Social Support Quality in Internet Based Information and Communication: From "Digital Divide" to "Voice Divide"*

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Introduction

National and international studies demonstrate that the number of teenagers using the internet increases. But even though they actually do have access from different places to the information and communication pool of the internet, there is evidence that the ways in which teenagers use the net – regarding the scope and frequency in which services are used as well as the preferences for different contents of these services – differ significantly in relation to socio-economic status, education, and gender.

The results of the regarding empirical studies may be summarised as such: teenager with low (formal[1]) education especially use internet services embracing 'entertainment, play and fun' while higher educated teenagers (also) prefer intellectually more demanding and particularly services supplying a greater variety of communicative and informative activities.

More generally, pedagogical and sociological studies investigating "digital divide" in a differentiated and sophisticated way - i.e. not only in terms of differences between those who do have access to the Internet and those who do not - suggest that the internet is no space beyond 'social reality' (e.g. DiMaggio & Hargittai 2001, 2003; Vogelgesang, 2002; Welling, 2003). Different modes of utilisation, that structure the internet as a social space are primarily a specific contextualisation of the latter – and thus, the opportunities and constraints in virtual world of the internet are not less than those in the 'real world' related to unequal distributions of material, social and cultural resources as well as social embeddings of the actors involved.

This fact of inequality is also true regarding the outcomes of using the internet.

Empirical and theoretical results concerning forms and processes of networking and community building – i.e. sociability in the internet, as well as the social embeddings of the users which are mediated through the internet – suggest that net based communication and information processes may entail the resource 'social support'. Thus, with reference to social work and the task of compensating the reproduction of social disadvantages – whether they are medial or not - the ways in which teenagers get access to and utilize net based social support are to be analysed.

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[1] In the stratified German school system 'low formal education' refers to the *Hauptschule* (and special schools

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The Network Perspective and "Social Support"

The concepts of „social networks" and „social support" are frequently used as interchangeable. Nevertheless it is analytically important to distinguish between different types of support.

Combining the outcome of different studies and utilizing a network-analytical perspective as an heuristic frame it is most appropriate to understand social support as a multi-dimensional construct (Barrera 1986; House et. al. 1988; Sarason et.al. 1990; Turner et.al. 1999; Vaux 1988) that includes: (a) the structural apparatus resp. the place of supportive transactions, (b) the support exchanges themselves (the domains of support – e.g. emotional, financial, informational,

and social network support), and (c) the subjective appraisal of availability and satisfaction with support (cf. Henly et.al. 2003).

Structure of Social Support Networks

Regarding the structure of social support networks, it is useful to draw distinctions in terms of strength of the relations - the 'strong ties' and the 'weak ties' as Marc Granovetter (1983) puts it - between the actors involved. 'Strong ties' (like family ties and close friendships) tend to produce closures and foster internal homogeneity as well as expectations that the members of this network share – and thus reinforce - common values, norms and beliefs. "Weak ties" are usually rather characterized by a greater permeability and heterogeneity (e.g. of age and status) between the actors involved. Weak tied networks are much more likely to have what Ronald Burt (2000) calls 'structural holes', and to serve as 'bridges' between socially distant actors and may thus address a larger variety of perhaps more specific needs.

Obviously 'strong ties' and 'weak ties' fulfil different functions: Networks of weak ties between different (status) individuals are considered to be best for providing access to information, influence, and resources that can facilitate new perspectives and minimize redundancy (cf. Woolcock, 2000). Affiliated strong ties however may serve as a substantial basis for sustaining and stabilizing personal identity manifested in stable and every day life embeddings and may thus provide the support required to endure life's challenges.

One may conclude that the more personal provision is necessary as a reliable and certain basis for problem solving and durable care, the better dense and narrow networks can match this demand (cf. Nestmann 1988). Therefore strong ties are good for enabling people to „get by" while stabilizing their given level of everyday life conduct. The more social support requires new information, new contacts, new perspectives, changing social roles and alterations of thinking, emotion, and acting however, the more helpful looser, more open and rather weak relations seem to be. In terms of Woolcock they are more likely to provide capacities to „get ahead". Notably strong and weak personal relations imply different forms of social support matching different needs.

