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Why communication studies need a reboot

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Abstract

The paper argues for placing public communication at the center of critical social analysis, critiques the status quo of media and journalism research, and develops a research agenda that includes ownership, international opinion cartels, the entanglement of states and digital corporations, and the influence of resource-rich actors on media realities.

Problem Outline

Critical social studies cannot avoid journalism. Formulated as an imperative: Critical social research must put public communication at the center of attention. Of course: I am a media researcher and therefore probably cannot see it any other way. A typical *déformation professionnelle*, so to speak, for which I would have been laughed at ten years ago, at least in Germany, despite the “non-objective and stigmatizing” debate about September 11 in the legacy media which resulted in a “widespread uninformedness among the broad readership” in the aftermath of that event already, thus covering up “fundamental abuses of power and profound criminal structures at the state level” (Schneider/Kolenda 2021: 60, 156).

Much has happened since then. In bullet points: Ukraine and Crimea (cf. Krüger 2016), Pegida and the AfD, Angela Merkel's “We will make it” (original: “Wir schaffen das”, in relation to the 2016 migration crisis) the rise of Greta Thunberg as an icon of the climate movement, and the triumph of an identity politics that does not stop at the language of public service broadcasting (cf. Unger 2021). The leading media have taken sides in these societal conflicts, considerably reducing the space for public debate as a result (cf. Mausfeld 2018) and have thus lost a part of their audience. The respective people do not simply turn away from the press and the screens, but take their protest to the streets, no longer allow themselves to be interviewed or photographed, and often show their disapproval very openly.

This type of potential for critique is not being heard at universities. Academic media research has always been a “state-based science” (Meyen 2021). What is taught as communication studies in German-speaking countries today was invented by an entire social sciences army in the U.S. during World War II – by people commissioned by government, military, and intelligence agencies to figure out how to get inside people's heads and win the struggle for public opinion, paid for by the state as well as billion-dollar industrial foundations (see Pooley 2011).

Those familiar with this tradition are not surprised by award-winning journal articles demonizing the use of oppositional outlets and indirect calls for censorship (cf. Schindler et

al. 2018 as an example), nor by the renaissance of studies on media credibility and public trust in journalism – a line of research that the U.S. forces brought to West Germany during the occupation to legitimize the new political system and the associated communication regime (cf. Meyen 2020). Employing broad-brushed questions, it is possible in this context to create the illusion of a satisfied majority and thus to suppress doubts about the quality of democracy and the leading media outlets.

Since the beginning of 2020, this debate can no longer be stopped. To put it bluntly: If the legacy media had fulfilled the “societal mandate” to provide a public sphere of open debate (Pöttker 1999) and delivered what legal texts and the (German) press code demand (above all: diversity, balance and neutrality), the narrative of the “killer virus” would have collapsed just as quickly as the claim that Covid-19 cannot be treated and therefore only a vaccination can save us (Arvay 2020: 55, Woodworth 2021). Even more pointedly, with a functioning media system, this Covid ‘pandemic’ would not have happened.

The Definitional Power of the Legacy Media

Whoever wants to govern, needs the leading media outlets – the platforms that reach large groups and are being heard where it matters: in the city hall and in the chancellor's office, in the executives' floor, in university management, in club leadership. The force of the leading media originates from a form of projection. We believe that ‘everyone’ knows what has been stated, reported, told (cf. Luhmann 1996). This would not yet be alarming, but this belief has a second component: leading media are powerful. We assume that media content gets into people's minds – not ours (we are enlightened, after all), but the others’ (cf. Davison 1983, Gunther/Storey 2003). Whether this is true or not does not matter. Nor does it matter what science says on the subject. What matters is that we believe in such effects. We turn the reporting of the leading media into a first-order reality ourselves (cf. Meyen 2020b).

The symbolic power of the leading media is a seduction for all those who have the necessary loose change or other abilities to exert pressure. Ulrich Beck (2017: 129, 134) has consequentially described “power relations” as “relations of definitional power.” Power: Today, this means being able to either make risks visible or to quite literally make them disappear. It also means playing risks off against each other. The financial market is more important than the climate, terrorism is more important than transparency on the internet, everyone's health is more important than my own personal freedom to publish what I think is right. Covid-19 has confirmed Ulrich Beck's diagnosis of the metamorphosis of the world, but in quite a different manner than he had thought. Yes: there were “television images of everyday horror” and even something like a “world communication” (Beck 2017: 32, 170), but the internet and the digital platforms, which to Beck are drivers of the metamorphosis, have been supporting actors in this story, at best. Now we know (and have long suspected) that the “powerful” (a large coalition of “experts, industry, the state, political parties, and established mass media”) can also control what Beck (2017: 172f.) calls “side-effects public sphere” – the places where problems that the “mainstream of the nationally organized public sphere produces” can be addressed and discussed.

When we use leading media, we observe relations of definitional power – the power to define. Who can get his topics, her view of things into the public sphere? Whom can I quote

without danger, who or what can or must I refer to? Which terminologies are appropriate and which are not? If the leading media say that there is a virus and a disease that I should be afraid of, I have to take that seriously, because those who make decisions about my life take it seriously. I can argue the opposite and attack the definitional power, but in that case, I must expect to lose all reputation without there being any public resistance.

