

**Comments on Nicole Mayer-Ahuja and Harald Wolf**  
**”Beyond the Hype. Working in the German Internet Industry”**

Fredrik Augustsson and Prof. Åke Sandberg  
Arbetslivsinstitutet, Stockholm, Sweden

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**Beyond the Hype and Towards Serious Research**

The Internet and multimedia hype is no doubt over. What was seen just a few years ago as the prime example of the new economy that would replace traditional forms of organization is, after the dotcom crash, largely treated as insignificant in the media and also in research. Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf’s article is therefore a valuable contribution that empirically investigates and sheds light on important aspects of Internet production in Germany.

We comment on the authors’ work from a Swedish perspective based on our own empirical findings (e.g., Augustsson 2004; Augustsson and Sandberg 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b; Sandberg and Augustsson 2002, 2004; Sandberg and others 2005). Unlike Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf’s study, our data mainly consist of large-scale national quantitative surveys directed to managers and employees within firms producing interactive media solutions. Still, we believe interesting comparisons can be made.

There has been an interest from public policy makers and trade organizations to label and determine the growth and size of IT-related sectors to show that they are valuable contributors to economic development and signs of progress. At the same time, the methods traditionally used to classify and measure sectors are of limited use for Internet related businesses, something Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf point out. Still, they do seem to want to keep the notion of Internet production as an industry, albeit one under formation. Our studies suggest that an understanding of Internet production should not be limited to a particular type of firms. It may be more fruitful to focus on

the tasks recognized as part of producing Internet and multimedia solutions regardless if they take place in firms specializing in producing such solutions for others, in firms also engaged in other practices or in organizations that produce their own solutions in-house. Such a conceptualization makes it harder and perhaps less fruitful to determine the size of a sector, but contributes an understanding that is better suited to determine changes in work, organization and employment compared to an earlier period, other parts of society or other countries.

Like in Germany, a considerable proportion of Swedish companies specialized in producing Internet and multimedia solutions: 36 percent have a background doing other things and 74 percent were also active in other areas in 2001. This means that the 'core' of firms started in the 1990s only focussing on producing interactive media solutions make up a minority of firms involved.

The total volume of interactive media production in Germany is bigger than in Sweden, but what is interesting to note is that the average size of firms in terms of employees is similar in Sweden and Germany -- about 16 employees of which 8 focus on interactive media in the Swedish case. Thus, it is not that Germany has, on average, larger firms (as in car manufacturing); there are just more of them. Swedish firms are, like in Germany, unevenly distributed according to size, with many small and a few large ones. But unlike what seems to be the case in Germany, the large Swedish producers are usually not founded by companies from the 'old economy'.

Swedish workers, like those in Germany, are predominantly permanent full-time employees. Short-term employees and consultants constitute less than five percent of all workers. Although it is hard to tell from our data, it does seem as if differences between managers/owners and employees are smaller in Sweden. Still, our findings indicate that psychosocial health

differences are larger between managers/owners and permanent employees than any other subgroups of workers (men and women).

We see the same separation between workers in Sweden as with those in Germany, e.g., workers focussing on economy/management, technology and aesthetics/content, respectively. This is a welcome confirmation for us since our hypothesis is that these are logics and corresponding clusters of activities inherent in the solutions produced. We also find similar sources of skills for the three groups of workers, that is, work stands out as the most important source of current competencies.

Telecommuting and 'virtual organization' seem as uncommon in Germany as they are in Sweden and partially for the same reasons: employees frequently need to ask co-workers for assistance to manage their working tasks. Although we have not specifically investigated managerial control techniques, they seem less important for workers' presence on companies' premises. The way work is organized into projects with tight deadlines seems sufficient as a means of control. Employees already work more than their contracts specify, and often without compensation, go to work when they are sick and have to refrain from competence development due to lack of time and poor organization.

We find interesting differences between work in specialized firms and in-house production. The latter seem more similar to other types of work. Workers are older, there are more women and they work less overtime.

Given the diversity of actors involved in producing Internet solutions, it is problematic to view the Internet industry as an example of new forms of work and there are good enough reasons to investigate Internet and multimedia production on its own terms without linking it to current debates about presumed overall societal changes. Taken together, Mayer-Ahuja and

Wolf's findings from Germany and our results from Sweden show the importance of not only comparing the Internet and multimedia industry with discourses about sharp breaks in work and organization or with other sectors of a nation's economy, but to also compare the development and organization of the same sector in different countries. Internet and multimedia production in Sweden and Germany share some features that seem to be inherent to the practice regardless of the context, a preliminary conclusion also supported by the international workshop held in Berlin in 2004. This points to the importance of conducting more systematic international comparative studies to understand not only Internet and multimedia production, but overall changes in work, employment and organization.

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