Courtship patterns in the information age.

Theoretical reflections on the impact of computer technology on human grouping.

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In diesem Aufsatz werden Medien als Gegenstände, die von Menschen als Zeichen verwendet werden, verstanden. Vor diesem Hintergrund wird argumentiert, dass das menschliche Beziehungsverhalten sich bei Verwendung von Computertechnologie als dominantem Medium verändert. Die These ist, dass unverbindlicheres und zugleich reflektierteres Verhalten bedeutender wird.

A medium is material substance used as signs by humans. Based on this concept it is argued that the use of computer technology as the dominant medium changes our unconscious attitudes and therefore influences the research process,

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which can be known at the same time as the influence takes place. Accordingly the influence of computers on human courtship patterns and our unconscious attitudes of personal relationships is analysed. It is shown that the dominant use of computers leads to reduced courtesy and responsability and increased reflection in social behaviour.

1. Introduction

„Meetic. All you need is love." Does this not sound tempting? Have you ever caught yourself thinking: „Why not give it a try?" Lots of people answer with "yes", and a few billion actually do try it. For the year 2005, reports indicate some five billion users of online dating agencies in Germany (Oberhuber 2005) and revenues of $516 million from consumer subscriptions for the US online dating market (Pasha 2005).

Online dating is a mass phenomenon. It is definitely not the only way of dating, since only a certain subpopulation uses this medium. However, it can be assumed that online dating will spread throughout the society with the increase in internet usage, which attracts the attention of researchers. Examples of research questions related to this issue include:

- How should these systems be designed in order to enable the most effective partner search?
- Which search strategies do users apply?
- How can users be retained?
- How can the marriage market be described?
- Which patterns can be analysed from the logged behaviour in online dating agencies?
- How can dating behaviour be analysed using statistical methods (Fiore 2004, Holme et.al. 2004)?

With these questions the existing research focusses on product selling strategies and the description of the phenomenon, while a theoretical framework needed to understand the phenomenon is lacking.

My suggestion is that the needed theory should focus on one methodological problem, i. e. we have to assume that the use of computer technology as the dominant medium changes our unconscious

attitudes (Cassirer 1930). This change is not only a theoretical problem, but the one which affects practical research. Since I am using a computer to write this article on the influence of computer technology on unconscious attitudes, I have to assume that an influence of the medium on the unconscious part of my own writing takes place at the same time. We always need a medium to express our thoughts and can, therefore, not escape the influence the chosen medium has on the creation of theory, which seems to be a vicious circle. Having said this, however, I have demonstrated that the influence of the medium should not only be considered as a theoretical problem and have a practical effect at the same time, but can also simultaneously happen and be known. A specific dialectical thinking method is applied here, which was first proposed by Hönigswald in 1927. Its core assumption is that Unity and Difference take place at the same time (Meder 1975).

With this methodological approach in the background, I will here discuss two theses:

- The broad use of computer technology in our culture influences human courtship patterns and our unconscious attitudes of personal relationships.
- Online dating agencies solve a problem which has previously been induced by computer technology.

By discussing these theses, I will show that online dating agencies are an example of the media induced change in culture. Before discussing these theses, it has to be shown that courtship patterns are related to an existential human need, because insertion into an existential need allows the computer technology to gain power over people. To understand this power which leads to a change in courtship behaviour, the interests expressed in the structure of computer technology must be considered.

2. Courtship behaviour is existential

Reproduction is the basis for life and amphigony is essential to higher animals. In animals, reproductive behaviour is substantially fixed by instincts. Since human beings do not only follow their instincts, but also patterns which they have learned by participating in culture, the fact that

the biological need is reflected in culture (especially in courtship behaviour) shows the existential character of courtship behaviour. The patterns derived from culture and instinct are intertwined and different at the same time.

According to Nietzsche and Darwin, culture depends primarily on instincts (Miller 1999). However, this position does not take into account the fact that culture detaches social processes from primary instincts, although social behaviour remains connected to them. For example, primary instincts are accessible in excess (Merleau-Ponty 1966, Baudrillard 1991), thus opening the possibility to undermine the cultural form of consciousness. This accessibility shows the connection between the primary instinct and the social pattern. Yet, with the introduction of media, which are a manifestation of culture, this process becomes detached from the primary instincts. Thus, primary instincts, which indicate an existential need, and the respective social behaviour change through the influence of media.

