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Achim Bühl (Ed.) (1999). *Computerstile: Vom individuellen Umgang mit dem PC im Alltag* [Computer-styles: Individual everyday use of the PC].

**Opladen/Wiesbaden:
Westdeutscher Verlag. 460 pp.,
ISBN 3-531-13410-8**

In this book 19 authors report on an elaborate theoretical and empirical study on computer-styles. In contrast to most edited books, however, it is not a collection of loosely related articles, but one integral work on individual everyday use of and attitudes towards computers. The main goal is to empirically identify distinct styles in the perception and use people make of computers in their everyday life and to demonstrate that these styles are not evenly distributed with respect to social-structural background characteristics such as age and gender. The authors do so from the perspective of the sociology of technology.

In the first chapter, previous research on computer use and attitudes toward computers is extensively discussed. After that, the second chapter is used to elaborate on a 'theory of the computer' in everyday life. The authors conclude that computers are a new kind of technology that becomes part of everyday life for more and more people at an enormous pace. Computers are a new kind of technology because they are universal machines that can simulate anything and are not only practical tools, but also a new medium of communication. This new kind of tech-

nology may be studied from different perspectives. From a technological deterministic point of view one can consider computers, or any technical device, as alienating devices that colonize everyday life and reduce communicative abilities of people by imposing their own logic on people's actions. Or, from an action theoretical point of view, one can look at computers as devices that have no meaning and can impose no styles of use unless people use them and give meaning to them. Both perspectives are employed in this study to define concepts that may be used to empirically search for computer-styles. Other such concepts are derived from the societal discussion on the information-society and the virtualization of life. Computer-styles are treated in a similar way as Bourdieu treats lifestyles. That is, computer-styles are combinations of practices, competencies, motivations, norms, and values with respect to computers in everyday life.

The authors use both qualitative and quantitative methods to empirically identify computer-styles. The main study is a representative survey among 1,241 students of the University of Marburg. Among these students more than ten different styles are identified that are made up of different combinations of different motives for computer use (good for career, feel forced, want to use the Internet, or want to play games), different types of computer use (use the Internet, use mainly text editor, play games, use different kinds of applications, use as expert), different levels of acceptance of computers in

everyday life (high, middle, low), and different estimations of societal dangers and chances brought about by the computer (critical, uncritical, differentiated). Without discussing these computerstyles, one may conclude that the main results of both the survey and the qualitative study are that there are big styledifferences between the students of different fields of study and that females accept and use the computer mainly as a useful tool, whereas males also use the computer as a leisure time medium.

Because students are a rather homogeneous group as to age, educational level, and culture, the authors also study a wide variety of comparison-groups such as librarians, secretaries, university teachers, people who take courses in computer subjects, their teachers, and trainees in banks and public offices. Most of these comparisonstudies reveal the same genderdifference as found among the students and additionally reveal that younger people are more inclined than older people to accept the computer as a leisure time medium next to its acceptance as a useful tool for work or study. Younger people are also more inclined to stress the societal chances and possibilities brought about by computers, whereas older people pay more attention to the societal risks.

The study is carried out very prudently, but some of the inevitable methodological flaws should be noted. In most of the quantitative parts of the study scales are used. The items in these scales, however, are in many cases 'poorly' formulated. For

example, the item "While playing at the PC, I can relax easily" poses two statements ('I sometimes play', and 'when I play I can relax') that have to be evaluated with one answer. Which one of these statements the respondents respond to is hard to say. Although in case of this statement one may conclude from another question that more than half the students and almost all the university teachers do not use the computer as a leisure time medium, that is, they do not play at the computer.

Another problem with the use of the scales is that no measures are reported that enable the reader to evaluate the quality of the factoranalyses that are carried out. The authors report no explained variance and no other measures like the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy. What they do report, however, is Cronbach's α . But they report this coefficient of reliability for the total set of items in the factoranalyses, disregarding the multidimensionality they demonstrate with these factoranalyses; and that is a gross violation the core idea behind the calculation of any measure of reliability.

All in all, however, the methodological flaws are outweighed by the very thorough and detailed way in which the reader is made acquainted with the data and by the fact that quantitative and qualitative research methods are used. The reader gets a good feel of the robustness of the conclusions, which is fairly high for the majority of the conclusions. As to where future research may do better, is also easily derived from the book

because of its detailed description of the data.

Finally, the editing of the book could have been better. On occasion parts of the texts differ wildly as to the methodological knowledge they presuppose and different parts of the text put emphasis on different aspects of similar theories, methods, results or other phenomena. More serious however is the rather poor quality of the concluding chapter. In this chapter hardly any link is made between theory and empirical results

and some empirical evidence is used that was not discussed before. The chance to round up the book is missed. On the whole, however, the fact that this book, with its nineteen authors, has become one integral work instead of a collection of loosely related contributions, is reason to credit the editor.

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