

Always Online – Always Stressed?

How Young People in Germany and Finland View the Use of Digital Media in a Mediatized Work Life

Abstract

Digital media have been revolutionizing our working lives. We are always online, we are always connected, we can be reached 24/7 regardless of where we are. The boundaries between work and private lives are becoming increasingly blurred. This phenomenon is part of the so-called mediatization, a metaprocess that leads to a profound change in culture and society. This article presents a part of an extensive comparative study which explores how young people between 18 and 25 years in Germany and Finland discuss and evaluate the use of digital media in their mediatized working lives. Based on 48 guided interviews, the study sheds light on similarities and differences in perceptions of young people in Germany and Finland. This article aims at answering the question of what significance digital media have for the interviewees and what disadvantages they associate with them.

Zusammenfassung

Digitale Medien haben unsere gesamte Lebenswirklichkeit und damit auch unsere Arbeitswelt revolutioniert. Wir sind ständig online, wir sind rund um die Uhr erreichbar, ganz unabhängig davon, wo wir uns gerade befinden. Die Grenzen zwischen Arbeits- und Privatleben verschwimmen immer mehr. Diese Phänomene sind Teil der so genannten Mediatisierung, eines Metaprozesses, der zu einem tiefgreifenden Wandel in Kultur und Gesellschaft geführt hat. Dieser Beitrag präsentiert einen Teil einer komparativen Studie, die untersucht, wie junge Menschen zwischen 18 und 25 Jahren in Deutschland und Finnland die Nutzung digitaler Medien in ihren mediatisierten Arbeitswelten erleben und bewerten. Auf Basis von 48 Leitfaden-Interviews arbeitet die Studie Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede in den Wahrnehmungen junger Menschen aus Deutschland und Finnland heraus. Die Untersuchung will einen Beitrag zur Beantwortung der Frage leisten, welche Bedeutung digitale Medien für junge Menschen in ihrem Arbeitsleben haben und welche Nachteile sie mit ihnen assoziieren.

Keywords: Comparative study, digital media, Finland, Germany, mediatization, world of work, working life, work life, young people, youth.

1 Introduction

New media technologies construct social reality and shape the perception of our living environment. They change the way we deal with space and time. Whereas in the 20th century our perception was primarily shaped by television, in the 21st century, it is digital media that have become important (co-)constructors of our social realities.¹⁾ Digital media have a huge impact on our lives. As Steinmaurer (2016, p. 1) puts it, everyone can be reached everywhere and at all times. This permanent networking mediated by digital media is part of a profound change in culture and society, which is called mediatization. In recent years, mediatization has emerged as an important concept and theoretical framework for considering the interplay between media, culture and society, which certainly affects individuals' work lives as digital media pervade all areas of living. Although the idea of mediatization dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, the current concept was not outlined until the last decade (Ekström, Fornäs, Jansson & Jerslev 2016; Hepp, 2013). Since then, there have been many publications that aimed to breathe life into the previously theoretical concept of mediatization (Hartmann & Hepp, 2010; Krotz, 2001, 2007, 2012a; Lundby, 2009; Meyen, 2009; Schulz, 2004; Lunt & Livingstone, 2016).

Mediatization is strongly related to technological advancements (Hepp, 2013). Encheva, Driessens and Verstraeten (2013, p. 10) defined how “the term mediatization describes the co-articulation of social and cultural changes on the one hand and changes in media and communication on the other”. With the increase of different types of technological and mobile devices, more and more people can access media from anywhere in the world. Consequently, mediatization is also correlated with the theory of the public sphere, as the citizens have increased access to information and hence media (Ekström et al., 2016; Laursen & Valentini, 2015). As a result, mediatization explains how societies, cultures and people become influenced and shaped by media and technologies (Hepp, 2013) and how technologies and media might proceed to control and have power over people, their behaviour and thoughts (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). According to Friedrich Krotz (2007), it can be stated that mediatization is just as much a metaprocess as individualization, globalization and commercialization.

