

## Internet and Society

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Ladies and gentlemen, when is it even possible to look at “the whole” and understand the “global worlds” of the Internet? This can only happen after we have freed ourselves from news coverage based on sensationalism and prejudices, which will be my first step in the following section. Only if we leave the cursory knowledge behind us in this manner can we see the three central elements in the interconnection of the Internet and society – which is my second step: By virtue of the Web 2.0, a special form of digital community building occurs as a true innovation that allows us to speak of the networked society. This is accompanied by a radical process of our present communication and society focusing increasingly on the visual level (visualisation). Within this context, the consumer market ultimately develops a special power because it creeps into the communication of young people more than ever before and has a determining influence on their value horizon. We should discuss this hypothesis under the keyword of the ability to force marketing.

The motivation for giving this presentation is also due to a certain weariness of the usual way of reporting on the social web in the arts and culture, as well as scientific journalism. The American Internet pioneer Manuel Castells begins his book *The Internet Galaxy* – which was already published in 2001 (German edition in 2005) – with the chapter called “The Network Is the Message.” He concludes that, even though the Internet is omnipresent, the insight into its language and the constraints that emanate from it would not extend very far beyond the area of strict technological matters and – I am filling this in on my part – the high impact attention-grabbing of individual communication practices. This relative source of reliable research has benefited – to quote Castells – “the ideology and the gossip.”

A look at the media coverage on social-web topics from the perspective of the tabloids and scientific features over the past (almost) 10 years shows the continued topicality of Castells’ diagnosis: Shocking topics such as “Undressing 2.0” (ZEIT.Campus), “Nude Among Friends” and “Unknown Friends” (both in *SPIEGEL*) or “Facebook Epidemic” (WELTWOCHEN) decorated the covers of the upscale German-language journalism in 2009/10. In a virtually classic way, the desires for eroticism and sexuality – as well as the fears of strangers and (addictive) health disorders – are used to get public attention. Even today, a social-media phenomenon is mostly just discussed from a criminological and alarmist perspective: The downloading of music/film (copyright violation) or data theft (violation of personal rights), as well as the commercial trade in data (unauthorised disclosure of private information) or social-ethical brutalisation (pornography and violence) are denounced.

The extremely forced development speed of the Internet has made it very easy for these “quick-fire journalistic responses,” but difficult for substantiated scientific research. For many years, there has been a flagrant deficit of enlightening empirical studies. The first comprehensive surveys on the reality of the Internet communication of (already older) children, youth and young adults in both the German- and English-language regions have only recently become available. The results of the extensive EU Kids Online Study will be presented and discussed within the scope of this conference today: More than 23,000 adolescents from 25 countries were studied and the overall picture that has been obtained is as comprehensive as it is differentiated. As you can see on the map, just a few white areas are visible on the map of the European countries. However, the white spot of Switzerland will be discussed by a study that our Basel working group will publish within the next few days under the title of “Friendship and Community on the Social Web.” This study was done in international comparative cooperation with the Hans Bredow Institute of Hamburg, as well as the former Austrian Institute for Youth Research (Vienna).

Which of the prejudices addressed – and they should undoubtedly be understood as an expression of our concern about the Web 2.0 – could or should we now say goodbye to?

The first is that most users do not see social network sites as places for presenting nakedness. This observation can be made on the basis of an exemplary study conducted in 2009 by Pscheida/Trültzsch: 421 SNS profiles that were selected randomly were analysed as to what extent adolescents show much or little bare skin or present candid intimate interactions to the Internet public in their pictures. Contrary to the previously mentioned media coverage (“Undressing 2.0”), it can be noted that pictures of a distinctively private or intimate/naked character presented thoughtlessly to the public were quite rare. The recently published German JIM Study also confirms: Young people have even become more discrete on the Internet during the past year!

Secondly, social network sites are not a prominent place for the encounter with so-called “unknown friends“! Time and again, the theoretical thought arises in the public sphere that by virtue of the “Friend’s Lists” – which, according to the consensus of current surveys, have a sweeping average amount of about 130 – contact is established with communication partners who are unknown to the individual users. This would create a difficult situation by meeting an unknown person under the disguise of familiarity and friendship. An individual would become involved more closely than is normal with regard to people who are unfamiliar. The average number of 10/12 users who communicate with each other on a regular basis has been clearly recorded in current complex analyses of networks and is shown to be steady.

How can we understand the meaning of this apparent tension between excessive lists of friends and a simultaneously manageable framework of actual, but infrequent, daily communication (traffic) on the SNS?

