CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The idea behind this book was inspired by the findings of the study “Communicative Publics in Cyberspace”¹ in which our research interest focused both on the communicative practices which young network actors and bloggers² between the ages of 11 and 32 engaged in online and on the subject constructions which were created as part of these practices. In the study, the process of subjectification, in which the subjects constructed themselves or were constructed as such under specific conditions created by the use of media technology (Reckwitz, 2008, p. 9) lay at the heart of the empirical analysis. One of the main findings was that the process of subjectification evolved between the conflicting priorities of autonomy and heteronomy for the adolescents and young adults participating in the study. While analysing the data, I soon gained the impression that the empirical sources, interviews, and visualizations did not only provide information on the communicative practices and subject constructions

¹The study was part of a larger project on *Subject Constructions and Digital Culture* carried out by research teams from the universities of Klagenfurt, Hamburg-Harburg, Bremen, and Münster. The members of Klagenfurt’s research team were Nicole Duller, Katja Langeland, Katja Ošljak, Christina Schachtner, and Heidrun Stückler. The project was financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) and the VW Foundation. The main findings are presented in Schachtner and Duller (2014).

²The term network actors refers to those who participate in various communicative activities in the internet, including blogging. The term bloggers is used when the narrators concerned primarily refer to themselves as bloggers and their narrative-based practices in the internet primarily consist of blogging.

but, on top of that, also told stories which related both to the internet as a life base and the everyday realities beyond the internet. These stories addressed not only the here and now but also the yesterday and tomorrow, putting the practices and subject constructions which we had identified in an overarching narrative context.

The narratives which emerged from our data then became the research interest in my secondary analysis of the interviews and visualizations, confirming my initial impressions and rapidly growing into a new research question: What stories do internet-savvy adolescents and young adults from different parts of the world tell in this day and age? The transnational perspective was possible because network actors and bloggers from six countries in Europe, four Arab countries, and the USA had been included in the initial study, accommodating the intention of analysing sociocultural transformation as one context of the stories which was playing out not only within individual nations but also on the global stage.

The secondary analysis was based on the assumption of the “hermeneutic circle”³ (Struve, 2013, p. 22), which means that the reading of a text never comes to an end. I do not wish to restrict the assumption of multiple stages of evaluation to empirical data which were collected as part of an understanding-interpretative approach to research. Nevertheless, texts produced in a research context are especially suited to a primary, secondary, and tertiary analysis because of the multiple layers of meaning they represent. Barney Glaser, who, together with Anselm Strauss, developed Grounded Theory, already pointed to the possibility of picking up on the research process time and again: “The research in progress is always there waiting to move forward when the researcher can return to it” (Glaser, 1998, p. 15). What Roland Barthes defined as a characteristic of objects is also true of texts; they have more than one meaning (1988, pp. 182–183). To a certain extent, that dethrones narrator and researcher alike because both have to reckon with the text allowing further meanings and interpretations (Struve, 2013, p. 22) going beyond what the narrator intended and the researcher interpreted.

³ All quotations from German publications were translated into English for this book.

1.1 THE SOCIOCULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NARRATING

In line with Kurt Ranke (1955), Albrecht Lehmann proposed that it is a basic human need “when describing the world to understand, interpret, and talk about it in all of its dimensions” (2011, p. 28). This implies that the world is predetermined for us, that we are born into a world which gives rise to narratives. The world is, as Michael von Engelhardt writes, a product of narrating and, at the same time, through narrating, it undergoes a process of further development (2011, p. 39).

In narrating, perceptions and what we have seen or heard take shape as experiences. In other words, experiences of the world do not befall us; we create them, we integrate them in existing stories, or we make new stories out of them (Wolff, 2012, p. 183). The dynamics of society see to it that storytelling does not end but develops as an unfinished process in which causes are identified, links are forged, predictions are risked, and the exceptional is linked with the ordinary (Bruner, 1990, p. 47). Narrative practices relate to existing social orders, interpreting them, modifying them, and refining them. As we encounter them in narrative, subjective processes of experiencing and doing can only be grasped in relation to their specific socio-historical nature according to Heiner Keupp (2015, p. 31). Lehmann maintains that every narrative situation is embedded in universal life circumstances (2011, p. 29). Thus an individual’s life is inextricably interlocked with social structures but without being at their mercy.

In times of sociocultural upheaval, such as we are currently experiencing, the challenge is intensified to process and digest observations, events, and messages in narrative form. Subjects are confronted with social contradictions, tensions, and conflicts which are crying out for solutions. As Keupp observed, ideas are formulated relating to the fundamental incompatibility of subjective desires and social imperatives (2015, p. 7). Questions are asked about negotiations between culture, society, and the subject (2015, p. 7). The ambivalences we perceive do not invite us to stand firm; rather they give rise to “a spur to speech, an urge to utterance, a way of working-through what is contradictory and unresolved” (Bhabha, 2012a, pp. 51–52).

