Editorial

How Does Social Psychology Deal with New Media?

Bernad Batinic[1] and Anja S. Göritz[2]

[1]Johannes-Kepler University Linz, Austria, [2]University of Würzburg, Germany

The fact that *new media* – and, in particular, the internet – have rapidly permeated many domains of life over the past few years is not especially new. Individuals who do not possess a mobile telephone or an e-mail address and who are unable to use a PC or send and receive text messages are rare and are meanwhile classified – at least in western industrial nations – as rather strange; not because they do not own, cannot afford, or are not capable of using the necessary technical equipment, but because they withhold themselves from possibilities for communication and interaction with others. In this context, Wellman (2001) describes computer networks as "[. . .] inherently social networks, linking people, organizations, and knowledge" (p. 2031). Abstaining from the use of new media results in an exclusion from social and societal life. Individuals who do not have access to new media are difficult to reach by telephone for friends and acquaintances when they are out; they cannot be sent photographs from the last birthday party via e-mail; they are unable to send online applications for a new job; and they are not in a position to foster professional networks in an online community. When considering the scope of influence that new media have gained in our lives, it becomes clear that this subject area must also be addressed by social psychology.

Social psychological research work on new media can be categorized into a macro perspective that tends to center on societal aspects and a microperspective that focuses more specifically on the individual. In both areas of research, attention is focused on new media and their users. A third field of research, which is strongly dominated by technological aspects, considers the usefulness of new media for the social psychological profession itself. In the following, each of these areas is discussed in more detail. Finally, the contributions presented in this special issue are outlined and classified according to the three areas of research discussed.

Society-Centered Macro Perspective

Over the course of the last few years, the number of new media users has drastically increased. In the year 2006, for example, a total of 22.5 billion text messages were sent and received in Germany; in comparison, 3.6 billion (Kurth, 2007) were sent in the year 1999. Meanwhile, in many Western industrial nations, there are more active mobile telephone contracts than inhabitants. In addition to this expansion in mobile communication, internet use has seen a steady worldwide increase over the last 15 years. According to a representative survey conducted by the market research company GfK (2008), almost 61% of the adult German population reported using the internet. Corresponding figures are approximately 63% in the UK, 56% in France, and 53% in Italy. In comparison, 68% of the population in the United States are "online." With figures far above 70%, internet use is most widespread in the Scandinavian countries. The average length of internet exposure with respect to the entire population, using Germany as an example, amounts to 54 minutes per day (Batinic, 2008). New media, thus, no longer represent a marginal phenomenon. Individuals spend a considerable share of their time interacting with and through these media forms. In light of this, social psychologists pose the question concerning the effects of using new media on traditional human cohabitation. Does the use of these media forms lead to an escape from reality into an illusory world? Does the internet result in loneliness and promote depression or is it, rather, able to overcome such states? In this context, strong emphasis is widely placed upon the potential negative effects of new media, on the one hand, and their potential positive effects, on the other. Accordingly, with respect to the internet, Wellman (2001) ascertained in his review that "too often the debate has been Manichean: The internet is bringing heaven or hell, but nothing in between" (p. 2032). A study on the negative effects of using new media, which has received much attention, is the HomeNet study conducted by Kraut et al. (1998) and published in *American Psychologist*. In this longitudinal study, the authors identify numerous negative influences of the internet upon its users. The main results of the study can be summarized as follows: "Greater use of the internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness" (Kraut et al., 1998, p. 1017).

Media-conveyed, internet-based communication, accordingly, has negative consequences for existing real-life relationships. This very study – which has been cited more than 470 times since its publication – triggered a series of investigations on the detrimental effects of internet use, despite the fact that only 4 years later and, on the basis of a more extensive period of assessment and an enlarged sample, Kraut et al. (2002) qualified or even completely retracted most of their previously reported findings in an article entitled "Internet Paradox Revisited." In this article, the authors provide evidence for a series of positive effects on personal well-being and social relationships.

Individual-Centered Microperspective

New media connect people with one another, allow them to transcend temporal and spatial distances in communication, and provide a sphere for self-presentation. In part, new media also afford users (at least the feeling of) anonymity. This leads to a series of effects and phenomena that are of particular interest for social psychology. For example, the question arises as to why certain individuals create publicly viewable homepages that contain a mass of personal information. Additionally of interest are the large number of online partnership sites that find wide appeal. How do users proceed in using such offers? What criteria play a role in the (pre-)selection of partners, and are partnerships that emerge in computer-based environments sustainable in "real life"? Is there such a thing as an "online friendship"? Is a virtual group at all comparable with a group of individuals who regularly meet in real life? This is just a small selection of questions that are of social psychological relevance and that arise from the multifaceted use of new media within the population (see also McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In addressing these questions, social psychology focuses on the person and investigates the effects of the media setting on his/her well-being and behavior. Social psychologists are, on the one hand, able to apply their extensive complex of theories to explain effects and phenomena emerging in the context of using new media. On the other hand, new media are associated with a series of contextual conditions for which no real-life equivalent is to be found. Accordingly, social psychologists are developing new theories and models to account for the specific conditions of new media.

