Changes in cultural practices and social values

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1. Introduction

The leading questions of session 3 assume that the media specific structures of the Internet will have corresponding effects on lifestyle, culture and values. In the following I will explain the relation between Internet und its users from a socio-cultural point of view. On examples of communicative practice of the Internet the anticipation will be backed that cultural practices and social values might change.

2. Internet and Internet users' specifities

To describe media practice I will use an interactive approach, which looks at the media offer, this means its content, on one side, and the way of its use on the other.

2.1 Three levels of media content

The content can be described on a macrolevel by aspects which are specific for a single medium. The mesolevel contains types of media content and the microlevel is the single offer which is to be described by its meaning (content and presentation style). The qualities of the Internet technology (macrolevel) are its velocity and virtuality, its accessability, multimediality, hyperptextuality and interactivity (Pietraß 2005). These qualities create the multidiversity und universality of the Internet. It is a global platform for communication, which offers the following applications (mesolevel): Platforms for communication, information services, art and creativity, games and e-commerce. The single message on the microlevel is the interface with its content and presentation style a user interacts with.

2.2   Demographical and socio-cultural factors of the young internet user

The main functions of media are information/orientation, entertainment/recreation, identification/distinction (Eichmann 2000, S. 175). They differ in EU countries in regard to demographic data like age, education and income (Statistisches Bundesamt 2005). The gratifications sought vary with age and education (Dehm/Storll/Beeske 2006; N = 552): The 14 - 29 year old (German) Internet user is likely to be hedonistic (34%) and in search for relaxation (26%), whereas seeking for information is the interest of older users (36%). The need for knowledge is dominating (58%) within the group of older users (50-69), curiosity (21%) and hedonism are less prevalent here (16%). Lower education is related with a need for hedonism (47%), whereas a better educational level is related with the need for information (31% on a middle level and 23% on a high school level). All in all hedonism is more often found in the younger user, who is less educated and has a lower income. He prefers more entertainment oriented TV programmes, likes to play computer games, prefers magazines and cinema and is less sportive (ibid. S. 96f.). What we do know about to the relation between sociodemographical factors and media practice can be summarized as follows: Younger users prefer action oriented media offers, whereas with age the less arousing information style is preferred, and media practices are more various and more aimed at information seeking in the group of high school pupils (Dehm 2006, Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2006; Schulze 1992, Seven One Media 2004).

2.3   Socio-cultural conditions of Internet use

The sociodemographical view on user's groups becomes meaningful in regard to values, cultural patterns and lifestyles when it is combined with a socio-cultural stratification of users like the "milieu theory". This sociological approach classifies social groups additionally to age, education and income by the social context the user is living in. It is interested in the environmental conditioning of values, taste, and lifestyle. The individual experiences her/his environmental conditioning as habits and preferences. These aesthetic likings are shared by all members of a milieu and are expressed by the lifestyle. Lifestyle is a pattern of values and habits which shows in activities and consumers choices and in the preference for special experiences ("Erlebnis"; Schulze 1992). An important source for aesthetic gratifications are media. Data show that the milieus have different media practices which are obviousloy passed from the parents to their offspring: Kuchenbuch (2003) prooved that the TV preferences of children are specific to the milieu of the parents. And from studies on reading habits we know that the way parents use print media is the strongest indicator for the reading socialization of their children (Hurrelmann/Bonfadelli 1993, a, b). However, there is a lack of knowledge about the relations between social milieu and media practices, especially in regard to young people.

3.   Interaction between media and user: Examples for Internet practice

Media are forced to reach their audience without knowing exactly who their audiences are. An important mean to reach the audience are the presentational styles. In correlation to the growing socio-cultural differentiation special "recipient designs" are developed (Willems 2000, S. 214) by the producers. They reconstruct the supposed expectancies, wishes and values of their recipients. This aesthetic side of media content prestructures media offers by promising special gratifications. They correspond with the gratifications a lifestyle gives (orientation, pleasure, identification/distinction) (Eichmann 2000, S. 175). This leads to a socio-cultural cohesion between media offers and users expectancies which is realized by the way a media message is compounded, its typical content and style. In the following I will give some examples to show how Internet communication might effect cultural practices and social values.

Playing is a form of internet usage which becomes more and more important. Games are especially attractive for young users. Digital games are stated as the biggest growth industry in the future (OECD 2005, p. 8): "Within Europe 1 in 3 people plays digital games regularly and although every other child plays everyday, (mostly with friends and family) the main user range is between 20 and 30 years old who play for an average of six hours a week." (Interactive Software Federation of Europe 2005, p.3) In the German JIM Study (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverband Südwest 2006; n= 1.088) instant messaging is the most important internet feature applied (57% of the 12 - 19 years old), followed by e-mails. Online games are used by 15%, about the same as chats, music downloads and newsgroups. Interesting in this study is the small difference in regard to education: Online games are used only with three percentage points more by pupils with lower education (17%) compared to high school pupils (14%). The latter have a wider variety of communicative forms; are more communicative, more interested in information seeking, have a more intensive use of all features offered, whereas pupils with lower education use the internet less diverse, more focused on playing and entertainment.