As this sociocultural unrest is global in nature, narratives are being triggered all over the world in which people try to interpret the upheavals they are witnessing and attempt to embed themselves in new social structures in the very stories they tell. The narratives spring from different cultural backgrounds and biographies, which means that they do not necessarily

form a harmonious whole. But people cannot keep out of each other's way in an increasingly transnational world. Where intercultural encounters take place and different narratives collide, "cultural translation" (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 132) is essential, but it does not always succeed. Misunderstandings, conflicts, and violence are highly likely when apparently irreconcilable narratives collide. And yet these narratives are almost all we have as a means of understanding each other, and their prospects of success will increase when they are combined with a global understanding of ethics, which, however, still has to be developed on the basis of human rights.

1.2 THE SUBJECT-THEORETICAL APPROACH

A subject-theoretical approach underlies both the theoretical and empirical parts of this book, which means that the subject is the starting and reference point for the empirical analysis and the theoretical reflection. The decision to take this approach was based on the fact that narratives start off with individual people (Lehmann, 2011, p. 31). It is individuals who process their experiences in narrative form, who tell Others⁴ about them, who exchange stories with Others, and who continue and change their narratives as part of this exchange.

Individuals construct themselves as subjects because they can make themselves the objects of their narratives by virtue of their reflexive practice. Narrating gives them the opportunity to develop a self-concept, to portray themselves, to make themselves perceptible to Others, to bridge the gap between themselves and their social surroundings, and in doing so they participate in the construction and maintenance of a common socio-cultural life-world (von Engelhardt, 2011, p. 39). These comments already imply a certain concept of the subject which differs from depictions of the subject in which the subject is an instance independent of Others in which it finds the basis for its knowing and doing in itself, and in itself alone (Reckwitz, 2008, p. 12). The idea of the autonomous subject is bound to the notion of occidental modernity, which conceptualized the subject as sensible, as identical to itself, as the sovereign of its life (Bilden, 2012, p. 184), and which understood itself as a social formation that pursued the

⁴In this book the term "the Other" refers to those who are indispensable for subject construction, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, amongst others. As such the term refers to specific Others, which is why it is capitalized.

emancipation of the subject (Reckwitz, 2008, p. 12). This concept of the subject has been criticized by many from a feminist and post-structuralist perspective along the lines that the classical concept of the subject is a historical product and that subjectivity is constituted in fields of power which are characterized by social inequality (see, for example, Bilden, 2012, p. 185; Reckwitz, 2008, p. 12).

This book follows a subject-theoretical approach, which assumes a dual structure for the subject as described, albeit with different accents and distinctions, by Helga Bilden (2012), Judith Butler (2005), George H. Mead (1934), Käte Meyer-Drawe (1990), and Andreas Reckwitz (2006, 2008).⁵ It is an approach that contrasts with both “individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the *I*” and those “schools of thought to which individualism is opposed” that favour “collective, plural pronouns [as in] traditional communism [or] the feminism of sisterhood” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 90) in which, as Butler underlines, “the *we* is always positive, the *plural you* ... is a possibly ally ... the *I* is unseemly” (Cavarero, 2000, pp. 90–91 quoted in Butler, 2005, p. 32).

The assumption of a dual structure, with the subject being simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous, is part of the etymology of the word. The term subject goes back to classical Latin *subiectum*, which means a person ruled by a monarch or sovereign state. In the modern era, its meaning changed, now being related to the recognizing self and referring to the self-determining self-consciousness. The Enlightenment, too, focused on the recognitional competence of the subject when calling upon it to free itself from its immaturity and its “inability to use [its] understanding without guidance from another” (Kant, 1784/1983, p. 41). This appeal was addressed to the subject as a whole, considering it primarily, however, as a rational being, even though, following Immanuel Kant, a philosopher central to the Enlightenment, the importance of experience for subject construction cannot be denied (Beer, 2014, p. 224). Reckwitz considers the two factors of autonomy and subjection as two sides of the self, which is prompted to “model itself as a rational, reflexive, socially oriented, moral, expressive, boundary-crossing instance” (2006, p. 10) in the process of its subjectification. His analysis of the subject focuses both on the discourses in which forms of the subject are represented and problematized and on the subjectifying potential of everyday practices (2008,

⁵ At this point I will elaborate on only some of the approaches; later on, the discussion will be taken up again and complemented by the positions of other authors.

p. 9). These practices include the narrative acts which are at the heart of this book.

In the process of subjectification, Reckwitz posits that the subject becomes an “allegedly autonomous” instance by subjecting itself to the criterion of autonomy (2008, p. 14). The formulation itself emphasizes that the autonomy of the subject is only apparent, which understandably leads Reckwitz to ask the following question: “Which codes, bodily routines, and preferred structures do individuals have to incorporate in themselves in their particular historical-cultural context in order to become an attributable ‘subject’ recognized by themselves and others?” This perception of the subject means that it does everything in order to satisfy the requirements of these codes.

As Butler sees it, a greater autonomy to act is accorded to the subject by Michel Foucault in his later works, particularly in his concept of “Technologies of the Self” (1988). Although both Foucault and Butler start from the premise that there is “no ‘I’ that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character” (Butler, 2005, p. 7), they also want to demonstrate that the subject is equipped with the power to shape these norms (Butler, 2003, p. 9). The commonly posed question “What should I do?” presupposes an ‘I’ and the possibility of ‘acting’, which indicates the existence of a subject capable of self-reflection (2003, p. 9). In the stories told by the network actors and bloggers, this question turns up time and again, triggered by external threats or also by newly gained insights into the impact of media-technical artefacts. It creates the opportunity to develop a critical perspective on norms; nonetheless the subject is not “fully free to disregard the norm. ... If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint” (Butler, 2005, p. 19).

