

# It is a men's world?

## How to use generalized communication media to observe gendered communication in internet agencies

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### ABSTRACT

In which ways can disorder and order be inweaved? This theoretically challenging question represents the working reality for internet agencies. As production-oriented service companies they have to be capable of acting, even so there are contingencies, which are evoked by clients or technologies. They must produce order to handle disorder. The paper follows this phenomenon by bringing in two perspectives, which delivers possibilities of analysing and describing complexity and contingency: social practices and social systems. Empirical material is used, to stress out that practices of order and practices of gender are linked together to a conglomerate of practices, which has its own inner logic. Gendering can also be seen as a function that allows organisations to reduce the external complexity by more or less repressive modes of internal homogenization. Our thesis is that gender regulates complexity. We will conclude that to define a new quality in the relationship between organisation and human resources, that lies beyond homogeneity, “Managing Gender & Diversity” is necessary.

### Keywords

Gendering, Diversity management, homogeneity, technology oriented service companies, complexity



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### 1. Working field with a high grade of complexity: Internet agencies

Designing and producing web application for clients is part of the everyday work of programmers in internet advertising agencies. They have to deal with a diverse field of requirements, which reach from clients' needs to project pattern or IT-infrastructure. And the involvement of technologies in the working process is multidimensional: programmers design applications for the web (they work *for* technology), they require state of the art technologies to accomplish their everyday work (they work *with*

technologies), and technology is the key issue in the interaction with their colleagues (they work *through* technology). The every day work of the programmer is characterized by a complex webbing of parallel working processes and various negotiations and by decentralized structures of decision-making, with a high grade of involvement and autonomy of employees, casual working atmosphere, high a rate of fluctuation and erosion of knowledge [1]. The work can be described as exemplarily for new forms of work, like communication-work, informational work or knowledge work for high qualified employees (i.e. [2], [3], [4]).

Internet agencies can be seen as production-oriented service companies. They offer information and consultancy to increase the productivity and efficiency of their clients' companies [5]. Client and agency are close-partnered, whereas the client can be seen as co-producer of the services he ordered [6]. Interaction and communication is essential to negotiate next steps of projects and working activities. Interaction and communication between client and agency are characterized by contingency because wishes, aims and requirements of the client often are not made explicit. Under this condition it is important for the agency to know *how*, in a sense of “flair”, the client wants things to be done [7]. In that purpose it is also important to be aware of the wide range of communication technologies that increase the possibilities and forms of communication. It is preconditioned which form of communication is best [8]. Of importance is not only to know *how* those technologies work, but also to know whether the communication partner is able to handle the used technologies or if a face-to-face-communication is the better way to discuss a problem.

As described, manifold phenomena can be seen as a challenge for the everyday worklife in internet agencies, like unpredictable changes in clients wishes, uncertainty about the “right” form of communication or insecurity about the stability of technical infrastructure. “Challenges” are contingencies, which are questioning the success of working activities. The success of working activities

become more and more a question of knowing how than of knowing that: more a question how things have to be done than a question of formal or explicit knowledge.

## **2. Contingency as challenge for acting practically, communication meaning and research**

### *Social Practices*

One of the main challenges for the social sciences of the 1990ies and at the beginning of the 21st century is to come understand – in an analytic and descriptive way – the complexity and the contingency of the social. This challenge was picked up by a diverse field of authors – like Bourdieu, Giddens, the late Foucault or in Germany by Hörning and Reckwitz. Their theoretical work can be brought together to the family of the theories of social practices [9].

A central paradigm of the theories of social practices is a widened understanding of culture. Culture becomes the status of a basic phenomenon of social order [10], which interfuse all social fields – not only the museums and theatres but also a person's body activities in front of a computer or the relation between men and women. In that perspective a webbing of collective complexes of acting and of shared conventions is of interest [9]. The concept of “doing culture” exemplifies this perspective on culture: culture has do be done [11].

In the ongoing process of carrying out practices, a knowing how is built up that opens up a horizon of possible actions – limited by adequacy and desirability. In the process of building up knowledge, dealing with “others” is constitutive [12]. That brings us to the question: who or what can be “the other”? According to Stefan Hirschauer's concept of the participants (“Partizipanden”), “the other” can be all entities that are involved in carrying out practices [13]. Participants can be bodies, artefacts or rooms. And they are more than just a framework; they are also part of producing standards or reproducing social order. The specific webbing of social practices, their agents and participants, becomes the “location of the social”.

