

Exploring the everyday life media competence from adolescents with different sociocultural background - theoretical framework and methodical implementation

Introduction

This article gives a short insight into a current research project focusing on the use of new media by German and Turkish adolescents. It takes into account the digital divide and the knowledge gap hypothesis and is based on assumptions from knowledge sociology. Therefore, we conceptualize media competence from a user perspective rooted in and shaped by the social environment of the individual.

Towards an inside view of social differentiated media usage

The approach of the study presented is generally based on two notions. These notions should be taken into account by media education discourse.

The *first* notion refers to the aspect that media and media technology can not be understood as sort of neutral objects. Just from their mere availability no explicit conclusion can be drawn about their actual use and their meaningful integration in everyday life. Media and media technology simply establish certain options which have to be adopted as one's own by the user. As a consequence, discussions concerning the integration of new media in the *lifeworld* (i.e. "Lebenswelt" in the German history of ideas) are not meaningful, if they are based only on a one-sided perspective highlighting the technological possibilities available by new media. Media research has to embrace the constraints of the individual context that represents the framework of media use and the developing of media competence.

These assumptions have been formative in establishing a qualitative domain within media research for about twenty years (Schorb/Theunert 2000). In this tradition the *effects* of media are not as interesting scientifically as the *meaning* of media and media content to cope with everyday life as well as the fact that they act as important symbolic and identity-forming resources for adolescents.

The *second* notion tends to the interrelation between social diversity resp. inequality and the use of new media. On this, corresponding research shows that the spread of new media proceeds rather inhomogeneous (see for the development in the Federal Republic of Germany: TNS/Emnid 2004). The access to new media (particularly the Internet) is affected by the user's socio-demographic characteristics. In order to denote this issue the well known term *Digital Divide* has been enforced.

But, the significance of this kind of macroscopic media research seems obviously to be limited regarding media educational discussions: From isolated data about overall access to new media we do not really know in which differentiated way people use them, how they think about them and for what purposes they integrate them into their everyday life. Recently, researchers like Bonfadelli (2002, p. 81) point out the need for research that focuses on the individual use of new media more on a microscopic level:

„What people really do when linked up to the Internet needs further and much more refined research. But this research has to be based on a user perspective looking at technology as embedded and shaped socially.”

Focusing on the individual level of media use as embedded in a social environment points out an extensive research question: What kind of media use is emerging within which environmental options¹?

What is media competence and how can we investigate it?

Beyond the unequal access to new media we find studies that emphasize the existence of different abilities to use the new media effectively to acquire knowledge. This research-tradition is tied up closely to the so-called knowledge-gap-hypothesis. This dates back to the early 1970s when Tichenor, Donohue & Olien found out that knowledge communicated via the mass media is utilized in a different way by the different parts of the population. The authors conclude that as one result of the different way to attain information a knowledge gap arises:

“As the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire (...) information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tend to increase rather than to decrease” (Tichenor, Donohue & Clarice 1970, in: Bonfadelli 1994, p. 62).

The knowledge-gap-hypothesis is often criticised in various aspects. Particularly with regard to our research project it should be pointed out that the concept of knowledge remains very ambiguous. Well-founded criticism such as the one of Kübler (1999) stresses the fact that knowledge has been split up undifferentiated in *inferior* and *superior*. The author emphasizes that knowledge should be conceptualized as adapted to the actual relevance and associated with the consisting requirements of the lifeworld.

In addition to that, there seems to be a core conflict concerning the *content* of media competence. This is due to the fact that knowledge communicated and acquired via media could be assessed in an entirely different way. To give an example: From a conservative middle-class view knowledge teenagers acquire by exploring the website of their favourite pop star is presumably judged in a pejorative way. On the other hand, this same knowledge is definitely valuable to their peergroup.

Another problem emerges from a narrow media research perspective that constricts media competence to technological proficiency. Even though, it is necessary to handle new media in an appropriate way (e. g. the ability to find content online) media competence should not be reduced to such skills which just could simply be measured by standardized methods.

If media research focuses only on this part of media use, both the individual meaning constituted by the recipient's view and the social involvement of the media use (i.e. the relevance and the embedding in everyday life activities) is disregarded. Focusing on this the task of media research should be to understand media use from the self-perspective by the recipient.

In principle, this conflict reveals an important question every media educator is faced with: What do we want and what do we mean when we demand a so-called media

¹ A similar question has been raised within the sociology of technology since the 1980s: E.g. Bertram (1987) points to the lack of studies that explore how the social constitution of technology comes into existence and due to which value system and motivation people use technological potentialities and ignore them respectively.

competence of adolescents, i.e.: Why do they should engage in new media? Which content and which quality media competence should have? While there is agreement about the importance of using media and technology, “there is little consensus about precisely what knowledge and abilities are necessary for children to be ‘information technology literate’” (Ba/Tally/Tsikalas 2002, p. 2).²

Taking this into account, the specific link of media education to general education theory should be regarded. This clearly points out, in how far modern pedagogical thinking is deeply rooted in the intellectual history of the Enlightenment. This provides a framework for a demanding pedagogical discourse until today. For example, already in 1826 the German educational philosopher Schleiermacher brought up the crucial question: “What does the senior generation actually want with the younger one?” Thus, whenever pedagogy claims what adolescents should know and be able to do concerning new media, requirements have always to be legitimized by the means on adequate criteria.

