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## Socialisation in the Age of New Media

### 1. Introduction

Media education is a comparatively young specialisation within educational science. It acts on the assumption that in modern (or postmodern) societies human's relation to the world is largely mediated by technical media. To act pedagogically therefore has to be conceived and understood as acting in a world shaped by information and communication technologies. Based on this media education addresses three different problems. First it tries to analyse and critically reflect on socio-cultural forms and practices of media usage in order to assess the social as well as individual relevance of technically mediated perception and communication. Second it tries to develop scientifically founded concepts for the practice of media education in order to foster people's media skills and media literacy. Third it tries to develop concepts for media didactics, that is for a methodical application of technical media in order to support teaching and learning processes.

This paper gives attention to the first of these three problems. In concentrates on the relevance of the computer-based new information and communication technologies which I will refer to as new media. Nowadays, there is no doubt that new media have penetrated the entirety of social life and will continue to do so. The ubiquity of new media maybe regarded as one of the most obvious social consequences new media have (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2002). This is why we are not merely dealing with new *technologies* but with new *cultural techniques*. Compared to traditional media, an important characteristic of the new media is that social and cultural phenomena in new ways extend into the media worlds

that have become interactive (Negroponte 1995; Escobar 1996; Marotzki 1997). Hence, those media worlds extend the socio-cultural scope of experience into the digital dimension.

To assess the relevance of social experiences for an individual's personal development may be regarded as the core of what is under consideration in socialisation theory and socialisation research. In the past two or three decades the media have become a matter of interest in the range of socialisation theory and research (Schorb, Mohn & Theunert 1991; Hurrelmann 1993; Fritz, Sting & Vollbrecht 2003). It is basically the possible influence of the mass media which has been discussed and investigated in this context. So the main objective of this paper is to discuss the relevance which experiences with and in the interactive worlds of new media (like computer games or the internet) may have for personality development. Therefore I will initially try to reconstruct the main ideas of the concept of socialisation as well as some relevant issues of current discourses on this concept. As a part of this, a critical side glance at corresponding public discourses will be taken. After that a closer look will be taken at how social experiences are enabled and shaped in the interactive (or virtual) worlds of the new media. This will include an attempt to highlight typical positions currently taken in theoretical and empirical work on socialisation effects of new media. Against this background, challenges and tasks of future research on socio-cultural implications of new media shall be pointed out at the end of the paper.

### 2. Central ideas of the concept of socialisation

Socialisation is a term not often used in everyday speech. Rather, it is a sociological term used since Emil Durkheim in order to denote the process of humans growing into their cultural and social environment. The notion is based on the anthropological insight that humans are not sufficiently equipped with instinct-driven mechanisms. This means for one that they require substantial support and protection – especially when still young babies/children. Additionally, this means humans need to acquire some essential skills and knowledge in order to be able to live and survive in a socio-cultural world. From this perspective, humans need a kind of second birth – a socio-cultural one – which is based on learning processes.

In a *broader* sense, the term socialisation encompasses all aspects of human personality development going back to social influences, including education and instruction. The concept of education represents intentional

and deliberately planned efforts by society and its institutions (e. g. family and schools) to convey knowledge and skills that are considered as necessary or important. This especially includes socio-cultural norms and values. Hence, the central idea of education is to positively influence personality development (Vogel 1996).

Socialisation research usually acts on a *narrower* definition of socialisation, factoring out any intentional efforts and concentrating instead on casual and involuntary learning processes taking place in the individual's social environment. In this narrower sense, socialisation refers particularly to those moments and events of someone's growing into a pre-defined socio-cultural world that are not shaped by pedagogical intent.

The term socialisation makes us primarily think of children as they initially hardly know anything about the social and cultural world they are born into. However, lifelong learning is becoming more of an issue in modern (or postmodern) societies which are characterised by dynamic processes of socio-cultural change. Because of this, socialisation is now widely regarded as a lifelong process, too.

One of the most significant achievements of early socialisation research was proving a connection between someone's social origins and family socialisation on the one hand, and his or her academic and professional success on the other. The general approach was to try to fit social origins into a layer model. According to this approach, the further down in the layer model a family is situated, the more it is subject to strains and discriminations. These have a negative effect on communication and interaction processes, which makes the development of cognitive and motivational abilities required for academic and professional success increasingly unlikely. The layer model is nowadays often seen as too narrow and one-dimensional. Hence, it is hardly employed any more. Nevertheless, thanks to the research in this field, it is no longer the individual who is per se held responsible for failings and shortcomings (e. g. at school). Instead, the possible influence of social circumstances the individual is faced with are being taken into consideration as well. In other words: socialisation theory and research tries to explain specific current attitudes and ways of acting on the background of specific bygone social experiences. This doubtlessly has to be taken as a scientific advancement compared to individualised models of explanation.

