

# From books to the information superhighway: young people's reading habits and Internet use in Iceland

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## ABSTRACT

In mid January 1997 a telephone survey was carried out on a random sample of 800 Icelandic children ages 10, 12, 14 and 16 years of age, 100 girls and 100 boys in each age group. The response rate was 88.5%. The purpose was to examine some factors related to publications for children in the Icelandic language, including books as Christmas gifts, reading habits and Internet use. The majority of children in all age groups received books as Christmas gifts, mostly new publications. Reading is a common pastime among children, mostly among the younger groups. Girls read more than boys in all age groups. CDs are more common than books as presents among the 14- and 16-year-olds, but computer games are rare, particularly among girls. The Internet is used more by boys than girls in all age groups but use patterns vary as well as choice of access points.

The author emphasizes the need to use the Internet systematically as a tool in cultural preservation.

## ***Introduction***

The issue of preservation of small cultures has become more and more actual in view of the internationalization that is taking place all over the world. Communication across national boundaries and continents is getting easier every day where the flow of information is dominated by the English language. In Europe there are strong tendencies towards unification, cooperation and easy communication but at the same time a parallel development is taking place, i.e., an effort to sustain and preserve small cultures. It is recognized that the world would be poorer if any language or culture gets lost, and the greatest loss would be to the people that have for centuries preserved the language and cultural heritage and for whom it means their identification as people. In spite of the tendencies toward internationalization there is also a psychological need for young people to "belong" and have knowledge of their heritage. They need roots that they can identify with.

One of the small cultures and language groups in Europe is Iceland, an island nation in the North Atlantic, settled in the 9th century, which through geographical isolation has developed a book and literature oriented culture. The country is very poor in terms of natural resources, being a recent land mass built up from volcanic activities. There are no minerals that could be used for export, there are no woods for construction and therefore,

during the centuries, the building material was stone and turf and when the houses were abandoned they went back to the ground which had created them.

As said before, the Icelandic culture has always been very book-oriented and the cultural heritage is almost solely preserved through the language, through books and literature. The main foundation of this literary heritage, which helped keeping it alive through the centuries, were the Icelandic Saga literature which was written in the 13th and 14th century in Icelandic. These sagas were very "Icelandic," i.e., all the scenes were specifically located and became a part of the land. The sagas were preserved by the people, copied, learned by heart and the characters were as much alive as if they had been members of the family. Through literature, the language was preserved almost unchanged through the centuries, in spite of isolation and very difficult internal communications.

With modern technology living conditions in Iceland have totally changed. Through technology it became possible to use thermal water for heating, and with advanced shipbuilding, Iceland gained access to its source of gold, namely the rich fishing grounds in the North Atlantic. Iceland is now one of the world's most technologically advanced countries and has achieved very high gross national income where wealth is evenly distributed.

The question that is addressed now is how can this small culture be preserved in view of the strong international tendencies? Can a culture closely connected to a language spoken only by about 260,000 people be kept alive? How can the cultural heritage be passed on to the younger generation against the strong international currents? The culture is very language and literature based, and therefore book publishing is very important, particularly children's book publishing. But the issue of a small market is obvious and there are only about 4500 children born annually who will be using the language as their means of communication and education.

Annually, about 1,000-1,200 titles are published, counting reports and ephemeral publications that are not for sale but appear in the Icelandic National Bibliography. The book market is basically privately owned and during the last three months of each year the publishers launch about 400-500 titles. These publications are meant for the Christmas market and a brochure with information about what is new on the market is carried to every home. About 150 of these titles are meant for children, either originally written in Icelandic or in translations. This indicates that there is a substantial book market, in particular for children's books, because a new title is not published unless the publisher expects an average sale of 800-1000 copies, otherwise the company suffers a loss.

It is an old tradition in Iceland to give books for Christmas. A study that was conducted in 1993 on Icelandic Christmas habits showed that about 80% of people age 18-67 said they generally received at least one book as Christmas gift. Women were in a minority, or 74.9% against 85.3% of the men. However, no study has previously been carried out of how many children receive books as Christmas gifts.

Since children do not buy books themselves it is very important to understand better this tradition and to analyze if and how it is kept alive. It can be claimed that if this old tradition disappears or weakens there is very little foundation on which to base publications of children's books in the Icelandic language. Therefore, an important factor of Icelandic culture may be in danger if this tradition disappears.

Many Icelanders are concerned that children and youth of today are more interested in computers and music than in books and reading. Absence of interest in books and reading means that the adults that purchase gifts for children are likely to select other items for the important Christmas present.