Here, the attempts at an explanation that consider the structures of the offline world, meaning the user’s natural daily world, are very promising. For young people and adolescents, the peer group in the real world also represents the social authority online that tolerates or sanctions their actions or has to sanction them (peer review). From this perspective, it is not surprising when the online world – as soon as it takes shape under the observation of real persons of reference – is not too far

removed from the norms and practices of offline life. Formulated in more obvious terms: Online - communication is socially embedded in the networks of the offline world. Consequently, a person's own everyday offline life is generally extended into the Internet. The circle of acquaintances is cross-linked and pictured, and communication happens only in the group of friends. Apparently, there is also no "community without closeness" on the worldwide Internet (Bettina Heintz) in the SNS: Welcome to reality!

Once we have left behind the keywords of "Undressing 2.0" and "Unknown Friends," it seems appropriate to me to take a look at the current media coverage. At present, it can easily be observed that a new theme is being presented in the media and the way in which it is being presented. In keeping with the current pre-Christmas period, an amusing essay was published a few days ago in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that refers to last year's Christmas speech by the Dutch Queen Beatrix I. In this speech, she complained about the coldness in today's world and also knew – according to the author Alex Rühle – what was responsible for this misery: the Internet, because there is no doubt that it makes people lonely! In response to this speech, the Dutch journalist and musician Wijnand Boon is currently putting the rule to the test and recently left on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The special feature of his pilgrimage is that he exclusively looks for his accommodations through Facebook, Couchsurfing and other social networks. Thus the SZ's title: "Pilgrimage with an iPhone." The reports on the trip and accommodations (in students' flat-sharing communities and with unemployed people, small families, farmers, etc.) published up to now on his website ([www.twalkwithme.eu](http://www.twalkwithme.eu)) clearly convey a very interesting but also contradictory picture: The pilgrim's greatest challenge has not been his isolation but coping with his increasing lack of sleep: "The biggest problem is the friendliness of the people who let me stay at their homes. It is so interesting with most of them that I am always tempted to take a break for one day." This (pre)Christmas (art) campaign by Boon may draw our attention on the one hand, as well as our scepticism on the other: How can this one case contribute anything meaningful at all to the clarification of our general question?

The essay then quotes a current study by the Munich Institute for Economic Research/Area of Human Capital and Innovation: Under the title of "Does Internet Use Harm Social Capital?," the authors Bauernschuster/Falck/Wössann disprove the thesis that the Internet is a medium for unsociable nerds who may network socially online but are isolated in the real world. 18,000 people were surveyed and the results speak volumes: Individuals who use the Internet on a regular basis are more sociable, meet other people more frequently, are often more politically engaged and spend more time in social arenas such as pubs, the theatre, events, etc., than those who use the Internet less or not at all. Accordingly, the title of SPIEGEL Online announced in red on 15/11/2010: "Offliners Are Lonelier!" This means – as we can easily see – that the media carousel with which we are all very familiar has begun to turn. And instead of referring to Queen Beatrix I, the Spiegel editors are blaming it the Pope – you see, the smaller title in black (sic!) is: "Where the Pope Is Wrong". Ladies and gentlemen, I think you must have got the point and that you will be able to personally observe in the coming days and weeks how the advancement of this topic will continue to run in the self-referring media circus of the leading media.

The picture of the "Facebook Epidemic" must now also be examined – and it also does not hold! Used as a metaphor, the term epidemic opens the horizon of the mind to overcoming illness and infection that encompasses all people, an existence at the mercy of the threatening (virus) nature,

one that needs the help of another (here: a doctor) and hoping for healing and recovery. Ladies and gentlemen, you can easily recognise a form of thinking and argument that we believed we had overcome: The spectre of the influential media. In this case, the Internet is up for discussion and the correlations of media effects are conceptualised in the scientific tradition of thought. The result is that people lose their reflective competence, their ability to act responsibly and their creativity. It almost appears to be a reflex that when a new medium is introduced the danger always arises that the central findings of research on media and communications science will be forgotten. Most recently the example of the television as a medium has been specifically researched very extensively – as well as how the exposure to the mass medium is integrated into the social processes of the communicative acquisition of media offers: An individual selects the personally most interesting media offer, uses it alone or in the company of others, follows a television show with complete concentration or allows himself/herself to be distracted in the course of the programme and also engages in additional activities at the same time; he/she comments on what has been seen with those present during or even after the presentation; in these conversations, the participants develop their own interpretation of what has been seen because – viewed from our perspective of cultural sciences – media offers represent “texts that are open (in meaning): As it were, the recipient must make sense of what has been presented; and the viewer also brings his/her view of things later in the following communications (keyword: traces of the media in later actions). This active and simultaneously reflective approach to media offers represents the basis for identity-relevant mirroring processes in the social counterpart and equally provides community-building topics of conversation in the circle of family, friends and colleagues. This complex confrontation with the media and associated everyday conversations constitute an important medium of social cohesion. And all of the previously existing research confirms that the new and latest media such as the Internet also have a primary significance for building and maintaining the identity of the individuals, as well as for the cohesion of modern societies – a thought that will be picked up once again under the keyword of networking.