In the 1960s the concept of socialisation became more and more popular in social sciences and humanities (including educational theory and science).<sup>1</sup> The adoption of this concept was accompanied by an increasing orientation towards empirical social research, one focus of which became social inequality. As a result, a greater sensitivity was developed towards structures (both inside and outside the educational system) leading to social exclusion or to stabilising social disparities. This is still a relevant topic in present social science discourses (e. g. Bauer 2002; Mansel 1995). Yet, the growing interest in how processes and structures of the social and cultural life do influence personality development in the first instance did not go along with an alteration of the prevailing normative attitude towards any uncontrolled stimuli and experiences. There was still a tendency to stick to positions held time and again since Rousseau; namely to the notion that any influences of modern society that are not pedagogically pre-filtered or controlled are more likely to be harmful than advantageous to a child's development. Especially the mass media were considered to have a mostly negative impact on younger recipients.<sup>2</sup> This attitude may be found to date, but with regard to the social sciences it does not seem to be prevalent any more. In the last analysis a more open and analytical interest in any social experience has been developed in the course of establishing socialisation as an accepted approach and field of research (as an early example, see Zinnecker 1979).

### 3. Non-scientific discourses about the effects of media

In contrast to this scientific development, in public and private discourses there is still a predominantly negative attitude towards certain non-educational influences on children's and juveniles' development. Exemplary of this are public discussions subsequent to the Columbine massacre in Littleton in April 1999, and the bloodbath caused by a 19-year-old in a school in Erfurt, Germany in April 2002. In both cases, heavily armed students

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of socialisation in effect served as a common theoretical foundation for interdisciplinary research especially in the range of sociology, psychology, and pedagogy (educational science).

<sup>2</sup> The tendency to discuss the media critically may also be related to the predominance of critical social theories in Europe at the time. In the tradition of Horkheimer and Adorno the media were regarded as a part of the culture industry, and mass communication was conceptualised as a powerful and effective form of manipulating or at least influencing the recipients.

entered their schools, first shooting several teachers and fellow students and eventually killing themselves. Equally, in both cases, mass media reported the perpetrators were ardent fans of certain computer games, namely so-called first person shooters, which allegedly spurred their actions. The two Columbine students were said to be *Doom* and *Quake* players, the Erfurt perpetrator reportedly played *Counter Strike*.<sup>3</sup> These instances open up the question what effects depictions of violence in modern media do or do not have. This is not the place to go further into this question. However, I would like to make the following thesis-like remarks with regards to my subject:

1. Initially, I stated that socialisation is not a term commonly used in everyday speech. Yet, these examples demonstrate that in public discourses, there is nevertheless a notion of casual learning of social – or in this case anti-social – behaviour. A classic causal view is adopted, though: certain behavioural patterns are seen as the results of antecedent media use. From this perspective, media and their contents, respectively, did something to the adolescents. They trained them to kill and made them imitate media models and experiences in reality.
2. The examples show that new media – in this case computer games – are being approached in the same effects-type way as traditional mass media were (or are) being discussed.
3. Disregard whether the assumption of such socialisation effects of media can actually be proven, and assume an observer's perspective. From this point of view, such discourses might be regarded as their own social reality, (partially) constructed by mass media. This, in turn, makes public discourses and rhetoric an interesting subject for socio-scientific research (Lange & Lüscher 1998; Lange 2000; Squire 2002). And these discourses are pedagogically significant, too, since interpretation patterns spread in this way influence parents' and others' educational actions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Following the Erfurt massacre, the *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* (*Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons*) did research and – among other things – examined the murderer's computer. A representative of the *Bundesprüfstelle* told me that *Counter Strike* was in fact not installed on the computer. Technically, the computer wasn't even sufficiently equipped to run that game. Hence, it is highly questionable whether that computer game «trained» the Erfurt student, as was reported in the German press.

<sup>4</sup> Such public discourses may not only influence education but jurisdiction as well. For instance, subsequent to the events in Erfurt, German law for the protection of minors was altered to the effect that all video and computer games need to be age-rated. By

The conviction outlined above – computer games like *Counter Strike* negatively affect adolescents – is very widespread among parents and teachers, which often sparks conflicts, especially with male juveniles aged 12 to 16, with whom *Counter Strike* was very popular until recently.

4. In a way, events like Columbine and Erfurt point to effects media have on socialisation that are quite different from the publicly discussed ones: the manner in which said massacres were discussed – at least in non-scientific circles – was shaped by the way mass media reported on them. Communication science has conceptualised this kind of media influence as agenda-setting (Dearing & Rogers 1996; McCombs 2000). The assumption is that media do not tell us what to think but what to think about. Hence, the relevance they have mainly consists in making or not making a topic of certain facts, and subsequently setting the tone for any topic. Thus, they convey a certain image of these facts to the public. In the case of Erfurt, the image of a violent criminal was created (Linssen 2003). With reference to Erving Goffman (1974), this socialising effect mass media possess may be identified as *framing*, which means they create a framework that provides a (more or less) consistent context for problem definitions, causal attributions, and values.
5. The mass media's agenda-setting (co-)constructed a notion of media having a negative effect. However, not all media are equally affected by this. In fact, at any one time, scepticism is mainly focussed on *new* media. Reading books, for instance, is nowadays hardly considered a problematic form of media use. On the contrary: reading books is generally accepted as a cultural and worthwhile activity, worthy of educational nurturing. The perspective on this was quite different in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Back then, people were worried about an accelerating «reading mania» among children and women (!). It was feared that children would gain «wrong» knowledge from reading the «wrong» books. Physical degeneration caused by reading too much was a concern, too. As far as women were concerned, it was dreaded that reading «shallow novels» would make them neglect their functional duties as mother, housewife, and faithful wife to their husband (Baacke 1995). Hence, the negative connotations of media often conveyed in public discourses express

the way, the people in charge for that obviously did not care very much about the fact that the Erfurt murderer wasn't a minor anymore: he was 19.

scepticism towards *new* media, i. e. media not (yet) established within a certain generation and a socio-cultural context. Conversely, media the debating parties grew up with – and are consequently used to – are much more likely to be accepted and looked upon favourably (Fromme 2001; Schäffer 2003).

