

Media knowledge and media menus as cultural capital and distinctive features¹

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Abstract: *The article presents the results of an empirical study concerning media use in Germany. The author determined six different media use typologies such as: The two criteria were work orientation in the use of media and the importance of media services in everyday life. Bourdieu's theory on social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital is used as a theoretical background together with some classical framework on the analysis of media use.*

I would like to provide an answer to the question regarding why the range of different media types is dominating the everyday life in modern societies - not only in Germany (see Figure 1), but also in Romania, where an average citizen watches TV just under four hours a day (see Balaban 2007).

	1980	2000	2005
TV	125	185	220
Radio	135	206	221
Press	38	30	28
Internet		13	44
Books	22	18	25
Magazines	11	10	12
Music devices	15	36	45
Movie devices		4	5
	346	502	600

Figure 1: media use in Germany, expressed in minutes

¹ The article was presented in the first issue of the journal, *Medienwissen und Medienmenüs als Kulturelles Kapital und als Distinktionsmerkmale*

Utilization period expressed in minutes per person (over 14 years) on an average day – the period from 5 to 24 o'clock. Gross figures (it may be possible for the respondents to have used two media simultaneously – such as the television and a daily newspaper). Source: Reitze & Ridder 2006: 49f.

The academic media has detailed knowledge about the reception processes of the produced media texts, but the question why people are using the media, now almost twice as long as a quarter of a century ago (Figure 1) has not been answered yet, as well as the question regarding the individual differences: Why do some people become so-called information junkies, others become specialists in media entertainment and some are avoiding the media? It is important for the future of PR and advertising to know what the audience is looking for in the media.

I represent the idea that the media use is for many working people, actually work – media use is often strenuous and a duty, which can be hardly avoided. This thesis is based on the habit-capital theory of Bourdieu (Section 2) as well as on a qualitative study (Section 1). The typology of media users in Germany, presented in the third section, shows that media use becomes work, especially for those who have a superior social position or are aiming for a higher function.

1. Research design

The study this article is based on, starts from the Uses-and-gratifications approach and assumes that media use depends on the needs that arise from our social and psychological situation, as well as from the requirements and Structures of everyday life (see Blumler & Katz 1974, Rubin 2002). Because this situation, that is connected to the personal life and everyday life can be hardly standardized and because the exploration of motives belongs to the most difficult fields of research of all, I have conducted guide interviews on four issues:

- *CV and current life situation*: origin and socialization, everyday structures (work, leisure), housing, family, income and education, evaluation of one's own life;
- *media equipment, access to media services*: equipment-access programs, subscriptions and regularly bought newspapers and magazines;
- *usage patterns and use of motifs*: since media are often used casually and are accompanying the daily activities, a "normal media day" was reconstructed (ideally "yesterday") – from morning until night. The interviewer has tried to ask the questions indirectly and as openly as possible and to provoke the respondents.
- *Assessment of the media offer*: credibility, image.

The respondents have been selected according to the procedure of theoretical saturation (common feature: German adults, who no longer go to school). This procedure assumes that in case of media use, there is not an infinite number of game types (Glaser

& Strauss 1967). To describe the area, the respondents must sustain many possible variants, where the assumptions, that determine the choice, are supplemented and adjusted until the “new cases” no longer provide additional information. The starting point was made out of central features of the respondents: gender, stage of life, income, occupational status. This approach also captured individual differences, because the ingenuity of the students involved in the project, had no bounds in the search for “new cases”. Pensioners, mothers with young children, teachers from Schleswig-Holstein and vendors from Baden-Württemberg, police, unemployed and politicians, priests, women in leadership positions and journalists have been questioned. Even after a few conversations with young mothers, it was clear that small children dominate everyday life and the use of media offerings – largely independent of the partnership model, of living and working form and also of whether grandparents are nearby or not. Of the slightly more than 400 talks that have been conducted between 2003 and early 2006, 133 of them, were chosen in the end, for the typology presented in Section 3. The main socio-demographic data on this sample:

