Media and Communication

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Abstract: German media sociology is in the process of developing from a sociology of mass communication to a sociology of a deeply mediatized world. This corresponds with three more general themes of international media sociology: a rethinking of agency, a redefinition of social relations, and a rediscovery of order in light of the digital. The specificity of current German media sociology's work to make sense of the digital can perhaps be captured most concisely by stating that it is dominated by a relational, process-oriented way of thinking that broadly seeks to describe and critically evaluate the transformation of social construction by digital media and their infrastructures.

Keywords: Media sociology, mediatization, datafication, practice theory, assemblage, figuration

1 Introduction

Broadly speaking, media sociology can be understood as a field of the social sciences that deals with the role technologically based mediation plays in the construction of the social world (Silverstone, 2005). Until the end of the last century, this was synonymous with an investigation into mass media's implications for society from both an international (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013) and a German perspective (Sutter, 2013). But a lot has changed in recent years. If we talk about media today, we may still bring legacy mass media such as newspapers or television into the equation. However, for more and more people media means the various digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or Netflix that many of us now take for granted. Even when we talk about newspapers and television, we are no longer referring to these legacy media but to new digital arrangements instead.

Just as the phenomena of media sociology have leaned towards the digital, so too has media sociology shifted in the approaches it takes, which in turn requires innovative theoretical strategies to help make sense of a media environment in rapid flux that is characterized by a great variety of media. With these changes, however, media sociology as a field has entered vague territory. From an international perspective, Silvio Waisbord (2014; 2019) argued that no single coherent media sociology exists; rather, sociologists engage with issues of media and communications in different ways. As a consequence, he defined media sociology as “the study of media processes and phenomena anchored in classic and contemporary sociological questions and methods” (Waisbord, 2014: 7). If we take this understanding as a basis for this discussion, media sociology extends into the farther reaches of media and communication studies as a scientific discipline. This is also the case for media sociology in

Germany: both the German Communication Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft, DGPK) and the German Sociological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie; DGS) have specific divisions dedicated to media sociology.¹ If one considers the shift in media toward the digital, media sociology becomes even more complex as it veers into the realms of “digital sociology” (Lupton, 2015) and spans many other areas of German sociology such as the sociology of science and technology or social theory (Philipps, 2017). With an increased interest in digital communications and a data-rich society, the boundaries of German media sociology are therefore becoming even more indistinct than they already were.

In this light, it is fairly clear that an all-encompassing overview of the development of German media sociology over the last twenty years is simply not possible within the bounds of a single journal article. Therefore, the aim of this article is not to discuss either German media sociology’s contribution to the international analysis of the *public sphere* or how internationally widespread sociological concepts such as *cultural capital* or *social class* have been adopted by German media sociology.² The central thread running through what follows is German media sociology’s shift to the digital and its (possible) contribution to the international discussion in media sociology. While more traditional areas of media sociology remain, such as the “sociology of particular media” (Hoffmann and Winter, 2018) or the “sociology of the public sphere” (Gerhards, 2002), my main argument is that German media sociology is in the process of developing from a *sociology of mass communication* to a *sociology of a deeply mediatized world*. This corresponds with three more general themes of international media sociology that I have identified elsewhere (Hepp, 2020a). The first of these themes is a rethinking of agency; the second is a redefinition of social relations; and the third is a rediscovery of order in light of the digital. Across these three points, we can highlight three particular contributions that German media sociology has made to the international discussion: (1) its interest in relationality, (2) its orientation toward processes, and (3) its broad focus on questions of social construction.

In developing this kind of argument, it can be tempting to oversimplify and construct one-dimensional histories of the field. I am aware of the risks of avoiding, for example, the distinction between particular “theoretical schools” such as the sociology of knowledge (which has a tendency to focus on the individual, on subjective meaning, and on cognition; see Knoblauch, 2017) and systems theory (with its emphasis on society as an entity in its own right; Ziemann, 2012). Also, the demarcation between “German” and “international” (that is to say, English-language) media sociology is—when it comes to the digital—far vaguer than one might expect. “German” in this article mainly refers to media sociologists based in Germany, a large

¹ For more information, please see the academic associations’ websites: <https://www.dgpk.de/en/index.html> and <https://soziologie.de/en/gsa> (accessed January 1, 2020).