In that perspective the problem of the social is, how the reproduction and the repetition of social actions are possible beyond boundaries of space and time [14]. Or with Giddens: “The true locus of the ‘problem of order’ is (...) of how continuity of form is achieved in day-to-day conduct of social activity [15].

### *Gendered social systems*

Ordering social complexity on the (meso) level of organisations depends on the capacity to transfer external heterogeneity into to internal complexity. Organisations are made to solve problems and to secure expectations, like schools to offer an institution, where educational and training needs can be addressed or hospitals, where medical problems can be solved. Therefore, complexity is not transferred in a contingent process, but is oriented to the autopoietical functioning valid in each system. Complexity is condensed (not solely reduced) in social systems, by reusing and enriching sense in different situations sense

[16]. Condensing complexity depends on the possibility to employ generalized communicative media.

The Theory of social systems defines organisations as systems, which produce their elements of functioning, by autopoietical processing their internal communication. Functions of gender-homogeneity are stabilizing social systems. Homogenisation fulfils several functions on different levels. On the organisational level, gender-homogenisation allows focusing on a certain – dominant selected – social reality. This is still the case if no increase in the capacity of perception and thereby no need for diversity management is internally signalled [17].

Homogeneity in organizations are – based on binary distinctions – fulfil the functional needs, which are:

- to build on social categories which form hierarchies to control people and process,
- to evaluate performance and decisions based on binary distinctions,
- to make hierarchical information channels reliable [18].

Organisations develop structural relations as expectations according to their functional needs [19], and therefore we can assume that these functions support homogeneous cultures in organisation. Discrimination in organisations, presents itself as lack of women in management in German organisations. It is connected to the socially acquired functionality of structures – produced by the history of the system through its own assessment and evaluation and is prevented and preserved as its organisational culture [18]. Organisations are able to internalise environmental suggestions according to the capacity to transfer external communication or sense to internal operations, like decisions [20]. They configure social complexity by connecting the contingency of the external environment to internal meaning and structuring. So organisations reduce uncertainty and transform the complexity of society into internal organisational complexity. Organisations produce (next to goods and services) decisions to convert problems into processable events. They transform insecurity and contingency into transitional certitude [21]. Also by using generalised media of communication they develop internal references and diverse structural expectations [22].

Gender differences are reproduced by doing gender in interactional processes, despite decreasing relevance on the macro level of institutions [23] and a tendency of undoing gender in cross-gender professional roles [13].

Organisational members are included in roles, which are interactional reproducing binary gender expectations by using external expectations [24]. Organisations are relating personal interaction on autopoietical functioning - despite or because the subjective motives. Interactions are a part of the selforganizing procedure and are getting structurally relevant by supporting or irritating organisational tasks or functioning. These functional orientations select all environmental influences and internal communications and

distinguish or “differentiate” as to whether they contribute to functional success or not.

The Theory of social systems distinguishes communication from interaction. Communication occurs on the level of organisations and cannot be attributed to single individuals and is supported by generalized communication media. But interaction of individuals as conscious minds is necessary to process communication [25]. This distinction between communication and personal interaction of conscious minds advert to different modes of compounding knowledge or information in organisations. Communication gains structural relevance, in the sense of getting connected to organisational structures or decisions. Personal interaction, as “microdiversity” [26] is much more connected to processes of self-organisation, than to organisational programmes and premises of decisions [27]. Organisational programmes are containing and processing procedures of organisational decisions, purpose of organisations, and communicative paths and processes. Communication paths contain both formal and informal communication. In this relation of interaction and communication the processes of self-organisation and organisational programmes are connected. Interaction has an intrinsic capacity to force the evolution of systems as long as they produce continuity and change. Communication is related to precommunicative interactional processes, which is often defined and interpreted according to the gender of participants. It forces, mostly in homogeneous context, to develop and to relate to gendered symbolically generated communicative media [28]. This functionally framed interaction[29] might be described as generalized gendered communication system [17], [30].