### **Research questions**

A research project was created with the objective to find out whether the old, Icelandic tradition to give children books for Christmas was still alive and what were the main characteristics of this tradition. Some influencing factors were also looked at to see the tradition in a wider social context. The topics discussed in this paper fall into four main categories where age and gender are looked at specifically.

1. **The Christmas book tradition**

Is the tradition to give children books for Christmas still alive? How many books do they get and what are the characteristics of these books? Who are the main Christmas book donors?

2. **Reading**

How much do the children read during the Christmas break?

3. **Competitors to the Christmas book**

Are CDs and computer games a challenge to the Christmas book?

4. **The Internet as a new challenge**

How much do the children use the Internet? What do they like to use? Where do they have access to the Internet?

### **Research method**

In January of 1997 the data collection took place. Permission was obtained from the so-called Computer Committee (Tölvunefnd) which authorizes such studies in accordance with the Privacy Act, that places limits on the use of personal data. With this permission it was possible to draw a random sample of 800 young Icelanders, age 10 (born 1986), 12 (born 1984), 14 (born 1982) and 16 (born 1980). Two-hundred children were drawn from each age group, 100 girls and 100 boys. The sample included their names, address and telephone number of parents or head of family for those 10-14 years of age, and the legal address and phone of the 16-year-olds who have reached the age of self-governance. The parents of children age 10-14 received a letter, asking their permission to have the children interviewed for five minutes on the phone. Only a handful of parents refused to have their children interviewed. Most of them were very positive towards the study.

Telephone interviews were conducted in mid January since it was considered to be vital to talk to the children as soon after Christmas as possible so that they would remember which books, CDs or computer games they got as Christmas presents. The interviews were conducted by five students of the University of Iceland who talked to the children. Each interview was used to fill out a questionnaire that contained 25 questions, three of which were answered from the sample itself, i.e. gender, age and residence. The response rate was 88.5% of the total sample, ranging from 84.5% of the 16-year-old to 91.5% of the 12-year-old. The data was then entered into SPSS where relationships could be looked at as well as actual numbers and percentages.

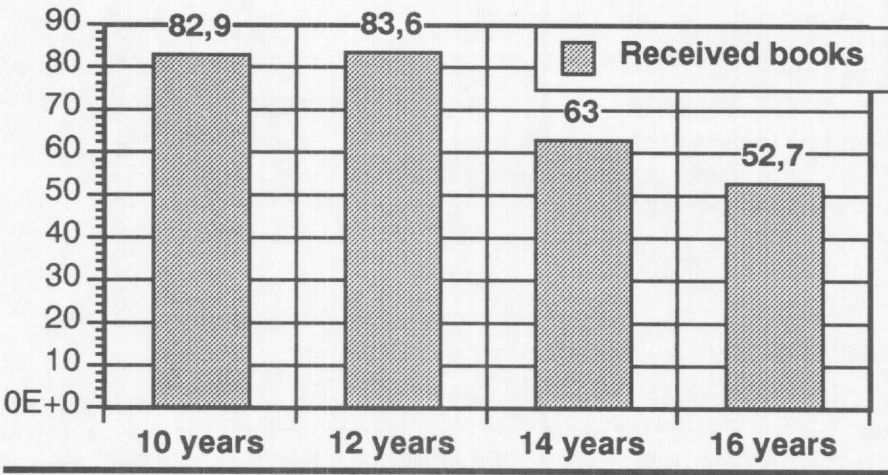
## The Christmas book tradition

One of the main questions of this study was to find out how strong is the tradition to give children books for Christmas. If the children had received books as gifts, they were asked how many books they got and had to name the books as well. By naming each title, it was possible to confirm their existence as well as to analyze the age and characteristics of those books the children received as gifts.

### *Books as presents*

Table 1 shows the percentage of children that received one or more books as Christmas presents.

**Table 1: Received books as Christmas Presents**



The findings show that for the ages 10 and 12 this tradition seems very much alive. After that the tradition weakens considerably.

82.9% of 10-year-old children reported to have received a book as Christmas present and 61.7% received more than one book, up to 10 books each. The average number of books per child was 2.2 distributed on the total sample. 83.6% of 12-year-old children received books and 56.3% more than one. The average number of books for all 12-year-olds was 2.16 books per child. Of the 14-year-old, 63% received books for Christmas and 37% received more than one giving the average of 1.7 books per individual. Only 52.7% of the 16-year-olds reported to have received books as gifts and 23.1% had received more than one. This means that almost half of that age-group did not get a book for Christmas in 1996. The average number of books for this age group is only 0.9 books per person. The tradition is therefore much weaker among the 16-year-olds than among the younger children.

