Abstract
Definitions of digital literacy in public discourse still focus mainly on technique, whereas educational studies want to break free from such functional concepts. To accomplish this, an approach is suggested that is not media-centred, but user-centred, which looks at the interaction that takes place on the internet. On the basis of Erving Goffman's frame theory, an example of such an approach is given.

Keywords
social context - media education - media literacy - frame analysis - Erving Goffman

Introduction: The communicative side of digital media
Functional approaches to defining digital literacy derive from the technical possibilities of usage single competencies that the user has to be taught. An example is the "Skills for Life Survey" employed by the Department for Education and Skills (Williams, 2003) in England in 2002 and 2003 (sample = 8730; 16 to 65 years). Such quantitative concepts look at the form and amount of the technical capacities a given medium demands (e.g. Johnson, 2008; Williams, 2003). Professional providers of media education, like the international company "Certiport", use quantitative data to design courses for media education (www.certiport.com). In these courses, digital literacy is subdivided into the smallest capacities, but derived from its social context. On the example of "writing", Lankshear and Knobel point out the problems of such an understanding of digital literacy: "writing" in this sense means the ability to put words on a screen, without considering that "reading and writing are always 'reading and writing' with meaning" (2007: 10). The authors suggest that the social context of usage needs to be taken account, since "meaning" is con-
stituted in social interaction. The social element of media usage can be illustrated in an investigation of the eBay community by Julia Davies (2008). In an ethno-methodological study, she shows that “writing” serves to ensure trustworthiness in the anonymous virtual surrounding. After four years of study, Davies identified the following elements of digital literacy:

- Understanding verbal and visual object presentations
- Self-presentation as seller or buyer and adopting these roles as part of one's identity
- Critical reading
- Information seeking also outside of eBay
- Knowledge of the activity norms and values in this community (Davies, 2008: 246)

To participate successfully on eBay it is essential to understand this community’s regulations. The challenge to selling and buying successfully is rooted in the fact that you cannot see and evaluate the offered object in the real world. Consequently, the seller has to demonstrate his own trustworthiness by making the advantages and disadvantages of the object accessible. To overcome the problems anonymity carries, it is important to show oneself to be an authentic person who can be trusted.

This conclusion is possible only when the internet usage is understood as social practice and not simply as digital technique. It is also important to look at the user and the way of usage. From the viewpoint of the media literacy discourse of educational studies, such approaches lead to much more satisfactory conceptions of digital literacy than functional approaches. In the following sections, this discourse will be analysed for its potential for also defining digital literacy. Though it provides a more humanistic concept, which is suited to overcome functionalism, it has to be enlarged in regard to its understanding of media: digital media brought a change from a receptive to a more productive usage. Consequently, the media literacy discourse is only partly suited to digital media. The frame approach of Erving Goffman will be suggested as a theoretical base that encompasses the two sides of digital media usage. Since educational studies have to ensure their relevance to pedagogical practice, how far frame theory is linkable to practical usage will also be discussed.

The need for a humanistic concept of the user when defining digital literacy

Media educators like David Buckingham (2006; 2008), Henry Jenkins (2007), Colin Lankshear, and Michele Knobel (2007) claim a more humanistic, non-functional concept of digital literacy. The potential for non-functional concepts lies in the media literacy discourse. Buckingham claims that “we need to extend approaches developed by media educators to encompass digital media” for a more “critical notion of digital literacy” (2007: 82). Unfortunately, many definitions of media literacy lack grounding in such a vision of
the user. Taking young or less educated people as a subject does not per se make an educational approach. Additionally, there has to be a theoretically based educational point of view that justifies pedagogical interventions and defines pedagogical needs.

An example from the German discussion shows how educational studies strive to find non-functional approaches to media literacy. In Germany, instead of “media literacy”, the term “media competence” is more commonly used. Dieter Baacke (1974), who became the most famous German media educationalist, introduced the competence term into educational studies. He devised a concept of communicative competence based on the theoretical work of Noam Chomsky and Jürgen Habermas. Due to this theoretical origin, Baacke’s concept distinguishes between “ability” as a natural gift that every human is endowed with by birth, and “performance”, which refers to the realization of this gift in competent communication. Pedagogically, what is crucial is that the ability to communicate does not lead automatically to perfectly communicating individuals. To further a competent use of this natural gift to communicate, education is needed.