Domains of Social Support

"Social support communication is traditionally considered to be the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages conveying emotion, information or referral, to help reduce someone's uncertainty or stress, and whether directly or indirectly, communicate to an individual that she or he is valued and cared for by others." (Walther & Boyd 2002)

Research about the attraction of net-based social support within Online Self Help Groups - like the studies of Walther and Boyd (2002) and Braithwaite et al. (1999) for instance - suggest utilizing a categorization provided by Cutrona and Suhr (1992) to differentiate social support. Modifying these reflections I propose to differentiate social support into "informational support", "social network support", "emotional support" and "esteem support":

"Informational support"	forms of advice, factual input and feedback
"Social network support"	directing or referring someone to another person or group of people who are able and willing to deliver support or advice in order to solve problems of personal or social life praxis
"Emotional support"	expressions of caring, concern, empathy, and sympathy
"Esteem support"	expressing admiration and/or understanding another's worth. Thus, esteem support reflects a conception of recognition as suggested by Nancy Fraser (2001) and Axel Honneth (1992). This may be regarded as a form of ethical support that equals what some commentators characterise as the moral basis of social work.

These modified categories are, of course, analytical ideal types.

"Emotional support" and "esteem support" rather refer to 'strong ties' while there is a strong relation between "informational support", "social network support" and 'weak ties'.

Also the way how teenagers evaluate the availableness of and contentment with social support is strongly connected with issues concerning access to its sources and also related barriers and exclusionary processes.

Barriers and Exclusionary Processes

A considerable number of help-seeking-pathway research studies suggest that dense relations (like parents, close friends or twosome relations) are the preferred resource of teenagers, in order to tackle most of everyday life problems, concerns and questions. These relations are also most appropriate to receive emotional support. Thus the 'strong ties' utilized here are without any doubt useful. Regarding structures and contents of social support however it is evident that they may also feature specific restrictions that affect the availability of support. This is especially the

case if:

➢ parents and friends are themselves originators of the concerns

➢ they are not regarded as to be adequate contact persons concerning the issue

➢ the information and estimations they may provide are already known and not really helpful: they don't know the ropes

➢ the existence of the problem and / or the demand of the kind of support contradicts their norms and values

➢ intimate or embarrassing problems are highlighted (also problematic because reputation and gossip travels faster in closed networks).

The boundaries of social support within 'strong ties' can be described with respect to three aspects:

1. the problem of redundancy and thus limited information
2. the problem of standardization and thus reduction of personal freedom
3. the problem of homogeneity and exclusive ties of solidarity and thus the production and exclusion of outsiders.

In her study from 1987 Mara B. Adelman points to this relation: "Network distance enhances perceived anonymity and allows people to seek information and support without having to deal with the uncertainty of how those in primary relationships might respond: The sexually active female teenager, for example, may avoid discussing issues of contraception with close friends and family, but may safely discuss contraception with weak ties who are socially distanced from her primary network." (132)

If Adelman is right the internet seems to be a truly Eldorado of this form of support taking to account how it is usually described: Easy, multi-directional, transcending spatial and cultural distances in order to communicate with mostly different people about personal interesting issues, to gather information about personally interesting topics and being only restricted by the borders of technical access.

But – as always – reality seems to be more complicated. Again: The internet is no space beyond 'social reality' and there is increasing evidence that a blurring of social boundaries usually does not take place in online-communication. Instead separate distinctive and socially homogeneous structured spaces are constituted within the communicative practice of using the internet. Pippa Norris (2003) has recently pointed out that participation in most online groups seems may actually have the capacity to cut cross generation lines but usually does little to bridge racial,

socio-economical or class divides. These results align with research undertaken in Germany: Schönberger (2000) indicates specific preconditions related to participation in different communicative online spaces on the level of their contents as well as on the level of communicative practices. Even though issues examined in certain forums may match the own interests of a certain user (e.g. the search for 'social support' concerning a specific issue), the sheer convergence of interests referring to the contents of the service alone is insufficient. Further conditions refer to social, economic, cultural, ideological, and generational convergences.

These insights are crucial for an inquiry of online as well as offline self-help groups.

International studies suggest indeed that offline self-help groups are usually based on shared thematic interests and/or experiences of (active) users. In their self-organised structure they provide a space of opportunity for informative exchange and emotional support referring to the relevant issues within the group (The themes are materialised in the 'on topic structure' of the self-help groups e.g. "alt.support.depression").