The current studies on the Internet use of adolescents that were quoted at the beginning, notably also the EU Kids Online Study – which will be presented to you in today’s upcoming programme – show that adolescents usually and for the most part move through a mediatised world and the Internet with media competence: They are familiar with the various communications channels and know what their advantages and disadvantages are. They also know how to use the cell phone, Instant Messenger, SNS, Chat, etc. in a differentiated and standard-conforming way. The following quote very nicely expresses this thought. A female student explains:

“You write a friendly hello or suggest meeting for coffee on the other person’s wall, where anyone can see it. An invitation to a date or secret gossip is sent as a Facebook message (like e-mail, but through the Facebook server). You have a little chat over the AOL Instant Messenger. For job interviews or a conversation with my mother, I use the Skype Online telephone service, and e-mail to send out curriculum vitae or to contact the lecturers. People adhere strictly to this hierarchy. Confusing the categories – such as asking someone on a date on their wall or using Skype to just make plans to meet in the canteen – would be like social suicide.” (Andreas Busch, WZB 2008)

The above-mentioned practice of social-web communication – status of 2008 – is currently becoming simplified as rapidly as it is extensive since all of the major providers such as Facebook have

integrated (almost) all of the mentioned applications into their social network site by following the strategy of “all in one!”

However, users not only employ the social web tools competently but also share their experience on the Internet with each other and reflect in this way on the existing and newly emerging risks: With considerable sensibility, they control and cope with infringements of an erotic/sexual or violence-oriented nature; but they react less attentively to the dissolution of boundaries that extends from the media and consumer market. This will be discussed again later.

I would first like to continue going down the road of asking what primarily motivates young people to become involved especially with the offers of social network sites and what role the processes of cross-linking, visualisation and marketisation of communication plays. In order to answer this question, I will call upon some of the central benchmark data of Web 2.0 use:

- 98 per cent of the adolescents (12 to 19 years old) have an Internet access; this means that almost all adolescents have access to the Internet.
- Three-quarters of all adolescents (approx. 75 per cent) use online communities/social network sites; this means that SNS and Internet communities are actually used to a very high degree.
- When looking at their ages, the major entry into the SNS really occurs at the age of 14 years; in the age group of the 18-19 year olds, approx. 90 per cent are already in the SNS.

There is no doubt that Web 2.0 or the social web can be seen as a social innovation since the previously known forms of mass communication have experienced an expansion through forms of the media-supported individual and group communication. A specific architecture of participation and sharing with different degrees of activity has developed. It is distinguished by three elements in particular: First, through the element of community building that allows the networks to be created through which – secondly – a culture of low-threshold participation appears possible from the perspective of politics and commitment, as well as – thirdly – through the momentum of collaboration. On the basis of the latter, the achievements of a collective intelligence become possible in the form of the Wikipedia free encyclopaedia, for example. All three elements come together in the idea of the so-called participatory Internet in which the people can post and exchange their user-generated content. YouTube has very appropriately tried to get to the heart of this thought with the motto of “Broadcast yourself.”

Within the context of our discussion, another noteworthy criterion for community building leads to the conclusion that the especially interesting thing about the social network sites can be seen in their multi-modality potential for articulating social relationships and expressing them in visual terms. Through the mostly reciprocal establishment of contact and its (partially) public documentation, the social networks that usually remain unseen become visible and can be experienced in visual terms by everyone. SNS offer a multi-faceted space for the presentation of identity, as well as the mediation of hierarchy and status, especially within the peer groups of young people. In this process, it becomes evident that the intention of the users is primarily not active networking in the form of new contact generation; instead, they mainly focus on the depiction and/or articulation of their personal networks and nature of the relationships that already exist offline. According to the American

Internet researcher Danah Boyd, “public displays of connections” are created. In the form of a multi-faceted differentiation of the various communication options that include private pictures, e-mail-like messages and status updates to the diversity of commenting functions, a peer-review system is maintained. Within the scope of this system, blueprints for the identity and lifestyles can be tried out by young people that – depending on the setting of protective functions for privacy – can be followed more or less actively or passively by many users on the screen. This results in online networks that are predominantly structured in terms of their relationship orientation, which means primarily on the basis of criteria such as friendship and previous (offline) acquaintance. For most of the people who use social network sites such as Facebook, they do not represent a virtual reality in the sense of an alternative world but are employed as an additional communication channel for a series of practices that involve the maintenance of friendships and relationships.