3.1   Effects on cultural patterns and values prevalent at schools

The question if "the use of ICT affects cultural patterns and values as those prevalent in education" demands to look on ICT applications which support play, leisure, non-commitment,

but which are highly attractive for kids like online games. They "can be defined as any form of computer-based games played over the Internet including PCs, consoles and wireless games" (OECD 2003, S. 2).

The multimediality of the Internet gives the possibility to design games which aim at learning, but are packed with real life information. War games are a special genre of online games, designed for training and information purposes as well as well as for entertainment. With their virtuality, interactivity und multimediality they build authentic virtual playgrounds. America's Army (http://www.americasarmy.com/gallery/) is a special offer in this field, which was developed by The Modeling, Virtual Environments and Simulation Institute (MOVES) at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey (2002). It combines game with information elements.

America's Army aims to interest young people in recruitung for the US army, since the Army has difficulties in gaining enough young persons to serve in the army – in contrary to Navy and Air Force. The computer game is offered in recruiting offices, but it is mainly distributed via WWW. The player can join different units of the army. Before joining the various units a basic training has to be absolved. This part of the game has to played alone. Elements of real life training like first aid, driver's training or shooting training, are presented authentically, e. g. sitting in a classroom, listening to a teacher and writing a test. The player can look around and observe his classmates, "cheating" will exclude from the test. This situation demands hearing the lesson and proving at least a rudimental knowledge. The goal of the game is to fulfil a mission, e. g. to combat terrorists, but it has no end in itself.

Games like America's Army are an excellent way to give information about an area of every day's life. The play character is mixed with elements which force the player to "work" if he wants to continue the game, which could make the play strenuous for those, who are not intrigued by the idea of joining the army. The mixture between play and information elements is hard to distinguish, if one is not acquainted with the military habits. The authentic design, the sociability of online games and their flow character resulting out of authentic experience and interactivity could mold a new form of learning habits, which are inconsistent with those of learning at school by supporting an attitude of playfulness.

3.2   *Global convergence of lifestyles because of the influence of digital content*

Digital content is fundamentally accessible all over the world. It is virtual, fast, interactive, hypertextual and multimedial. Additionally to this structures of the Internet every single offer is endowed with a certain design. There is knowledge about style and genre in literature, in TV and also in print media, but we still do not know about styles in the Internet. The question of style touches the gratifications users draw out of media use. As mentioned before an action style is sought for especially by young users. The Internet answers this demand in regard to information services.

A comparison of two German online-Newspapers, one high quality offer (http://www.faz.net/s/homepage.htm) and a boulevard online-journal (http://www.bild.t-online.de/) shows that also in the Internt there are different presentation styles. Obviously the prevalent presentation styles of TV and print media are transferred on the Internet. The comparison showed that there is a more entertaining and a more serious presentation style in the Internet. The entertainment style uses more pictures, colours, human touch topics and practical advice, less text and bigger letters, whereas the information style is more textually oriented, with less colours, pictures (still and vivid) and more background information. This means that users may continue their preferred ways of information seeking, of learning and entertainment while using the Internet. There is evidence that "transmedial practices" (transmediale Nutzungsstile) (Schweiger 2005) exist, since the expected gratifications of internet use corresponds with those of TV (Dehm/Storll/Beeske). Since the entertainment style is preferred by younger and less educated users, Internet use could fix existing differences in lifestyles (in regard to media practice). In this case the Internet could lead to a global convergence of lifestyles, but only in regard to already existing media styles.

3.3   Higher value of multimedia than of mere text: The nature of pictures

This question can be answered in regard to prevalent communicative practice or communicative discourse. I do not know research which deals with the amount of text/pictures used in communicative situations. But in scientific discourse on educational media the enrichment of texts with pictures is seen of higher value than mere text. Cognitive psychology states that the combination of text and picture forces to more mental representation building of the learner than mere text (Blömeke 2003, Issing 1997). Though data are not really clear about this, the pedagogical discourse sees the enrichment of texts as more effective for learners (Niegemann 2006). In spite of this, it is needed to differentiate between communicative situations wherein a picture is used and the types of pictures (modes of iconicity) to be clear about the positive effect of multicodal media communication.

Understanding pictures demands knowledge about the situation in which a picture is used, since the nature of a picture is ambiguous. Its ambiguity is reduced by different styles of iconicity – this is the way of similarity to realistic perception– and by the situation in which a picture is used. The situation or context usually is given by words (Muckenhaupt 1986). In an empirical study (Pietraß 2003) I prooved that media users have a great variety of patterns and styles (frames), which help them to understand vivid pictures even without knowing in which context they are used. Such situations occur e. g. during channel hopping: In applying these frames, the user can state the meaning of a picture. However, the more dense and less specific a pictoral code is, the less it is necessary to frame a picture with textual explanations. This kind of pictures may gain importance out of two reasons: On the side of the users exists the unsettling number of functional analphabetism about one third of OECD population (OECD 1995; zit. n. Eichmann 2000). This means that these people lack "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Statistics Canada 2001). For these people multimedia is a pure need. Additionally the global range of internet communication has to overwhelm cultural boarders which is easier for pictures as long as they are dense in meaning and use a well known pictoral code. The question here is if there already exists such a pictoral Internet code and when it is applied.

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