² This is how more traditionally structured introductions, such as Hoffmann and Winter (2018), Jäckel (2005), and Sutter (2013), discuss German media sociology.

number of whom also publish in English. In addition, I write this article from a particular perspective, namely, that of a media sociologist who works at a research center for media and communications. Nevertheless, I believe that a broader discussion is worthwhile since it has the potential to lead to a better understanding of media sociology's general trajectory in Germany.³ In a best-case scenario, this may offer some insight into how German media sociology can contribute to the international discussion.⁴

2 From a Sociology of Mass Communication to a Sociology of a Deeply Mediatized World

As noted above, German media sociology has its origins in the sociology of mass communication. Mass media communicate to a “general audience,” with a spatial distance between “communicators” and “recipients” and a unidirectional mode of communicative flight from the former to the latter. The traditional sociology of mass media was concerned with a critical analysis of mass communication's social patterns at the levels of production (e.g., the institutional arrangements of media organizations or the social organization of the newsroom), content (e.g., ideologies, stereotypes, frames), and use (e.g., differences in media use by social class or the situated context of reception). In addition, key sociological frameworks were applied to mass media, such as those of “field” or “system,” and questions of social inequality were discussed in terms of concepts such as “social class” or “habitus.”

In contrast to mass media, digital media differ as a consequence of their software-based character and their embeddedness in new global infrastructures (Hepp, 2020b: 5; Waisbord, 2014: 6). When Sonia Livingstone questioned “the mediation of everything” (Livingstone, 2009: 1), she characterized a shift in which media can no longer be considered a separate “domain of society” (Lunt and Livingstone, 2016: 3) that affects other domains. Consequently, the emergence of “new” digital media and the digitalization of “old” legacy mass media required media sociology to take a completely different approach when analyzing the mediated construction of reality.

Various contributions from German sociology are implicitly or explicitly positioned within this broader international discussion. For example, from a systems-theory perspective, Armin Nassehi (2019) argued in his proposal for a theory of a digital society that digitalization should be seen against the backdrop of the simul-

3 I would like to thank Udo Göttlich, Jan Fuhse, Sigrid Kannengießer, Hubert Knoblauch, Friedrich Krotz, Wiebke Loosen, Peter Lunt, Christian Pentzold, Jeffrey Wimmer, and the ZeMKI Lab “Mediatization and Globalization” for their helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

4 This article only deals with media sociology in Germany. The reason for this focus is that the sociology of media in Germany has already taken on a multifaceted form that is subdivided between sociology on the one hand and media and communication studies on the other hand, which is different from the situation in Austria and Switzerland.

taneous complexity and pattern-like character of today's societies, which both become, in a novel way, observable through digital media. From a sociology-of-knowledge perspective, Hubert Knoblauch (2017) argued for a rethinking of social constructivism as *communicative* constructivism, that is to say, an approach to constructivism that places communication at the center of analysis and considers the transformation of society as a re-articulation of its communicative construction.

However, internationally, mediatization research is probably the most well-known contribution made by contemporary German media sociology (Ekström et al., 2016; Livingstone, 2009: 6–7; Lundby, 2014a). At its core, “mediatization” is first and foremost a “sensitising concept” (Jensen, 2013: 206, with reference to Blumer, 1954) that draws attention to the interrelations between changes in media and communications on the one hand and changes in culture and society on the other (Couldry and Hepp, 2013). Mediatization research is concerned with empirically identifying patterns of these interrelated transformations with the aim of gradually arriving at more general theories on the role of mediated communication for social and cultural change.