6. Insofar the popular public argument for a direct effects correlation of media to social problems also represents a protectionist attitude which supports different interests such as: the protection of traditional and elitist canons against popular culture, increased pedagogical or governmental control (not only of the minors), and moral conservatism using media as a punching bag.

#### 4. Theoretical problems and developments in socialisation discourse

There are two main directions in socialisation theory: structural functionalism, and symbolic interactionism. At first, the predominant perception of socialisation was a structural functionalistic one. This notion goes back to Talcott Parsons and sees an individual's development as a functional outcome of social structures. Traditionally, this theory leaves no room for individual decision and acting autonomy. Socialisation is rather seen as a process of internalising socially pre-formed roles and thereby taking a particular position within the social system. This means that the individual is only considered as a socio-structurally pre-defined person. In contrast to this, symbolic interactionism, which goes back to Mead, sees socialisation much more as interplay between role taking and role making – which is a process the individual actively influences. While structural functionalistic theories focus on the macro level, symbolic interactionism concentrates particularly on the micro level of interaction.<sup>5</sup> According to symbolic interactionism, any meaning emerges from social interactions and is not an inherent property of any object or social situation. This implies that any

individual actively helps shape – and change – such meanings and values, instead of simply adopting them.

Both theory traditions do share some common ground, however, as both conceive socialisation as the adoption of social norms and values through the acquisition of social roles. A social role is seen as a bundle of normative expectations on attitude and behaviour which are put forward to the individual by a reference group. In this respect, social roles (are supposed to) give some regularity and predictability to behaviour within a society. Thus, during the socialisation process, every individual acquires the ability to assume and subsequently fill social roles. As far as socialisation is concerned, the main difference between symbolic interactionism and structural functionalism is a different view on the relation between social determination and personal autonomy.

In my opinion, this is the central problem of socialisation theory. Many discussions were sparked off by this issue in the past. Exemplary, one may recall the debates about a new sociology of childhood that took place in the US as well as in Northern and Central Europe in the 1990s (Corsaro 1997; James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta & Wintersberger 1998; Zeiher 1996). Since Ariès (1975), an accepted perception is that childhood is not a natural phenomenon, but a social construct. Adopting this point of view, the new sociology of childhood has criticised the manner in which children and childhood were thitherto constructed in social science and humanities, i. e. children as nascents and childhood as a transition period. From this perspective, the concept of socialisation was also accused of seeing and studying children as immature beings, rather than actors with their own cultural practices. The protagonists of a new sociology of childhood not only pleaded for a different research into childhood, but also for giving more (political) rights to children, hence enhancing their social status. The radical focus on children's competence as actors, as well as the call to give up the notion of socialisation itself, has been rejected as exaggerated (e. g. Fromme & Vollmer 1999; Prout 2004). However, the theses of a new sociology of childhood have – at least in German-speaking countries – led to a discussion about revising the concept of socialisation, with the acting role and the willfulness of adolescents gaining more consideration (Honig, Leu & Nissen 1996; Zinnecker 1996; Zinnecker 2000). Currently, the term self-socialisation denotes such a – firstly heuristic – concept. This notion continues the tradition of symbolic interactionism while taking social change into account.

<sup>5</sup> French sociologist Bruno Latour's work claims to solve the conflict between micro-sociological and macro-sociological approaches – and hence between interactionist and structuralist theories (Latour 1998; 2001). Latour's stimulating thesis states that both social structuralists and interactionists neglect the relevance material objects have on social practice. This is why, according to Latour, they also overlook technology's mediating role. To my knowledge, his work has not yet been used to enrich socialisation theory and research, though. For that reason, I shall – for the moment – confine myself to discussing those approaches to socialisation theory that are at hand.

This implies reflecting on the consequences which processes of de-traditionalisation and individualisation (Beck 1992; Beck, Giddens & Lash 1996; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) may have on the idea and reality of personality development. What is diagnosed since the 1980s is nothing less than a decrease in bonding and orientation provided by most social instances that shaped norms and values in modern society: family, career, social class, religion, neighbourhood, trade union, and others. Thus, new scopes of actions and decisions open up for the individual, as it is no longer self-evident for him or her to simply adopt pre-defined social roles. Instead, one may choose what group or culture to become a member of oneself (Hurrelmann 2002). This is what the term self-socialisation draws our attention to. Individuals are set free in the socio-cultural sphere, but at the same time they are confronted with a growing influence of anonymous instances of socialisation like the media.