New Media as an Instrument for Social Psychology

New technologies have long since been intensively employed by psychologists as a scientific research tool; examples include the computer and corresponding software for statistical data analysis (for a critical appraisal, see also Rosen & Weil, 1996). Psychologists quickly recognized the discipline-related potential of new media and, as, for example, emphasized by Kelley-Milburn and Milburn (1995), understood that "psychologists who use the internet only for e-mail are missing out on a wealth of database information and research tools [. . .]" (p. 203). In psychology, a central field of new media application is the collection of survey data and the conducting of (field) experiments using the internet (Birnbaum, 2004). Of further importance for scientific research in general (Schneiderman, 2008), and social psychology in particular, are social software applications. These allow people to create social and virtual networks with the aid of new media. Virtual networks are a unique research environment for the investigation of altruistic behavior, the formation of groups, and motivation in virtual teams.

Special Issue Contributions

This special issue includes five empirical contributions. In their paper entitled "Plain Texts as an Online Mood-Induction Procedure," Christopher Verheyen and Anja Göritz examine the effectiveness of short texts for the induction of positive or negative mood in an online environment. They demonstrate that, compared to control groups, texts are successful in inducing mood in the intended direction. Stefan Stieger, Tina Eichinger, and Britta Honeder address the issue of online deception (e.g., online gender switching) and the feelings associated with being deceived in an online setting in their contribution "The Deceived Persons' Feelings in Reaction to Revealed Online Deception of Sex, Age, and Appearance: Can Mate Choice Strategies Explain Sex Differences?" In their paper entitled "Embodied Conversational Agents: Research Prospects for Social Psychology and an Exemplary Study," Nicole Krämer, Gary Bente, Felix Eschenburg, and Heide Troitzsch investigate the effects of virtual human-like characteristics on user acceptance and usability and compare these with the effects of conventional text-based and voice-based interfaces. In his brief research report "Gender-of-Interviewer Effects in a Video-Enhanced Web Survey – Results From a Randomized Field Experiment," Marek Fuchs addresses online data collection and compares a video-enhanced version of a web survey (in which questions are posed by a female and male interviewer shown in prerecorded video clips) with traditional online surveys (in which questions are presented in written form on the screen). In the fifth contribution to this special issue, "Effects of Different Types of Progress Indicators on Drop-Out Rates in Web Surveys," Uwe Matzat, Chris Snijders, and Wouter van der Horst analyze whether and how different types of progress indicators affect the tendency of respondents to continue filling out a web survey, focusing on whether the progress indicators' effects

depend on the position of the respondent in the question-naire.

In terms of the system used to classify the relationship between social psychology and the new media, which was presented in the opening section of this paper, the contributions in this special issue primarily focus on the individual-centered microperspective. While some papers also address potential internet applications for the collection of data in social psychological research, basic questions pertaining to societal effects of new media are only touched upon in the present special issue. In our view, the selection of papers in this special issue reflects the current spectrum of publications dealing with this subject area. New media penetrate into so many areas of society and permeate social cohabitation so deeply that the investigation of associated (social psychological) phenomena has become a prolific field of research and is likely grow further in the future.

References

Batinic, B. (2008). Medienwahl [Media choice]. In B. Batinic & M. Appel, *Medienpsychologie* [Media psychology] (pp. 107–125). Heidelberg: Springer.

Birnbaum, M.H. (2004). Human research and data collection via the Internet. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*, 803–832.

GfK. (2008). Internet Nutzer in Europa [Internet usership in Europe]. Retrieved September 25, 2008 from http://www.gfk.at/de/images/frontpict/Internet-Nutzer%20Europa%20Millionen.jpg

Kelley-Milburn, D., & Milburn, M.A. (1995). Cyberpsych: Resources for psychologists on the Internet. *Psychological Science, 6*, 203–211.

Kraut, R., Kiesler, S., Boneva, B., Cummings, J., Helgeson, V., & Crawford, A. (2002). Internet paradox revisited. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*, 49–74.

Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., & Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet paradox – a social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist, 53*, 1017–1031.

Kurth, M. (2007). *Bundesnetzagentur. Jahresbericht 2006* [Federal network agency. Annual report 2006]. Retrieved September 25, 2008 from http://www.bundesnetzagentur.de/media/archive/9009.pdf

McKenna, K.Y.A., & Bargh, J.A. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implications of the internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4*, 57–75.

Rosen, L.D., & Weil, M.M. (1996). Psychologists and technology: A look at the future. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 27*, 635–638.

Shneiderman, B. (2008). Science 2.0. *Science, 319*, 1349–1350.

Wellman, B. (2001). Computer networks as social networks. *Science, 293*, 2031–2034.

Bernad Batinic

Department of Education and Psychology, Johannes-Kepler University Linz
Altenberger Straße 69
A-4040 Linz
Austria
Tel. +43 732 2468-8225
Fax + 43 732 2468-9315
E-mail bernad.batinic@jku.at