

USING ICT AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE

Persistent and recombinant practices in using weblogs

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Abstract. The connection between socio-cultural change and use of the new media is frequently being conceptualized as a dichotomy of unleashing ["deboundarisation"] and persistence. Based on a discussion of the use of the new media in everyday life by an example of weblogs, the paper suggests a contrasting view. From this perspective, a connection between persistence and recombination of social structuring and social practices can be seen as a model for social change. This model is based on the hypothesis that the use of new media is based on given social structures and social practices. With respect to tendencies like individualization and globalization, the social potential of new media like Weblogs offers distinct forms of media use within different social practices, including the strengthening of the latter as well as doing without them.

The starting points of the following reflections are the connections between individual, day-to-day use of 'new media' and the more general socio-cultural process of change. The question how individual use of media supports socio-cultural change or interacts with it points to a more general connection between social change and media development. Rather than focusing on this more general change, this paper aims to outline a theoretical model to describe development and change of socio-cultural patterns of communication and action in the context of web-based communication and from the perspective of users.¹

¹ In Gerndt's (1999: 222) terms, the following considerations are engaging with cultural forms of expression mainly on that level of reality where, according to Gerndt's categories, "culture can be understood as an analytical component of a wider, complex

The process of socio-cultural change is not seen as a consequence of the individual processes of using and appropriating new media. Rather, it is being conceptualised as a complex arrangement of conditions, where use of media and media development can have the function of amplifier or catalyst as well as precondition. The weblog media format will be used as an example.

1. Culture of Change and Culture as process

In recent years, a perspective of looking at culture has emerged which focuses less on the essence of culture and more on its characteristics as a process: "The static thinking, which has postulated universal similarities based on grammars, rules of thinking and acting, or clearly defined types, has increasingly given way to a process oriented thinking which looks at changes of cultural meanings in social interactions" (Steiner, 2001: 28).

With the emergence of this approach, a static, normative concept of culture is largely being abandoned in favor of a concept where culture is understood as a set of heterogeneous, processual, contradictory and essentially inconsistent phenomena. In this understanding, culture is not a list of norms or values, but the result of practices. Against this background, the notion of cultural change appears almost tautological.

Culture is now, by definition, incessantly and continuously changing. Therefore, there is no 'one single change', but different processes of change that are happening in a non-synchronised manner (Boehnke et al., 2001: 21). If change has become a quasi inherent part of the definition of culture, then culture itself is an incessant process. Insofar, the discussion is sometimes not only about a change of culture, but about permanent change, i.e. about a "culture of change" which characterises everyday life in postmodern times (ibd.).²

phenomenon". These „complexes of artefacts" (i.e. Gegenstandskomplexe) are pointing to more abstract cultural complexes, for instance areas of live (culture, economy, politics etc.). Within those, the diverse cultural forms of expression are in turn determining interdependencies, influences and structural change.

² We are using the concept of socio-cultural change in the sense of a change which includes both social and cultural phenomena. The boundaries between both are difficult to define. Using the concept of socio-cultural change does not imply the existence of a third form of change, i.e. socio-cultural change in addition to social and cultural change. It is meant to express that a satisfactory analysis of social change can only be achieved by including the entire ensemble of social and cultural changes.

2. Socio-cultural change and technical innovations

Looking at individual use and appropriation of new media and the socio-cultural phenomenon of change connected to it, numerous considerations within the media as well as academia are mainly concerned with (possible) changes of interaction and communication behavior: “A change in communication is expected from new media. This change is marked by a farewell to established concepts about direct as well as mediated human communication that have traditionally been taken for granted” (Paschen et al., 2002: 43). Similar to scripture and letter-press, new (digital) media are accredited with considerable potential regarding the change of conditions and practices of sociability. Socio-cultural implications are in this context being discussed in categories of substitution and ‘deboundarisation’. Usually, three tendencies are being enounced:

(1) It is argued that web based communication allows for (more) intensive forms of interactivity within communicative social relationships; and that this is accompanied by considerably enlarged potential for reciprocity and active participation and involvement in various social contexts. Additionally, new forms of human-machine communication are stated, which make higher demands towards what is usually called media competency. Especially the ability to interpret and contextualize machine-generated symbols (signs), it is argued, should be mentioned (see below).