Helga Bilden, who shares the notion of a dual structure and, like Butler and Foucault, considers the subject to be capable of challenging norms, goes one step further in her formulation of the notion of a subject. She emphasizes the processuality of becoming a subject when she rejects the idea of a “complete subject” in favour of “an ensemble which is repeatedly negotiated and constituted afresh” (2012, p. 188), an idea which had already been taken up by Silvia Pritsch (2008, p. 127). Subjectivity, Bilden continues, is negotiated and constituted in the stories which Others tell about us and which we tell ourselves. Bilden stresses that narrations can contribute to uniting heterogeneous elements (2012, p. 221), a process

which many of the stories presented in this book certainly bear witness to, for example when they are about formulating concepts of democracy within authoritarian societies or redefining the relationship between the public and the private.

Bilden also highlights the subject's diversity of voices (2012, p. 296), developed in response to the plurality that is a core characteristic of contemporary societies. She releases the notion of the subject from the requirement that the subject should generate itself as a harmonious entity, allowing it instead to be contradictory and multifaceted. It should not be forgotten, however, that a diversity of voices can also be problematic, for example when they are part of a multiple personality disorder, often brought about by traumatic experiences which can only be tolerated by the person concerned splitting the mind into multiple, separate, non-communicating identities (2012, pp. 194–195). When acknowledged by the subject, a diversity of voices without such a traumatic backdrop could, in contrast, increase the capacity to deal with messy or ambiguous situations or to react to cultural differences in a more open and tolerant manner, understanding them as being bound to other cultural locations (2012, pp. 222ff.).

Finally, the notion of the subject as developed by Bilden includes not only the sociocultural world as a stimulating-to-constitutive factor of subjectivity but also the world of things, here, primarily, the world of digital media. From the moment they are born, people are faced with a world of things “which they encounter in a friendly or hostile fashion, which are enticing, motivating, terrifying” (Schachtner, 2014, p. 9), and which, as Kurt Lewin already established in the 1920s, have a particular “demand character” for the individual (1926/1982, p. 64). Things prompt infants to interact with them, as the paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott observed (1971, pp. 4ff.); they encourage infants to reach for them, to squeeze them, to throw them away, and to get them back. In this interaction game, they discover the difference between inner and external reality, between the I and the Other; and so the foundations for subjectification are laid. Things retain their demand character for the subject for a lifetime. Time and again they stimulate so-called interaction games anew (Lorenzer, 1981, pp. 155ff.); they become object, instrument, and space for narrative practices. But that is not all: They also influence these practices alongside the narrative forms and contents they produce. How could it be different? After all, things materialize sociocultural codes which trigger a certain way of thinking and acting when

interacting with them. A chair, for example, makes us sit in a certain way, a ball forces us to make specific physical movements in certain directions, and a blog compels bloggers to write and present themselves in a certain way. Nowadays, the digital media play a dominant role across the globe in the world of things. Following in the footsteps of images, they have become powerful engines for changing subjectivity (Bilden, 2012, pp. 206ff.). This book also deals with this proposition.

1.3 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Because the results of the empirical study which form the core of this book are influenced not only by my theoretical perspectives but also by my methodological approach and research methods, the following section is devoted to a presentation and discussion of issues relating to my methodology and methods.

1.3.1 *Methodology*

Methodologically, this book is rooted in the tradition of an understanding-interpretative approach to social research which makes it possible to grasp subjective experiences and actions in their specific socio-historical nature (Keupp, 2015, p. 31). This is precisely the interest which lies behind my research when I ask what stories internet-savvy adolescents and young adults from various parts of the world recount in this day and age. This question also includes an interest in “the way in which historical and social conditions affect the lives of individuals interacting with each other,” to use Rainer Winter’s words (2014, p. 125). The possibility of an understanding approach arises from the fact that, in their everyday lives, individuals always face and interpret each other and the world (Soeffner, 2014, p. 35). No matter how preconfigured social situations are, in their everyday lives, individuals must define them anew for themselves and they do so, according to Hitzler, with the help of “knowledge-guided and knowledge-generating processes” (2014, p. 61). If social research aims to understand these processes, it has to be involved in reconstructing meaning (2014, p. 61). With reference to Alfred Schutz, Hitzler proposes that meaning constitutes itself in “conscious acts which take a stand” (2014, p. 64). This definition places meaning on a conscious and rational level, ignoring the fact that it can also have a tacit dimension (Polanyi, 1966) and that, alongside cognition, meaning also includes sensory and

emotional elements which would remain hidden from social research if meaning were only considered to be the result of “conscious acts which take a stand” (Hitzler, 2014, p. 64).