While the discussion on mediatization goes back much further in time (see, e.g., Schulz, 2004), an important boost to German mediatization research's focus on digital media was the establishment of the priority program “Mediatized Worlds” between 2010 and 2016.⁵ Priority programs are established by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) on current and highly relevant research topics in order to promote research across different locations. Mediatized Worlds was in many ways an important catalyst for German media sociology. First, it spurred empirical research and theoretical discussion on mediatization and the digital through its ten to eleven projects per two-year funding period. Second, it brought scholars from media and communications together with scholars from sociology within a general media-sociological framework. And third, quite early on it placed an emphasis on the relation between questions of mediatization and datafication, that is, the role of data in digital communication. With the end of the priority program, mediatization research has continued in various guises, including the research network “Communicative Figurations” (see below).

Early studies into mediatization were more in line with media sociology's approach to legacy mass media, describing media as a discrete sphere that influences other social spheres through its “media logic” (Birkner, 2017). With the progression of digitalization, more attention began to be paid to the “media-saturated” (Lundby, 2014b: 3) character of social domains. Some scholars opened up the concept of media logic to address various kinds of logics, such as interaction logics, the logics of organizations, or of media's materiality (Thimm et al., 2018). Others abandoned the idea of media logic completely and focused more on media users' shifting practices and their entanglement with digital media (Krotz, 2017). Mediatization research then

⁵ For an overview, see Hepp and Krotz (2014) and Krotz et al. (2017). The old website for this program is still accessible: <http://www.mediatisiertewelten.de/en/home.html> (accessed January 1, 2020).

turned its gaze toward “synthetic situations” (Knorr Cetina, 2014) and the “intersituativity” (Hirschauer, 2014) of communication that emerge when digital media and computer-based data processing offer new spaces of interaction.

With almost all domains of society saturated by digital media and their infrastructures, we find ourselves living in an advanced stage of mediatization in which the ways society is recursively constructed constantly refer to those media and the arrangements that undergird them. We can call this stage of mediatization “deep mediatization” (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020b). In this context, the key task for media sociology is to develop appropriate concepts and analyses that articulate the consequences of media saturation and its related social transformations.

3 Rethinking Agency: Media Practice, Acting on Media and Datafication

As already mentioned in the introduction, we can see this development of appropriate concepts and analyses in German media sociology as being initially linked to a rethinking of agency in international media sociology. Here, as in the themes discussed in the following two sections, German media sociology’s particular “take” is to highlight relationality, to propose an orientation towards processes, and to broadly focus on questions of social construction.

Rethinking agency in relation to digital media’s widening out into every facet of everyday life is a more or less general focal point for international media sociology (Couldry, 2012). Rethinking agency here refers to a move beyond a traditional theory of action (Thomas and Krotz, 2008) by broadening the view on media-related action when the digital emerges. From its infancy, German (media) sociology was involved in this discussion since practice theory is firmly anchored in German sociological traditions (Reckwitz, 2002; Schmidt, 2012; Schatzki et al., 2001). Within this discussion, German media sociology paid special attention to the analysis of interrelated routines, that is, everyday activities as the foundations of ongoing processes of the social construction of reality (Foellmer et al., 2018; Gentzel, 2015; Pentzold, 2015). In today’s deeply mediatized societies, the contrast between practices of specific media use (e.g., “watching television”) and other social practices (e.g., “cooking”) becomes less distinct as an increasing number of our social practices also refer to media (e.g., “cooking with the help of YouTube tutorials”).

An approach rooted in practice theory characterizes many German media sociological studies that have followed the mediatization approach. Research by the aforementioned priority program, the Communicative Figurations research network, and other projects should be mentioned here. They have dealt with a range of topics including the mediatization of the home (Röser et al., 2019), community building across media generations (Hepp et al., 2017a), migration and diaspora (Greschke et al., 2017), political opinion formation and deliberation (Laube et al., 2017), the con-

struction of subjectivity and identity (Gentzel et al., 2019), play and gaming (Möll and Hitzler, 2014), business models and cultural production (Pfadenhauer and Grenz, 2012), the experience of mobility (Wimmer and Hartmann, 2013), commuting (Berg, 2017), communicative demarcation (Roitsch, 2020), grief (Offerhaus, 2016), memory and remembering (Lohmeier and Böhling, 2017), the experience of time (Görland, 2020), homelessness (Hartmann, 2014), work (Wimmer and Hartmann, 2016), and media reception in general (Göttlich et al., 2017).⁶ Precisely because of the broad adoption of a practice theory perspective, studies like these can be considered to be a shift towards the international “audience turn” in mediatization research (Schrøder, 2017). The principal thread connecting them is to see media-related agency not only in relation to one single medium but to focus on the entire “media repertoire” (Hasebrink and Popp, 2006) and the relatedness of its constitutive media across which agency in times of deep mediatization develops.