2) At the same time, virtualisation, mediatisation or the technologisation of communication as well as the disembodiment of social actions connected to it are often seen as implying the dissolution of commitment in communications. It is said that the absence of physicality requires new forms of trust building (for example in business transactions) and new shared rules of conduct. Also, the skills required for making decisions or choice in real time are different from those required in direct communication under face-to-face conditions.

(3) Furthermore, it is argued that web-based communication leads to a considerable acceleration and multiplication of options and choices for communication and information. Especially the availability of knowledge based on new forms and techniques for storage is accelerating to such a degree that a change in the forms of acquiring and organising knowledge, but also of data protection, becomes necessary.

These processes of cultural ‘deboundarisation’ of social networking are the core focus of the discourses on socio-cultural phenomena of change and individual use of ICT. Face-to-face interactions and web-based communication are frequently being constructed as two opposing poles, which create both closeness and distance. Another current view claims that in this process of

'deboundarisation', the networked individual is growing beyond the boundaries of local communities and national societies, and participates in transnational cultural exchange (From here, a connection can be made to macro-structural processes of change such as individualisation or globalisation. Web-based communication is at the same time the practice and the tool for such processes). The discourse on cultural 'deboundarisation' of social networking is frequently spelled out either as a scenario of cultural pessimism or as its mirror-image, technological euphoria. Both scenarios imply, quasi in a kind of media determinism, that media technology per se entails or generates social action or acting (Schönberger, 2000b). In this view, the technical conditions of media are "not only the horizon against which we perceive social change, they are the very cause of social change. Just like economic determinism, this position causally deduces social transformation from one single trans-social entity" (Marchart, 2004: 38).

Yet, how can the relationship between technological possibilities and individual as well as collective use of new media be operationalised, without conceptualising it either in a deterministic or an arbitrary (in the sense of as-well-as) way?

Bausinger (2001: 2) has pointed out that media are not merely technological installations to be switched on and off, but that they are rather "integrated in the course of daily life, in everyday processes and in the entire cultural situation". With regard to web-based communication, internet and new media, it is equally useful to understand use as appropriation, as an active dealing with situations and things. This implies that agents are not automatically stripped of any alternatives when reacting to the demands and possibilities of technology. It is better to define the use of technology as "active appropriation" (Boehnke et al., 2001). From this research perspective, socio-cultural change is constituted by the relationship between culture and society as expressed in the respective human practices. Such a view on use and users of web-based communication already implies a perspective that takes social context as its central point of reference.

This research perspective corresponds with a research programme which is currently being developed in Germany within the academic disciplines succeeding the subject of *Volkskunde* (*European Ethnology*, *Cultural Anthropology* and *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft*) under the label "Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung" (Hengartner, 2004): "Doing 'Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung' means to depart from two main perspectives: On one hand, to depart from the technological objects and how human beings actually handle so-called technological artefacts. On the other hand, 'Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung' always investigates how technology is situated in everyday life ('Sitz der Technik im Leben'). This approach aims at analysing the various influences technology exerts on the

way we shape our lives. These can be open or hidden and they can be perceived consciously or unconsciously.”³

On this basis, it makes sense to take a closer look at the social potential and the materiality of various services and media formats for net-communication provided by the internet.

The internet allows for patterns of communication and action which were not feasible in direct face-to-face communication or hitherto possible technical means of interpersonal communication. Using weblogs as an example, the following discusses to what extent the technical features of weblogs can be seen as having social enabling potential.

3. Weblogs as tools for self-representation publishing and networking

A weblog (“blog”) represents a comparatively new media format, consisting of short comments, photos and hyperlinks. Weblog is a neologism, made up from “web” and “logbook”. Mostly the short version “blog” is being used. A weblog is a frequently updated website, where the contributions appear in chronological order. The most recent contributions appear on top (Bausch/Haughey/Hourihan, 2002: 7). A weblog can be seen as a new type of content management as well as of web publishing (Przepiorka, 2003: 1). Weblogs allow for simplified publishing of a wide variety of information.

The emerging of weblogs sparked considerable interest within the media. For the first time since the end of the internet euphoria, a media revolution is being talked about (Gurak et al 2004; Möller 2005). But also some observers within academia are seeing Weblogs as „communicative avantgarde of social software“ (Burg 2004b: 13). Sometimes, they are even regarded as pacemakers for the further development of the World Wide Web (WWW) altogether (Matheson 2004: 448).