An especially significant factor for this networking is quite apparently the role of expressing this relationship work in visual terms. I would like to once again quote some of the few main estimated figures with regards to this image-related communication on the social network sites, which – I will mention one more time – is practiced by three fourths of all adolescents:

- About 100 million pictures are uploaded to Facebook every day, which means about 3 billion pictures every month;
- As a result, there are currently an estimated 45 billion pictures stored on Facebook;
- As a comparison: The Flickr photo portal currently stores “just” over 5 billion pictures;
- There is no doubt that the portal for amateur photos is Facebook!

But why this multitude of photos? We must ask why these millions and billions of pictures are even posted on the Internet. The communicative function of these countless pictures can only be roughly understood if we look at the special structure of the digitally conveyed communication and interactivity: As we know, communication by means of the computer is distinguished by the fact that the basic condition of social interaction – the (face-to-face-) presence of the participants – is not fulfilled. The interactive possibilities of a digitally supported communication do not take place on the level of direct, natural interaction with all of its multi-faceted opportunities for perception and manipulation (gestures, facial expression, intonation, etc.). Instead, communication by means of the computer is characterised by the element of anonymity on the one hand and by that of dissolving the boundaries of the self on the other. Within this context, this dissolution means that the users are confronted with a variety of interactive options for creation that make it possible for them to deal with the prevailing social boundaries in a self-determined manner. Consequently, they can practice a high or lower degree of self-revelation. Here is a further example: selecting and acting out prosocial or antisocial, aggressive (cyberbullying) opportunities for actions in the contacts. These special creation options become possible when the users do not interact with other persons by using texts or symbolic representations because pictures (symbolic representations) take the place of persons. Phrased in a different way: PC communication does not involve conversations and relationship-shaping between concrete persons who perceive and identify each other as persons within the framework of a face-to-face situation; instead, it entails intertextuality and the relationships between

the prepared, uploaded texts (written/e-mail/comments) and the pictures/photos that are no longer distributed through the mass media like books.

An additional factor is that the open framework of computer communication does not specify any sequencing of the interaction events. It is up to the individual user to look into and/or construct the meaning in the vagueness (contingence) and inscrutability (opacity) of the computer communication. As in times of mass communication, PC communication is no longer the same for everyone, but can only be accessed individually. This relationship can be called media-conditioned generalisation and personalisation (in the sense of personal use, which means that each individual user assembles and interprets the texts/pictures/clips in an idiosyncratic, unique manner!) of communication, which has been a result of the consequence of the disconnection of digitally supported communication from its natural form (Tilman Sutter).

The structural attributes of PC communication's generalisation and personalisation are invoked here in order to illustrate the specific communicative function of the (flood of) images. Profile and album pictures have the function of making the actor visible on the Internet. This visibility is one of the premises of social network sites, which – like hardly any other Internet offer – are based on the articulation of the member's personal information. Photographic portraits and other pictures convey with whom they are interacting to the counterparts with more precision than nicknames or graphic icons. The documentary dimension of pictures serves as a visual biography and proof of individuality. To a certain degree, the portrait picture compensates for the (pseudo-) anonymity and the photographic depictions and function as graphic (self-) representations of the actor. Seen in this light, the pictures in the digital world are placeholders for persons and occurrences that can be attributed to the analogue world: As a result, the pictures act as agents at the interface of the analogue world of communication on the one hand and the digital one on the other. At the same time, they allow the process of authenticating the communication (... that really is him!) to occur.

Now the follow-up question must be answered with regard to which criteria the users go by in the creation and selection of their private pictures. The production of their amateur pictures occurs – according to an initial response – within the scope of ritualised mediation processes and in an orientation upon conventional poses that document the efforts for a successful impression management by the actors. But what is the source for the models of these above-mentioned conventional poses that young people assume in front of the camera in a self-determined and other-directed manner? The few accessible studies on this topic show that the selected forms of visual self-presentation are oriented upon the symbolic codes of the market, youth and consumer culture. But, above all, they are based on the advertising and star system. Role models, idols and stars continue to be “in” among young people: Two-thirds of all adolescents admit to orienting themselves upon these celebrities and usually name stars from the glamorous world of music, film and sports.