When it comes to questions of agency, such an intense engagement with the deep mediatization of social practice is linked to two particular realignments: first, a re-orientation toward *acting on media*; second, a turn towards the agency of media technology. In essence, the term acting on media emphasizes the fact that “a wide range of actors [...] take an active part in the moulding of media organizations, infrastructures and technologies that are part of the fabric of everyday life” (Kannengießer and Kubitschko, 2017: 1). What is at issue here, then, is another form of agency—not that of practices with media but practices of shaping media and their infrastructures, thereby broadening the analysis of social movements nationally and internationally (Foellmer et al., 2018; Wimmer et al., 2018). Empirically, this expansion of a practice-theoretical perspective has been carried out in reference to various examples such as repair cafés (Kannengießer, 2019), the Chaos Computer Club (Kubitschko, 2018), the open-data movement (Baack, 2015), digital utopianism (Dickel and Schrape, 2017), and pioneer communities (Hepp, 2016).

A practice-theory-informed approach to mediatization is closely related to a turn toward datafication (in German: *Verdatung* or *Dataifizierung*), which queries the agency of technologies (Rammert, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION, this volume). This discussion was already ongoing in the aforementioned “Mediatized Worlds” program. The focus was on the “quantified listener” (Passoth et al., 2014), that is, the listener of digital music who, through his or her practices of media use, leaves behind digital traces that are then automatically processed to enable a new “numeric inclusion,” as can be observed in collectivities of taste (Wehner et al., 2017). Since then, researching datafication has emerged as an important sub-area in German media sociology, and various other studies have followed. These included the datafication of gambling (Möll, 2018), individual self-measurement (Zillien et al., 2015), and online stores

⁶ The list above can only cover a small part of the relevant studies and is by no means exhaustive. The anthologies by Hepp and Krotz (2014) and Hepp et al. (2018) provide an overview of further research in English.

(Grenz and Kirschner, 2016).⁷ This research has developed a close relationship to German sociology of science and technology, which has investigated the formation of new collectivities through platforms and data processing (Dolata and Schrape, 2015).

Theoretically, this research is again specifically concerned with questions of agency, namely, to what extent agency shifts to technical systems through data processing and how this is to be appropriately understood. A central reference point in this discussion is—drawing on Latour’s actor–network theory (1991)—the metaphorical “agency without actors” which “suggests that non-human entities do something unique which is not reducible to what human actors do with them” (Passoth et al., 2012: 3). Such questions have recently gained further attention in German media sociology as research on the automation of communication and communicative robots (e.g., bots, artificial companions) has begun to increase (Höflich, 2016; Hepp, 2020b: 79–84). The question here is no longer as simple as whether and how people can, for example, delegate their ability to act to technology. Rather, it is a question of how to adequately describe algorithm-based communication media when they become communicators themselves (Esposito, 2017; Pentzold and Bischof, 2019).

It is clear that the rethinking of agency in German media sociology is deeply embedded within the international discussion. That said, we can already see a particular interest in questions of relationality (e.g., the interrelatedness of different media in the individuals’ media repertoires across which media-related practices develop), a process perspective (e.g., by focusing on the “continuous flow” of everyday media practices), and a broad focus on questions of social construction (e.g., by discussing how this all relates to a making over of the communicative construction of society).

4 Redefining Social Relations: Networks, Assemblages and Figurations

With the development of digital media and infrastructures, an international discussion arose that sought to explore how social relations can be adequately described in the context of transforming communications. Three concepts in particular gained relevance: networks, assemblages, and figurations (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 61–66, Hepp, 2020a). By considering the contribution of German media sociology to this discussion, we can attain an even deeper understanding of its particular interest in relationality, process, and social construction.