### 5. New media: technical foundations and social contexts

Generally speaking, new media is a notion which is based upon the difference of old and new. Newness, of course, is not a lasting quality. In the course of time anything that used to be new for a reference group will eventually become more or less well-known and lose its status of novelty. The same applies to the media. The adjective «new» refers to media that are regarded as new in a given time and a given socio-cultural context. For example television was a new medium for most people in Western Europe until the early 1960s. But today hardly anybody would name television a new medium anymore. At present most of the media which integrate computer technology are regarded as (relatively) new media. In a few years this might be quite different. When computer technology has become more or less omnipresent, and we are not too far away from that point, then we will presumably need an adjustment for the name new media.

This is why it is necessary to describe and define the object of our interest more precisely. I refer to media that are based on computer technology and therefore combine the qualities of a technical medium on the one hand and of an automaton on the other hand (Meder 1998). Which are these qualities?

*Media* may be defined as artifacts or devices designed for the mediation of information. In other words: the term media refers to all technically

produced or technically enabled forms of communication.<sup>6</sup> The general quality and ability of technical media therefore is to take up and transmit information. Information may be conveyed without retardation (e. g. in a phone call), but quite often the information is technically stored before its transmission or reception (e. g. texts on paper or music on a recording tape).<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, one has to differentiate between the instruments (e. g. typewriter, camera or film projector) utilised to produce, transfer and receive the respective information, and the various signified genres (e. g. film, letter or photo). In that sense, technical media are always comprised of hard- and software: they consist of a material object (or a system of objects) which somehow carries a more or less complex bundle of information.

An *automaton* is a system that retrieves information from its environment, saves and processes that information, and eventually distributes altered pieces of information to its environment. In comparison to traditional kinds of automaton, this principle has been exponentially advanced in computer technology, which is based on digital micro electronics. By connecting the functions of an automaton with those of a medium, the hybrid system of a media automaton is produced. Unlike traditional mass media which mediate prefabricated media genres this hybrid system can convey media genres which change according to an individual user's input.

This new feature of a medium (or message) usually is referred to as interactivity (Bieber & Leggewie 2004). It has been discussed whether interactivity actually can be regarded as a new property of the medium or rather has to be conceptualized as a quality of experiences that users equate with interactivity (McMillan 2002). But even if the latter position is taken we can say that perceived interactivity is bound to the hybrid system of a media automaton. This type of interactivity – McMillan calls it user-to-system interactivity<sup>8</sup> – has been particularly far developed in the field of

<sup>6</sup> This follows the most common understanding of the term media. Sometimes the term is used in a broader sense which comprises all resources available for communication, including speech and gesture.

<sup>7</sup> To communicate asynchronously is one of the ways in which technical media extend our inartificial abilities to communicate.

<sup>8</sup> McMillan (2002) suggests to distinguish three levels of interactivity: user-to-user, user-to-document and user-to-system. The first refers to technically mediated forms of interaction between two or more communicating partners as a new form of social (symbolic) interaction, the second refers to activities around prefabricated content packages (like content-on-demand or content exchange), and the third refers to the

computer games. They usually demand a constant user input, which matches the depicted events or circumstances respectively. Consequently, the games initiate a circle of input-output-interaction that starts and maintains the course of events (Klimmt 2003). If the players do not take any actions at all, usually nothing new happens in the virtual world. For instance, in racing games, the user's vehicle only moves if he or she presses a certain button. The same applies to the virtual characters in adventure or sports games. Depending on the own input, the game program simulates specific incidences, like crashes with other cars or the appearance of new obstacles, upon which the player has to react with new input.

Hence, user-to-system interactivity goes along with the new experience of self-efficacy in a mediated world (Bandura 1997). Compared to computer games the reactions of other interactive media, like word processing software or internet sites, may appear less impressive or relevant. But on the whole new media expand the user's range of influence sort of into the mediated presentation.

Further far reaching consequences in terms of media based communication is achieved by another technical development, namely the conjunction of computer technology with modern telecommunications. This development makes it possible to create a network between individual computers. People around the globe can interact with and within the same mediated environment at the same time. Hence, computer networks provide opportunities (and are used) to develop new forms of user-to-user interactivity like electronic mail, chat, online communities, newsgroups, multiplayer online games, and so on. In the past five to ten years these phenomena have started to arise some research interest in the field of media studies and social sciences (e. g. Thimm 2000; Stegbauer 2001; Götzenbrucker 2001). The approaches and research questions are diverse, but yet the studies show that new media are used «to actively construct social meaning within the challenges and opportunities» posed by these media (Baym 2002, 66). Computer-mediated activities in computer-mediated environments<sup>9</sup> are reshaping communication and putting forth new relationships and social

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interaction between people and the computer, which somehow simulates «real» interaction.

<sup>9</sup> Metaphors of space like virtual environment, cyberspace, arena or multiuser dungeon are quite commonly used when describing the internet or new media. The mediating technology which is put between the users apparently is not so much perceived as a new communication channel but as a communication environment.

groups. Therefore the internet can be considered as a new arena for complex socio-cultural practices – which gives the notion of media socialisation a different meaning. Here the media are no longer just presenting and transmitting social norms, roles or other contents to an audience, but they allow for making and shaping actual socio-cultural experiences «in» a technically mediated environment.

