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The Refiguration of Public Communication: A Relational and Process-oriented Perspective*



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The Refiguration of Public Communication: A Relational and Process-oriented Perspective

Abstract

In the field of communication and media research, the "public sphere" and its "structural change" have long been central themes, particularly in the development of communication within society and politics. However, this concept often suffers from an imprecise normative profile and vague empirical scope. This paper introduces a novel theoretical approach that emphasizes a more rigorous relational and process-oriented perspective. We propose conceptualizing the transformation of public communication as a process of refiguration. First, we examine media-environmental changes through the lens of mediatization theory. Then, we explore how this shift in public communication can be understood as refiguration, highlighting that public communication is not confined to a singular public sphere but involves the transformation of relational dynamics among at least three distinct types of publics. Finally, we discuss how this relational and process-oriented perspective can be analytically realized. While our argument is grounded in extensive empirical research, this paper primarily aims to make a theoretical contribution.

Keywords

Public communication, public sphere, mediatization, media environment, transforming media, pioneer journalism, media repertoires

1 Deep mediatization and the changing media environment

Public communication is intricately connected to the media environment, which includes the entirety of available media within society at any given time.¹ In retrospect, we can observe the significant transformations that have occurred in our media environment over just a few decades. During the 1990s, the media landscape was predominantly characterized by what we now refer to as "legacy media" (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018: 245), including television, radio, print media, as well as personal communication tools like telephones and fax machines. The fundamental transformations brought about by the internet were looming over the horizon, even if early web studies now seem like a tentative glimpse into another era (Gauntlett 2000). The infrastructure of the internet grew quickly, making online newspapers and the World Wide Web significant parts of the media environment.

As we move into the 2020s, the discourse increasingly focuses on the importance of digital platforms and the impact of issues like fake news and hate speech on public communication (e.g., Lazer et al. 2018; Lim 2020). Recent developments also include the automation of communication through various forms of communicative AI (i.e. Guzman & Lewis 2020; Hepp et al. 2023; Stenbom et al. 2021).

All these changes have made it considerably more complicated to delineate where public communication begins and where it ends. Previously, public communication was assumed to be solely the domain of institutional communicators, such as professional journalists, who directed their communicative practices to "specific non-specific others" (Adolf 2015: 57). However, this close connection is progressively loosening in today's media

¹ For such an understanding of media environment see Hasebrink & Hölig 2014: 16; Hepp 2020: 84; Jensen & Helles 2015: 292; Livingstone 2001: 307.

environment. A considerable portion of online communication today is partially public but is neither directed at "non-specific others" nor created by professional journalists. This is why we also refer to personal publics (Schmidt 2013). Simultaneously, professional communicators continue to play a significant role in shaping public communication. They remain, for many people, an essential and—albeit to a decreasing extent—the most trusted source of information (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen 2023: 24). This is also why we can understand our current media environment as a “hybrid media system” (Chadwick 2017), where communication dynamics unfold across both legacy media and the latest digital platforms.

From an analytical perspective, we can discern five overarching trends in the evolving media environment: The first trend involves the proliferation of media platforms and their diversifying functionalities in recent decades. The advent of digitalization has introduced a wide range of media, all invariably software-based and digital in nature, facilitating the communication of various kinds of content across this varied media landscape (Andrejevic 2020; Bolter & Grusin 2000).

The second trend is the growing intensification of *connectivity*. This refers to the interlinking of various media platforms as a result of their digitalization and the underlying internet infrastructure (Dijck 2013). This connectivity is relevant not only for legacy media such as television and print, which have transitioned to digital formats, it holds even greater significance for the newer generation of personal communication technologies, digital platforms, and mobile apps. This interconnectedness among media also serves as a crucial prerequisite for the political media system to evolve into the aforementioned hybrid media system.

Besides their differentiation and connectivity, the increasing *omnipresence* of media is a clear expression of the changing media environment. Face-to-face meetings, talks and lectures, walking and other social situations, which for a long time were not particularly mediated, have become so in one way or another (Katz & Aakhus 2002). These dynamics have gained particular momentum thanks to the spread of mobile communication technologies (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, LinchuanQiu, & Sey 2006; Schrock 2015).