Network is, first of all, a structural metaphor to describe the relations between human actors within a social entity (e.g., a community, a group, the family) and the relations between such entities (Häußling, SOCIAL NETWORKS, this volume). The

⁷ A good, albeit German-language, overview of this research is provided in the volumes by Mämecke et al. (2018) and Houben and Prietlii (2018).

internet and digital media have given rise to an analytical perspective formed around the network concept to describe the complexities of both social and emerging structural relations (Castells, 2009). In such a perspective, society appears as nothing more than a large, complex aggregation of networks: “societies—like computer systems—have networked structures that provide opportunities and constraints, rules and procedures” (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 7).

Such a turn towards the concept of the network has also been characteristic of German media sociology’s discussion over the last two decades (Stegbauer, 2008). However, a special feature can be identified here in relating network analysis to a “relational sociology” that rejects “the notion that one can posit discrete, pre-given units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis” (Emirbayer, 1997: 287). Instead, the focus is on the interrelations between entities, a perspective that held firm while the concept of the network was being addressed in the German context. As Roger Häußling (2010: 63) has argued, relational sociology is a theoretical perspective on network research that focuses on network structures and dynamics as interrelations. Specifically, the aim is not to describe networks as relations between individuals from the point of view of methodological individualism but to capture the relationality that is present in networks. Questions that arise then concern the structures of reciprocity and inequality in networks (Stegbauer, 2010) or how digital media alter the communicative conditions within and across networks (Fuhse, 2018). Starting from media-sociological network research, this kind of relational thinking has generally found its way into German media and communication studies, where, in dynamic “networked publics,” three relational modes of interaction are classified: “conflict,” “competition,” and “cooperation” (Neuberger, 2014).

For German media sociology, network is therefore understood less as a metaphor to describe the digital infrastructure of the internet than as an analytical concept to grasp the changing relational structures of society with digital media and their infrastructures. This even applies when the idea of network is adapted to system theory (Holzer and Fuhse, 2010: 321). In this sense, Dirk Baecker (2007) suggests what he refers to as the “next society” in which the functional systems—law, economics, politics, and so forth—are intertwined in new ways through networks based on digital media.

The idea of *assemblage* was introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to describe the ways in which “complexes of lines” of connection can be built into “territories” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004 [1980]: 587). In terminology that is closer to the social sciences, “social assemblage” refers to a “set of human bodies properly oriented (physically or psychologically) towards each other” (DeLanda, 2006: 12). In international research, various kinds of media-related assemblages have become the foci for media sociology. At this point, we can see a direct reference to actor–network theory and its redefinition of agency: objects must be considered to possess agency of their own that unfolds in an assemblage with humans and their actions (Latour, 2007).

Compared to the network concept, over a long period of time German media sociology's interest in the concept of assemblage was glaringly limited. One explanation for this might be the relative lack of institutionalized science and technology studies in Germany compared to the US and the UK (Bauer et al., 2017: 9). Therefore, whereas actor–network theory—as we have already seen—has been harnessed by German media sociology (Thielmann and Schüttpelz, 2013), the concept of assemblage has thus far not been approached with the same level of enthusiasm as it has enjoyed internationally. If it is used at all, it operates more as a metaphor to describe the entanglement of humans and technological artifacts in certain forms of practice—without further theoretical development of the original ideas.

By contrast, and supported by the aforementioned long tradition of relational sociology, the international field's adoption of the concept of *figuration* in recent years has been mostly stimulated by German media sociology. Figurations are constituted in “processes of interweaving” (Elias, 1978: 130) in which the practices of the people involved are interdependent on and oriented toward each other. A figuration—be it a family, group, organization, or the like—is constituted in the continuously changing pattern of interaction between all those involved, which also indicates the material objects and technologies that are entangled with the practices through which a figuration is articulated.

