-mediated forms of collaborative learning are emerging (Vogel

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\(^2\) According to Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan 1964), media are corporal extensions that help to overcome biological restrictions of human being. Media operate as interaction coordinators, in so far they help to coordinate human action. The notion “new media” is not used in literature in only one way. Often one can find the position that new media are further developed forms of old media and that they are “new forms of distribution of well-known and already developed media”. So the notion of new media is related to new methods of multiplying, transferring and distributing information. The digitalization of media brought with it broad innovations of media structures. Information is now not only transferred in an analog way, where there is a relation between the information and the information-object, but also in a digital form, so that information is translated in the numbers 1 and 0 (Koring 2000).

\(^3\) Virtual Reality is used as notion for differentiated forms of computer-based constructions of reality. The notion of virtual reality is closely related to the idea of cyberspace, a realm that exists behind the interface.

\(^4\) The term “formation” is used within this article to translate the German notion of “Bildung” that focuses on subject development.

\(^5\) The following results are related to the German speaking theological discussion on computers and its relation to RE. This discussion is paradigmatic for the wider European perspective (Price 1986; Bakker 1994; Bakker & Bakker 1995).