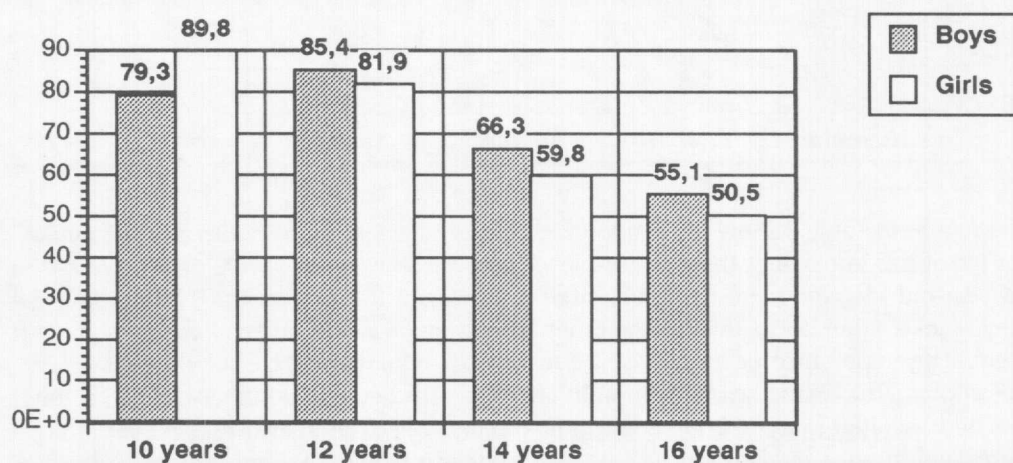
It can therefore be deducted that the children's book market aims mostly at children age 14 and lower. The reasons for the drop in books as Christmas gifts about the age of 14 may be several. Within many families it is customary to give children Christmas presents until they reach confirmation age at 14. After that the youngsters are counted among the grown ups and do not receive presents from relatives. Another explanation may be that the book

market does not cater for teenagers. The third explanation may be that there is a diminishing interest in reading that is reflected in the presents that the children receive. Probably the explanations are a combination of all of these factors and there may be some individual explanations as well.

### *Gender differences*

When looking at gender differences, the study showed that more 10-year-old girls received books than boys of same age. After that the gender attitudes change and in all other age groups, fewer girls receive books than boys.

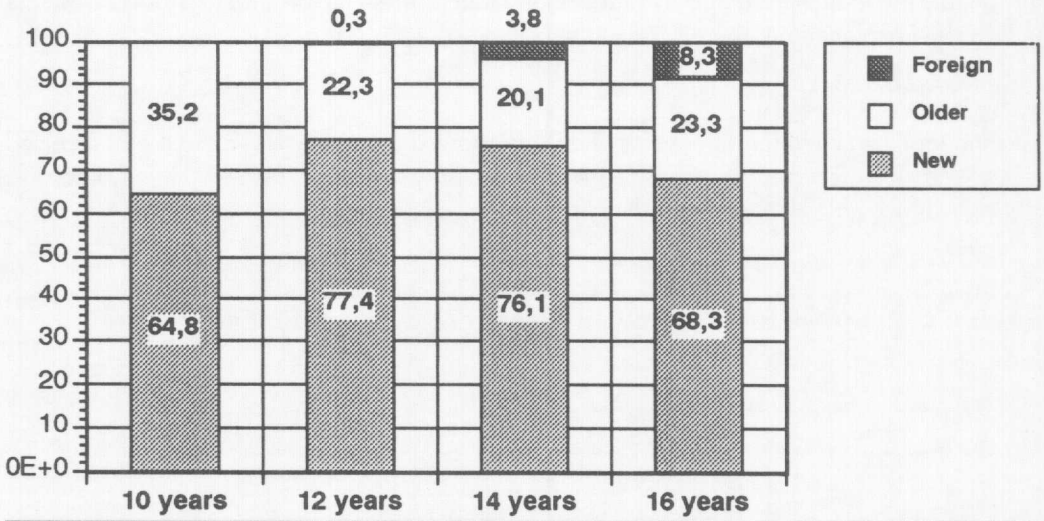
**Table 2: Books Received as Christmas Present Gender Difference**



Only about half of the 16-year-old girls received a book as present. The great decline in the tradition when looking at the age differences is worth noticing. As we will see later it was found that more girls, in general, read books than boys. It would, therefore, have been logical that girls also received more books than boys. On the other hand the survey from 1993, cited above, showed that fewer women receive books as gifts than men. There is no obvious explanation for this in this age of equal opportunities and the girls were not asked what, if anything else, they received as presents instead of books.