In addition, Baacke’s concept has an emancipatory background that arose from the historical situation in the 1970s, when critical theory saw mass media and advertisement as manipulating the individual to adopt consumerism and an inaccurate awareness of his own social situation. The younger generation Baacke belonged to wanted to change the existing political, educational and economical circumstances. It was their aim to encourage and to enable the individual to political participation by using the mass media for public communication (1996: 316). Media competence Baacke saw as a systemic specialization of communicative competence. It is composed of four conceptual aspects:

- Media critique: allows the user to be critical of media communication and of its systematic function and manipulation
- Media knowledge: arising from media sciences; it helps the user to gain a critical attitude
- Media usage: encompasses technical abilities and insight into the role and reactions of the audience
- Media production: means a creative use, which fosters emancipation and helps to improve the media system

The weakness of the theoretical conception of competence, Baacke critically claims, is its “empirical void”, which has to be “filled”. Here lies the danger of a turn toward functionalistic and affirmative definitions like those discussed above. To avoid this, Baacke suggests the German term Bildung (i.e. education in the sense of self-formation) instead of competence, referring to a humanistic concept of self-education, which means to gain a lifelong, subjective and critical perspective of the world. The term implies an inalienable potential and right of everyone to find an individual and socially responsible way to deal with man, nature, and the material world. It stems from the Enlightenment and corre-
sponds, as Buckingham (2007: 80) points out, to the Anglo-American concept of literacy in contrast to “competence”. The notion of Bildung directs the focus to a theoretical base of media literacy, which is user-centred in defining the aims of media literacy. It is a way out of the hidden functionalism of many media technique-driven conceptions since it understands a competent usage from a philosophical approach: media usage shall help the individual to grow; single competencies are just a step to support this growing (e.g. Marotzki/Jörissen, 2008; Meder, 2007; Pietraß, 2006; Sesink, 2008). Understood in the light of the notion of Bildung, digital literacy is not economically valuable, but valuable for the individual.

Digital literacy under the shift from reading to writing

The media literacy discourse is mainly based on a philosophical concept of (mass) media that illuminates their communicative function as that of representation of reality. Mass media are seen to create another reality, which leads to the question of how that reality is constituted. The paradigm of representation also fits for the web 1.0, with its online journals, information servers, homepages, etc. Representation is connected with reception and with understanding media reality by “reading” it (or “interpreting”; “understanding”, or “decoding” it). This creates an additional world as a source for new and astonishing experiences, with a realistic appearance that reduces the difference between real and mediated perception. Representation causes manipulation and artificiality and raises the question of how to differentiate between the multiple media realities.

The fast-growing possibility of self-directed usage, of constructing one’s own homepage, and of getting feedback that interactive software offers, introduced “interactivity” as a new mode of using media. But it was the social web that brought a profound change to user activities. While the first internet was the space of information surfers, web 2.0 is the web of authors (Gapski/Gräßer, 2007: 23). With new manageable software, it is now possible to write texts in the form of wikis and to comment on events in blogs; services like YouTube or Twitter are self-forming communities that allow non-professionals public participation. The social web demands that users develop the ability to interact in virtual contexts, which create and necessitate new forms of self-presentation and communicative styles: for example, YouTube advertises itself with the catchphrase “Broadcast Yourself”.

With this change to a more active usage, the paradigm of “reading” does not sufficiently cover user activities anymore. There is a shift from “reading” to “writing”, from receiving to producing. In regard to the conceptual aspects of media literacy, this shift reinforces the importance of “production”. In Baacke’s sense, production should help individuals to emancipate themselves from mass media’s alienating and manipulating effects. This understanding serves two interests:
1. The rise of critical theory in the 1960s and ’70s led to the opinion that media have a problematic influence on consumerism and public opinion, causing individuals to be alienated from their own needs and social situations. This problem could be addressed by providing scholars with knowledge about media, the social function of the media system and the power of the media to manipulate reality with false and distorting information.