Baudrillard (1991: 204) has shown that inserting something into existential needs allows the attainment of power. His first example is the existential need to set up a relationship to the dead. By inserting themselves into the relationship with the dead and taking over the symbolic exchange with the dead, priests gain power over people. The same happens when capitalists insert machines into the relationship with work, or teachers insert themselves into the relationship with cultural knowledge, or when computer technology is inserted into courtship behaviour. The priest, the capitalist and the teacher gain power over people owing to their control over the existential needs. Based on this power, they have the possibility to accomplish or effectuate their further interests.

It is not my intention here to concentrate on the interests of those people (which nowadays probably concern mostly money), but to analyse the power that computer technology gains through its insertion into an existential need. A Computer is, naturally, not a person. It does not have an own free will and it does not want to gain power. Instead, the interests

of certain people are transferred to computers. That is to say: the influence which computers have on courtship behaviour is informed by the ideas of people who construct computer technology. These people express their will through actual computers, which, later on, have an effect on courtship behaviour. Thus the interests of people who build computers becomes effective in courtship behaviour, which are two completely different contexts.

Since the context is so different, the interests of the people who construct computers have to be interpreted, just like in any form of communication the message needs to be interpreted. However, we are not following communication theories here, since we are not analysing the message, but the physical structure of the medium. People using computers for dating accept and thereby interpret the interests of the people constructing the physical computer (Cassirer 1930). As the contexts of the people constructing computers and the contexts of the people dating are different, it is difficult to understand how these courtship patterns are shaped.

The above described process implies the understanding of computer technology as a medium. As I have shown elsewhere (Swertz 2000), a medium is material substance used as signs by humans. These three elements reflect on each other. When a medium is constructed, it reflects the will of the constructor (just like a book shows the intention of the author). At the same time, a medium reflects other media: e.g., a word processor reflects paper and pencil. The three elements of a medium are interconnected and different at the same time. Unlike Dijkstra/Jonasson/Sembill who state that "signs are used to denote objects" and "can be stored in an information medium" (2001:3) we claim here that signs are not only used to denote objects but are objects themselves at the same time and therefore inherently "stored".

Understanding a medium ? as material substance used by humans as signs shows that the interests of people constructing a medium are expressed its physical structure. When a medium is used, the user understands the will of the constructor (just as a reader understands the

will of an author). Of course this does not determine the user (likewise, an author does not determine the reader), but something must be accepted when a medium is used. This process is rarely referred to and, therefore, very effective in influencing the unconscious part of human behaviour. Thus, starting the analysis with the physical structure of the medium is the best strategy to identify the influence of computer technology on courtship behaviour. In their physical dimension, computers are constructed as digital, electric Turing automatons.

3. Courtship in time and space

Courtship behaviour is a primary instinct related to social behaviour, which, in turn, is learned through media. This implies that courtship behaviour is at the same time innate and shaped by culture. Theculturaly shaped courtship patterns have to be passed from one generation to the next. In this process courtship patterns change over time (while learning is also a kind of social pattern).

The time structure of social behaviour is shaped by the medium used for communication. The medium determines how the communicated information is distributed in time and space (Innis 1952). Since computers are electrical machines, information is transferred at the speed of electrons in copper cables or the speed of light in glass fibre cables. Thus, the transmission of the information in space is fast compared to books or oral communication. In the electrical computer nowadays, memory chips based on transistors are most often used. This technology is capable of keeping information for the duration of nanoseconds. Consequently, the transmission of information over time is rather poor, and it does not become much better with flash memory, hard disks or compact discs. The latter, for example, is capable of keeping information for decades, while printed books keep information for centuries and stone plates even for millennia.

A medium transferring information fast in space and very little in time has another impact on culture than a medium transferring information slowly

in space and well in time (Innis 1952). Through this impact computer technology induces us to develop new courtship patterns, and by developing these new patterns we accept the social impact of computer technology. This impact affects responsibility and courtesy in courtship behaviour.

The effect on courtesy can be shown by harking back to the concepts of I-Identity and We-Identity which were introduced by Norbert Elias (1996). According to Elias I-Identity and We-Identity are in a dialectical relationship: they both necessarily exist, but the balance between I-Identity and We-Identity changes over time (Elias 1996: 347). In clannish cultures, the We-Identity even predominates over the I-Identity in order to ensure survival. Additionally, there is only one group that can be addressed as "we". But through history the complexity and size of social units has changed significantly.