The first weblogs appeared in the mid-nineties. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon language area, weblogs have developed into a mass phenomenon with several millions of bloggers. By now, more than seven million weblogs are

³ Website of the research college ‘Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung’ at the Institut für Volkskunde of the University of Hamburg. Available at <<http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/technik-kultur/index.html>> [accessed 01.04. 2006]. On the relationship between *Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung* and *Volkskunde*: “The anthropological and ethnographic approach used within the ‘Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung’ (KT) aims at probing the diverse and multiple dimensions of experience with regard to technology. KT departs from the German University Subject ‘Volkskunde’ defined as research looking into our every day lives and into everyday culture from a contemporary but also historical perspective” (ibd.).

being estimated in the US alone (Perschke/Lübcke 2005: 17)⁴. In July 2005, dedicated weblog indexes are counting 13 million worldwide. In Europe, France is deemed as leading (Jüch/Stobbe 2005: 3). While between 50.000 (Franz 2005: 2) and 200.000-300.000 weblogs are being mentioned for Germany in 2005, Mediametrie counted 2,2 million weblog owners for France.⁵

Their popularity increased in the beginning of the new century, when they became available as an easy-to-use and free tool. Setting up weblogs doesn't happen anymore through specific web design programs requiring more or less extensive knowledge of the text formatting language HTML: text editing and image publishing can be done directly in the browser. Technically, this crucial simplification was the precondition for the remarkably fast spreading of weblogs.

“The success of weblogs relies to a considerable degree on the fact that a few years ago, various software developers have invented applications which are simplifying the process of setting up and maintaining such weblogs to such an extent that everybody is now able to generate such a site in a few minutes, without having to install software and needing only little computer skills. Many providers have made their system available for free (for instance twoday.net, blogger.com, manilasites.com – effectively as free content management systems for everyone” (Wrede, 2001).

The World Wide Web implied the promise to everyone to be able to publish. But it is only since weblogs made their appearance that the preconditions for this promise have improved, because now, all that is needed is to enter the desired text.⁶

Due to their technical potential for social networking, weblogs appear as an ideal tool for very different groups, organisations and communities to meet their needs regarding communication and cooperation. In this context, it is pointed out that the software used for weblogs is characterised by a strong orientation towards dialogue (see for expl. Efimova/de Moor 2005: „distributed conversations“) or a discursive constitution (Wijnia 2004; Ó Baoill 2004).

In a weblog, the author (the blogger) describes his/her forays through the internet as a chronicle of his/her web activities. S/he writes an entry about the respective sites and creates a link to them. Besides the linking, commenting on recent events as well as the selective representation of the blogger's own

⁴ According to Blood's (2003, 13) guess, in 2003, 500.000 weblogs were active.

⁵ Mediametrie 2005, La blogosphère en ebullition. Communiqué de Presse. 15.12. 2005 <<http://www.loiclemeur.com/france/files/mediametrieblogs.pdf>>. [01.04. 2006]

⁶ „In some ways, blogs are representing the web as it was originally intended: A mass media, controlled by the masses, where those are being heard who have something to say and who have the guts to say it.“ Meet Joe Blog. TIME-Magazine, 13.6. 2004. Qt. in Möller (2005: 115).

thoughts and ideas are typical. The entirety of all weblogs is called the 'blogosphere'. Weblogs are mainly text-based; however, by now there are also experiments with audio-, image- and video-files. Weblogs are also being compared to news-sites or newsletters.

The current interest in weblogs triggers a wide range of descriptions and meta discourses about this „new cultural form ... in the social space of the internet“ (Burg 2004a: 11). This process of canonisation is not yet completed. Therefore, for the time being it is problematic to undertake a generally accepted definition. As the case may be, considering the plurality of models, it is under consideration whether or not it makes sense to define the weblog in itself.