2. Putting the new media techniques into the hands of users should help to overcome the one-directional flow of information by articulating the users’ own needs. When users produce their own media content and apply technical effects in a self-directed, creative and active way, they can better understand how media can manipulate our feelings and our knowledge of reality. The aim of production is to help individuals articulate their own social situation by producing media offers that are based on their own authentic experiences.

These aims are still important, and they live on in projects like school magazines or radio channels managed by students. In these projects a professional way of producing media offers is aimed for, similar to those available on the media market. Thus, media education shows how professionals present their material and lets younger users comprehend the effects of media design by transferring these standards to their own media products. Moreover, it encourages a creative usage of media to support self-awareness by articulating inner needs and wishes.

However, this understanding of production does not fully apply today. Representation of reality is only one part of digital communication. The sociality of web 2.0 augments the importance of active participation. Users are no longer restricted to receiving information and entertainment offers from mass media. The web 2.0 tools provide users with public agency and the possibility to express their points of view alongside national states and companies. These communities are political in a new form of public engagement, which emerges from the users and expresses their individual interpretations of social reality (Winter, 2010). Besides its democratic potential, web 2.0 allows new forms of sociality, expressed in virtual communicative settings like games, social networks, and different kinds of social communities. The change in interactivity shows why the often-described activity of identity building is one of the most important characteristics of digital literacy. It gives a special importance to digital communication and demands that internet users know how to deal with different communicative situations.

Buckingham’s conception of production already considers the shift to more communication between users: “Literacy also involves understanding who is communicating to whom, and why.” He sees the need to be aware of the growing importance of commercial influence and to extend this “to non-commercial sources and interest groups, who are increasingly using the web as a means of persuasion and influence” (2007: 83).
However, this notion does not reach far enough, since it is mainly based on the paradigm of representation. Today, on an individual level, problems such as unemployment, economic contraction, and environmental health issues have emerged. People find themselves powerless against anonymous institutions and disappointed by politics – the young generation loses interest in the latter. (In Germany, a broad empirical study showed that only about a third of young people aged 12 to 25 see themselves interested or highly interested (4%) in politics (Hurrelmann/Albert, 2002)). What the young already do and should be further educated to do is actively communicate. Based on their own studies, the Munich institute for media educational research and practice (JFF; http://www.jff.de/) sees three new components of digital literacy as “interaction”, “articulation” and “participation”. This shows that the paradigm of representation has to be enlarged by “presentation”, a term that considers the virtual self as a communicating identity. Correspondingly, Jenkins and colleagues (2007: 98) point out that meaning on the internet is constituted in a social and cultural environment, which demands that “new media literacies” should be seen “as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply an individualized skill to be used for personal expression” (2007: 98). For such a conception of digital literacy, a theoretical framework is needed, one that understands communication as interaction.

Framing as theoretical concept for digital literacy

Interaction in face-to-face situations is the main topic of Erving Goffman’s work, which deals with knowledge about typical situations of interaction and their normative demands (1973; 1993), while distinguishing between various kinds of public and non-public behaviour (1982) as well as with the capacity to deal with institutional power (1973). The book *Frame Analysis* shows that the meaning of interaction depends on its situational context and as such is well-adapted for the manifold new virtual spaces for communication.

*Interaction as framing*

The term “frame” was originally used by the psychologist Raymond Battegay, who observed that the mannerisms otters use when starting a fight also serve as an example of play. Goffman refers to Battegay’s use of the term in his main work *Frame Analysis*, which deals with the idea that the meaning of social interaction depends on the situational context in which it takes place. He sees man as being led by the question “What’s going on?” (15), which refers not only to natural events but also – and mainly – to social interaction. With communication being polysemic, the context is very important to correct understanding. The meaning of interaction can be “keyed” by a change in the context, e.g. from being “true” to ironically pretending to be true. There are typical modes of keying like the
theatre or novels, which Goffman calls “frames”. A frame has at least two layers: the interior (e.g. fighting) and the edge of the frame (e.g. real fighting or playing). The edge can be understood as the situational context. It shows the status of what takes place within the frame, its interior.

