

Online-Offline. A theoretical Approach to define a crucial Category of Online Research

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Who ever was involved in Online Research knows about the problem of a proper definition of „being online“. Of course, it is possible - for example - to set a minimal number of hours per week as a measure of ‚real‘ online usage. But there are certain caveats connected to this decisionistic approach. In a study conducted 1998 in Frankfurt/Germany² several findings point to the need for a theoretically guided way of defining online usage. To mention only one of these findings, it was evident that those, who are more active in terms of time per week, are spending not merely more time with the Internet, they are using different parts of the Internet and they are doing it in a different way.

In accordance to this findings I am suggesting a theoretical framework to avoid the pitfalls of unjustified simplifications. With a strong concept of „everyday life“ („alltägliche Lebensführung“) developed by Günther Voß et al. I am able to describe different types of interconnections between media usage, work and leisure time. These arrangements are changing both in an individual and a superindividual sense. According to the so called „French School of Regulation“ I distinguish two major modes of media usage, a fordist and a postfordist, which describe two very different arrangements of everyday life. Whereas the former is dominated by a strong distinction between media usage at work on the one hand and for recreational needs on the other, in postfordist media usage both are inextricably intertwined. Often this is combined with the integrated usage of a wide variety of different media.

In Internet usage we can find both arrangements, in its institutional shape and in the usage itself – with a strong tendency to postfordist modes. So we have to be aware of the type of usage we are observing, when we try to explore Internet usage. The study of postfordist media usage has to reflect the new significance and position of media in postfordist everyday life. For example „one media studies“ are no longer applicable to this type of usage.

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² The study consists mainly of a logfile analysis and an e-mail questionnaire.