

Call for Papers: Special Issue in *Studies in Communication and Media* (Issue 4/2020)

Criticism of, in, and through Communication and Media Studies

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The social function, legitimacy and consequently the meaning of social science research is undoubtedly closely tied to the ability to criticize. In the present early 21st century, this critical dimension of social science research is confronted not only with the familiar but also with new challenges that need to be addressed.

Social science critique, in the sense of evaluating phenomena and processes, always requires the reflection and classification of ideas and values contained in the social phenomena and processes to be analysed. In order to achieve this, critique itself needs concepts, theories, socially accepted norms and ideals, which underlie analysis and guide interpretation. Necessary conditions for social science criticism have long ceased to be self-evident, due to a multitude of competing offers of knowledge and interpretation. In particular, data-based strategies of optimisation oriented towards the ideal of economic efficiency – for the individual self, the entrepreneurial organisation or the efficient society – seem to be widely accepted socio-culturally and shape, e.g., public discourses as well as the objectives of organisational or institutionalisation processes. Additionally, the pluralisation of interpretation frames, and the knowledge of evaluation and orientation also goes hand in hand with their devaluation, e.g., in the form of the shortening of their half-life as part of social acceleration processes (e.g., Rosa, 2005).

For critical research not only are plurality and devaluation problematic, but these processes also disavow the (supposedly) historically stable norms and transcultural standards that form its foundation. Consequently, in the face of digitalisation, datafication and metrification, big data, algorithmic data processing and AI, scientists or journalists are seduced to proclaim the “end of theory” (e.g., M. Graham, C. Anderson) and critique (Latour, 2004) or less fatalistically, to propose a fundamental revision of understanding and the meaning of critique (e.g., Boltanski, 2011).

The social loss of significance of social science criticism can also be interpreted in another respect: as a consequence of processes of digitalisation and datafication. These contribute significantly to the transformation of the basic structures and rules of discourses and public communication. Critical scientists must therefore find new ways in postfactual times to make themselves heard in a fragmented and segmented public sphere; in a digital media world consisting of indignation, echo chambers and filter bubbles. Critique does not necessarily fall silent, but the “speechlessness of critique” in the sense of a lack of a critical social narrative leads to the fact that it is hardly heard (Voswinkel & Wagner, 2011).

Above all, communication science, which sees itself as an integrative (Kunczik & Zipfel, 2005, p. 20) and a cross-sectional science (Krotz, Hepp, & Winter, 2009, p. 5), is called upon to engage in the communicative negotiation process, both in the social sciences and in society, about the potentials and capabilities of social scientific criticism. As a discipline that deals with the “social conditions, consequences and meanings of media, public and interpersonal communication” (DGPuK, 2008), it is therefore necessary to reflect on, and further develop, one’s own theoretical and analytical tools in the mutual relationship to the trans-

formation of the disciplinary material objects communication, the public sphere and media outlined at the beginning.

Against this background, submissions are invited for the SCM 2020 Special Issue, which deal, in particular but not only, with the following topics and questions.

Topics & questions

1. *Communication and media theories*

Theories provide the frame of reference for scientific criticism because they deliver a normative framework; a certain perspective from which the phenomena studied are viewed. Critical reflection begins where it is questioned why which theories are used and not others, what normative perspectives a theory contains, and what this means for the results and their interpretation. The critical reflection of the explanatory power of existing theories is also necessary, especially in order to test their suitability for contemporary phenomena. In this context, the following questions, for example, are relevant:

- What (implicit) normative reference points does contemporary research in communication science contain?
- How can the approach of Cultural Studies be applied to datafication processes?
- What does historical materialism say about the data economy of the present?
- How can the alienation thesis of the Critical School be extended to communicative practices of a mediatized culture and society?
- What critical potential can be tapped with actor network theories?

2. *Empirical methods and analysis data*

Evidence-based research statements as a central justification argument for social relevance also means that the applied methods and underlying data sources must be subjected to critical reflection – from a methodological, a research economical or a research ethical perspective, and on a meta-level. In this context, the following questions, for example, are relevant:

- What potential does quantitative communications research have in fundamentally data-based, economic media environments? How can this compare to the potential of large Internet corporations and market research (?) companies (direct access to large amounts of data, enormous research and development departments)?
- How is the development of buying large amounts of digital data from Internet companies for social science research to be assessed?
- Are automated Big Data analyses (and their visualization forms) self-evident or is their significance negotiated in discourses? How transparent are these discourses and who conducts them?
- Which phenomena are researched with which methods and what is not empirically researched for which reasons? What does this say about current communication science?

3. *Critical media practices and media criticism*

Media criticism in the sense of evaluating media content, appropriation and production is a traditional research interest of communication and media studies: content analyses criticise media content and look at criticism as media content itself. Media appropriation studies criticise people's media dealings or look at critical, "alternative" media dealings; the produc-

tion of media technologies is critically questioned, or the alternative production of media technologies investigated. At present, critical research focuses, in particular, on digitalisation phenomena such as self-measurement, Smart City, Big Data and datafication. In addition, diachronic and synchronous analyses of media-critical practices are addressed which explore current instances of critical counter-publicity and question the self-understanding of partial public spheres. In this context, the following questions, for example, are relevant:

- Which public discourses shape media criticism and criticism of the social role of media?
- Which critical media practices can we currently perceive? Who are the actors and against whom or what is the criticism directed?
- What are the media-critical findings on the symbolic, discursive and social role of ubiquitous global media infrastructures owned by global media corporations?
- What role does media criticism play in modern media society and what is the relationship between media criticism and social criticism?
- What are the consequences of the findings of critical research, in particular for media policy, journalism or media education?

4. Understanding of science

At present, several and different efforts can be observed to assign communication science research an active role in society. Be it in the form of collaborative co-creation of media content or technologies, or in the form of a readjustment of self-understanding.

The metrification of scientific expertise on digital platforms such as ResearchGate, Academia or Mendeley is also important for the understanding, form and significance of disciplinary research. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a gain in transparency and an increase in the quality and comparability of scientific research. On the other hand, it also involves standardisation and classification processes, which may have negative effects on pluralism, diversity and the overall success of scientific research. In this context following questions, for example, are relevant:

- What does society criticize about communication science, and what does communication science criticize – with what yield – about itself?
- Should communication science, in the sense of an open and/or transformative science, play an active role in shaping processes of change? Or should it analyse its objects at a distance?
- Is the increasing metrification of scientific expertise (citation index, research scores etc.) an effect of data-based, economic optimisation processes in science or does it contribute to quality assurance, transparency, equality and comparability? What influence does this have on scientific creativity and quality?

Manuscript submissions

We welcome submissions that fit any of the SCM formats “*Extended Paper*” (50–60 pages), “*Full Paper*” (15–20 pages), and “*Research-in-brief*” (5–10 pages). Manuscripts should be prepared in accordance with the SCM guidelines:

- https://www.scm.nomos.de/fileadmin/scm/doc/Autorenhinweise_und_Checkliste.pdf (German)
- https://www.scm.nomos.de/fileadmin/scm/doc/Autorenhinweise_Checkliste_english.pdf (English)

Manuscripts should be submitted to jeffrey.wimmer@phil.uni-augsburg.de. Deadline for submissions will be **April 6th, 2020**. The special issue will be published in December 2020 (SCM issue 4/2020).

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