Another trend is the rapid *pace of innovation*. While innovation always remains “a reciprocally reflected communicative construction of the new as something new” (Knoblauch 2018: 114), the perceived time sequence of fundamental media innovations has—at least in the perception of many media users—shortened considerably over the past few decades (Rosa 2013: 97-107). These cycles of innovation are driven both by “sociotechnical imaginaries” (Jasanoff & Sang-Hyun 2015) that develop within pioneer communities and tech movements, leading to new product ideas, work practices, and organizations (Hepp et al. 2023b), as well as by significant investments from large technology companies and state institutions in the development of certain technologies (Berlin 2017; Mazzucato 2013).

The fifth significant trend is *datafication*. As more and more of our media become software-based, users leave behind exponentially larger quantities of digital traces. When processed, these traces can be aggregated (van Dijck 2014) and harnessed across the entire spectrum of digital media platforms (Couldry & Mejías 2019; Flensburg & Lomborg 2021). In mainstream public discourse, this is primarily discussed in terms of “big data” (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013), which refers to the potential for the automated processing of substantial data volumes collected from digital traces. Today’s automation of communication and the development of communicative AI are rooted in this trend of datafication.

We refer to the changing communicative construction of our social world, as it relates to these five trends, as *deep mediatization*. Mediatization, a concept frequently used in the social sciences and cultural studies, describes a familiar experience: communication

technologies increasingly permeate social domains, contributing to their transformation (i.e. Ekström et al. 2016; Esser & Strömbäck 2014; Hjarvard 2017; Lundby 2014). More specifically, mediatization examines the interplay between the evolution of media and communication on the one hand and culture and society on the other (Couldry & Hepp 2013: 197). This is a question that is also addressed by various theoretical frameworks, including sociological theories, science and technology studies, and cultural theories. Mediatization research contributes to this discussion by focusing on changes in the processes of mediated communication.

Within mediatization research, *deep mediatization characterizes an advanced stage where the constitutive elements of our social world are intricately connected to digital media and their underlying infrastructures* (Couldry & Hepp 2016: 7, 34; Hepp & Hasebrink 2018: 17-18). This term resonates with other uses of “deep” such as “deep learning” (a new level of automated learning processes based on algorithmic processes, i.e. Mühlhoff 2019) or “deep analytics” (applied to data mining, i.e. Cao 2017). The choice of the term deep mediatization is deliberate, as it highlights a stage where understanding algorithms, data and, artificial intelligence become crucial to our comprehension of the social world.

While these trends offer a clear view of the evolving media landscape, they do not fully capture the transformation of public communication resulting from these changes. This paper aims to contribute to a deeper comprehension of how these transformations affect public communication.

2 The transformation of public communication as refiguration

We approach the transformation of public communication from a distinct theoretical standpoint: relational and process sociology (Elias 1978; Abbott 2016). This approach rests on several fundamental assumptions. Specifically, we focus on the interrelatedness of actors, examining the dynamics between individuals and their practices, particularly in the context of journalists and users. Adopting a relational perspective means approaching them not as isolated individuals, but as integral parts of larger social figurations, always embedded within social interrelations.

Approached analytically, this relational and process-oriented perspective entails a twofold approach to public communication. First, we investigate both theoretically and empirically the social relationships among the actors involved in the production of public communication. These relationships can be fundamentally described as the creator-addressee relation or, more specifically, as the producer-user relation. Second, we emphasize communicative and media-related practices, acknowledging that public communication encompasses both communication and media elements. We are addressing a social relationship that is structurally significant for public communication but is not solely dependent on communicative relationships (cf. for this distinction Fuhse 2013).

From this a point of view, we are immersed in processes, indicating that everything is in a state of continuous change, with tomorrow differing from today. The critical question is: When do we experience structural change, or a transformation? According to relational and process sociology, the answer lies in the alteration of the fundamental social constellations. In this sense, the transformation of public communication can be understood as a process of refiguration, representing a shift in the underlying social figurations that define it.

Overall, the term figuration serves as a “simple conceptual tool” for theorizing social relations at various levels, challenging the “social constraint to speak and think as if ‘the individual’ and ‘society’ were antagonistic as well as different” (Elias 1978: 130). Rather than viewing them as antagonistic or distinct, the idea is to conceptualize them as interconnected. Figurations are formed through “processes of interweaving” (Elias 1978: 130), where the practices of individuals are interdependent and oriented toward each other. With figurations, the “behavior of many separate people intermeshes to form interwoven structures” (Elias 1978: 132). A figuration is constituted by the continuously evolving pattern of interactions among all involved.