The constant change of meaning and the importance of frames, to ensure the meaning of interactions, make Goffman’s approach interesting for questions concerning media. The main difference between a non-mediated and a mediated event or interaction is an additional frame around the original frame of the event, set by the medium. This frame emerges from the intention of a person to write about the event, for example in the form of news or a drama. Frames in the media are always frames set by authors, and this makes media communication vulnerable to misunderstanding, manipulation and the construction of new realities.

To ensure meaning and a given frame, interactions typically provide meta-communicative clues. In face-to-face interactions, they are provided by the situation and the way people act: for example, the situational context of a ceremonious event like a marriage includes such clues as the exchanging of wedding rings or wearing of festive clothes. In the media, clues are given within the publishing environment, by title and presentational means (e.g. cut, position of camera and illumination).

Writing a text in the logic of frame theory means to engineer these clues towards the planned meaning to help the audience understand “what is going on”. If an author wants to be understood, he must phrase things as clearly as possible – and a clear frame supports this intent. Here lies the relation of interaction theory to educational studies. The rules and norms of social interaction are learned during the process of socialization and education.

In the logic of frame theory, media content has to be understood as communication of an “author” with his reading, listening and viewing audience. The user has to understand and accept the frame. If he does so, then in the sense of frame theory, interaction takes place: “writer” and “reader” (listener/viewer) interact by keeping up a frame and by sharing the view of “what is going on”. Frame theory helps to analyse the different contexts in which reading and writing take place and shows the context-specific ways of composing and of understanding a message. Framing applies as well to productive and receptive usage, as well as to web 1.0 and web 2.0.

**Dimensions of framing competence**

Frames in the media have three levels: the context, wherein the content is published, the meta-communicative clues and the content itself (Pietraß, 2003). These levels jointly constitute the frame of a media offer, and they are clues themselves to the valid frame. To understand these clues, the user needs a special knowledge of media frames: for example, to frame moving pictures, the viewer uses knowledge of typical media frames (like boule-
vard press and quality press), typical ways of presenting pictures within frames (styles and presentational means) and a knowledge of the typical contents within media genres:

- The “context” is most important for understanding. It corresponds to the situation in face-to-face interaction. The context of communication encompasses where an offer is put and what genre it belongs to and the beginning and the end of a frame. Without knowing the context, understanding is impossible. It has to be evaluated in regard to credibility of a communicator, to the suitability of a frame and to the way the frame is set. The context is related to social interaction and its norms and values, which regulate what is allowed within a frame and when a frame is broken.

- The “presentation” dimension demands knowledge of the various technical possibilities of designing a media offer and the way in which it is presented. This includes technical know-how as well as knowledge about communication and “forms of talk” (Goffman, 1981).

- The “content” dimension demands the ability to understand a subject, to bring knowledge into communication, to distinguish what is correct from what is wrong, and to identify logical ruptures and factual manipulations. This dimension transcends media education and embodies a person’s entire knowledge.

Framing competence expresses itself in engagement in the frame and moral attitude towards the interaction partner and the communicative situation, in knowledge of design, in typical styles (genres) and effects of presentational means, and in knowledge of the credibility of the interaction partner and the media system (Pietraß, 2006).

**Linkability of framing competence to the theory of Bildung**

As argued above, to avoid a functionalistic approach to digital literacy, a concept is needed that is user-centred and that understands the user as an individual, endowed with the potential to grow and to learn. The theory of Bildung provides a humanistic concept that frame theory lacks. Consequently, a literacy conception based on frame theory has to be linked to the concept of Bildung. This concept sees man in a threefold relation to the world: the aesthetical dimension of perception, the cognitive dimension of knowledge and the moral dimension of acting. Enlarged by these dimensions, framing competence includes (Pietraß, 2006):

- The aesthetical dimension is realized by an inner, emotional engagement into a frame, commitment to the partners of interaction and the communicated topic.

- On the cognitive dimension, knowledge of the world is needed, which helps to distinguish wrong and distorting ways of presentation and manipulative presentational means.