In this paper I will focus on the interaction between mediatization and work. People define themselves through their work. As sociologist Ulrich Beck (2007, p. 37) puts it, work has become “the only valid yardstick for the appreciation of people and their activities“. For this study²⁾ my Finnish colleague and I selected Finnish and German people aged between 18 and 25 years who use digital media in their vocational

1) When I talk about digital media, I mean any technical means of disseminating information based on digital technologies, e.g. mobile phones, computers or the Internet as well as their applications such as software or websites. Like Roth-Ebner (2015, p. 18), I use the term digital media synonymously for information and communication technologies (ICTs) because the boundaries between media and technologies are blurring due to the increasing convergence.

2) This paper presents a part of the results of a comparative study I conducted together with my Finnish colleague Mari Maasilta from the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi, Finland.

lives on a regular basis and asked them to discuss and evaluate the impact of digital media on their working lives. According to Schelsky (1957, p. 16), these young people were in a late state of their youth on the threshold to adult life. This group of people is especially relevant because they will shape working life in the years to come.

As there is no research on whether young people in Germany and Finland rate the importance, benefits and disadvantages of digital media differently we wanted to close this research gap. We believe that a comparative study is relevant as Finland is considered a pioneer in digital media whereas Germany lags behind. We opted for a qualitative study because there is still little research in this specific area. Hence, we were not able to rely on robust hypotheses. Nevertheless, the aim of the study is to find out how work is shaped by digital media and how young people perceive and evaluate this phenomenon.

2 Research methodology

The study examines the interaction between digital media and individual practices in the world of work. In doing so, it essentially follows a perspective based on action theory. It focuses on the concrete activities and problems of young individuals. Thus it follows the insight of Andreas Hepp (2011, p. 14) that „we have to analyse the moulding forces of the media always in their netting with human action, especially (but not exclusively) with communication action“.

First, the study approaches the concept of “media“. With Stig Hjarvard (2008, p. 114), I use the term “media“ to “designate technologies that allow people to communicate over space and/or time“. According to Krotz (2012b, p. 41), these technologies must have the ability to “enable, modify and design communication“. In his opinion, media are characterized by four features: They are instruments of the staging, as they provide the framework for a specific form of communication. Besides, they are individual experience spaces for the users. And, in structural terms, “media“ are determined by their characteristics as “technology“ and “social form“ (Krotz 2012b, pp. 43 f.). For the study based on action theory, the perspective of the experience spaces plays a major role because the survey focuses on actions, problems and perceptions of the individual recipient. Characteristic features of digital media – especially in contrast to analogue media – are digitality, networking, globality, mobility, convergence and interactivity (Hüther, 2005, pp. 346 ff.).

As a theoretical basis, the study draws on the theoretical approach to mediatization as a metaprocess by Friedrich Krotz. Just like him (Hepp & Krotz 2012, p. 13), I am convinced that it is impossible to describe the mediatization of a society as a whole. However, what can be empirically investigated and described are sub-areas of society, such as the world of work, which this study focuses on.

Our research pays particular attention to the interplay between the characteristics of digital media described by Hüther and the experiences individuals take note of in

their daily working routines. In this context, it should be taken into account that these properties are mostly so closely related that they cannot be considered individually.

The study focuses on young people aged between 18 and 25 years because they will have a lasting impact on the labour market in the years to come. It is based on 48 guided interviews amongst German and Finnish young people between 18 and 25 years. The interviewees came from widely differing sections of society and backgrounds. To ensure that all of them were able to reflect on their perceptions and observations as experts of the situation, we chose people who have regularly dealt with digital media in their working environments. The proportion of men and women was relatively equal.

The 24 German interviews were conducted in German between February and June 2016. In Finland, 11 interviews were conducted in English during autumn 2016. The remaining 13 interviews were conducted in Finnish between May and June 2018. Each interview lasted around an hour. In both countries the interviewees were working in white-collar professions.

The complete study was based on the following key question: How do young people between 18 and 25 years in Germany and Finland discuss and evaluate the use of digital media in their mediatized work life. In this paper I just want to shed light on one aspect of the study. I want to answer the question of what significance digital media have for the interviewees and what disadvantages they associate with them.