There are countless varieties of weblogs with regard to the number of readers, quality and intentions, and regarding forms and contents. Collaborative weblogs, online diaries and journals, regional weblogs, or those dedicated to an event, expert weblogs, news digests providing media filters and service weblogs with commercial intentions can be distinguished (Herring et al., 2005). In fact, weblogs "in all their variety" can reasonably be placed "somewhere between private homepage and professional news-agency" (Wrede, 2001). On the level of "genre" or media format, other observers (Praschl, 2001) have identified an affinity to the rather private online diaries (Schmidt, Schönberger and Stegbauer 2005) and to personal homepages. Mostly, weblogs are being maintained by individuals, and a personal, commenting and informal style is characteristic (Schmidt, 2006). Additionally, most weblogs include a function to add comments, which allows readers to discuss every single entry. The owner of a weblog is able to determine the level of participation. Numerous entries are quoting entries in other weblogs, or relate to them. Weblogs are heavily networked with each other. The programs available for this purpose simplify the linking to other weblogs as well as the integration of text paragraphs to which comments are referring. This process is especially supported, when a weblog offers a list of its entries (news) including a short summary in the form of a so-called RSS-feed.⁷

A further, powerful tool for networking is the track back, which informs a weblog that another weblog has referred to it.⁸ Extensive use of links and mutual references in weblogs with similar topics or made by a circle of friends

⁷ RSS is an abbreviation for „Rich Site Summary“, „RDF Site Summary“ or „Really Simple Syndication“. RSS-Feeds are files using the XML-standard. XML (Extensible Markup Language) is a standard to define markup languages. Markup Languages (ML) are used to describe informations, processes or steps needed to represent content in digital spaces. For details see the entry in Wikipedia for „RSS“ available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_%28file_format%29>. [01.04. 2006]

⁸ For details see the entry in Wikipedia for „Trackback“ available from <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trackback>>. [01.04. 2006]

allows users to track the conversations amongst bloggers. The thereby emerging circuit has also been called „back-channel-behaviour“(Globalvillage 2004).

4. Social enabling potential of weblogs

The example of weblogs clearly shows the process of socio-cultural change with regard to patterns of communication and action between persistence and recombination. Taking weblogs as a starting point, the following will outline a theoretical approach to describe socio-cultural change, which is able to account for the dynamical interplay between media technology, the actions of the subject and other relevant factors that are structuring its actions. This perspective allows to productively resolve the unproductive dichotomy of the rhetoric of change, which either emphasises tendencies of persistence or heralds the disintegration of existing social structures and practices within web-based communication. I would like to propose to use the image of the "long arm of real life"⁹. This image refers to the persistence of social structuring and existing social practices as well as to processes of innovative intensification and recombination of these social practices within web-based communication and interaction. The image, or model, takes into consideration elements of persistence besides tendencies of change. Recombination by means of web-based communication, however, relies on existing social structures and antecedent social practices. It is this ambivalence from which the social potential of weblogs for inclusion and exclusion arises. The following discusses the potential of the media format 'weblog' for social inclusion with reference to the enlargement of individual room for manoeuvre (4.1) as well as the connected processes of disintermediation (4.2) of a public media sphere.

4.1 ENLARGEMENT OF INDIVIDUAL ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE

What is special about weblogs as a media format in comparison with non-digital media, but also with some already "dated" internet services, is that it intensifies the options of disperse users to participate in a public media sphere. Weblogs are potentially increasing the room for manoeuvre of individual users within the mediascape. Furthermore, weblogs are seen as a version of „social software“ (Burg, 2004b), which technically supports the social networking via the internet. They are in fact being used precisely for that purpose.

Based on comparatively low cost, easy-to-use features via web-browser (compared to maintaining personal homepages), the automated generating of

⁹ A first outline can be found in Schönberger (2000a).

entries through preferences integrated in the weblog software, and the networking options via RSS and track back (Winer, 2001), weblog maintainers are (potentially) more 'visible' than other users. They can react and act faster. According to the dominant media dispositive (Hickethier, 2001: 20), bloggers are able and allowed to argue more subjectively and emotionally. The media dispositive regulates structures of perception, contexts, forms of mediation, appropriation and usage of web communication and the resulting dominant norms of style. Significantly, due to the comparatively easy-to-use technology, most Weblogs mainly focus on entertainment and personal self-representation.¹⁰ More generally: While using weblogs, hitherto passive recipients are developing into creative and active media users.