Here mutual exchange between the affected or interested, the involved emotional backing combined with a stronger tendency to self-disclosure based on anonymity and a compensation of discrimination in real life is highlighted. Even though there is a lack of evidence or contradictions in the suggestions referring to socio-demographic formation of the users of this organisational form of social support, there is hardly any doubt about restrictions in access and stratifications of social inequality.

For a long time, evidence of participation research suggests a middle class bias in self organisation. Using data from ALLBUS[3], Brömme and Strasser (2001) show that just because of a considerable increase of small self-organised forms of organisation people with low educational degrees are disaffiliated from a participation in voluntary associations in a broad scope, as they do not possess the necessary resources of access (and the required social capital neither): "Not the affiliations to a specific moral milieu but communicative competences, organisational capabilities, negotiation qualifications and the ability to insert actively own interests and so to connect personal advance are important disposition for this form of engagement". Thus self-help groups are no easy accessible associations but arrangements of resource accumulation for educational homogenous active agents.

As the Deutsche Shell Study (2002) points out, this is not only true for offline engagement. The

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[3] The German General Social Survey (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften - ALLBUS) is a biennial survey on attitudes, behaviour and social structure in the Federal Republic of Germany.

findings of its qualitative approximation to self organised teenage engagement on the internet also show a similar relevance of the educational degree. Obviously Robert Mertons 'Matthew effect' is confirmed: 'success breeds success' or the successful succeed.

More differentiated evidence about actual restrictions to success and closure within net-based self-organised social support is provided by the study of Galegher, Sproull and Kiesler (1998) on Legitimacy, Authority and Community in electronic support groups.

They point out for those seeking advice - and not just observe the problem exchange of others (so called 'lurkers') - it is necessary to give evidence to the group, that they are entitled to get an answer. This happens through picking out their affiliation to the group and the problems discussed there and explicitly theme common issues of this group in their demand. „Questions that did not explicitly acknowledge the common bond as well as problem group membership were likely to be ignored" (Galegher et al. 1998, 516).

Through the analyses of the answers of active support donors they additionally conclude, that their answer is more likely to be accepted if it refers to the level of exchange constituted by personal experience. Attempts to generalize the others tend to deny validity.

Additionally the 'top ten posters' of the examined support groups contribute between 23% and 38% of all messages across a three-week period. A rather limited active population regarding a mean of 19.000 calendared members in the investigated groups. If the only nominal members are extracted other studies (for instance Stegbauer/Rausch 2000, 2001, Preece et. al. 1998) confirm these dimensions of 'active posters' and 'passive lurkers' on the level of 70 % of the users being exclusively 'lurkers'.

So one may suggest that Online Self Help Groups have only limited scope and information flow in a double meaning: a concentration on „emotional support" as opposed to „informational support" and additionally on group norms as opposed to the production of not legitimised demands of support. The decision about which demand is legitimate and which is not is incumbent upon those piping up – the few committed.

Thus also in the everyday use of the internet 'strong ties' are to be found. This is not only true in the case of personal relevant friendship-relations, 'online-romances' or work circles, but also in the case of net-based informal support.

This is an interesting fact and it is no bad thing per se – as pointed out in the discussion of the different functions and dimensions of social support. But nevertheless regarding these phenomena it seems to be necessary to widen the perspective on issues concerning the digital divide. This may then be described as an in-use dimension of the digital divide which may appropriately be analyzed as a 'voice divide' referring to the not only 'formal' but effective access

to the various types of net-based social support. Considering access to the different social figurations of net-based social support including participation, the heuristic frame I suggest allows to focus on largely disregarded conditions precedent.

Referring to Social Work and social inequality and considering a positive relation between „coping support" and „strong ties", as well as „leverage support" and „weak ties" (cf. Briggs 1998) it is to be examined what social work professionals can contribute to ensure the benefits of 'weak ties' - and thus of heterogeneity and permeability and 'leverage support' for those who need them, and, may be also 'strong ties' for those who need them.

For some years, also in German-speaking parts of the World Wide Web, a differentiated range of counselling offers is established. This is especially an effect of the discussion about easy accessibility and user-oriented supplies in youth welfare alongside self initiated self-help groups.

Reflecting the general conditions mentioned yet I would suggest that especially professionally moderated counselling forums in the WWW are of significant relevance in order to compensate the social Inequality of opportunities of access to net-based social support beyond the own narrow social and cultural homogenous group.