As the interpreting, meaning-creating subject never acts alone but always in a force field of interdependencies, it is the task of an understanding-interpretative approach to social research to analyse these interdependencies, for example between an individual and historical situation, or between an individual and collective world view (Soeffner, 2014, p. 40). This book covers the interdependencies between media artefacts and individual positions, between individual stories and sociocultural transformations, between self-definitions and social expectations. These interdependencies also involve non-verbal forces to a large degree, which need to be translated into language during the research process. Reality only becomes visible once it has been verbalized, but a discrepancy remains between reality which has been lived and reality which has been interpreted; Soeffner warns against confusing “linguistically interpreted and understood reality” with “actual reality” (2014, p. 51). Winter does not appear to share this view of a division between lived and verbalized reality. Instead he believes that “lived experience ... is always shaped and structured by texts and discourse” (2014, p. 119). The risk of confusion in his proposition has a somewhat different emphasis, involving as it does the difference between lived textuality and verbalized textuality.

It is in the tradition of an understanding-interpretative methodology that Grounded Theory can be placed. The elicitation and the analysis of the empirical data at the heart of this book were based on its principles and rules, integrating aspects of its methodology and methods. Grounded Theory was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the early 1960s; on the one hand, it was inspired by American Pragmatism as expounded by John Dewey, George H. Mead, and Charles S. Peirce and, on the other hand, by the use of case studies, which were favoured by the Chicago School of Sociology. Since the turn of the millennium, Grounded Theory has enjoyed increased attention in German-speaking countries, not least, I presume, because of its openness, making it a very vibrant approach which can be regenerated and refined, as was the stated intent of its founders. In the USA it was one of Anselm Strauss’ students, Adele Clarke, amongst others, who related Grounded Theory to the “postmodern turn” (Strübing, 2014, p. 100); in the German-speaking world it was Heiner Legewie and Barbara Schervier-Legewie (2004), Bruno Hildenbrand (2000/2004, 2011 with Juliet Corbin), and Jörg Strübing

(2004, 2014) who rendered services to the reception and evolution of the approach.

In contrast to a nomothetic methodology, the goal of Grounded Theory is not to verify a theory but to discover the theory slumbering in the data (Strauss, 1995, p. 71). The main task of researchers consists of finding an interpretative approach to the data and to develop theoretical assumptions in close connection with the empirical evidence; in other words, it is an inductive approach. The crux of the interpretative work is the identification of a core category which not only lies at the heart of developing a theory but is also central to the empirical reality. Glaser writes: “Grounded theory produces a core category that continually resolves a main concern, and through sorting the core category organizes the integration of the theory” (1998, p. 13).

Grounded Theory is an appropriate research approach for analysing the stories told by network actors and bloggers because it focuses on the dialectic relation between action and structure, particularly in Strauss’ reformulation (Strübing, 2014, p. 103). Thus it supports the research interest pursued in this book relating to the entanglement of micro- and macro-structures. Clarke took the approach one step further by integrating non-human actors in her research, which was not expressly ruled out by Glaser and Strauss but not explicitly formulated either. In the stories analysed here, this is certainly a factor which is not to be ignored.

As meaningful as an understanding-interpretative approach to the empirical field may be in relation to the explicit issue at hand, it also has its limits. As a matter of principle, it must be assumed that the procedures in an understanding-interpretative research method shape the empirical data under investigation. As mentioned, Soeffner identifies the sources of error mainly in the discrepancy between “the immediate horizons of meaning of the practical action and the ... later interpretation of this action” (2014, p. 41). With reference to Winter (2014, p. 119), when analysing the narrative acts of the network actors and bloggers, I do not assume that they signal an immediate horizon of meaning but rather that they have already been shaped by a meaning which has been mediated through discourses and experiences with the media. All the same, the difference between the meaning embodied in the narratives and the one that is interpreted when these narratives are analysed has to be taken into account, especially since it is impossible to capture all levels of meaning. In the study presented here, several transfers of meaning took place which presumably resulted in changes in meaning. The first transfer already took place when the

network actors and bloggers recounted their day-to-day reality and the second one when their spoken language was written down as text, with the third and fourth transfers happening when these texts were interpreted and then transferred into book form. On top of that, the influence of the interviewers on the first transfer must not be ignored, caused by their sociocultural origins and the way in which the interviews were carried out. The risk of potentially changing the meaning in the transfer process cannot be eliminated completely, although it can be reduced by following specific rules when collecting and interpreting the empirical data. A high level of reflection is also required on the part of the researchers, on the basis of which a critical distance is established, both to themselves and to the empirical material, which encourages a wealth of perspectives in the research process.

Winter pleads for a socially critical appreciation of the understanding-interpretative research approach (2014, p. 118). I understand his plea to cover not only a critical look at the limitations of the methodology and methods but also an appreciation of the consequences of the findings. Glaser formulated a socially critical interpretation of Grounded Theory in as much as he demanded that it has to be measured up against whether it produces findings which are of value for relevant behaviour in the real-world setting under investigation and are meaningful for the people in that setting (1998, p. 17). Winter's socially critical interpretation goes one step further as he demands not only that researchers uncover cultural myths when they write, along with the emotional substance of the stories under investigation, but also that they search for new perspectives for those who are affected (2014, p. 125).

This book complies with the demand for a socially critical perspective to the extent that

- The social mechanisms are uncovered which have an impact on the subjects, including those which restrict their freedoms.
- The ideas which could transform society are given a voice, particularly those formulated by the Arab network actors and bloggers.
- Observations are made on the future of narrating which reveal the possibility of establishing a social alternative in the face of transnational developments.