Such a figurational approach was strongly stimulated by German (media) sociology. Herbert Willems (2012), for example, presented a draft of a “synthetic sociology.” His aim was to describe the objective and relational positioning of actors in given figurations—a positioning that can change with digital media. In the Collaborative Research Centre “Re-Figuration of Space,”⁸ the term *figuration* is broadly understood as the figuration of society as a whole, whereby its spatial transformation is examined in detail (Knoblauch, 2017: 391–398; Knoblauch and Löw, 2017). It focuses on (deep) mediatization as a driving force in the reconfiguration of spatial structures, such as when digital media and their infrastructures support a spatial extension of “chains of interdependence” (Elias, 1978: 68). In the “Communicative Figurations” research network, we explore the re-figuration of public communication through new, pioneering forms of journalism, a change in the figuration of journalists and their audiences, and altered forms of public connection (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Hepp et al., 2018; Hepp and Loosen, 2019).⁹ Over and above their particularities, such diverse studies come together in their use of (re-)figuration to describe the societal transformations associated with deep mediatization from a relational and process perspective. The concept of figuration integrates ideas from both network research (e.g., in the reconstruction of actor constellations) and assemblage research (e.g., in that the description of figurations always includes material technologies).

⁸ For further information about this CRC, see <https://sfb1265.de/en/> (accessed January 1, 2020).

⁹ For further information on this network, see <https://www.kommunikative-figurationen.de/en/> (accessed January 1, 2020).

5 Rediscovering Order: Digital Infrastructures and Data

Media sociology's turn toward concepts such as network, assemblage, and figuration provides us with powerful analytical resources for defining agency and social relations in times of deep mediatization, but, significantly, it also reflects changes in the social construction of order. Manuel Castells (2009: 42–47), for example, raises the question of a new order of the “network society.” With a closer focus on specific contexts, research on assemblages is also beginning to take an interest in questions of power and order (e.g., Beer, 2017), and the figural approach explicitly aims to describe the shifting articulation of social order. In this way, the “classical” perspective of media sociology—analyzing “communication [...] [as] an integral part of the broad study of social organization and disorganization” (Katz, 2009: 168)—emerges once again. This occurs, however, within a new framework that is no longer (only) concerned with public opinion and mass communication but rather with the role that digital infrastructures and data play in the changing production of social order.

Generally speaking, we can define “social order” as relatively stable patterns of interdependences between not just individuals, groups, and institutions but also between the numerous types of relations involved in social life that all depend on larger stabilities of resource and infrastructure (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 190). With deep mediatization, the establishment of order in and with media has fundamentally changed: It is no longer simply a question of how order is legitimized by mediated discourses. Digital media's role in the production of social order is much more far-reaching in that these media permit a new “microphysics” (Foucault, 1991: 26–29) of the production of order through their saturation of everyday life. The discussion on these new forms of creating order by means of digital media is taking place along the concepts of infrastructure and data and is currently cumulating into a critique of contemporary capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Here, too, it is not simply a question of how media as mass media legitimize the economic order or advertise certain products; it is mainly about a globalized transformation of the microphysics of social order running in parallel with capitalism. German media sociology is close to the international discussion here but also sets its own emphasis.

When it comes to infrastructures, the priorities of German media sociology are twofold. First, digital infrastructure is not only conceived as a relationality but much more so as a process of “infrastructuring” (Knoblauch, 2017: 357–361). This means that infrastructures are understood not simply as a given but as materializations of continuous practice (Hepp, 2020b: 67–84). A second focus of German media sociology is its interest in the governance of infrastructures and processes of infrastructuring. Characteristic here is a broad and inclusive perspective on governance as processes of constructing an understanding of rules on how mediated communication should occur (Katzenbach, 2018). The discussion on the governance of digital infrastructures

meets again with the aforementioned work on “acting on media”: From the point of view of such a broad concept of governance, acting on media is nothing more than a contribution to the debate on the regulation of mediated communication whereby a special focus is placed on environmental issues concerning digital infrastructures (e.g., Kannengießer, 2019).