### *Characteristics of the Christmas books*

One of the questions was to what extent the tradition to give books as Christmas presents supports the book market. It was therefore important to see if the Christmas gifts were newly published Icelandic books or not.

**Table 3: Characteristics of the Christmas Books**

The figures in Table 3 show the relationship between the Christmas books and the market. 77.4% of the books that the 12-year-old children received and 76.1% of the books the 14-year-old received were new publications. The figure is lower for the 10-year-olds but they receive more books than all the other age groups so the number of copies is greatest there. The importance of the Christmas market for publishers is considerable. If a book does not sell during the first three months after it is launched the publisher is likely to suffer loss because after that the book is less attractive and will only be available in special book stores and in book markets. Those who select books for children approaching the teenage years seem to be more concerned with fashion and most of the 14-year-old received the same few titles. It is also worth noting that donors look for older publications mainly for the 10-year-olds and classical texts, therefore, find their way into the hands of the youngest children.

It is also interesting to notice that foreign books constitute a minimum of the gifts and in line with the importance of local publishing. Among the 12-year-old, only one received a foreign dictionary, 3.8% of the books that the 14-year-old received were foreign, including dictionaries, and 8.3% of the books that the 16-year-old received were foreign, mainly novels in English.

### ***The book donors***

The children generally do not purchase books for themselves. It was, therefore, considered important to find out who were the main providers of books as presents. Six possibilities were offered: Parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives, friends and others.

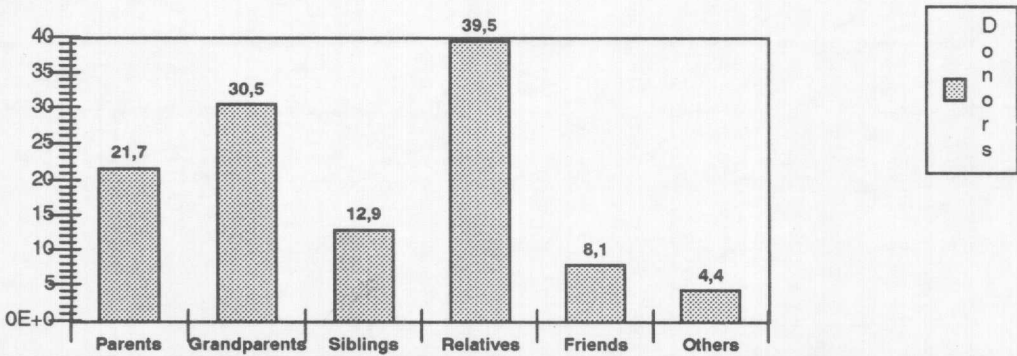
**Table 4: The Book Donors**

Table 4 shows whether or not each individual received a book from the predetermined group. Therefore, the numbers do not equal 100%. When a child received many books there could be many donors. In the group classified as "others" were books that the youngest had received as presents from "Father Christmas" and prizes from the Traffic Police. Among the oldest group "my boy-friend" and "mother-in-law" were among the donors.

Here it is probably the grandparents who are the winners because they are a limited group of people whereas the relatives are a larger group. It is also noticeable to see that the parents are in third place among the book donors. Actually it was only in the group of 16-year-olds where the parents were reported as the main donors.

It is, therefore, very important for the preservation of this tradition that grandparents sustain this habit. Hopefully, when the parents become grandparents they also support the tradition that the older generation obviously practices.

### **Reading**

In Iceland in December, the weather is often bad and the hours of daylight are few. The outer conditions are, therefore, likely to favour indoor activities. Before the time of mass media the families cuddled up with books and enjoyed peace, warmth and the lights of the Christmas decorations.

### ***Reading during Christmas***

The question now is whether Christmas still is the time to read or if young people have given up on reading and prefer to use their time on something else.