- *Gender*: 65 women, 68 men.
- *Age*: 15 persons over 70 years, 38 persons between 50 and 70, 53 people between 30 and 50, 27 people younger than 30, but older than 20. Interviews with students and apprentices have shown that access to the media is conditioned by the parents and by the cash budget and therefore, in this phase, the emergence of independent media menus is conditioned.
- *Education*: 62 persons with higher education (caused mainly by higher participation preparedness).
- *Occupation*: 36 workers, employees and officers, 16 senior executives, 15 entrepreneurs, 17 artists and freelancers, 10 students, 9 housewives, unemployed and long-term patients, 30 pensioners.

The interviews lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes and have been recorded with a tape recorder and written down in normal German. For each interview there is a protocol, in which abnormalities and information on the respondents were detained.

2. Theoretical background: habitus-capital-theory

The idea to evaluate this material by the help of the habitus-capital-theory of Bourdieu (1987) occurred only during the research process. This theory is particularly outlined in the thesis, because it underlines the fact that media use is not only entertainment, but also work. With the term *habitus* Bourdieu describes the disposition of people and everything that has formed them in their earliest childhood: family, school and living conditions, career, individual and collective experiences. The habit determines what is possible – how someone perceives the world, how one is evaluating others, what tastes one has, how does one think and act and how one presents and moves his body. The habit concept is thus a key for the media habits and for the topics a person is interested in.

Although Bourdieu's approaches of sustainable perception, thinking and action schemes stress that early experiences shape a human being, the habit is not something rigid and unchanged, but will be modified again and again. Decisive is here the social position of each actor. For Bourdieu, the fight for status is almost a synonym for human life. It assumes that we act in order to differentiate ourselves from others – a process that is constantly developing and which we are not aware of. Whether in the family or at work, in the neighbourhood or in the sports club, or in the subway: it's always about the rise of our action and profit opportunities, its about a place in the hierarchy. Bourdieu describes the power of an actor with the term *capital*. He distinguishes between four types of capital:

- *economic capital*: material wealth – everything that can be exchanged for money;
- *cultural capital*: skills, knowledge forms (“education”) – skills, just like the school and academic titles (institutionalized cultural capital) as opposed to personal economic capital;
- *social capital*: relations with other actors (networks), can be used in the reproduction of economic and cultural capital;
- *symbolic capital*: the recognition of the other three types of capital by the environment (prestige, reputation).

Capital is in any case „accumulated work“ (Bourdieu 1983: 183). Bourdieu's notion of working is connected to expense and effort, to investment and (latent) levy. He has repeatedly pointed out that capital „can be gained just by the cost of labour, effort and above all – time“ (Bourdieu 1985: 13) – time in which people have to give up less strenuous activities. If we believe, like Bourdieu, that ultimately all people are looking to get capital (especially economic and cultural capital), in order to be distinguished from others and to improve their position, we have to question how the time that one spends with media services, contributes to the individual capital fund. The present examination sustains that every media act can be placed on a scale with the endpoints *entertainment* and *work*:

- In order to be able to implement my working force in economic capital, I need phases of rest and relaxation (see Früh 2002). The entertainment concept that has been used here, connected the entertainment experience to the activities that are necessary (and cannot simply be bypassed) for ones existence.
- If we use the terminology of Bourdieu – the opposite of entertainment is neither information nor boredom, but work – work that is needed for gaining cultural capital and for acquiring a good position in the game for power and recognition, and to strengthen or expand that position.