- On the moral dimension, digital interaction has to meet the same standards we put on face-to-face interaction: empathy for our communication partners, sensitivity to their needs and their dignity – in short, dealing with them as human beings and not as soulless avatars.
Teaching media education: didactical applicability of framing

The challenge educational sciences have to face is to close the gap between theory and practice. Problems arise when the scientific discourse is detached from educational practice and addresses only the scientific community. Although the terms “media literacy” and “digital literacy” are often used with regard to educational practice, teachers do not necessarily know how to transfer the abstract term into teaching. Most of them are probably able to define media literacy, but not to diagnose failings in literacy in their pupils. This can be illustrated by a meeting with German teachers from primary and secondary schools at the University of Education in Ludwigsburg, Germany, in October 2008. During one of the workshops, the teachers were asked to identify required aspects of media competence. The teachers listed single items, derived from their individual experience in their classes and with their students. But they could not, in spite of being able to define media literacy, transfer the abstract literacy conception to diagnose the needs of their pupils. This shows that educational practice demands a more applied definition, with a framework that can be used in different teaching contexts. In addition, this framework has to be understandable in everyday language so it can be put into practice without an expert’s knowledge of media education. Baacke’s and also Buckingham’s definition of media competence probably had such a profound impact because of their language, which provided names for single literacy items (like “production”), which practitioners could understand from their own media experience.

Framing competence includes the communicative situation, means of presentation and media content. These conceptual aspects are also accessible for practitioners without a deeper theoretical knowledge. The possibility to relate the single dimensions with the whole educational process enhances the didactical applicability of frame theory:

- Knowledge of communicative contexts is learned during socialization and media socialization. People with such knowledge are able to adapt their ways of communicating and behaving to a special situation. The same has to be learned by media users. They have to know the differences between media realities and between various communicative contexts. Who carries which interests during interaction? What guarantee is given for the credibility of an interaction partner? How is the frame marked? Media education and (media) socialization are entangled processes. Individuals who are less privileged with regard to their framing competence in face-to-face interaction have problems gaining framing competence in media communication. So far, media education is linked to the educational process in schools.

- The presentation dimension requires classical media education: users have to be taught the means of presentation to help them understand media effects and intentions; they need to learn how to produce own media offers and how to make their interaction partners understand.
The content dimension is not genuinely media-educational: to be able to recognize wrong and distorting ways of presenting, a good educational background is required. General education and expertise in special domains are preconditions for critical usage. Here, it can be seen how important is the expert knowledge of teachers, because it helps them to evaluate the quality of media offers.

Teachers need support to integrate media education into their curriculum. Many media-educational applications do not fit into curricula or demand a specialized expertise in media education. At the same time, the media competence that teachers already have is underestimated by placing too much emphasis on some technical tricks. Teachers as academics have to have a broad communicative and media competence. Their education qualifies them to read professionally and to write different forms of texts. From their TV and print socialization they have learned to distinguish media genres. This and their subject expertise and world knowledge are much more important for framing competence than technical know-how.

Conclusion: Potential and limitations of the framing approach

Technique-driven concepts of digital literacy reduce the understanding of the capacities needed to participate successfully in virtual society. The media competence discourse uses a more humanistic concept and as such is a better basis on which to define digital literacy than the digital technique itself. From this discourse, three main requirements have been raised to access digital literacy from a non-functional point of view: 1) digital literacy has to be defined with focus on the user and not on the medium; 2) digital literacy has to take into account the shift from a more receptive to a more productive usage; and 3) digital literacy concepts have to have the potential to be used by practitioners.

An example for such a definition was given on the theoretical ground of framing theory. As a theory of interaction, it is suited for a user-centred point of view, which focuses on the communicative side of media usage, not the technical side. Since it understands communication as interactive, it can be applied to the Internet, which allows productive as well as receptive activities of the user. The frame paradigm is well suited to the manifold communicative contexts that digital media provide and allows us to specify the competencies that are needed in the single contexts. From a didactical point of view, the components of competent framing are related to the whole process of socialization and education. This relation allows us to transfer the concept of framing to media education in classrooms: The situative context is linked with the social norms of inner and outer engagement into a frame, the presentational means are part of media education and the content dimension refers to the curricula. Furthermore, frame theory provides a conceptual scaffold similar to everyday experience of communication. So it can easily help
teachers to pin down which digital competencies their pupils lack. However, this potential for practical applicability still has to be tested in classrooms. Framing is not an overall answer for all aspects of digital literacy: its potential lies mainly in the question of how meaning is ensured and endangered in digital communication.

References