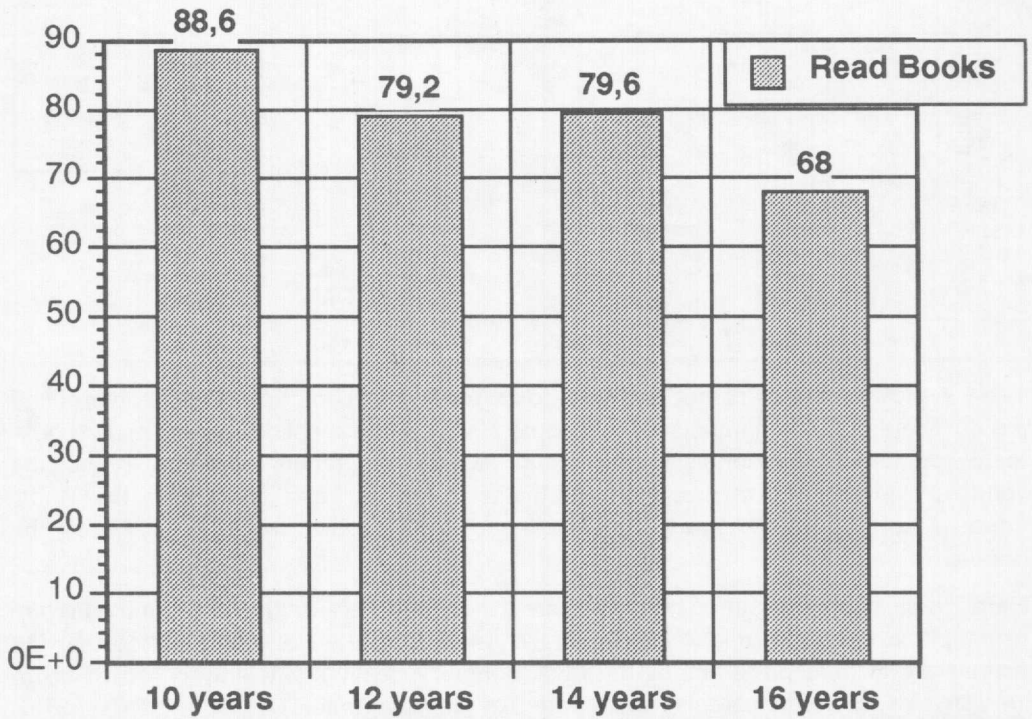
**Table 5: Reading During the Christmas Break**

Table 5 shows that reading during the Christmas vacation is still a very significant pastime among children and youth, particularly among the 10-year-olds where 88.6% of them said they had read. 79.2% of the 12-year-olds, 79.6% of the 14-year-olds, but only 68% of the 16-year-olds had read at least one book in the past 2-3 weeks. Each 12-year-old reader had read, on the average, 3.06 books, each 10-year-old reader had read 2.87 books; the 14-year-old readers had read on the average 2.45 book each and the 16-year-old readers had finished 2.28 books each. It seems, therefore, that those who read, read quite a lot and at the same time there is a considerable group that does not read at all.

It is also worth noting that there is a significant relationship between receiving books as presents and reading among all the age groups ( $p < .05$ ). This does not tell us whether those who are interested in reading are more likely to receive books as presents or if the presence of a book on the table induces people to read. Whatever the explanation may be, this relationship is worth paying attention to.

### ***Gender difference in reading***

One of the things that was looked at is whether there is a gender difference in reading activities, and to see if both genders show similar tendencies in their reading behavior.



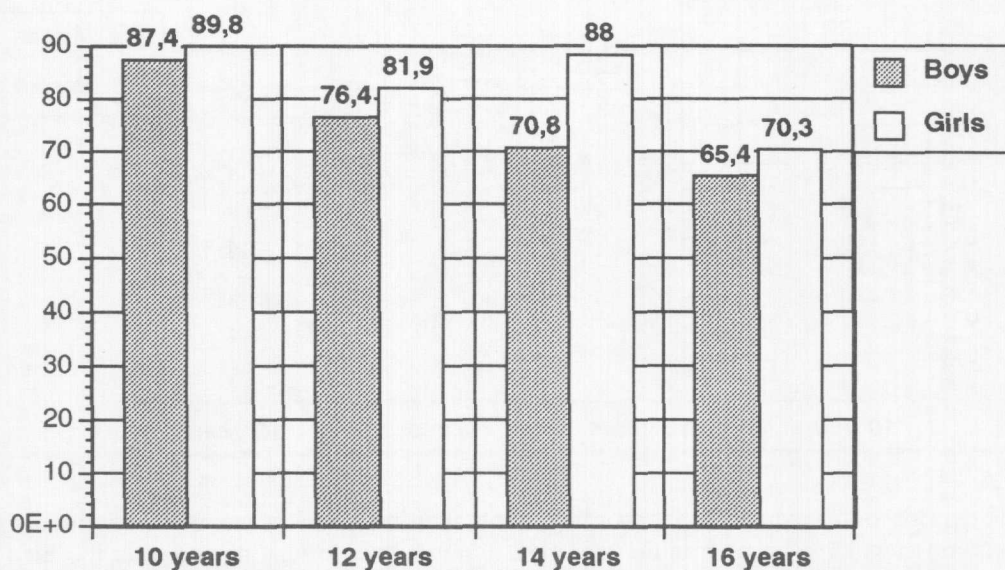
**Table 6: Reading During the Christmas Break, Gender Difference**

Table 6 shows that more girls read books than boys in all age groups. The greatest difference is among the 14-year-olds where the girl-readers are a majority of 17.2%. The high interest in reading among 14-year-old girls came as a surprise and the fact that only 59.8% of them received books as presents shows a remarkable discrepancy. It seems that the donors select other things for girls or find it more logical to give boys books although the girls are obviously more interested in the written material.