However, within current international research on weblogs, a remarkable imbalance needs to be noted: Although the overwhelming majority of weblogs is presently neither run by journalists, political activists, companies, PR-agencies nor by academics, scientific interest focusses precisely on those weblogs whose contents, styles of use or organisation of content production cannot be regarded as "practices of blogging" appropriated by large numbers of people (Schmidt, Schönberger and Stegbauer 2005: 4 f.; Schmidt 2006).¹¹

„Excluding personal journals – defining them as less important or ‚not weblogs‘ – not only minimizes women’s and teens’ contributions to the evolution of blogging, but overlooks broader human motivations underlying the weblog phenomenon“ (Herring et.al., 2004).¹²

From the perspective of ‚Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung‘, two intersecting discourses can be identified in conjunction with the assumption of banality and vulgarisation as well as the stated academic disregard of weblogs:

On the one hand, it might be instructive to recall the reactions in the 19th century, when the „educators of the nation" called for a "fight against ‚reading mania‘ and ‚reading addiction‘“ (Maase 2003: 229).¹³ The educated elites during the 19th century (rightly) considered their hitherto existing privilege in using the cultural technique of reading under threat. Similarly, today’s educated

¹⁰ Cf. a. Cywinska-Milonas, (2003: 149f.), who states that for instance polish weblogs resemble public diaries or journals rather than tools for publication. 62 % of weblog users are girls (15-17 years old) and young women.

¹¹ Reichmayr’s (2005) study as well as the linguistically oriented contributions in Schlobinski und Siever’s anthology (2005) are exceptions for the German speaking regions.

¹² Cf. a. Möller (2005: 126), who looks in a rather journalistic manner at the users of the weblog provider „LiveJournal“: „Naturally, most entries are concerned with personal affairs of all kinds. To a certain degree, such blogs are revealing the banality of the everyday, which traditional mass media are cloaking with a merciful veil“.

¹³ Translation by the author.

elites are responding with aggression to the threatening devaluation of their privilege to produce and publish texts or content.

Disregard for diary-type personal online journals can be found in various cultural contexts, which points to the social dimension of the debate: In 2003, bloggers "in persian weblogestan" used similar arguments in a "vulgarity debate". Similarly to debates in the US or in German speaking countries, this debate touches the core of the power relations between laypersons and traditional internet mediators. Doostdar (2004: 651) analyzes „blogging as an emergent speech genre“. He identifies “the structural features and social interactions that make this genre look ‘vulgar’” and also examines “the controversy as a confrontation between bloggers with unequal access to cultural capital and a struggle over ‘intellectualist’ hegemony.”

The persistence of so-called A-List-Bloggers or „Quality blogs“ should be interpreted against this backdrop, when they insist that weblogs cannot be compared with the traditional cultural pattern of the diary. The appropriation of weblogs by large numbers of users reveals not so much an alleged „banality of the everyday“ (Möller 2005: 126), but rather highlights the enabling potential of digital media for an independent, active and creative unfolding of popular culture (Tarkowski 2005). In this context, the issue is not to argue, as Lawrence Lessig (2001) does, that the pre-digital era was something like the „dark ages“ of popular culture, and that the real heyday of popular culture (both in terms of production and distribution) is imminent in the digital era, or to draw on weblogs as proof for an alleged „rebirth of the author“ (Rombes 2005).¹⁴

On the other hand, the discourse on banalisation and vulgarisation is closely connected to the debate on the future of journalism, which in turn points to more general fears of disintermediation on the part of traditional media and opinion gatekeepers.

4.2 PROCESSES OF DISINTERMEDIATION

In connection with the simplification of publication described above, but also regarding the accelerated access to information sources for individual producers and the associated bypassing of intermediators, the question of disintermediation of traditional providers of media content is being discussed: „The majority of communication products have traditionally been distributed by gatekeepers, i.e. users were presented with a selection. The field of new digital media is all about a shift towards user driven communication products or, more generally, a shift from a push economy to a pull economy“ (Burg, 2004a). In

¹⁴ “Rather than the utopian dream of collective, collaborative authorship that many theorists first saw in hypertext and blogs, we see instead the proliferation of auteurs vying for public space in the public sphere” (Rombes, 2005). Cf. a. Burg (2004a: 5).

fact, it can be stated that weblogs, like no other internet service before, are allowing individuals as well as collectives to position themselves as political observers, publicists or actors in a potentially global public sphere. Individual or dissenting perspectives can now publicly emerge in a way which didn't hitherto exist due to lack of visibility. Even though it is apparent that so far, weblogs are more likely to be used for personal positioning purposes than for organised political exchange of opinion, they are also being used in a wide variety of political contexts in many different ways. In these cases, weblogs are functioning as diaries, journals, but also as news sources, for example about events in places of crisis.