Even if there is still a lack of data, respective (rather small) studies hitherto allow for the conclusion that, in different synchronous and asynchronous professional supplies, teenagers with low education (Haupt- und SonderschülerInnen) are proportionally below 10 % and thus significantly under-represented users (especially because it is extremely unlikely the these teenagers have less problems).

The design of the research project

This significant bias is seemingly also true for a multi-qualified counselling service by professional, peer-counsellors, and users my own, ongoing research project is concerned with. Already a short overview on the surface of the statistically aggregated socio-demographic data of the users (as accomplished by the staff of this service) strikingly points to this direction.

Socio- demography of a multi-qualified online counselling offer for teenagers

Gender	
girls	38, 5 %
boys	61, 5 %

Formal Education
(Formal Education, referring to the German layered school system)

Sonderschule ("special school" for disabled and "problematic" pupils):   0,6 %
Hauptschule ("lower" secondary school):   4,7 %
Realschule ("higher" secondary school):   13,8 %
Gymnasium (grammar school – highest secondary school):   53,2 %
Vocational school (integrated in the school system):   10,2 %

What swayed you to seek help on the internet?

The 4 most common mentions are:
1. the anonymity of the net
2. it is possible from at home
3. it is more easy to write about myself in ‚the virtual'
4. it is a freebie offer

Do you have someone in 'real-life' you may talk about the problems and concerns you posted or mailed to kids-hotline.de?

The 8 most common mentions are:

1)	friends	42,5%	5) acquaintance	05,1%
2)	partner	16,0%	6) nobody	04,0%
3)	parents	14,5%	7) teachers	02,2%
4)	siblings	07,5%	8) social workers	01,6%

(data-base: Schopp and Berg 2002)

While these facts are hardly to ignore in terms of digital inequality my major research interest is not only about the mere statistical allocation of socially different users but about the social dynamics within net-based social services compensating, perpetuating or even enhancing closure, inequality, and exclusion.

The focus of my research is a reconstruction of different net-based figurations, in which young people get ‚Social Support' and of the practices they realise in order to get support.

An analytical fundament of this investigation is a classification of the value of ties as 'social capital' deployed by Michael Woolcock (2000). Woolcock distinguishes between 'bonding social capital' (strong ties 'inter pares' i.e. between immediate family members, neighbours, close friends, and associates sharing similar demographic characteristics), 'bridging social capital' (weaker ties between 'horizontal' heterogeneous actors i.e. people from different ethnic, geographical, and occupational backgrounds but with similar economic and educational status), and 'linking social capital' (ties between 'vertical' heterogeneous actors i.e. poor and poorly educated people and the better off resp. those in positions of influence in organisations).

The central assumption of my research is that socially and culturally different young people tend to build up different forms of networks associated with different forms of social capital that in

turn tend to bring about different form of ‚Social Support' (e.g. cognitive, emotional, moral etc.). This assumption will be assessed on three levels:

1. the complex of resources ('Who uses which information and communication resources within the counselling arrangement?')

2. the complex of relations ('Who is communicating which whom within the counselling arrangement?')

3. the complex of power ('Which and whose knowledge gets what degree of consideration and recognition?)

These complexes are studied by the means of content analyses and a utilization of the 'documentary method' ('dokumentarische Methode') deployed by Ralf Bohnsack (2001). A fundamental part of the research process is he analyses of communicative modes within net-based support structures (using content analyses and 'documentary' forum analyses). Subsequently 'nicknames' of users are 'logged', what allows for an analysis of ego-centred networks. So the density and variety as well as the progressions of support and their outcomes may be documented and analysed (using qualitative network analyses). This 'net-based research' will be framed by 'e-expert-interviews' with users, online-volunteers, and professionals about percept preconditions of and experiences with net-based social support.

Using such a multi-level research approach focussing on support processes and communication processes itself as well as the ever different embeddings in the network structure and the own perspectives of the different actors involved may allow more detailed insight in digital inequality and voice divide not only as a statistical 'true' but as a social process.

Thus I suppose that my further research will show that professionals as well as peer-counsellors and the 'normal users' have very different impact in terms of compensation (or production) of social closures and stratifications of inequality in the access to and even more the utilization of net-based 'social support'.

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