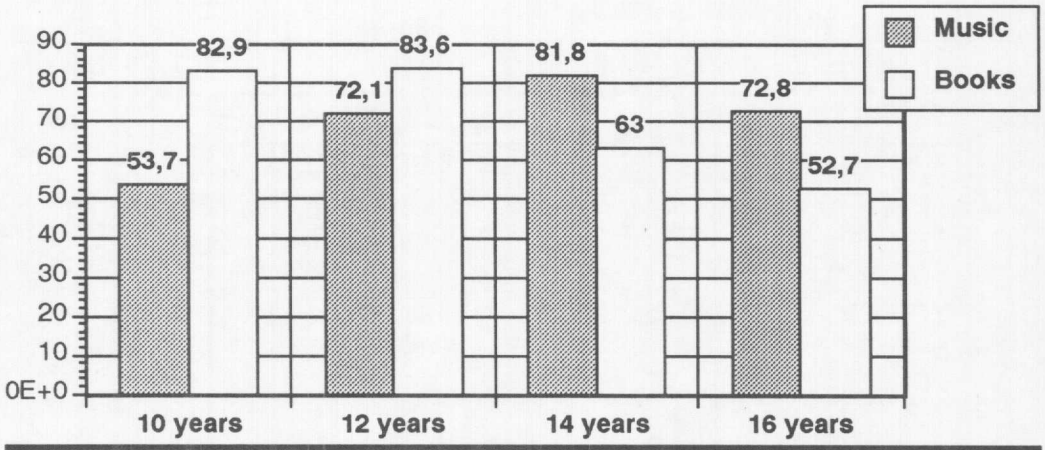
### **Competitors to the Christmas book**

The main competitors to books as gifts have been considered to be music in the form of CDs and computer games, and now the Internet as the main competitor to reading. It was of interest to compare how many youngsters received music or games as presents compared to those who received books.

#### ***CDs as Christmas gifts***

Table 7 shows that CDs are a challenge to books as presents after the age of 14. The turning point seems to be between 12 and 14 years of age where the number of individuals who received discs becomes higher than the number of those who received books.

**Table 7: Music and Books as Christmas Presents**

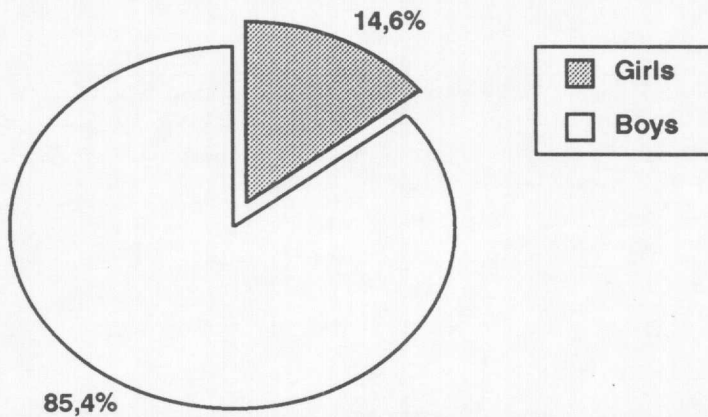


The reasons for more music as Christmas presents after the age of 14 maybe that at this age the youngsters have become more interested in music than in reading and only the high reading activity of 14-year-old girls contradicts that theory. It can also point to a wider variety that is available in music than books for this age group. A youngster can enjoy the international music world although books in foreign languages are more of a problem. Also there may be just a general drop in the number of presents that the youngsters receive. On the other hand no statistical significance was found where books as presents indicated fewer discs or vice versa.

***Computer games as Christmas gifts***

Computer games were not very common as presents. Only 88 of the total sample received computer games.

**Table 8: Computer Games as Christmas Gifts**



It is here that the strongest gender difference could be found. Of those who received computer games only 14.6% were girls. When looking at the titles of the games, it is fairly obvious that the games are mostly characterized by excitement, speed and fighting. The games that are on the Icelandic market do not seem to create much interest among the girls.