This excursus should underline that any empirical research that deals with media competence has to take certain normative snares into account. To return to the presented research project following implications can be summarized: The investigation of media use and media competence has to take into consideration the user perspective as well as environmental conditions affecting the usage of new media.

Furthermore, the presented assumptions are looked at from a perspective related to sociology of knowledge. In this tradition, which has its roots in Schütz (1974) and is carried on by Berger/Luckmann (2003), knowledge is no longer conceived as unquestioned and objectively. It is rather seen radically subjectified and associated with its significance for the individual lifestyle. It could be assumed that the knowledge sociology is a capable paradigm for the research questions of the presented study because it is able to identify the informal and habitual practices concerning new media. This means that recipients actively select information and topics provided by any kind of media and individually integrate them into a meaningful context. In this process a coherence is created between personal existence and social and cultural reality.

Implementation for the research practice

Referring to the concept of media competence it is important not only to take it as an educational goal. Rather, media research should investigate media competence to discover its empirical diversity in everyday life of various groups of people. This entails to conceptualize

² Efforts in proposing overall rationales for engaging in the new media can be found, e. g. from the American National Research Council’s report (1999). Introducing the term *fluency* instead of using *literacy* or *competence*, the report articulates what everyone should need to know and understand about information technology, thus, empowering all citizens to participate in the information age:

“In summary, FIT individuals, those who know a starter set of information technology skills, who understand the basic concepts on which information technology is founded, and who have engaged in the higher-level thinking embodied in the intellectual capabilities, should use information technology confidently, should come to work ready to learn new business systems quickly and use them effectively, should be able to apply information technology to personally relevant problems, and should be able to adapt to the inevitable change as information technology evolves over their lifetime” (Committee on Information Technology Literacy 1999, p. 5).

media competence in the manner of cultural studies tradition (Hepp 2004) instead of focusing on its functional and pragmatic aspects primarily – like in common educational research (i.e. *literacy*).

Up to today, studies regarding the detailed use of new media by adolescents are rare. Past studies only focus on surface of the media usage, particularly the frequency and variety of media use (Feierabend/Klingler 2002). If studies implicate the user's perspective and try to explore the media use in a more hermeneutic (i.e. interpretative) way, they are concerned with traditional media (e.g. television) and exclude new media (Barthelmes/Sander 2001). Last but not least, the increasing sociocultural diversity of society seems not yet to be in place within media research. Existing Studies predominantly work on homogeneous samples. There still remain open questions regarding the use of new media by adolescents with a migration background (Eggert/Theunert 2002).

Thus, with the presented empirical research project Blömeke and Hacke (2005) try to fill this gap. The main objective is to achieve a broad insight into media competence of Turkish and German adolescents regarding the use of new media offline (i.e. PC) and online (i.e. Internet), taking into account their wishes, needs and abilities as embedded in everyday situations. Considering sociocultural diversity these two groups participated similarly (i.e. *selective sampling*). Media competence – as a theoretical construct – was used in a heuristic way to identify certain subject areas for further investigation. Based on a theoretical model of media competence conceptualized by Groeben (2002) the aim of the study is to investigate the function and the signification of their use of new media in the context of their everyday life practices. Inter alia the study tries to find out

- how do adolescents use new media in their everyday life (i.e. for what purpose, such as entertainment, learning, communication etc.),
- how do they make themselves familiar with new media?
- what do they know about new media,
- what kind of problems occur while using new media and how are they solved (“troubleshooting”),
- how do adolescents evaluate new media regarding their capabilities and perils,
- what significance new media place in comparison to other traditional media,
- how the use of new media is rooted in and shaped by processes of communication and interaction in the social environment (mainly family and peer group).

To answer these questions compendium guided interviews are conducted. The compendium ensures that certain topical dimensions derived from the theoretical construct of media competence are considered (i.e. reception patterns, knowledge, evaluation, emotionality, the combination of new and other media, productivity and communicational environment). Trying to obtain a naturalistic talking atmosphere, the interviews were conducted in a conversation-like style to facilitate free narration. Thus, this approach combines theoretical founded topic-spheres with the potentialities of ingenious descriptions by the respondents.

In general, analysing the data shall provide detailed information about different kinds of way to deal with new media. Thus, findings may provide an informative basis toward fostering media competence which allows a meaningful integration of new media in everyday life beyond mere qualification. Studies like this should contribute to future considerations about media education facing the increasing sociocultural diversity of society.

If media education is responsible for helping adolescents prosper in the information age, it should be open-minded about the different ways adolescents deal with new media.