The relevant aspect here can be shown by taking into account the difference between villages and cities. While in villages the number of groups we can be a part of is small, in cities the number of groups we can participate in is by far bigger, as there are more societies, clubs or associations. This means that the number of groups which can be addressed as "we" is higher, offering, in turn, the chance to change the group. While in the Stone Age the group could hardly be changed but only be left, in a modern city the We-group can easily be replaced.

One consequence of the easy change between groups is that participating in a group becomes less binding. If there is only one reading club in your village you can decide to participate in it or not. Thus leaving the reading club if you do not like some of the people there means leaving the group without having the chance to enter another one. In a city where many reading clubs exist you can change the club, that is, the We-group, more easily.

This tendency is intensified by the Internet. Through the fast transmission of information in space there are hundreds of clubs, communities or networks available. This tendency is enforced by a possibility Turing automatons open up: since Turing automatons are simulation machines

(a Turing automaton is capable of simulating a Turing automaton) it is possible to create new types of communication rooms by just installing a piece of software. In an environment where hundreds of groups are available, changing the group one belongs to is simple and easy. Changing the We-groups they belong to quite often (and not never, like in the Stone Age, or rarely, like in ancient villages), leaves people with the I as the only permanent structure (Elias 1996: 272). The balance between I and We is moved to the I. At the same time, the simple and easy change of We-groups in online culture reduces the commitment to a certain group: if you do not like a certain chat room, there are hundreds of others waiting for you. The courtesy in social behaviour is thus reduced.

4. Courtship goes public

The reduced courtesy is not induced by a certain software but by the physical structure of computer technology. Therefore it shapes the media habit of everybody who frequently uses a computer. The media habit describes the expectations induced by a medium which is mainly used by people. For example, if people spend a lot of time with computers they gain a media habit which fits the computer. They assimilate to the computer. This media habit influences the behaviour also in other contexts, that is, the decreased courtesy in online relationships, which is induced by computer technology, also affects other relationships. The readiness to leave one's family or a real life partner is increased, thus causing the problem of finding a new partner more often than under the condition of the book as the mainly used medium.

This shows that online dating agencies are solving a problem through computer technology that has been caused by computer technology in the first place. In contrast to Holmes, who claims: „We believe that the interaction on-line is exposed to less structural forces than what is typically the case in most other social settings." (Holmes et.al. 2004: 155), it is shown here that the structural force of computer technology does shape the time and additionally the space where courtship behaviour takes place.

There are further influences on the unconscious part of courtship behaviour which can be assumed:

Responsibility is intertwined with courtship behaviour. Responsibility means to be held accountable by others for our actions. If the relationship with other people is loosened by an easy change of groups, the individual can easily escape from his or her responsibilities. One is no longer responsible for the group, but only for oneself. One's own interests become more important than the progress of mankind, the latter being a typical media habit of the print-book culture.

Using not just a communication room inside a solid structure (like a church), but a solid material substance (the physical computer) executing a piece of software, which, in turn, is a written text, has another effect. While a building also has qualities that are not explicitly planned but implicitly derived from unconscious decisions made by workmen, thus never expressed in language, software has only qualities that are expressed in language. Everything that is shown on the computer screen has before been expressed in an algorithm. Expressing things in language is a more conscious process. Computer technology, therefore, forces the tendency to make courtship behaviour, which is in many parts an unconscious process, more conscious. Courtship patterns tend to become a more reflected process.

Courtship behaviour is transferred from the private sphere into the public, in this context meant as the anonymous mass, "the public". Showing oneself in an online dating agency means offering oneself to the public. People using online agencies do not have much control over who is going to see their offers and who is going to respond. Just as the meaning of manpower has been reduced to the market value by industrialisation, the same now happens to personal relationships (the recent discussion on social software is indicative of this process). Social relations have as much value as people are willing to offer on the market. Since this offer is copied throughout the Internet by everybody watching it, the body loses in this process what Walter Benjamin has described as the aura. The production of the body becomes more important than the

body itself. Coping with this kind of relationship to our own body is not simple and might cause fear, but there is certainly an online group offering help.

While the examples used here prove the applicability of the suggested theory by referring to observations, they do not provide proof by empirical studies. Conducting these studies will be the necessary next step, which will also show the relevance of the suggested theory for teaching media literacy

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