The so called "warblogs" (Wall, 2005) are often referred to as an example for this process. These have been maintained by professional journalists as well as private users during the 2003 Gulf War (Neuberger 2003b). The "South-East Asia Earthquake and Tsunami-Blog" at the turn of the year 2004/2005 is seen as a further example for the role of weblogs in situations of crisis and catastrophe, and for their "unbeatable power of information". This blog developed rapidly into a point of contact for offers for help and news about victims of the tsunami. Moreover, numerous additional blogs delivered information from the sites of the disaster. They ensured that „information circulates rapidly and coordination can be made more efficient“ (Rötzer 2004).¹⁵ Traditional providers of media content like the ‚Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung‘ (3.1. 2005) stated: „The internet diaries of bloggers are the best sources in this catastrophe“. During the hurricane catastrophe „Katrina“ in New Orleans, „weblogs turned out to be an indispensable medium“. At the time of terror attacks, military invasions and natural disasters, „weblogs with their personal descriptions and self-made photographs and videos establish themselves“ (Prigge 2005) from this perspective „as competitors to traditional sources of information that should be taken seriously“ (ebd.).¹⁶ However, weblogs are not only functioning as sources of information. They also proved to be crucial tools when looking for missing people. This could also be observed after the terror attack in London in July 2005, when informations and signs of life were first distributed via weblogs (and emails).

A further example for changes in reporting from areas of crisis are the „soldierblogs“ in the US. „Army Times“ („Blogs of War“) estimates more than a hundred soldierblogs, which are, according to Defence Week reporter Nathan Hodge, representing the „characteristic cultural phenomenon of the Iraq war“ (quoted after Pany, 2005)¹⁷: „Soldiers are trying to make sure their version of the truth from Iraq gets out. Even though for many, that truth doesn't include revealing their identities, their online diaries are becoming an increasingly

¹⁵ Translation by the author.

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popular way for anyone with an Internet connection to “listen in” on the war zone. Blogs provide a vehicle for soldiers to speak their minds and tell their personal stories. But the information medium also poses new dangers that the Army is still trying to come to terms with.”¹⁸ Weblogs obviously take over the function of the former army postal service letters of the soldiers.

This type of crisis or war reporting is also attractive for traditional providers of media content, because it conveys a promise of authenticity, especially under conditions of propaganda and disinformation, or when traditional information structures of the mass media are breaking down.

Burg (ibid.) emphasises the reinstating of the figure of the author (as opposed to the discourse in media theory about the death of the author) as an instance of authenticity and quality. He points out that the validation of information and opinions is taking place on a different level. Other than in traditional media, quality control is being shifted into the public sphere: „The information they are publishing is under the reservation that it yet needs to be checked by the users first” (Neuberger, 2003a: 10; cf. a. Neuberger, 2003b).

5. Persistent patterns of action and communication

Despite all the discussions in the blogosphere (and sometimes in academia) about “contamination through mass-use” and banalisation of contents, the risk of dumbing down, the violation of copyrights or economic interests through weblogs (Burg, 2004a; Shirky, 2004), it is hardly surprising that mainly those technology-euphoric fantasies on the social potential of the internet which have been pivotal at the beginning of the internet hype are tying up to the debate on this media format, considering that the debate is focussed once again on interaction and networking (Burg, 2004a). As a matter of fact, in this sense weblogs can be regarded as the realisation of promises made in the early days of the internet – or, in fact, already in Bertolt Brecht’s radio theory (1990). It seems that by means of web-based communication, everybody can be a sender. Perschke and Lübcke (2005) are regarding weblogs as a true mass medium, while applying a new meaning to the term: The masses are taking up the medium weblog. In this process, vast amounts of observable practices of usage are emerging.