From this perspective, it is crucial for any reflection on today’s social order that these globalized infrastructures do not simply serve the functioning of these digital media. They form the basis of a comprehensive collection of data across the various networks, assemblages, and figurations in which digital media are used. In German media sociology, this has first of all been examined in particular regard to the discourses around big data (Puschmann and Burgess, 2014; Pentzold and Fischer, 2017). Other studies deal with digital infrastructures’ ordering power with a particular focus on social inequality (for an overview, see, e.g., the chapters in Houben and Prietlii, 2018). Overarching concepts in which this kind of research culminates are, for example “reflexive self-scientificization” (Zillien, 2020), which seeks to describe the ordering forces of data infrastructures on the conduct of life, or the “metric society” (Mau, 2019) to describe the transformation of societal self-observation and regulation.

The examples discussed so far make it clear that, when it comes to the transformation of social order at a time of deep mediatization, the far-reaching “infiltration” of capitalism into everyday life in the form of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019) or “data colonialism” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019)—internationally a very active discussion—is only *one* of the topics that German media sociology focuses on. There is also a great interest in other kinds of transformational societal ordering, such as changes in an individual’s way of life or changing social evaluation regimes. On a critical note, German media sociology can be said to be less interested in an analysis of digital capitalism; seen positively, it is trying to develop a broader critical view of the transformation of social order in society as a whole, an enterprise that also addresses processes of evaluation, control, and cultural ordering.

6 Conclusion: Where is German Media Sociology Heading?

My aim with this article was to make tangible recent developments in German media sociology. I have argued that with the changes in the media environment over recent decades, German media sociology—as media sociology in general—has evolved from a sociology of mass communication to a sociology of deeply mediatized societies. We can relate this overall orientation of German media sociology to the dominant themes of international media sociology when it comes to the digital: first, a rethinking of agency; second, a redefinition of social relations; and third, a rediscovering of order in relation to digital infrastructures and data.

If one compares this with international media sociology, it is not surprising that the topics dealt with in Germany are not so different. Many of the scholars quoted in this article are less “German” in the sense that their publications would refer to (solely) German-language discourse. Perhaps the sociology of media—driven by its own globalized subject area—is one of the most internationalized fields of German sociology. Nevertheless, some peculiarities of German media sociology stand out, and we can see them as its particular contribution to an international discussion.

First, there is a strong tendency towards relational thinking. This should not come as a surprise, since many of the classics relevant to German media sociology, such as Georg Simmel or Alfred Schütz, are regarded as pioneers of a relational sociology (Häußling, 2010: 64–67), that is, a sociology which focuses neither on the individual nor on the abstract whole but rather on interrelations between and the interdependencies of its constitutive parts. This relational thinking becomes manifest in specific adaptations of “network” in German media sociology, which are less driven by a methodological individualism and are more interested in networks as relational structures. German media sociology’s push toward the concept of figurations demonstrates this strand of relational thinking most broadly.

This brings us to the second point, namely, process-oriented thinking. The adoption of practice theory into media sociology represents this approach, in which different social entities are thought to be produced in the continuous act of “doing” (Pentzold, 2015: 236). Concepts such as figuration stand not only for a “relational” but also for a “process” sociology, in that figurations are also thought of as process-like dynamics. This corresponds to the broad interest in processes of re-figuration, that is, a structural transformation of the ongoing everyday making of figurations. Furthermore, materialities such as infrastructures are thought of in a process-oriented way, placing an emphasis on their dynamics.

Third, the strength of social-constructivist thinking is particularly striking in German media sociology, which is oriented less towards paradigms of poststructuralism and deconstruction and more toward the question of how the social world and society are constructed through technologically mediated communication. Certainly, attempts to guide media sociology in the direction of a “communicative constructivism” (Keller et al., 2013) are too narrowly conceived; however, for German media sociology, a unifying factor remains as a kind of anchor for a broadly understood constructivism that aims to include materialities in its observations and critically analyze how social reality is (co-)produced through digital media and their infrastructures.

In sum, the specificity of current German media sociology in its work to make sense of the digital can perhaps be captured concisely by stating that it is dominated by a relational, process-oriented way of thinking that broadly seeks to describe and critically evaluate the transformation of social construction by digital media and their infrastructures. It is to be hoped that, with just such an orientation, German media sociology will make many more empirical and theoretical contributions to the international discussion.

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