### The Internet as a new challenge

The Icelandic nation has accepted the Internet with great enthusiasm and statistically speaking there are more computers per household than in most countries of the world.

#### *Use of the Internet*

Internet use in Iceland is reported among the highest of all countries. It was therefore expected that Internet use would be very common and spread down to the youngest children.

**Table 9: Use of the Internet by Age and Gender**

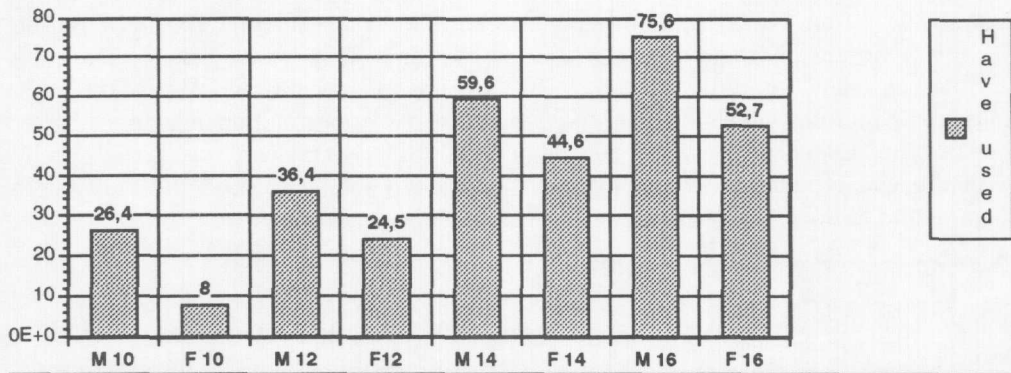
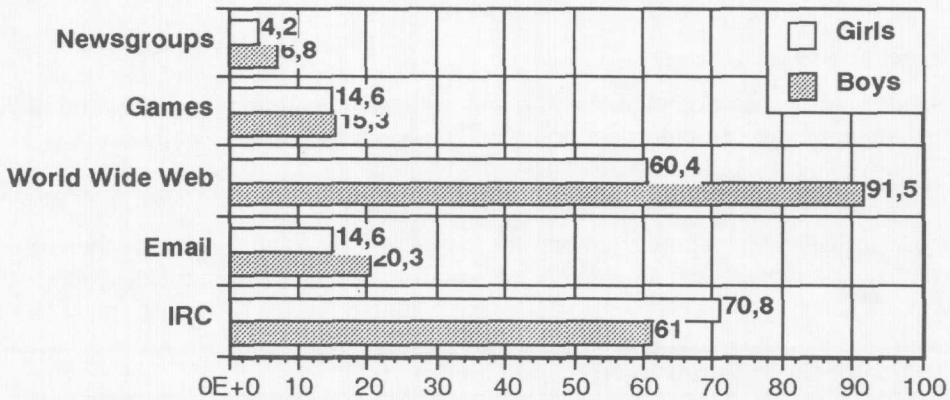


Table 11 shows that in all age groups boys (M) are more active as Internet users than girls (F). The numbers indicate that the girls are approximately two years older when they start using the Internet than the boys. Thus, 10-year-old boys and 12-year-old girls show similar frequency of use. The 16-year-old boys are the most avid users and 75.6% of them use the Internet. Only about half of the 16-year-old girls have used the Internet. Of the sample as a whole there were 59.5% of children 10-16 year of age that had never used the Internet.

#### *What do youngsters use the Internet for?*

The Internet use of the 16-year-old was looked at specially to see if there was a noticeable gender difference in the use of the Net.

Table 10: 16-year-olds—what do they use on the Internet?