However, it should be noted that there is a tendency of persistence of social structures and existing social practices especially when weblogs are concerned. Taking this into consideration, the use of weblogs does not automatically happen according to technological defaults (and neither according to the hegemonic discourses or narratives about weblogs). Rather, their use is

¹⁸ Blogs of the War. *Army Times*, 4.3. 2005. Available from <http://www.armytimes.com/story.php?f=1-292925-700605.php>. [01.04.2006]

accompanied by the adoption, reproduction and duplication of existing behaviour and structures.

5.1. LIMITED DEBOUNDARISATION OF INDIVIDUAL ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE¹⁹

In spite of the simplification of the technologies for publishing and participating in the internet public sphere, it should be noted, for instance, that the use of these possibilities does not come without preconditions. Assembling their own, personal 'Readers Digest' is the most important creative activity of bloggers. This includes checking, gathering and arranging of information and links: "One of the main achievements is the integration in existing concepts of knowledge and experience. An elementary building block on the way towards this is filtering information and data" (Burg, 2004a).²⁰ In this regard, Dünne's (2004) hypothesis seems plausible: He assigns a potential (future) function to web-applications with commenting functions: to contribute to the ability to cope linguistically with an overwhelming variety of discourse or, to put it differently, to the establishment of a cultural memory altogether.

More generally, this opens up a space for rehearsing cultural techniques which in future will be even more necessary. The main skills that are needed to realize the social potential of this media format are not only basic cultural techniques such as reading and writing, but also their extension through abilities such as collecting, filtering, sorting and structuring.

These skills can by no means be taken for granted; rather, they imply a wealth of preconditions and are based on respective linguistic and intellectual skills, which in turn are closely related to access to education as well as issues of habitus, milieu, or class. Likewise, in order to use the extension of the individual room for manoeuvre²¹ to its full potential, a subjectivity is needed that includes a sense of mission and a desire for self-presentation.²² The tendency towards persistence is based less on economic constraints or the increasing complexity of software technologies, but on linguistic skills as well as individual (subjective) personal skills which Bourdieu (1982) has subsumed under the concept of „cultural capital“. These are precisely the qualifications at stake in the debate whether blogging can be regarded as journalism. The

¹⁹ i.e. options of acting.

²⁰ Burg (2003a) and other authors like Sommergut (2003) regard the so-called news aggregators as a new type of „content generation“. News aggregators are making the contents of other sites available and enable them to be further processed. They also point out an „enormous potential for mutual connectivity on the basis of micro content.

²¹ "Room for manoeuvre is an attempt to grasp the German language concept of "Handlungsspielräume", i.e. the space or playing field that contains people's choices to act."

²² Cf. footnote no. 2.

attempts of elite bloggers to shed the label of diary writers, as well as the efforts of traditional media in refusing bloggers the quality attribute of journalism show in which way these discussions are also negotiating the evaluation of cultural capital.

5.2. PROCESSES OF RE-INTERMEDIATION

The increase in the number of weblogs points to their success, and this success inevitably causes an information 'white noise' in the mediascape (Stegbauer, 2001: 172ff.), which implies a tendency towards a social closure, quasi a protection mechanism to conserve the „conditions of possibilities of communication“ (Stegbauer/Rausch, 1999). This reveals a crux inherent in the basic-democratic sender-multiplier utopias. If everyone is sending, who will then be left to listen or watch? Therefore, with regard to weblogs, we can anticipate a development already familiar from the World Wide Web, where traditional media providers have benefited from certain brand transfer effects (Eimeren et al., 2002: 348 and 358); even now, such media providers have introduced weblogs by well-known journalists as an additional service on their sites (ZDF, ORF, ZEIT, Wirtschaftswoche, Ostseezeitung, Kurier).

Such re-intermediation is becoming apparent when, as can be seen already now, it is once again mainly those content providers who can count on attention outside the internet who dominate the current developments. It appears that the power of traditional media brands or the symbolic reach of large organizations or institutions remains largely, if not completely, untouched. Insofar, juxtaposing the “new media system internet with the old system of oligarchically controlled broadcast media” (Möller 2005: 51)²³ creates too extreme a dichotomy. Processes of social closure, i.e. persistent tendencies, mainly arise from previous, non-technological structures and have long unfolded their potentially powerful impact in the blogosphere as well as in other parts of the public sphere of the net. Such socially generated mechanisms of closure of the media public prevent the technically feasible process of social ‘deboundarisation’ or disintermediation from leading to a sustainable shift or change regarding power, hegemony, influence or participation and autonomy in favour of so far subaltern or underprivileged groups and individuals.