The insights the study provides are to be seen against the backdrop of social constructivism. That means that there is not one objective truth that has to be revealed through positivist scientific inquiry. Hence, the study does not mirror reality; rather it creates it. To answer the key question in all its complexity, we used guided interviews as research method, as they provided us with a wealth of personal information from the interviewees. The questions were consciously formulated in a very open manner so that the interviewees had almost no restrictions in telling their stories. With Roth-Ebner (2015, p. 129), it can be stated that people who openly and frankly tell their stories are a wealthy source of information and data for the researcher.

The interviews were evaluated with grounded theory, a concept which was first published by the American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The methodology of grounded theory is theoretically characterized by “symbolic interactionism” (Flick, 2002, p. 270). Grounded theory was used because it enabled an open and unbiased approach to the research field. As the impact of mediatization on the world of work is a field where little research has been carried out so far, grounded theory is an appropriate method because it is based neither on models nor on hypothesis. Because of the constant reflection and re-construction of the categories, it is highly unlikely that the researcher will overlook aspects and influencing criteria. However, this evaluation method is complex and time-consuming, which can be seen as a disadvantage.

3 Results

3.1 Use of media in an occupational routine

In the world of work, young people rely on digital media as they ensure digital networking. Finnish and German interviewees agree on the importance of computers and laptops. For them, these are the most important tools in their working lives. Some interviewees also mention tablets and iPads but they play minor roles in their occupational routines. Apart from these similarities, the study reveals regional differences. One big difference is that for Finnish youth mobile phones seem to play a major role in their working lives whereas young Germans do not mention them when they think about their working environments. One reason for this difference in significance could be that unlike in Germany there are usually no landline phones at Finnish work places. Instead, the employees are equipped with smart phones they carry with them wherever they go.

Unsurprisingly, the study shows that young individuals take the digital media, especially the Internet and mobile devices, for granted. They cannot imagine everyday working life without using them. Asked how they would react if they had to give them up, they said unanimously:

“Nowadays, I cannot imagine working without modern means of communication. I would not know how I could do my work without a computer. This would surely make work much more difficult.” (German interviewee)

“It would not work without modern communication devices. I would not know how to communicate and network with others.” (German interviewee)

Some even argue in a more dramatic way and describe the loss of digital media as a shock.

“Media and communication technologies are such a big part of my working life. For me, it would be a shock to return to the analogical working life.” (Finnish interviewee)

The answers underline that digital media have revolutionized the world of work. The interviewees can no longer imagine everyday working routines without using them. One German interviewee even argued that the loss of digital media would mean “the loss of his existence”.

3.2 Communication in a working environment

However, when drawing the attention to communication in a working environment, the study reveals differences between German and Finnish interviewees. While in Germany the personal communication loses its significance in a vocational context, this seems not to be the case in Finland. German interviewees admit that face-to-face communication is often replaced by digital media. Young people in Germany regard emails as most important tools for their communication. Other software plays a minor role when it comes to coordinating work processes. German individuals are very much used to non-personal communication, mainly through emails. They often even do not

communicate personally with colleagues in the same office. Nevertheless, some German interviewees admit that non-personal communication always runs the risk of giving rise to misunderstandings that can possibly delay communication processes. In addition, communication instruments which are easy to handle lead to the exchange of too many and partially unnecessary pieces of information which triggers stress.

“Stress occurs through the simplicity. Because it is so easy to write an email, an incredible amount of emails are written, even if they are totally unnecessary.” (German interviewee)

The picture in Finland is quite different. Finnish people obviously appreciate face-to-face communication. Even if they use a lot of digital media in work, they appreciate face-to-face communication. Only if it is not possible, they use instant messaging like Lynci or Whatsapp. Possible causes for that clear preference of personal communication could be found in the geographical situation of Finland. Finland is a sparsely populated country. The distances are long and during working days people have to be in contact with colleagues, clients or students who are often not in the same places. The interviewees mention online meetings, distance teaching and webinars where they have to use several applications (e.g. Skype, Adobe Connect, Apppear.in, Jabra) which may make meetings more troublesome. In contrast, they regard personal communication as easy and relaxing. Hence, it is not surprising that coffee-breaks are very common in Finland. It seems to be an unwritten law to meet at certain times to have a coffee and a chat together. Germany, on the contrary, is a densely populated country where face-to-face meetings are still common. They are not regarded as something special and valuable.