### **3. (Re-)Producing homogeneous culture in an internet agency**

Social order in organisation can also be seen as processes of ordering the social [31]. In that perspective analysis of practices of order came into the focus of research. To reconstruct social practices in an internet agency, ethnography was used. Ethnography offers a methodological framework, which makes it possible to reconstruct also incorporated and routinized actions. Most of the time social practices are not known in an explicit way, but shown in carrying out practices. The main instrument was a participant observation, performed over six months. The observed internet agency is a unit of a big advertising agency in one of the five main cities of advertising business in Germany. The local network is integrated in an international advertising network. 33 persons are employed with the internet agency with permanent contracts. That is 30% of the local company network.

The analysis stressed out that a main element of the production of order is the construction of three collective agents: the account (management), the creative

(department) and the programmers. To be a member of one collective agent is obligatorily necessary, it is unambiguous and irreversible. The contact to the other collective agents is reduced to a minimum, which is defined by the working process.

Below we will have a closer look at the collective agent “programmer”. The programmers hold a degree in technical disciplines like media-computer sciences or media technologies. The practice to engage a person who has learned programming by self-education is no more in common. Many of the programmers have worked at other internet agencies before or had their own enterprise. To select a new employee not only the formal qualifications are important, it is more important, to fit into the existing team. The chief of the unit describes a 100% fitting as follows:

“well...yK (the freshman – DL) and I...we were the first...at this farewell party, so he said: ‘Come on guys, let’s drink another one. This one’s on me...cheers.’ You see, we have found exactly the right person (laughing)... he was the one speeding the others up... congratulations...a perfect decision...he was integrated rapidly...that was quite cool...you see, that’s someone who fits in 100%...and so I said to yF: ‘We have found the right one’.” (TA001)

The core team of the programmers with permanent contracts consists of seven people, all of them male. Additionally, there is a fluctuating group of trainees and freelancers, so the team includes from seven up to 14 people. The employees are between 25 and 35 years old. They can be described as a very homogeneous group by age, ethnicity, class, education, and also eating and clothing habit, the way they cut their hair or drink beer.

The analysis of the dataset showed that the processes of producing and reproducing gender are constitutive for the programmers as a collective agent. To make that point clear it is helpful to provide an insight to gender studies (i.e. [32]): During the development of industrial work, men were assigned to the sphere of work and women to the home sphere. These were ideal constructions, which continue to have an effect until today. Industrial work is connotated with masculinity and connected with the ideal of the standard employment relationship (“Normalarbeitsverhältnis”). In that perspective it is instructive to recognize how the programmers describe their work in terms of industrial work: they are “building up”, “building in”, they are “producing” or “putting sth. on”. In those descriptions we can find the physicality of heavy work at a machine. That was a surprising phenomenon because the everyday work of the programmers has nothing to do with heavy physical work: the mouse is clicked, the keyboard typed or a phone receiver is picked up. The research shows that it is less the body-activities than the construction of the technology used, which makes these descriptions obvious, as an interview partner illuminates:

“you can’t hear it, but you will see it (a sheet of paper is picked up)...these are all...machines, which are running at the Interactive for (the client), on which some task are running on (...) you have to say ‘goodbye’ to the image of an internet agency as being sexy and cool...and like ‘I just try it’ and ‘hey look, it is online.’... it is more like a... like a production process” (TA002)

For further differentiations within the collective agent of the programmers, the kind of programming is mobilised: the closer the language and the environment are to the machine the higher ranked is the work. At the end of this scale there is the creative, art, design programming (gestaltungslastig). This kind of programming is put next to the creative department – another collective agent that has traditionally a higher percentage of women. The chief of programming explains it like this:

“...and then you have those who are dealing with...yes with real business-logic-programming and...yes...that what you can call proper programming...yM is dealing with this:...how to do software architecture...how to built up a class diagram and such things (...) and this is more and more shifting apart...or yes...in two different directions...on the one hand you have the creative people, who are just flashing around...as long as it looks nice...and then you have people like yN, who do proper programming in flash...but he can also pack these big, great things into just a few KB or so...at the end it is all just code...” (TA002)

Corresponding to further social practices, it is possible to conclude that there is a relation between the hierarchic structure of the job activities and gender. Gender is made relevant. There is a very instructive example from the research diary, which shows how a task becomes a “girl-task” in the workflow:

“yD comes into the office and explains that he approved some electronic tasks to be processed. There are also two tasks for me, he adds. I am getting a little panicked, not sure whether I can deal with it and remind him that I cannot program. ‘These are girl-tasks’ he comforts me. (FT016)

In addition to the actual working process further “informal” activities at the organisation play a central role in everyday work life. One main activity is playing tabletop football. Several times a day work is interrupted to play against each other. This practice is carried out gender-exclusively. In this homosocial space men are not only playing tabletop football but, as Bourdieu stressed out, the “serious games of competition” which are a main element of *doing masculinity* [33]. Other forms of competition are demonstrated, like hard drinking and excessive partying. Important is that competing has two directions: it *distincts* one player from the other but it also *includes* the player of the competition via membership.