Covid in the reality of the leading media

That the leading media have not fulfilled the “societal mandate” of supplying us with an open public debate on the subject of Covid-19 is now, to a certain extent, on record – confirmed, for example, by Marc Walder, CEO of Ringier who has called on the editorial teams of his company to support the governments (cf. Meyen 2022a), or by content analyses which, although somewhat ambivalent in tone (“proximity to the government and critical of the government”), justify the principled lack of attention paid to fundamental differences by referring to fear of the virus. Quote: The reporting “was close to the government because the media, like the politicians, predominantly advocated tough measures. At the same time, however, it was also critical of the government because these measures often did not seem tough enough to the media or came too late” (Maurer et al. 2021: 57).

The “societal mandate” to provide an open public sphere of debate is rooted in the model of pluralism: in any society many and partially conflicting opinions and interests exist which, in principle, hold equal rights (the interests of individuals and social outsiders just as well as those organized in parties or associations). The field of rapprochement is the public sphere: “In principle, no social group, not even an individual, but also no object, no topic, no problem may be excluded from it” (Pöttker 1999: 219f.). Instead, the leading media, in concert with politics, have shrunk the space of public debate to a narrow corridor from early 2020 onward, creating a reality that many (had to) believe to be so real that it was possible for the world to be restructured completely in the name of fear of a virus.

It is too early to present a synopsis of media content research at this point. Science is slow – particularly so when a narrative like that of the killer virus along with dependence on government funding paralyze large parts of the university landscape. I will bundle the few studies on the topic, as well as the numerous observations published on digital platforms and in the nonfiction market, into three theses to then identify causes as well as research needs:

- Covid-19 as a topic has been omnipresent since early 2020 and has since displaced almost all other relevant issues from the public eye. Besides others, this includes, different threats and risks – other diseases, world hunger, the environment, saber rattling. All of these issues we need to discuss. Moreover, no distinction has been and is being made between the virus and the political measures taken in response to it. In other words, the reporting shades state action and the corresponding actors from any public criticism.
- The reality of the leading media is dominated by individual anecdotes, a slim number of expert voices supporting the government's course (virologists as fortunetellers), and mathematical figures that are not being questioned or even put into context.
- Dissenting voices and public protests are either suppressed or delegitimized in the leading media. So-called fact checkers play a special role in this context – these are

portals that are either operated by the media companies themselves (such as the Tagesschau Faktenfinder ('fact-finder') and the Faktenfuchs ('fact-fox') of the Bayerischer Rundfunk or they depend on grants from large foundations and digital corporations and are thus easily instrumentalized in favor of the hegemonic narrative (cf. Meyen 2022b).

Research Agenda

Critical research must answer the question why the journalism of the leading media outlets is not currently fulfilling the "societal mandate" to provide an open public sphere, and at the same time develop proposals for how public communication should be organized to change this circumstance. This also means that critical media research must begin at the roots of the matter and address ownership structures as well as international cartels for opinion-shaping (such as the Trusted News Initiative, cf. Woodworth 2021, Meyen 2022b), the entanglement of states and digital corporations, and the influence of resource-rich actors on media-produced reality – from governments, parties, and authorities to corporations, foundations, and the intelligence services.

I do not want to minimize the challenges associated with the last point alone, but rather to advocate that the effects of public communication (the subject of my academic discipline) not to search for the effects of public communication exclusively at the individual level but rather to consider societal knowledge as a whole – including norms and values as much as concrete narratives and ideas that guide political, economic and, of course, scientific practices. Such effects require neither direct nor indirect media contact (via interpersonal communication) and therefore cannot be 'measured' along the traditional methods of media research (surveys and experiments) or 'explained' using medium-range theories often based on psychological insights which dominate the field today.

Second, critical journalism research should focus on the conditions of media production that I have just touched on, which of course include all that has been discussed under the label of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2018). While working on this text, an email was published which the aforementioned Marc Walder sent not only to the Ringier-leadership, but also to the heads of the other Swiss major media organizations on March 20, 2020. In it, Walder announces how his print and online platforms will support the "Stay at home" campaign, launched by the Federal Council and the Department of Health, and encourages others to do the same. The government, Walder added, has "gladly taken note" of his initiative and will follow up with "some kind of speech to the nation" from the president.

Those who are interested in the interplay between politics and the major media, in the homogeneity of reporting or in the influence of algorithms and the composition of editorial teams onto media reality (cf. Ungar-Sargon 2021) do not necessarily have to take such leaks as a starting-point. At this point, and representatively for many others, I will here refer to work focused on the logic of practices within a media system that follows the imperative of attention (cf. Karidi 2017), on medialization (= everything that people and organizations do to generate positive and prevent negative coverage, cf. Meyen 2018), and on a journalistic field that is closely interwoven with the centers of power (cf. Krüger 2019) which is also oriented

toward “the acceptance of power structures“ (Klößner 2019: 33, cf. Wernicke 2017). The foundation is there. Now it is time to build a house in which critical media and journalism research also finds its place.

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