Therefore, the study's overall concern is to refine theoretical approaches and likewise help to ascertain the principles in everyday work of media education.

References

Ba, Harouna / Tally, Bill / Tsikalas, Kallen (2002): Investigating Children's Emerging Digital Literacies. In: The Journal of Technology, Learning, and Assessment (JTLA) 1 (2002) 4. Internet: <http://www.bc.edu/research/intasc/jtla/journal/v1n4.shtml> (Stand: August 2003)

Barthelmes, Jürgen / Sander, Ekkehard (2001): Erst die Freunde, dann die Medien. Medien als Begleiter in Pubertät und Adoleszenz (Medienerfahrungen von Jugendlichen, Bd. 2). München: DJI Verlag

Berger, Peter L. / Luckmann, Thomas (2003): Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer

Bertram, Hans (1987): Technik und sozialer Wandel. In: Lutz, Burkhard (Hrsg.): Technik und sozialer Wandel. Verhandlungen des 23. Deutschen Soziologentages in Hamburg 1986. Frankfurt: Campus, S. 233-236

Blömeke, Sigrid / Hacke, Sebastian (2005): Medienkompetenz im Alltag – Überlegungen zu Aneignung, Nutzung und Bewertung neuer Medien von Jugendlichen unterschiedlicher sozialer und ethnischer Herkunft. In: Kleber, Hubert (Hrsg.): Perspektiven der Medienpädagogik in Wissenschaft und Bildungspraxis. München: KoPäd, S: 97-110

Bonfadelli, Heinz (1994): Die Wissensluft-Perspektive. Massenmedien und gesellschaftliche Information.. Konstanz: UVK-Ölschläger

Bonfadelli, Heinz (2002): The Internet and Knowledge Gaps. A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation. In: European Journal of Communication 17 (2002), 1, S. 65-85

Committee on Information Technology Literacy (1999): Being Fluent with Information Technology. National Research Council Report. Washington: National Academy Press

Eggert, Susanne/Theunert, Helga (2002): Medien im Alltag von Heranwachsenden mit Migrationshintergrund – Vorwiegend offene Fragen. In: Medien und Erziehung, 46. Jg., Nr. 5, 10/2002, S. 289-300

Feierabend, Sabine / Klingler, Walter (2002): JIM-Studie 2002. Jugend, Information, (Multi) Media. Basisuntersuchungen zum Medienumgang 12- bis 19-Jähriger. Baden-Baden: Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest

Groeben, Norbert (2002b): Dimensionen der Medienkompetenz: Deskriptive und normative Aspekte. In: Ders. / Hurrelmann, Bettina (Hrsg.): Medienkompetenz. Voraussetzungen, Dimensionen, Funktionen. Weinheim; München: Juventa, S. 160-197

Hepp, Andreas (2001): Cultural Studies und Medienanalyse. Eine Einführung. 2. Aufl., Wiesbaden: VS Verlag

Kübler, H.-D. (1999). Wie zerklüftet ist Wissen? Aporien und Desiderate der Wissens(kluft)debatte. Medien praktisch 23 (1999) 3, S. 10-17

Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst: Die Vorlesungen aus dem Jahr 1826. In: Lichtenstein, E. (Hrsg.): Schleiermacher: Ausgewählte pädagogische Schriften. Paderborn, 1964, S. 36-243

Schorb, Bernd / Theunert, Helga (2000): Kontextuelles Verstehen in der Medienaneignung. In: Paus-Haase, Ingrid / Schorb, Bernd (Hrsg.): Qualitative Kinder- und Jugend-Medienforschung. Theorie und Methoden. Ein Arbeitsbuch. München: KoPäd, S. 33-57

Schütz, Alfred (1974): Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt. Eine Einführung in die verstehende Soziologie. 1. Aufl., Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp

TNS Emnid/Initiative D21 (2004): (N)onliner Atlas 2004. Eine Topographie des digitalen Grabens durch Deutschland. Internet: http://www.nonliner-atlas.de/pdf/NONLINER-Atlas2004_TNS_Emid_InitiativeD21.pdf [Zugriff: 01.06.2005]

About the authors

Sebastian Hacke, General Educationalist, study of Educational Sciences at the University of Hannover, Germany. Since 2003 academic staff at the chair of General Education and Instructional Research at the Humboldt-University, Berlin. Priority research: Media education under the terms of socio-cultural diversity.

Sigrid Blömeke, Full Professor of General Education and Instructional Research at the Humboldt University, Berlin. Research areas: Teacher preparation and professional development in teaching, Teacher knowledge and expertise, Teaching and learning with ICT, ICT and equity.

Contact address

Humboldt-University, Berlin
Philosophische Fakultät IV
Institut für Erziehungswissenschaften
Abt. Systematische Didaktik und Unterrichtsforschung
Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: 030/2093-1911
Fax: 030/2093-1828
Email: Sebastian.hacke@staff.hu-berlin.de