Regarding to the fact, that fitting into the team is very important for choosing new employees for the programmer’s team, the described practices become

relevant further. Fitting into the team corresponds to *knowing how* to play tabletop football, *how* to drink alcohol, *how* to succeed in a competition. And, that is especially interesting, it is not only important to know how *but* to be a potential partner for the competitions. To be a member of the serious games of competing, you have to be a man.

#### 4. Reducing complexity in organisation by gendering

The example of the internet agency offers the possibility of rethinking the phenomena of complexity reduction in organisations. Gendering can be seen as a function that allows organisations to reduce external complexity by more or less repressive modes of internal homogenisation [34]. Our thesis is that gender regulates complexity. If we can assume that gender requires a context to be actualised, we know that a *form* which proceeds a social meaning is needed besides binary distinctions or codes. This form is depending on the social context in which communication takes place. So, if the context in an organisation is power-related, gender is: distorted by other social criteria to mark a power position. These might include race, class or the hierarchical status. Also, these need to be interrelated to certain media to rely on gender, which in organisations are mostly discursive (language) strategies for producing meaning, and are connected to money-related rationales. If gender is the case, it is meant that it is used to regulate – by binary distinctions or codes – a social situation in a complexity reducing manner.

Social System	Forms	Media	Codes
Gender-Relationship	sexual division of labour (segmented/hierarchical)  gender relations (partnership, romantic affair, work relation, competition-rivalry)  discourse	language person alter/ego connection by competition (dominance & subordination) empathy trust love (...)	binary gender-distinction  woman/not man man/not woman or woman/not-woman man/not-man  public / private submissive/ permissive adaptive/ complementary
Organisation (profit)	discourse  legitimacy of neo-liberal, capitalistic modes of production, hierarchy vs. participation	language  power competition trust capital/ money	member/ not-member  accountable/ not-accountable

Table.2: Gender-Relationship as medial-coupled communication-system (source: [35])

We would like to describe with the model of gender communication – relying on Luhmann’s theory of generalised communication [36] – how structural inertia in gender communication is built and how it regulates complexity. It shows the interconnectedness of forms,

media and binary codes in the homogenised communication process. Within this model it can be explained how complexity is condensed by generalisations. Complexity occurs in this moment, if one item of binarity can be irritated or deconstructed. The possibility of deconstructing binary gender distinctions relies on the alternative to build a new functionality as (gender-)structure within the system. If the autopoietical process allows an evolution of functional equivalents, new forms are generated [37], [38].

We would like to mention the social and historically situated media like competition [39] or empathy/love [40], or trust [41]. Media are structuring communicative (emotional and cognitive) relations in contingent situations by coding the non-expected. As shown above, we would like to define competition (like empathy, love or trust) as an ability to perform communication by getting in connection to “the other” without the prescriptive attitude to act only within the own functional relation. It is the connection to the relevant other as “alter-ego” [42] who enables to act in connection with other (conscious) systems, but being distinct. The other is first of all an “address” for communication or action, which performs under the condition of double contingency or insecurity to make choices of performing or rejecting an understanding. Like sense – someone understands us and we react with sensual answers – we are able to rely on emotions. This makes sense producing or understanding in unclear, complex situations possible or keeps complex systems going [43]. Language is the form or pool to structure this attitude, and love as a medium to perform in complex situations might be misunderstood as self-attachment and can be substituted by other media like power and money, but we like to make the distinction, how trust or love – more than money – can produce respect and attention, necessary in diversity settings. If we attach to the media of trust/love the issue of attention, which seems to be one of the rarest assets or gains in the information society, we might understand how trust/love functions in social systems like organisations. It is the question of how much attention might be paid to diversity or complexity.