3.3 Disadvantages of modern communication technologies

Part of the guided interviews was a discussion on the disadvantages of digital media. Finnish and German interviewees agreed on the presumption that they produce a constant flood of information. So, they often have difficulties to decide what to concentrate on.

“Often it feels that there is information coming via all possible channels. You may be in Skype waiting for someone to call and, at the same time, someone tries to call you by phone or sends you a message and you have several windows open at the same time. The contacts coming through different channels may be very different and you can’t deal with them all.” (Finnish interviewee)

The majority of the interviewees would agree with the statement that learning to prioritize is the only way to handle this information overload. Most of the interviewees regard the constant availability as a burden. They clearly see and express the risk of blurring boundaries between work and private lives.

„The constant availability is really a problem. There are situations when you are annoyed because something at work does not function (...). Imagine the following situation: You are at home in the evening starting to relax. Then you get an email from your boss because something has happened. Then you have to deal with that problem in the evening.“ (German interviewee)

Both, Finnish and German interviewees said that the use of several digital media and a need to be available all the time disturbs the working routines. Especially for German interviewees the constant pressure to receive and answer all messages in real time is a burden. However, a large portion of the interviewees revealed that they would worry about missing something important if they were not able to permanently update their communication channels. Consequently, people constantly feel under pressure because they are in fear of missing some messages.

"I would say that the constant possibility to get information and to be informed about everything is more of a burden than a relief." (German interviewee)

Another obstacle the study reveals is that the permanent rechecking of the communication channels has virtually become an addiction, which the majority of young people has not come to terms with. The results of the interviews suggest that it is less the information overload which becomes a burden but rather the constant pressure to receive all messages in real time.

The study shows that German and Finnish interviewees tend to deal differently with the disturbances of working routines. German interviewees tend to accept the constant interruptions of their daily working routines as unalterable and complain about it. On the contrary, Finnish interviewees tend to react more self-critically. They admit that it also depends on their individual behaviour.

4 Conclusions

Digital media shape the individuals' everyday lives and thus their working world. The study revealed that for young people in Germany and Finland, digital media are indispensable when it comes to working routines. A working life without them is unimaginable. It is no exaggeration to conclude from the answers that digital media have revolutionized working life.

The study shows that the importance of digital media for communication in the working environment is greater in Germany than in Finland. Whereas Finnish young people appreciate and use face-to-face communication whenever possible, German interviewees favour communication via digital media even if personal communication would be possible and easier.

The interviewees in Germany and in Finland agree that digital media not only have advantages but also disadvantages. As negative effect the interviewees particularly emphasize that the use of digital media leads to permanent networking and thus to constant availability. This is seen as a burden as it bears the risk of blurring boundaries between work and private lives and triggers stress.

Finnish and German interviewees said that the need to be available all the time and the use of several digital media disturbs working routines. Even if their perception is similar, German and Finnish interviewees tend to deal differently with these disturbances. German interviewees tend to accept the constant interruptions as unalterable and complain about it whereas Finnish young people react more self-critically.

The interviewees' answers show clearly that permanent availability in the working environment triggers stress. Hence, it will be vital for the quality of work in the future, how companies will deal with the permanent distraction of their employees triggered by a constant flood of information and the compulsion of people to receive it in real time. As far back as in 2007, South Korean researchers came up with the term "digital dementia" as a result of the mediatized world. A study of the Website Incruit and the Research Company Embrain amongst 2000 employees aged between 20 and 30 years revealed that young South Korean adults suffered from concentration problems as well as from attention deficits and memory disorders.

Considering these findings, a responsible and health-oriented use of digital media on the side of the employees will be of major importance. What is even more vital is the attempt to implement a responsible use of digital media in the culture of a company. What impact media literacy will have on the individual company is surely a question of company culture. At this point superiors take responsibility. They have to serve as role models for a responsible use of digital media, and they have to appreciate it as an enterprise value.

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