## 6. Sozialisation und computer based media: a mutual connection

The analysis with regard to some of the theoretical issues and problems the concept of socialisation implies certainly has underscored that socialisation cannot be understood as a mono causal and one-sided course of effects. In other words, the individual is not rendered social, as it were, through imposed role expectations and social structures. The structures and social guidelines rather impinge on individual characters who develop, by coping with the social circumstances, their own ideas and behaviour. Hence, the same applies to media related socialisation, which is a process in the tensional field between media structures and mediated information on the one hand and motives, expectations, and socio-cultural contexts of the user on the other hand. That is, (adolescent) users always socialise themselves in the symbolic sphere of the media, too. Before further investigating the peculiarities of socialisation processes with regard to the «new» computer based media, I should like to point out that the connection between media usage and socialisation is a mutual one. The utilisation of media does not only influence actual processes of socialisation but an individual's socialisation history also forms a base for the actual use of media as a socio-cultural activity. This will be briefly explored in the following since this connection, too, is relevant for media-related research.

Social experience that a member of a particular social group (e. g. age group, gender or social background) has gained provides, among other things, potential explanations for specific forms of media usage. Quantitatively oriented media studies start from the assumption that there are links between social backgrounds and media utilisation when they for example discuss and describe characteristic features concerning media use and media preferences for different social groups. That is to say, empirically found differences with regard to media practice are – at least partially – related to different antecedent social experiences. Respective findings and arguments are being reported for «new media» like video games, computers, and the internet, too. One of the results which has been confirmed time and

again is that boys and girls prefer different media activities and contents (e. g. Greenfield 1984; Mühlen-Achs & Schorb 1995; Greenfield & Cocking 1996; Lange & Lüscher 1998; Livingstone & Bovill 2001; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2003). The *processes* which are at the root of these empirical differences, are usually not being discussed in the context of quantitatively oriented studies. Normally they are only taken into account in the compressed form of obtained social membership. This category is utilised as an independent variable in order to explain other phenomena, but it is not so much a subject to further investigation.

The limitations of approaches that make use of dependent and independent variables have increasingly been recognised by the social sciences. Accordingly, more qualitatively oriented approaches have been applied, by now. These new approaches aim at understanding the socio-cultural mechanisms and meanings from the point of view of the protagonists. From this new perspective, it is the processes and contexts rather than the effects of socialisation that are important. Yet, the ties between social experience and media practice can still be emphasised. Burkhard Schäffer, for example, has investigated the development of generation specific media cultures. He presumes that every age group grows up with specific types of contemporary media and interactively develops a mutual style of using them, which deviates the group from other generations. The members of each generation perceive their own styles of media usage, and their own media culture, as quasi natural ones. These styles and cultures have the tendency to last over the years and subliminally predetermine the way <new media> are dealt with. In exaggerated terms: someone who was born in the 1950s and who spent his youth using analogue media like record players, TV, and tape recorders, will approach computers and the internet in the same way they approached the familiar analogue media (Schäffer 2003). As mentioned above, media cultures also embrace a specific – mostly informally acquired – <media competency>, and they predispose positive as well as negative attitudes towards certain media.

For the generation that grew up in the 1990s (in western industrialised societies), utilising a computer was, for the first time, a normal experience. So, this generation acquired a specific <computer competency> which comprises the dimension of computer knowledge and literacy as well as the dimension of practical computer skills (Tully 2000). This competence may

vary with regard to gender and social background, but on the whole it exceeds the average computer competence of older generations.

The fact that media competency is predominantly acquired casually is of special interest when it comes to the medium computer because it is not merely an entertainment medium but an essential instrument for many jobs, as well. True, adolescents primarily use computers to play games and entertain themselves, but in this case their toy is not a simplistic model of a device from the adult world but it is basically the same device used in modern offices. Often the performance of computers used for computer games even surpasses that of office computers. Hence, some people believe that using the computer for entertainment purposes still possesses the potential to familiarise children with computers and may encourage the pursuit of a career in technology (Cocking & Greenfield 1996; Cassell 1999).

#### 7. Socialisation and new media – on the relevance of the content

In discussions and research conducted so far, there are two distinctive main approaches. With regards to socialisation, one primarily considers contents; the other focusses on different modes of media conveyance.

In work dealing with (possible) effects of content, three topics seem to be predominant: violence and aggression, gender issues, and ideologies (including world views and attitudes towards other ethnic groups).