Many of the respondents have felt, that it is a “must” to be aware of topics that are considered to be important and are discussed in the personal environment. The television newscast Tagesschau, for example, was repeatedly described as a compulsory

program – especially by persons belonging to the central and upper class and who activate in fields, in which cultural capital leads to specific profit opportunities (see Bourdieu 1985: 10). A bank clerk from Baden-Württemberg, born in 1962, said that for him, business news is a must. If the next customer comes and asks him about the situation of Infineon, then it is not enough for him to have read the headlines. Even a PR consultant, who was born in 1973, thought he could “not afford” not to read the business press. In order to be able to propose topics to the customer, a PR consultant should be “on the amount of time”, and at evening events one can make “a very bad impression” if one must always say that one has never heard about one topic or another. As with the other components of the incorporated cultural capital, by the notion of “being on the amount of time” we don’t mean those knowledge appetizers, that one can bring up in a conversation and then are usually quickly forgotten, but the general cultural empowerment (see Bourdieu 2001 : 115).

Media Knowledge and the media menu are also being used as distinctive features. Bourdieu describes every consume act as a “distinctive feature”, independent of whether there is an intention behind it or not (Bourdieu 1985: 21), and irrespective of whether the respective “practice” takes place in public or in private. Just as car or clothes brands, the media a person uses, indicates the social position he aspires to and which group he feels he belongs to, which attitudes and values he is sharing and which not. The investment in this form of cultural capital is particularly necessary because of the wealth in Western societies and the opening up of educational pathways, that have brought up central differences in the last three to four decades – especially regarding the possession of economic capital, access to academic education and the status of origin. Someone who owns other (rare) forms of cultural capital (such as an Artist), is expected (this was indicated by the interview material) to be less interested in media knowledge.

Bourdieu’s theory also explains why the media use is associated with identity management and with the attempt to determine the own value, the own situation – whether the use of media services is rather work than entertainment. Bourdieu assumes that we are using the “social structure in its totality” in order to develop a “sense of our own position in social space”. Everyone has a sense of what one can do or not “(Bourdieu 1985: 17f.). This “sense of limits” of our own identity is especially sharpened by the observation of media figures.

The social advancement through the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of Media Knowledge, however, has its own limitations. These limits are also affected by the social field of a person, but in the (broken) hierarchy of capital types, money is on top. It doesn’t matter how much cultural capital an unemployed person may have, in a society in which paid work determines the reputation and the personal leeway of a person. It is similar with other economically disadvantaged groups (retirees, mothers with small children, single parents, foreigners).

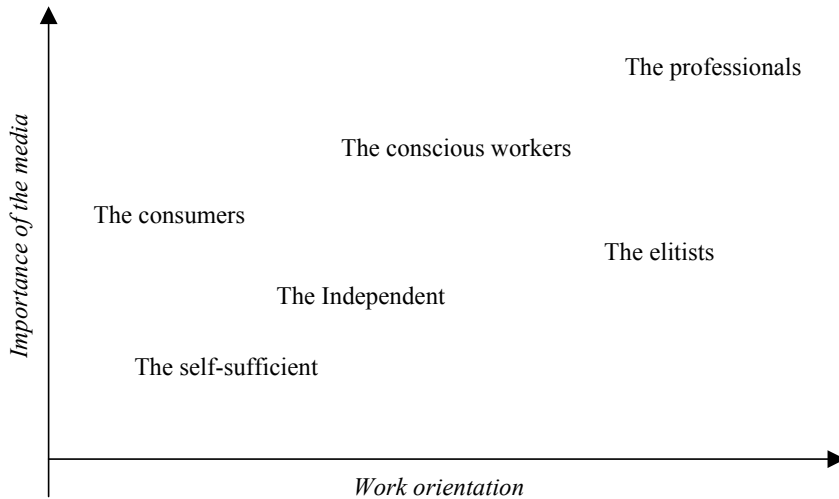


Figure 2: media user types in Germany

3. Typology of media users in Germany

In order to answer the question, which factors are influencing the communication needs and what is the importance of the media in the lives of individuals, I have developed a media user typology (see Figure 2). As with any other typology, everything is a construction process. The classification is based on two criteria:

- *Work orientation in the use of media.* This term does not refer to the job of a respondent, and for which he may also read newspapers, but to the acquisition of cultural capital and thus on a long term process. As discussed in section 2, media offers can be displayed on a scale between the endpoints: work and entertainment. Evidence of a strong working orientation were the comments stated in the interview material (“learn”, “study”) and the use of services, referred to as “exhausting” and this is why they were considered to be prestigious (national daily newspapers, foreign press, political magazines, information services on television, radio programs, classical music).
- *The importance of media services in everyday life.* Just as with the work orientation, this criterion is an interpretation performance, which is based on the one hand, on the amount of media use (duration) and on the other hand, on the commitment to the services offered by the mass media, which are “indispensable” for some and for the others “totally irrelevant”.

As such a lecture does not offer enough space to present all six types in detail (see Meyen 2007), we will mention, at this point, only essential features:

- *The self-sufficient* are satisfied with what the media provide for them. They don’t spend time thinking about the media offer. Their media menu is conducted by the everyday structures or by the partners. The radio is being used as

background noise, the evening television as a guest and as a sleeping pill and the daily newspaper just to leaf through. The self-sufficient are positioned in the lower areas of social hierarchy, have a small traffic circle and might have so many everyday burdens, that they have no time for such entertainment activities.

- The media menu of the *consumers* is limited to radio channels, and the interest in politics is minimal. Consumers grew up in the 1970s and 1980s and are positioned in the lower strata of society. Consumers have little economic and often little cultural capital. This type is less interested in politics, than the self-sufficient, but media offers are more important for them – of course, to relax, but also as evidence, and to be included and informed about news, or even as a support for the initiation of contacts.
- *The Independent* have much economic capital (company owners, lawyers, pharmacists, doctors, restaurant owners, managers) or cultural capital, that distinguishes them from the major part of population (artists, scientists, pastors). Media offers are playing a subordinate role, because it is not necessary for the independent to gather knowledge about media and media menu. The cultural capital of the Independent enables him to analyze the media landscape and to choose the offers according to their quality.
- *The elitists* are a junior edition of the independents. This type is also avoiding the entertainment offerings and is criticizing the media coverage. While the Independent tries to put a little effort into getting the “basic information”, the elitists are using the media offers to make a delimitation. They are using nationwide newspapers. The elitists are young and are therefore positioned relatively far down in the social hierarchy, but they are hoping to gather soon as much economic capital to full fill their status needs.
- *The conscious workers* are required to be informed, and have the obligation to meet this standard. This type reads his newspaper every day and rejects commercial radio offers. The conscious workers have reached a position that is equal to their skills or slightly exceeds them and want to safeguard this position – even with the help of Media Knowledge.
- *The professionals* use a wide range of the media menu, from national newspapers and magazines on political information, television and radio programs, books, movies, to, of course, the Internet. This type is a person that is working in or for the media. These are people who are very well educated, but have not (yet) reached the desired position. These professionals use media to claim their status and to use the free time they have, doing something “meaningful”.

This typology can also be read as empirical evidence, to show that the media menus and media knowledge are actually seen as means to determine, maintain or improve ones position, and that the use of media services is primarily depending on how to present ones own career and ones future prospects. This judgement is influenced by

many positional and individual characteristics:

- *profession*. In occupations with high social prestige, with large income or assets and in certain fields, such as art, distinctive features, such as media and media menu are largely superfluous.
- *origin*. The claim itself is characterized by socialization, by the expectations of parents, by the region one comes from. For example, many East Germans see themselves as “second class” citizens – with consequences for their media use.
- gender, stage of life, everyday stress, personal environment, mobility, personal (including intellectual property) conditions, professional relationship with the media.

If media usage helps accumulating cultural capital and if media knowledge and media menus become distinctive features, then this must have consequences on research. Those who want to use and explain media, must not just seek for functional alternatives to everyday life, but should also involve the capital owned by individual actors and the social fields, they live in.

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