1.3.2 *Sample*

The secondary analysis of empirical data taken from the study “Communicative Publics in Cyberspace” included 21 network actors and bloggers⁶ between the ages of 11 and 32 (11 female and 10 male). The age group was chosen to represent Generation Y, defined by Klaus Hurrelmann and Erik Albrecht as those born between 1985 and 2000 (2014, p. 15). Worldwide, members of this generation use the internet and smartphones most intensively and the organization of their everyday lives is closely connected with the digital world. As an affinity for digital media is a general characteristic of this generation, it can reasonably be expected that the results of the study presented in this book are relevant for this generation as a whole, even when the entire range of stories told by this generation cannot be traced due to the limited number of participants. In spite of that, the narrative typology which was identified provides insights into the experiences of and attitudes towards life of a generation whose future is being organized amidst the increasing digitalization of everyday life and sociocultural upheaval. It reveals the focus, expectations, hopes, and doubts of this generation as they set foot on the stage of the adult world, or, to be more precise, the self-concepts and social practices which accompany them in their free time, as they start studying or working, or when they are entitled to vote or become involved in politics.

The network actors and bloggers were not selected to represent one country alone, coming as they do from six European countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine), four Arab countries (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) and the USA.⁷ The reason behind this broad geographical dispersion is the increasing deterritorialization of phenomena, events, and developments in view of transnationalization and globalization. In connection with digital media in particular, national borders no longer represent the limits of experiences and actions. The narratives of Generation Y often develop in transnational contexts, forging links with narratives from other parts of the world, so that transnational occurrences and questions of interconnectedness and exchange themselves become the subject of narratives.

⁶The original study involved a total of 33 network actors and bloggers.

⁷The network actors and bloggers from the Arab world and the USA were interviewed in English. The other interviews were carried out in German; any quotations from these interviews have been translated into English.

1.3.3 *Research Methods*

Stephan Wolff claims that stories are told to those who know the storyteller well, who ought to get to know the storyteller well, or who challenge the storyteller to tell one (2012, p. 187). The last reason applies to the narrators who have their say in this book, although they were invited to do so rather than challenged. Generally, appropriate participants first have to be persuaded to take part in a study. Initially the interest in participation appears to lie exclusively with the researchers, who want to obtain results and publish them. In retrospect, the possibility of talking about themselves is often seen as a good opportunity by the participants as well. Talking about oneself is a fundamental human need and where do you get the chance to talk about yourself at length, to attentive listeners to boot? The Arab narrators must have experienced their interviews as an ambivalent situation, even though nobody picked up on the topic. But they did speak about the conflicting situation they found themselves in. On the one hand, it was important to them to make their critical voices heard worldwide; they may have seen their participation in a Western research project as a good opportunity to do so. On the other hand, they knew about the personal risk of criticizing the political and cultural systems which prevailed in their countries.

The research methods which were chosen were thematically structured interviews and visualizations. The topics which were included in the interview guide focused on the questions that were important for the original study on computer-based practices and subject constructions. In the interviews themselves, the interviewees were deliberately left enough wiggle room to set their own criteria for relevance, enabling them to bring in new thematic aspects. This increased the spectrum of levels of meaning, which was certainly very useful for the research interests pursued in the secondary analysis. Interviews are occasionally objected to on the grounds that what people say is not the same as what they do. Jerome Bruner would find such an objection strange as it implies that “what people *do* is more important ... than what they *say*, or that the latter is important only for what it can reveal about the former” (1990, p. 17). It would be like insisting that “‘saying’ ... is *only* about what one thinks, feels, believes, experiences” (1990, p. 17), leaving aside the fact that, as he writes a couple of paragraphs later, “saying and doing represent a functionally inseparable unit in a culturally oriented psychology” (1990, p. 19).

The visualizations produced by the interviewees provided answers to two questions: “Who am I online?” and “I move between different platforms. What does that look like?” They were asked to draw their answers to these questions at the end of the interview. Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp emphasize the value of imagery in research, characterizing it as “the irreducible center for the research and evidentiary context of the sciences” (2003/2013, p. 24). The method of visualization addresses different levels of consciousness, to a certain extent, to methods based on verbal language; it opens up access to the preconscious, the anticipated, even to the unconscious. The latter, however, did not play a role in the analysis. Contradictions and ambivalences can emerge more prominently in images because they do not push the artists to provide logical explanations; they also free them from the pressure to be unambiguous because differences can exist alongside each other. Finally, it could be expected that images, which arise out of sensory perception and appeal to the senses, can also convey emotions to a greater extent than words. And emotions play an important role in telling stories, after all (von Engelhardt, 2011, p. 46; Wolff, 2012, p. 191).

Both methods of eliciting data gave rise to narratives,⁸ which arose in a very specific situation. This is quite likely to have had an influence on the narratives. One of the influential factors in that situation was the language used. The interviewees and researchers did not always speak the same mother tongue, for example when the interviewees came from English-speaking countries, but sometimes, too, when they came from German-speaking countries because not all of the researchers spoke German as their first language. It was particularly challenging when neither the researcher nor the interviewee could use their native language, which was the case when interviewing the Arab network actors. Misunderstandings were to be expected due to the language barriers, but when they were identified and talked about during an interview, they could be extremely revealing because they encouraged more precision and differentiation in the content. Above and beyond that, the contacts with the Arab interviewees involved political risks, which meant that the researchers had to find a balance between their research interests and protecting the interviewees. Then there were technical malfunctions with the Skype interviews, which were often interrupted for hours or even days. Finally, the interviews with

⁸The type of narratives they produced will be explained later on in this introduction and in more detail in Chap. 4.

the Arab network actors in 2010/2011 were affected by the revolutionary events in North Africa and the Middle East. The interviewees gave their opinions on political topics in a context dominated by violent confrontations; some of them were also facing existential threats themselves. One interview, for example, took place while the blogger was on the run.