Violence in the media frequently absorbs both the public and science. In the past, this topic was discussed with regards to almost all new media. As outlined above, a great deal of attention is currently focussed on the possible effects of playing computer games containing graphic violence. The predominant fear is that violent and aggressive media content leads to an increase of hostile feelings, aggressive thoughts, and violent behaviour in personalities that are regarded as socially and morally immature, i. e. especially in children and juveniles (for an overview, see Anderson & Bushman 2001; Anderson 2004; Bergmann 2000).<sup>10</sup> Referring to new, interactive media, mostly stronger effects are assumed compared to film and television, for instance. Reason being that interactive media supposedly depict and transmit information in a more realistic way – an assumption

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<sup>10</sup> Computer games like *America's Army Operations* reveal that in the military domain, such learning effects are not so much feared but desired. At least, the fascination many male juveniles have with first person shooters is being tied in with to try to convey the army and its ideological basis.

which, of course, refers to the presentation mode rather than to the presented content. However, all available research work and its results are disputable, both theoretically and methodologically. This cannot and shall not be discussed in more detail in this paper (see e. g. Klimmt & Trepte 2003; Squire 2002). Still, from a socialisation-based perspective, the following aspects are worth mentioning:

1. Existing studies at best only measure short-term increases in aggressiveness, rather than long-term effects on social or anti-social behaviour.
2. Those studies imply relatively trivial (mono-) causal connections, neglecting the constructive character of digesting (media) information (Klimmt & Trepte 2003).
3. Not rarely correlation is being confused with causality.
4. Violence is removed from the narrative context it is originally situated in. The assumption is, that actions perceived or developed in a media context are simply transferred to situations in everyday life (Squire 2002).

Work dealing with implications of gender roles as depicted in video and computer games usually has a different focus and follows a non-causal argumentation. Instead, it is pointed out that media, just like other agents of socialisation in society, convey social roles (here: gender roles) which boys and girls deal with during their adolescence (Cassell & Jenkins 1999; Dietz 1998). Similar to the agenda setting approach mentioned above, focus is put on those ideas and messages that, without being topical themselves, form the basis of any content conveyed. In modern (or postmodern) societies, images and information delivered through media play an increasingly important role in children's efforts to define and integrate into their self-concept social categories like gender. If traditional and stereotypical presentations prevail, this may have an influence, e. g. on boys' and girls' gender role expectations and definitions. Consequently, their identity formation could be influenced, too. In my opinion, the media are thus rightly criticised if the way they portray gender roles occasionally falls way behind the degree of differentiation reached in society. Content analyses have actually shown that new media like computer games predominantly portray gender roles in a stereotypical way. For example, most controllable characters in computer games are male, and the portrayal of male and female characters tends to be even more clichéd than in films and

advertisings. Heroic, strong males are often juxtaposed to feeble, passive female characters (Dietz 1998; Fromme & Gecius 1997).

To date only little attention has been paid to the question whether or not it makes a difference for processes of identification and socialisation when a character presented in the media can be controlled and/or (re)designed by the recipient. According to a recent study the parasocial relationship to *Lara Croft*, a famous computer game character, is less distinct than the parasocial relationship to selected film or TV characters (Klimmt & Vorderer 2002). This may lead to the assumption that the relationship to roles represented by controllable characters (or avatars) are not so much based on identification, but on interaction with the virtual environment. These characters act as an extended arm and electronic proxy of the user within the virtual environment (Fritz 1995). The user's attention seems to be drawn off the presented role models as soon as the avatar is engaged in intense virtual interactions. From there we could at first argue that representation (e. g. of gender) becomes less powerful for users of new media – at least for experienced ones – than of traditional media. But we could also argue that it becomes more difficult for the user to critically reflect on the presented role models, because the reception becomes a casual, mostly unconscious part of acting within the virtual world. On the other hand interactive media often allow the users to choose and design (or redesign) their avatar. In that case we could argue that the construction of role models becomes topical. The users are not confined to adopting given role models but they may or even have to create their own character (that is the avatar's race, sex, outfit, attributes, capacities and so on). This is why Sherry Turkle claims that MUDs<sup>11</sup> can be described as identity workshops where the users play with new or different aspects or concepts of their selves (Turkle 1995).

Something similar can be said about world views and ideologies conveyed by new media. As is the case with gender roles, the ideologies, norms, and world views usually are not explicit topics. Rather, they are seemingly natural premises the new media (like the traditional mass media) employ. To some extent, these premises may reflect the programmers' and design-

<sup>11</sup> MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) are text-based virtual environments on the internet where hundreds of users may be logged in simultaneously. They can be regarded as the non-commercialised antecedents of the so-called MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) or MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) which present shared 3D graphical environments on the internet.

ners' views, who may often not be aware of what social and cultural concepts they are attached to.

Again we could argue that an interactive access would not necessarily advance the development of a critical and reflective distance to contents like that. Rather, the necessity to constantly interact with the virtual environment could detract the users from the incidentally mediated ideologies and norms. This assumption is backed by research on the perception of computer games which usually are highly interactive. Their game internal requirements tend to absorb all the player's advertency. Studies on the relevance of game contents have shown that, from the player's perspective, the topics and stories are less important than in other media. When playing a computer game, one's own action and striving for success can – depending on the type of game – be more crucial than the content or the story (Witting, Esser & Ibrahim 2003).