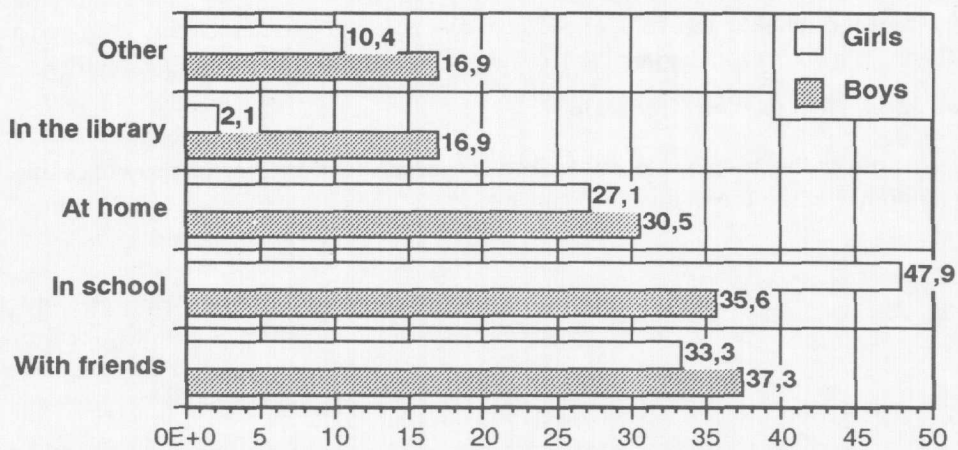


As can be seen from Table 10, the use patterns are somewhat different. The boys use the Web much more than the girls, or 91.4% of the boys and 60.4% of the girls. Girls use the IRC (Internet RelayChat) more than boys. 70.8% of the girls use IRC and 61% of the boys. Similar use patterns are seen in regard to newsgroups and games, but email is used slightly more by boys. Other use the youngsters mentioned was to get material for assignments by 4% of the girls whereas a few of the boys mentioned that they used the Net to get programs and to download pictures.

#### *Where do youngsters use the Internet?*

Another thing that was looked at here, was where the youngsters had access to the Internet.

Table 11: 16-year-olds—Where do they have access?



The Internet has been considered to be an anti-social phenomenon which isolates the children in their own world. This study does not support the theory of isolation among 16-year-old users in Iceland. About one third of the both genders reported to use the Internet with friends and there is little gender difference in this aspect. The availability of computers at home is not markedly different between boys and girls.

The boys in general report more access points than the girls. The boys go to exhibits, to stores, on courses, and visit their parents at work to access the Internet. The girls seem to concentrate much of their use of the Internet with school assignments and the school is more frequently named as the only access point for girls than boys. What came as a surprise is how little the girls use the Internet in the library, considering that they use libraries more than boys.

What these numbers seem to indicate is that the girls use the Internet more systematically than the boys and the school is the most important access point for them. They seem to spend less time surfing the Net than the boys. The girls show a higher use of the Internet to get in touch with other people and chat rather than surfing.

### **Conclusions**

In short, the findings indicate that books are still popular as presents for the Christmas packages of young children in Iceland. The tradition, however, seems to get weaker when the children get older and when the youngsters reach 16 years, only about half of them receive books. The children's book market seems to aim at children younger than 14 years of age and the market is supported largely by the Christmas gifts. As long as each child receives two books or more on the average there is a sufficient market to keep publishing about 150 titles per year. Thereby there is a reasonable wide selection of books to chose from. It should also be noted that CDs become more common as Christmas presents after the age of 14.

This survey indicates that boys loose interest in reading between the age of 12 and 14, but the girls continue to be heavy readers beyond the age of 14. More girls are readers in all age groups than boys. In general, girls seem more attracted to books than computers. Computer games are not common as Christmas gifts and of those who get games for Christmas, only 14.6% are girls.

The Internet is more attractive to boys than girls. It is only at the age of 16 when more than half of the girls have become users. Their use of the Internet also seems to be quite different. The girls seem to use the Internet for communication and assignments whereas the boys use it more for exploration and fun. The reason for this slow acceptance of the Internet by girls is not quite clear. One of the reasons may be the role models. The 10-year-olds in this survey, were asked if they knew what the Internet was. The answers were quite indicative: I have seen it in the work-place of my father; My father has a computer; My father is teaching me to use the computer; I have seen my father on the IRC; My big brother uses it a lot; My teacher showed me—and in one case only: My mother has the Internet. One might assume that the mothers are more of a model for the girls and the boys are influenced by their fathers. In general women use the Internet and computers less than men and therefore this difference is perhaps understandable.

But will the Internet kill Icelandic book publishing? Is the Internet a dangerous challenge to Icelandic book-culture? In the near future it will become clear whether Icelandic book publishing will suffer next to the Internet. I expect the answer to the question to be negative but I would like to see a proactive use made of the Internet to support Icelandic culture. I would like to see that the Internet is used specifically as a publication tool for Icelandic material. The market is so small that a considerable amount of material never appears in book form in the Icelandic language because publishers could never sell enough copies to support the publication. This is the case with much of non-fiction.

It is an obvious contradiction that a "nation of books" can also be massive "computer freaks." I believe that a happy balance can be and will be struck before too long. When people get more used to the possibilities and the limitations of the Internet, it will be used as a tool rather than a toy for the excitement it offers.

I believe that the Internet and book publishing can survive very happily together and actually strengthen each other, provided that there is material available on the Internet in the Icelandic language. One of the most important things for the preservation of Icelandic culture is for youngsters to get used to the idea that you can also see interesting stuff in Icelandic on the Internet.