The analysis of the data followed the guidelines of Grounded Theory, which could be used to interpret both the interviews and the visualizations. The basic procedure in Grounded Theory is coding. First of all open coding is used in order to identify as many aspects as possible which are relevant for the research question; this is followed by axial coding, which looks for linkages in the wealth of data. The goal of coding is to identify a core category; examples of core categories in the analysis of the narratives at hand are “interconnectedness,” “managing boundaries,” or “setting out and breaking away.” A core category must appear frequently in the empirical data and has to play a pivotal role, such as being the starting point for various subpatterns of the phenomenon (Strauss, 1987, p. 36). The core category is central to the coding paradigm, creating a structural context for the data which were sorted out during axial coding (Strübing, 2014, p. 24). The coded segments which occur around the axis of a core category can be used to answer questions about the conditions, context, and consequences of a phenomenon as well as about strategic actions related to the phenomenon (2014, p. 25). The narrators’ reflections and emotions relating to the phenomenon were also coded in the analyses of the narratives presented here.

The analysis of the visualizations also followed the guidelines of Grounded Theory, albeit in the knowledge that visualizations contrast with verbal language as a source of data. They were examined as a combination of symbols which stand for something else (Lobinger, 2012, p. 55). The visualizations drawn by network actors and bloggers which are included in this book stand for everyday scenarios, feelings, self-perceptions, relationships, and intentions. When analysing the drawings semantically, I was interested in the relationships between the sign and the signified. In this sense, the focus was on the visualizations as symbols which, according to Lobinger, are characterized by a “high degree of semantic vagueness and ambiguity” (2012, p. 55). At the same time, Susan Sontag suggests that the “photographic exploration ... of the world ... provid[es] possibilities of control” (1973, p. 156). Furthermore, “at its origins [image-making] was a practical, magical activity, a means of appropriating or gaining power over something” (1973, pp. 154–155).

Both aspects can be found quite frequently in the narrators' visualizations, namely in attempts to provide possibilities of control, for example between human being and machine, between the I and the You, or by assigning the machine a specific spot in one's everyday life. At the same time, the visualizations include signs of ambivalence, ambiguity, and openness, as expressed in one drawn by a 14-year-old blogger to answer the question "Who am I online?" It only consists of a circle, creating the impression of a closed order, which the 14-year-old is possibly trying to establish with his blog; yet the circle is empty, leaving what is happening inside the circle fully open. The open horizon of meaning in the visualizations was counteracted in the research process, firstly by asking the person who had done the drawing to comment on their visualization and secondly by following the guidelines of Grounded Theory when analysing the drawing, as described earlier. In this book, the results of these analyses are not presented systematically; the drawings are only used to illustrate the stories that they accompany.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The second chapter of the book deals with narrating as a cultural practice and life form which is deeply embedded in the history of humanity. Storytelling is introduced as an act which contributes to producing the foundations of our lives as it helps us to comprehend the world in which we must be able to act on the basis of this interpretation. Individuals merge with the world through their narratives. This is followed by an attempt to relate narrating to time and space following Paul Ricoeur. Time is described as the contextual framework for narrating, as its content-related and structural relationship, and as the product of narratives. Space is also characterized as a framework for narrating, but one which only constitutes itself through narrating.

Inspired by the subject-theoretical approach at the heart of this book, the next question concerns the functions of narrating for the subject. With reference to Michel Foucault (1988), the discussion focuses on a technology of Self-construction which provides orientation and agency, self-knowledge and self-understanding, as well as self-assurance and transgression. Based on the proposition that narrating as a technology of Self-construction implies not only a movement towards the Self but also a movement towards the Other, the role of the Other is explored as a reference point, topic, co-narrator, and part of the narrative Self, also in

reference to the concept of the “relational self” developed by Kenneth Gergen (1999). This leads to the question concerning the extent to which narrating is limited in its actions, which can be answered by characterizing narrating as a technology of subjection or enablement. This means that, as narrators, we are not alone when directing our narratives, yet we are not totally at the mercy of the expectations of our social and material environment either. It is proposed that we situate our stories within a set of norms, which we cannot ignore completely at the risk of losing out on social recognition, without our stories becoming effects of these norms. On the contrary—the argument continues—they retain something irreducible which arises out of the necessity of adopting norms, in the process of which autobiographical dispositions have to be considered in relation to norms, which creates structural opportunities for critical reflection (Butler, 2003, p. 10).

