

The Virtual City

- Research for “Mediacity” from a Sociological Perspective -

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1. What is sociology?

- It is not: social work, philosophy, moral science
- Sociology is about society (but what is society...?)
- It defines itself by its methods: empirical research

Preliminary assumptions

- Communication is always and everywhere
- Technologies are part of a historical process
- Media are specific forms of channels with their own dimension
- Cities are a societal form of organizing complexity, based on technologies, media and communication
- The “stuff” (metabolism) to organize are expectations (emotions, preconsiderations, cognitive concepts, ideas etc.)

Reference: Jackson, M. H./Poole, M.S./Kuhn, T. (2002) The social construction of technology. In: Lievrouw, L.A./Livingstone, S. (eds) The Handbook of New Media, London.

Research areas

1. Difference between online/offline interpersonal communication
2. Changes of social interaction patterns caused by new forms of communication
3. Changes of expectation structures
4. Societal logic of technological progress

Main findings

1. Interpersonal communication

- Neither dream nor nightmare (only little proof for addictive impact; isolation)
- Higher frequencies, less accountability (potentially more contacts across pre-given social borders, in reality however not really found)
- More emotion the “romantic” style
- References: Hulme, M./Truch, A. (2006) Die Rolle des Zwischen-Raums bei der Bewahrung der persönlichen und sozialen Identität. In: Glotz, P./Bertschi, S./Locke, C. (Hg.) Daumenkultur. Das Mobiltelefon in der Gesellschaft, Bielefeld; Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2005) Personality and the Internet. In: Ders. (ed) The Social Net. Understanding human behaviour in cyberspace, Oxford; Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2005) “Detachment”: the unique nature of online romantic relationships. In: Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (ed) The Social Net. Understanding human behaviour in cyberspace, Oxford, S. 134.

Main findings

2. Social embedding

- Reproducing pre-given identities (ethnic, cultural, gender)
- Reestablishing social inequalities (digital divide; dual user-structure)
- Introducing subtly new norms on communicative behavior (exceeding the online area)

References: Döring, N. (2003) Sozialpsychologie des Internet, Göttingen; McKenna, K./Seidman, G. (2005) You, me, and we: interpersonal processes in electronic groups. Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (ed) The Social Net. Understanding human behaviour in cyberspace, Oxford.

Main findings

3. Changing expectation patterns

- “Wilder” expectations (worldwide, unlimited) and new expectation structures
- A different “check” of expectations
- New bridging mechanisms for the gap between expectation and reality
- New avoiding mechanisms against frustrations

Reference: Döring, N. (2004) Kommunikation in Cyberspace und der Wandel von Vermittlungskulturen: Zur Veränderung sozialer Arrangements mediatisierter Alltagskommunikation. In: Thiedecke, U. (Hg.) Cyberspace: Die Matrix der Erwartungen. Soziologie des Cyberspace. Medien, Strukturen und Semantiken, Wiesbaden; Gergen, K. J. (2002) The Challenge of Absent Presence. In; Katz, J. /Aakhus, M. (eds) Perpetual Contact. Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance, Cambridge

Main findings

3. Societal logic of technological process

- Society: De-definition and Re-definition
- Space: De-territorialisation and Re-territorialisation
- Time: De-synchronisation and Re-synchronisation
- Reference: Graham, S. (2004) Introduction: From dreams of transcendence to the remediation of urban life. In: Ders. (Hg.) The Cybercities reader, London; Matei, S. /Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (2002) Belonging in Geographic, Ethnic and Internet Spaces. In: Wellman, B./Haythornthwaite (eds) The Internet in Everyday Life, Malden;Hampton, K./Wellman, B. (2001) Long distance community in the network society beyond Netville. In: American Behavioral Scientist, 45/3, 476-495; Wellman, B. (2001) Physical place and cyber place: the rise of personalized networks. In: IJURR, 25/2, 227-252.

Theoretical understanding

- Mediacity is based on an observation of slight changes in the overall structure of society
- These changes are not caused by but correlated with technological developments
- Technological innovations nevertheless enable new behavior by enabling the redefinition of key concepts of society

Remaining questions

- The relationship between society, “space” and technological innovation is complex and without predominance from one side.
- Is there however a “driving force”?
- How then can there be “steering”?