²³ Translation by the author.

6. Recombinant practices – the weblog as a medium of confined ‘deboundarisation’

The significance of persistent practices of use and existent social structures notwithstanding, the wide variety uses of weblogs is also pointing to a second tendency, which in the following shall be analysed in terms of the concept of recombination²⁴. This concept is pointing to processes of innovative intensification and recombination of social practices on the basis of existing social structures. This allows for the new to be found not so much in the revolution or dissolution of existing socio-cultural patterns of action and communication, but rather in their further development, different prioritization or intensification.

The importance of cultural capital has been mentioned above as an indication of the tendency for persistence. Taking this argument into consideration again, recombination means that all those who have enough of this type of capital will have the means to use the social potential of the weblog media format for their own purposes. Not every blog can, should, or must become a mass media. However, users from the most diverse partial cultures have the possibility to meet up worldwide in a weblog and to act collectively: “Every blog has at least the potential to move up to the dimension of traditional media” (Möller, 2005: 131). Adequately useable cultural capital might not be a sufficient condition for this to happen, but it is certainly a necessary condition.

Individuals or groups without much power in the market, but with adequate resources in terms of the cultural techniques necessary for this type of media, now clearly have changing and growing possibilities to make a global and disperse audience aware of their perspectives; an audience which has previously been out of reach to them. A most prominent example are the Independent Media Centers (IMC/Indymedia). On the one hand, they are an articulation of the emergence of a worldwide, transnational social movement which is critical of globalization. On the other hand, they have influenced this social movement’s perception of itself as a movement, by way of “reporting from below” as a means of mediated self-representation. This is based on a weblog-like media technology, which is being used in more than 160 IMCs worldwide, and is permanently producing a mixture of journalistic content-processing and

²⁴ In using the concept „recombination“, I am referring to Franco „Bifo“ Berardi’s (2001) thoughts on „principio ricombinante“. Coming from a post-operaist theoretical tradition, he is searching for possibilities of a non-dialectical understanding of social action. The dialectical school of thinking is asking for a totalising whole where contradictory parts are being assembled into a proceeding system. In contrast, I am mainly looking at the vast plurality of possibilities for the ongoing re-assembling of defined relevant elements in the context of new media use. The concept is aiming at the process of this recombination, and the diversity of its results, but not at the construction of unified ideal types.

web-based auto-production of media information as a journalistic practice from below. In fact, this practice does not really shatter the structures of capitalist socialization which are criticized rather heavily within Indymedia. However, activists of this movement no longer need to rely on intermediators in the traditional media to articulate protest or express their own issues and content. Additionally, on the level of representation, Indymedia reporting is turning isolated activists into a global mass movement, which then, in the same process, becomes visible in the streets: “real goes virtual goes real”.²⁵ Such a process, whereby a social movement invents itself, is being enhanced and accelerated by the possibility to network medially and at the same time the possibility for self-representation (Schönberger, 2005).

Taking the tendency of recombination into consideration, weblogs can be described as a media technology of limited deboundarisation. While weblogs are in no way revolutionalising existing power relations, they are certainly an enabling technique, for instance for the elites of social movements, whose new possibilities of media representation mean that certain news can no longer be made invisible. The social potential of this media technology mainly determines a shift in the structure of the media public sphere and between the political actors.

7. Future Outlook

I have suggested to use the image of the „long arm of ,real life““ to analyse the two seemingly contradictory processes of persistence and recombination. This concept does not conceptualise these processes as a contradiction, but as two sides of the same coin. It allows theorising the process of socio-cultural change in the context of use of new media at a more general level.

The next step would now be to re-connect the tendencies I identified as well as the actual practices that accompany them to the various models of describing social structures (lifestyle, ways of life, habitus, milieu, or class.) Only then an analysis can be accomplished which not only adequately describes the dynamics of social processes with regard to the use of media and technology, but also allows for findings that go beyond the mere stating of interdependencies between both tendencies.

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²⁵ See for example Hamm (2005).

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