In the case of the party portals, we were able to demonstrate in one of our studies that the photographs uploaded there resemble the familiar motifs from the (fan) newspapers and (party) magazines. In the interplay of posing and photographing, the actors oriented themselves upon the self-concepts of the market (“external images”) that are embodied by the role models (stars/models) and assume them as their own self-concepts (“self-images”). As a result, the pictures actualise the external image rather than the self-image! The photographs of the young people are adapted to the

media pictures introduced by the culture industry, which reflects the standards and values of the society. The leading cultural theme is that of glamour. They imitate the poses of the media stars and – just like the role models of Paris Hilton and Claudia Schiffer – turn themselves into the spectacle that is viewed by the collective. However, this staging usually just copies the professionally enacted star glamour in an amateurish, sometimes even semi-professional way. Consequently, the self-expression of the young people in the new medium of the Internet cannot be seen as a reflection of a movement such as “off to new shores of our own!” Instead, it follows the familiar and prescribed market aesthetics.

The market does not just get involved in the creation (production) of the pictures, but also has an impact on the organisation and propagation (distribution) of these pictures. The provider-designed portal structure encountered by the user frames these actions in a specific way: Certain things must be done, such as entering the personal data and setting up a profile picture, and others are voluntary options for action. For example, the party portal of Tilllate, well known here in our area of northwest Switzerland has set up a hierarchically structured communication world. It differentiates between three categories of members: Guest with an Account, Member and Gold Member with an Account. The three classes control the various access rights of the portal’s offers. A Gold Member has a special status within the portal community: “The Tilllate.com Gold membership is a status of the special class – for those who would like to stand out from all of the other members and want to benefit from the many goodies,” according to the operators – very original !. The Gold membership can be purchased or even acquired/earned through much traffic/activity. People must become friends with other members, write and receive comments, hand out karma, maintain their own profile and reach higher ranking positions with their attractive pictures in the photo charts (All-Time Charts, (macho) Superboys, (sexy) Supergirls), etc. In addition, the members are shown what activities they can do to increase their karma value – such as filling in the details of their information regarding shopping preferences or nightlife interests – under the “Task” category.

Besides dating and flirting, people on Tilllate primarily strive for prominence. The communication culture is strongly influenced by representation and self-promotion. Tilllate users employ their profile to market themselves in the best possible way. Ideally, this strategy should lead not only to social recognition but also to VIP status: initially just within the Tilllate community, but later – they hope – on other catwalks and red carpets of show business.

The analysis of the “social picture world” of such a portal leads us directly to the current “popular culture of success”: The modern market society is dominated by markets of opportunities in which a quick success supported by (casino) “luck” appears possible (with the stock exchange as the guiding model). This domination of coincidence finds its cultural continuation in all those places where the chances of good opportunities determine the everyday world of human beings. Media and the culture industry provide arenas for post-modern “attention economies” (Georg Franck) in which primarily young people seek public attention for themselves as a product and unmistakable brand (“The Brand Called You”). Entrepreneurial Ich- AGs (Me Incorporated) develop with personality structures that we could call the social type of the “marketing character,” a term coined by Erich Fromm. Users subject themselves, especially on the Internet, to the trials of being selected (casting). For just a few of them, this can lead to success through the felicitous ways of representing the body



and habitual “typology” (picture advertising) – even if experience has shown that this is usually just for a brief time.

This brings me to the conclusion of my presentation: In the intention of wanting to understand important facets of the “global worlds” of the Internet, it was first necessary to let go of the relevant prejudices. However, recent national and international surveys – as well as the very successful long-term activities by the state media institutions for the promotion of media competence and the protection of minors in the media – have been able to make a decisive contribution to the fact that most young people have now learned to deal with the offers of the Internet in a good and responsible manner. Consequently, the specific problem groups and precarious communications practices such as the undoubtedly disastrous cyberbullying have become the theme of such expert conferences as ours today. If we now take a more precise look at the topic of the Internet and society or the Internet and the change of value orientation, it becomes evident – and this is what I wanted to make very clear – that what was previously called the visualisation process of society has now actually come true: The extent of the picture-relatedness of digitally supported communication, especially for the adolescents, has become possible to a degree that hardly could have been imagined. And the production and distribution of these pictures by the users themselves (keyword: user-generated content!) represent – which is somewhat surprising – the gateway for the market and its corresponding image of people and society: Above all, the maxims from the success culture of the current market society are what count within the scope of the given portal structures: physical attractiveness, glamorous success poses and an economy of public attention that is supported by competition and follows the motto of: “either attract attention or fail to do so!”

Thank you for your attention!

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