### **Conclusion & Outlook**

The Internet agency is a brandnew working field, with young, flexible and mobile employees, who work in project teams with new technologies. This form of organisation, with its flat hierarchical structure, decentralised working organisation and close partnership to its clients, seems to offer new possibilities of arranging gender (i.e. [44], [45], [46]). The presented case study stressed out, that also in innovative working fields gender is made relevant in a rather traditional than innovative way by relating to the communicative media of competition instead of trust.

We would like to conclude that there might be two aspects that guarantee the arrangement of gender in a homogeneous way: the language styles between male and

female employees and the dominance of male connotated competition in interactional situations. Regarding to these considerations we would like to offer a theoretical and practical outlook by questioning functional equivalents to competitive and divided social actors in the organisation.

If different language styles between males and females employees are expected and occur [47] conflicts might result in “intergender” communication difficulties. Troubles occur, e.g. if communication styles are stereotyped and are interfering with expectations of (male gendered and connotated) “professional normalcy”. Interactional expectations interfere with gendered forms, distinctions, use of media, and meaning and might force irritation and puts additional work of decoding on persons. Gendering communication releases from complexity by reducing expectations and motives [48], but it also causes trouble, if context and expectations are not congruent. Following the assumption, that there are no ungendered codes in communication, it explains how organisational (recruiting and promotion) processes of “similarity – attraction” [49] are to be seen as attempts to reduce complexity in interaction and organisational communication.

Second, the dominance of male connotated competition in interactional situations relates to the function of regulating the multiple dimensions of social sense in communication processes [50]. There is always the decision of (male) communicators to dominate or subordinate in the competition to define the situation. Power is constituted in this male game as double-dependency (“Herr-Knecht”) and has the function to avoid conflicts and enable cooperation. This is possible as ambivalence of difference and contact [51]. “Dies setzt, als Vehikel der Operationalisierung, eine Semantik der Einheit voraus, die das Verschiedene als Konkurrenz verbindet.” Focusing on the unity of masculine competition enables us to abstract from differences within the group and enables interactional cooperation and definition of inclusion and exclusion – e.g. by defining external role obligations for female co-workers [52].

We follow Luhmann’s assumption [53] that competition is not a relevant principle to build social structures in social subsystems (like economic or academic systems) because competition does not require communication and can be interpreted as conflict or provocation. Therefore, we might find functional equivalent forms [37] to contemporary, (male connotated) competition. Competition seems to have a vital function for the autopoiesis of social systems. Like love [54] or trust [41] it has the function as a medium in systems to enable different positions (alter/ego), to observe each other as distinct, but to relate actions and communication to each other.

And this might be a perspective to discuss gender differences in communication – either nonpersonalised generalised communication or interactions. Practical

emotionality is the glue of “professional” communication. It offers a wide range of “irrational” aspirations: like empathy, resistance, affection, anger. It is functionally equivalent to regulate communication in organisations in case communicative chances do not have to be decided in hierarchies (like competition suggests). But, differences are much more internally ascribed (to the person) than externalised in binary distinction of gendered communication.

On a discursive level, Managing Gender & Diversity is willing to define a new quality in the relationship between organisation and human resources. Boundaries of subjectivity are related to organisational function and diversity serves the autopoietical process of change and stability. The individual performs as bounded subjectivity if it becomes an integral part of the social order in organisations. While realising profits, the organisation becomes ignorant of which social valuations – in diversity and arbitrariness – are supporting functionality [55].

A relative indifference exists regarding the heterogeneity of human resources, as long as the demands on membership in an organisation such as achievement, motivation, and respectively, commitment and reliability of job completion can be ensured and are connected to the rationale of the firm. Hitherto, management reacts on the level of inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the culture of the organisation (which results in strategies for personnel/HRM instruments).

Exclusive or homogeneous cultures will not meet the political approach to include minorities because minorities are applying to the dominant functional attributes, which need to be sensibly connected to be functionally included into dominant homogeneous or dominant cultures which are built on exclusive assumptions [56], [18]. We suggest, searching for functional equivalents in interaction and organisational communication might enrich reality construction toward condensating – instead of solely reducing – complexity. It might offer the possibility of observing and managing diversity in the sense of Dirk Baecker as to respect a complex reality, apart from gender categorisation and deprivation.

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