In the past, discussions have been sparked by – among others – the ideologies underlying the games *Command & Conquer: Generals* and *The Sims*, respectively. The stereotypical way in which the selectable US, Chinese, and terrorist units were portrayed in the strategy game *C&C: Generals* led the German *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* (Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons) to the decision to put this game on the so-called <index> of media not appropriate for minors.<sup>12</sup> As regards the simulation game *The Sims*, the inherent ideology of consumption became a target of critical comments (e. g. Kline et al. 2003).<sup>13</sup>

But communication and interaction in the area of new media is not limited to prefabricated media environments and contents. Media usage here also goes beyond media reception in terms of traditional mass communication. Users can be – to different degrees – actively involved in the development of content: e. g. creating one's own avatar, designing a personal homepage,

<sup>12</sup> The German law for the protection of minors not only comprises regulations for the age-rating of different media, but it also allows for 'indexing' media which are regarded as especially harmful for adolescents. Media which have been put on the index mustn't be distributed to people under 18, mustn't be distributed via direct mail selling, and mustn't be advertised. The reasons for indexing *Command & Conquer: Generals* can be found in the online-version of the gamer's magazine *Game Star* at <http://www.gamestar.de/magazin/specials/vermischt/11740/index.html> [28 Feb. 2005].

<sup>13</sup> Another area where ideologies seem to be widespread are marketing concepts for action computer games (Witting 2003).

modifying or expanding a given media environment, etc. These are, in the truest sense of the word, constructive activities which go along with normative as well as content-related decisions and selections. Hence, these activities can contribute to a more reflexive approach to media usage and media communication. This applies for communicative and social processes in networked virtual environments as well, since they cannot start with seemingly natural social circumstances and structures, but have to be arranged and designed in all respects (Marotzki 1997).

However, in all attempts to theorise or empirically study socialisation effects of media content, one must pay attention to the important fact that media content is in large part fictional. Fictional media worlds are not meant to inform about the <real world>, but to entertain (Luhmann 1996; Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld 2004). This applies to the new media as well. But they provide interactive entertainment. None of the activities in interactive environments have any direct influence on the real world. Like games these environments constitute their own realities, separate in time and space from so-called reality (Huizinga 1956; Sutton-Smith 1978). Here, some fixed laws and provisions of the real world do not apply; for instance, a simulated car accident does not have any negative effects on the health of those involved. Interactive shared environments constitute their own social worlds. They might look and even feel like reality (or what is perceived as such), but the virtual inhabitants or actors usually know they are in a game-like situation, though. So there is a mostly knowledge based borderline between these different realities.

This is not to say that activities in interactive environments framed as entertainment, fiction, or play do not have any relevance towards socialisation processes. But their relevance can be very different from the relevance of events and experiences in what we call the real world. They provide a chance to distance oneself from the demands of the everyday world, including socialisational expectations. Hence, one has the opportunity to experience relief, play through different alternatives, give in to the excitement of something different, try and practise new behaviours, or work on conflicts. This is not in all cases a harmless and harmonic affair, as Brian Sutton-Smith (e. g. 1986) stressed time and again. However, it is known from development psychology and cultural theory that experiences with fiction and playing are in many respects essential for personality development. These experiences are of particular importance as they train the ability to distinguish between play and non-play, between fiction and

reality, which means knowing that different behavioural rules may apply in different contexts.

My thesis is that acting in and participating in the construction of virtual worlds can also be beneficial to these framing skills. In media education, they are seen as one important dimension of <media competency>, which is the main agenda of media education – and which has also been recognised as important influencing factor of possible (socialisational) effects of media (Klimmt & Trepte 2003). The assumption is that this competency is also decisive for the question whether or not a transfer of behaviour from a world framed as fiction or play, respectively, takes place (Fritz 1997).

### 8. Socialisation and new media: on the relevance of formal aspects

Interactivity – or perceived interactivity – has already been referred to as the most conspicuous feature of new media which leads us to the question which relevance formal aspects and means of conveying may have towards socialisation. The earlier statement that interactive media can convey their information in a more realistic and credible way than traditional media already hinted at this aspect. But what exactly does <more realistic> mean in this context? What is meant is not a proximity to reality with respect to content, but with respect to how information (about something) is mediated. From this perspective visual and audiovisual media present the world (and even fictional worlds) in a more realistic way than a text, for example. In this respect, computer technology was for a while lagging behind standards reached by audiovisual media like films. But the realism offered by traditional audiovisual media is limited to the dimensions of sound and vision. Computer-based media, with its interactivity, opened up a new dimension of realism; and developments in this field have not reached their end yet. An interactive presentation of a world which is accessible not only optically and acoustically is perceived as realistic in a new way. Interactivity here may cover the following aspects:

- The simulation of movement in and through a media environment: The computer can actualise the presented environment in real-time according to the user's virtual movements.
- The simulation of action in a media environment: The user may manipulate some of the presented objects or features which means their status is different afterwards. Previously, media worlds did not allow for such self-efficacy.

- The simulation of interaction in a media environment: The user may sort of interact and communicate with computer generated characters.

Shared virtual environments, as provided by multi-user-games for instance, add another aspect enhancing the realistic impression of the depicted events. These games offer the possibility to interact, in a virtual world, with characters not controlled by a computer, but by other real people (user-to-user interaction). These are no longer parasocial phenomena as described in the context of television and film (Horton & Wohl 1986). Instead, we are dealing with the paradox of actual sociality in a virtual environment.