Following on from the social counterpart, the material counterpart in the form of digital media is addressed as a further reference point for the narrating of present-day adolescents and young adults. Digital media are portrayed as the products of social practice which are endowed with a sociocultural charge in the process of being created. This is fleshed out—as the argument goes—in the form of structural characteristics which are pertinent to narrating, such as interconnectedness, interactivity, globality, multimodality, and virtuality. The claim is not made that digital media differ fundamentally from all types of media which preceded them; however, it is postulated that there are differences in relation to the form and intensity of these characteristics. The multimodality of digital media, for example, demands that the relationship between image and text is re-examined in terms of its consequences for narrating. Finally, virtual space as constituted by digital media is illuminated from the perspective of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. The conclusion is that narratives from the physical world are not barred from virtual space but that the latter, at the same time, stimulates novel narrative acts.

In the fourth chapter, the empirical data are presented in the form of a typology of the stories which were told. The analyses reveal how these stories interweave experiences and actions from virtual space and from the physical world, from the past and the present, and with intentions and hopes for the future. As the analyses also show, they move on different levels of awareness, intuition, and pre-awareness; they run like a subterranean web through the narrators’ lives, initiating specific patterns of thinking and doing. The core categories which were already identified in the

primary analysis in relation to the narrators' practices pointed the way to the focus of the individual stories. The following six types could be identified, which sometimes also appeared in different variations: stories about interconnectedness, self-staging, suppliers and sellers, managing boundaries, and transformation, as well as setting out and breaking away.

The next chapter addresses the extent to which the concepts covered in the second and third chapters, namely time and space, the Self, and the You, and the structural characteristics of digital media, are present in the narrative typology and which form they take on in the stories. This is an attempt at a theoretical postscript. Time appears in the stories as biographical and sociocultural time. Space takes on form in the narrative practices of managing boundaries, in the crossing of national and cultural spaces, and in the production and configuration of virtual spaces. The presumption that narratives are technologies of Self-construction is confirmed on many occasions in the stories. These can be seen as attempts by the narrators to find their bearings in the world through Self-construction or as narrative saunters between standardized and experimental representations of the Self, or between those representations which divide and those which create continuity. In addition, the analysis of the narratives confirms that the I does not act in isolation in relation to time, space, or the Self. The You appears on the narrative stage as a reference point, a topic in the narration, or in the imagination. Finally, this chapter turns to the interaction which unfolds between narrators, narratives, and media technology. "No end in sight" is shorthand for the seemingly infinite distribution of narratives through digital networks unleashed by their rhizome-like character. To look at this interaction from another angle, the fact that images are particularly en vogue enhances their function as a narrative medium for the documentation of social events, as a social binding agent, and as a means for self-staging. A typical feature of this kind of interaction is trans-media narrating, which interlinks media experiences from earlier phases of life as well as experiences in different media, creating a cosmos of stories which the narrators share as designers.

In accordance with the research interest formulated at the beginning of the introduction, the analysis focused not only on which stories the network actors and bloggers told but also on whether and, if so, how these stories relate to sociocultural transformation in contemporary society. Consequently, they were matched against phenomena of change like detraditionalization, pluralization, the blurring of borders, individualization, and global flows, revealing that the stories of the network actors and

bloggers are not left untouched by social upheaval. That is not to say that they are determined by upheaval as the narrators are self-willed subjects with the ability to select, differentiate, and reflect. In particular, the search for and establishment of alternative value orientations and life forms can be seen as an answer to social challenges, whereby the narrators from Western countries tend to act as individuals, and narrators from the Arab world strive for collective strategies.

In the last chapter, narrating is placed in the context of cultural developments, tracing an arc back to Chap. 2, in which storytelling was explored as a cultural practice and life form. The question is which guise must narrating assume in a world in which global flows and the global interplay are intensifying and accelerating. The demands placed on narrating are discussed from the perspective of the “translational turn,” from which consequences can be deduced for the future of narrating. Storytelling must be in a position to help create narrative spaces which literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha calls the “Third Space” (1994, p. 37), describing it as the springboard for a type of narrating which is detached from dualisms and offers space for cultural differences.

1.5 INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

When I outline the innovative nature of this book, I do not want to imply that the aspects I mention have been overlooked by the academic community so far but rather that they have only been discussed—as far as I can tell—inadequately or on the fringes.

This book is about everyday stories, not literary or cinematic narratives as staged for television or in film. It is about research into a narrative world which, although of constitutive significance for developing one’s personality and culture, narrative researchers have tended not to focus on as they are primarily concerned with “self-contained, aesthetically pleasing narratives” (2011, p. 28), as Lehmann points out. The interest pursued here in everyday narrating in the context of digital media is also relatively new, although it is more common in academic discourse in the Anglo-American context, where it goes under the heading of storytelling, than it is in the German-speaking world. Even there, though, media space has received little attention as a co-creator of narratives. This gap is counteracted by drawing on approaches which deal with the sociocultural meaning of things, even if digital media do not play a specific role in them, as in the approaches of Lorenzer (1981), Barthes (1988), and Csikszentmihalyi

and Rochberg-Halton (1981). Awareness should be raised of the fact that people are not confronted with a neutral world of things but rather with a stimulating one in which new accents have been set by the digital media as they leave their traces in the narratives of individuals.

The transformation of the topic of narrating into media studies is also breaking new ground in that the storytelling under consideration is carried out by everyday actors and not by professional narrators, PR agencies, or media companies. The analysis within a media studies framework is not limited to an interpretation of the texts alone but also includes the narrators, as the creators of these texts and as actors in the narratives; it thus focuses on the subject, an approach which cannot be taken for granted in the context of media studies (Gentzel, Krotz, Wimmer, & Winter, 2019). Moreover, the notion of the subject used here has to hold its ground against the classical notion of the subject which, although it has come under criticism, has not yet been set aside. In contrast to the idea of an independent subject, a subject is posited which moves between the poles of self-determination and determination by the Other.

The entanglement of micro- and macrostructures demanded by the nature of the research question required an interdisciplinary approach. Complementing the perspective of media studies, there was input from sociology, psychology, philosophy, literary criticism, and cultural studies, which also contributes to the innovative nature of the book.

Alongside the theoretical innovations, new avenues were explored in connection with aspects of the methodology. While the understanding-interpretative approach is sufficiently acknowledged and almost mainstream these days, I would suggest that the introduction of visualization as a research method is methodologically innovative. In media studies and visual culture as well as in the history of art, the image is the main object of research; in disciplines like psychology or education, it serves as a diagnostic instrument, which comes closer to the function of the image as a research method. On the one hand, the drawings produced in the empirical study represent a form of communication between the narrators and researchers and, on the other hand, they serve as representations of the Self and as interpretative pictures with which the narrators attempt to organize their perceptions, emotions, and relationships. The drawings reveal “inner landscapes” which bear witness to the ambiguous rapport between the I and the world (Sontag, 1973, p. 122).

Finally, I would like to reiterate that I did not examine traditional stories and have thus created a concept of narrative which differs from traditional notions. The stories presented in this book were told within the context of interviews and visualizations in words and images; they do not proceed in a linear fashion spanning the beginning, climax, and end. They do not restrict themselves to memories and descriptions but encompass future perspectives, commentaries, and reflections. They are like pieces of a narrative jigsaw puzzle which reflect different phases of the narrators' personal biographies and different spheres of life which do not dovetail perfectly with each other. The narrative notion represented here draws on an integrated view of the pieces in the jigsaw and on the identification of a focus around which the pieces of the puzzle arrange themselves, although the narrators do not necessarily have to be aware of this. The narrative notion takes account of the "small stories" (von Engelhardt, 2011, p. 46) and favours a spotlight on seemingly unimportant details, passing remarks, metacommunicative comments, incomplete sentences, and pauses, on the assumption that it reflects a complex reality (Ginzburg, 1980, p. 13). I was interested in securing the narrative traces as time stamps for Generation Y.

1.6 MAJOR THEMES

The following propositions are my attempt to summarize the theoretical and empirical insights gained while working on this book in connection with the everyday stories, digital media, and sociocultural transformations as currently experienced by adolescents and young adults from various parts of the world:

- Storytelling transcends the immediacy of human existence. It points to the past and future alike; it integrates what has been experienced with what can be imagined, what is close and what is distant, what is solid and what is fluid.
- Media change the forms and locations of narrating. They turn out to be playing grounds for our narrative self-realization. Digital media are driving forward the deterritorialization of narrating, displacing experiences, interpretations, ideas, and values in the process. At the same time, they are the products of narratives.

- The narratives told by the network actors and bloggers are like subterranean webs which integrate experiences and actions in virtual and physical reality and give them their meaning.
- The narratives provide some answers to phenomena associated with sociocultural transformation, such as detraditionalization, pluralization, the blurring of borders, individualization, and global flows. They are shaped by this transformation and, at the same time, serve to process social challenges. Some of the narratives are also characterized by a desire for sociocultural change, particularly those told by the network actors and bloggers from the Middle East.
- The pronounced narrative search for coherence is a response to the fragmentation of everyday life experienced or initiated by the narrators as well as to the erosion of cultural coherence. It serves to assemble new perceptions, experiences, and encounters.
- The breakneck dynamics of sociocultural transformation are reflected in the incompleteness of the stories. Denouements, a good ending, the final closing bracket are missing; instead the stories reveal scepticism and insecurity but also optimistic visions of the future.
- In the future, narratives, whether online or offline, will increasingly evolve in spaces which are confronted with cultural differences and which question what were believed to be time-honoured systems of values and norms. More than ever before, it will be necessary to provide a cultural translation of narratives, which cannot be envisioned as a smooth transfer but as a reciprocal presentation and negotiation of differences, as an opportunity to critically examine and overcome hierarchies. This would lay the foundations for the emergence of a “Third Space” (2012b), a subversive philosophical construction imagined by Homi K. Bhabha which undermines closed systems.
- The multimediality of digital media opens up new opportunities for cultural translations which dispense with verbal language. The removal of language barriers bodes well for narratives, expanding their range in the form of images, videos, and music so that they can be appreciated beyond cultural borders and so that they can interact with narratives from other parts of the world.
- Cultural translations can certainly come up against boundaries which appear to be unsurmountable, however. The stories told by Others can contain untranslatable fragments which irritate, resulting in an experience of the uncanny. As Sigmund Freud described it, the

uncanny points to the repression of an emotional affect which balks at a translation or transformation because it inspires anxiety (1919/1955, pp. 226ff.). The irritation or fear which is experienced can leave the individual with a desire to eliminate cultural differences; at the same time, these feelings represent the opportunity to discover the Self in what is perceived as the Other or the Foreign when they are accepted and reflected on.

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