How can the socialisational relevance of media interactivity be described? This is a question for (further) research. Here I just want to outline two perspectives which could be of importance. One aspect is that user-to-system interactivity is tied to specific demands on the user. If users want to interact with or in a computer mediated environment they need (to acquire) certain skills and competencies (Gebel, Gurt & Wagner 2004). They need to be able to handle the hardware as well as the software. Otherwise, the virtual world may remain all but shut to them. In this respect, interactive new media casually and informally convey computer skills and competencies. Generally spoken, the users get used to computer technology in its various forms of application. They acquire a specific <computer literacy> (Sutton-Smith 1986; Tully 1994). The qualities and dimensions of this literacy still need to be explored in more detail. Patricia Greenfield's thesis is that we are witnessing an increase in <visual intelligence>, linked to the development of new technologies and visual communication, while also being accompanied by an average decrease in (literary) vocabulary (Greenfield 1998).

A second aspect is that we are confronted with new technical developments which tend to blur the borders between what is perceived as reality and as virtual reality. New immersive technologies make it more and more difficult for the user to clearly distinguish between the <real> world and computer mediated artificial worlds. The same applies for augmented reality technologies which actually project additional visual information into the user's real world perception.<sup>14</sup> They are presented as a possibility to enrich one's real environment by providing relevant additional informa-

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of current projects and applications see <http://www.augmented-reality.org/> [28 Feb. 2005].

tion virtually. So, unlike virtual reality augmented (or mixed) reality includes the real environment. Such technologies might be useful in different ways, but they also raise the question, whether or not the individual will always have the chance to clearly identify what is «real» and what is «virtual» when his or her senses don't perceive any difference. Up to now the ability to distinguish between media worlds and the real world, between fiction and reality, is regarded as a central dimension of so-called media-competency. The pre-conditions for developing this framing ability could become problematic – and this would imply a fundamental challenge to our concept of individual autonomy. But the protagonists and developers usually do not reflect too much about the politics of new technologies to which they might contribute.

## 9. Conclusion

It has been shown that the outcome of selected socio-cultural experiences is unpredictable when socialisation, in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, is defined as the active and contextually embedded digestion of information and experiences.<sup>15</sup> The development of behaviour – and personality in general – is comprised of a plurality of different conditions and processes which influence each other mutually. This difficulty to explain clear causal correlations might be interpreted as a weakness of the notion of socialisation. However, I favour a different perspective. On principle, assuming somewhat mechanical effects cannot do justice to social and cultural phenomena. Yet, the concept of socialisation is a productive one, from a theoretical as well as from an empirical perspective. It allows to study and describe the relation between conditions and expectations relevant for socialisation on the one hand<sup>16</sup> and the (re-) constructive processes of acquisition on the other hand. Research on media socialisation therefore has to observe both sides, the mediated messages as well as how they are perceived and acquired by the user.

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<sup>15</sup> British Cultural Studies favour a similar approach. Stuart Hall, for example, proposed a model of mass communication which stressed the importance of active interpretation (decoding) within relevant codes (Hall 1980).

<sup>16</sup> Issues of socio-cultural exclusion and socio-economic disparities remain important in this context. The notion «digital divide», for example, draws attention to possible new knowledge gaps which can arise with new media (Bonfadelli 2002; DiMaggio et al. 2004). In knowledge based societies the ability to participate in new possibilities of communication, interaction, and information is also based on the access to the tools.

With regard to interactive media, the approaches and prestudies at hand which attempt to analyse what is conveyed by them (for computer games, see e. g. Fromme, Meder & Vollmer 2000; Aarseth, Smedstad & Sunnanå 2003) should be further developed into a broadly accepted analytical methodology as we have them for older media like films and pictures. From a socialisational perspective, an analysis of interactive media worlds has to be focussed in a way which can systematically point out their qualities as informal learning environments. At that, especially the roles, rules, values, ideologies and so forth that are not explicitly topical have to be laid open. With regard to new media, it could be very fruitful to try and analyse the mediating and framing function of the technical side in more detail, as Latour demanded to generally do in social sciences (Latour 2001). After all, the possibilities as well as the limitations of acting in media environments are to a great degree defined technically, as are the possibilities and limitations of interacting and communicating in shared virtual environments (Marotzki 2003).

Having pleaded to make use of a non-trivial notion of socialisation in order to study and describe casual processes of (socially relevant) learning with interactive media, I finally want to draw attention to developments which partly limit the range of this approach. Our present socio-cultural world is characterised by plurality. Media have contributed to this pluralisation, and the world of media itself has become immense. So-called new media have not substituted the old ones, but have been added to the existing media collection, which today is bigger than ever. It particularly exceeds the processing abilities of any individual. This forces one to make choices, and any choice is an act of putting oneself into a specific position in the socio-cultural world. Having to make choices is constitutional for the notion of socialisation becoming too narrow to adequately seize the phenomenon of learning (that is: acquiring the world) outside educational settings (Meder 2002). This is the background for the currently growing interest in so-called informal and self-directed learning, which in a way shoves itself in between the spheres of socialisation and education. Therefore, the growing up of children today may no longer be described as a predominantly «original» process of socialisation. Especially in the leisure domain children are not only allowed, but also expected to make their own choices. A different approach is necessary in addition to socialisation research concentrating on the more casual and involuntary aspects of acquiring social norms and values with and through media. Such research should also

study processes of informal and self-directed learning with and through media.

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