Today, many figurations are closely tied to forms of media use. The figurations of collectivities (such as families, peer groups, and communities) and organizations (like media companies, churches, and schools) are “entangled” (Scott & Orlikowski 2014: 873) with specific media ensembles that can potentially (trans)form these figurations. Deep mediation also enables the creation of new figurations, such as online gatherings in chat threads, on various platforms, or through apps. Some figurations are even entirely constructed around media technologies. For example, “collectivities of taste” (Passoth, Sutter, & Wehner 2014: 282) are formed by groups of individuals united by shared product interests on online stores like Amazon. Furthermore, hybrid figurations are emerging, including those involving communicative AI, such as newsrooms that utilize automated text generation systems (Caswell & Dörr 2018; Thurman et al. 2017).

These examples lead us to questions of agency within and through figurations. Against the background of the extensive discussion on agency in the social sciences (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), a figurational approach emphasizes two key aspects regarding individual and supra-individual agency. First, individual agency is never isolated; it arises within a network of relationships with others—within figurations. It is crucial, then, to consider the prevailing “power balances” (Elias 1978: 74) within these figurations, which are typically multipolar rather than merely bipolar, and which mediate humans’ agency. For instance, a supervisor’s authority is contingent on the compliance of employees with their instructions. This concept of a power balance highlights that individual agency ultimately has a social dimension. In this way, media (technologies), entangled with the practices of certain figurations, play a role in shaping individual agency.²

From a social science perspective, questions of supra-individual agency have traditionally centered on entities such as “corporate actors” (including organizations and state agencies) or “collective actors” (such as social movements and communities) (Schimank 2010: 327-341). However, based on the argument presented so far, it can be said that every figuration—whether an institutionalized social relationship, a specific group, a community, an organization, or any other social entity—inherently contributes to supra-individual agency.³

The meaningful construction of a figuration is significantly shaped by communication practices. Figuratively speaking, these practices are often articulated through interactions across various media. Family members, for example, who are geographically separated remain connected through multimodal communication technologies and practices, such as

² David Morley (1986) demonstrated this early on in his classic study on family television use, showing that control over the remote control reinforced the power position of fathers within families. This dynamic remains relevant for today’s media technologies as well.

³ With regard to current deep mediation processes, hybrid figurations are particularly noteworthy, especially those incorporating communicative AI (Hepp et al. 2023a). Here, a “joint” (Gunkel 2020: 277) agency of human and machine emerges. For example, a newsroom that works with systems that automate communication through generative language models exhibits a different type of agency to a newsroom where this is not the case.

(mobile) phone calls, email, and sharing content on digital platforms, which sustain everyday family dynamics (Hasebrink 2014; Kammerl, Lampert, & Müller 2022). Similarly, the “communicative constitution of organizations” (Putnam & Maydan Nicotera 2010: 158) occurs through the use of databases, communication across intranets, and printed materials and other media for internal and external communication. Individuals participate in these figurations according to the roles and position within their respective actor constellations.

Three characteristic features define a figuration (see Couldry & Hepp 2016: 66f.; Hepp & Hasebrink 2017; Hepp 2020: 104f.):

- First, a figuration contains a certain *constellation of actors* that can be regarded as its structural basis—a network of individuals who are interrelated and communicate with one another.
- Second, figurations are continually rearticulated through *communicative practices* that are interwoven with other social practices. These practices typically draw on and are entangled with a media ensemble.
- Third, each figuration is characterized by one or more *frames of relevance* that serve to guide its constituting practices. These frames define the orientation and behavior of the involved individuals, thereby shaping the character of the figuration.

When adopting a figurational approach to societal analysis, it is insufficient to consider individual figurations in isolation. We must also clarify how different figurations relate to one another and construct what we call societies. In so doing, there are two basic ways in which figurations are interwoven: first, through relationships between different figurations, and second, through their meaningful arrangements (Couldry & Hepp 2016: 72-76).

A basic interrelation of figurations emerges through the *overlap of actors* who are involved in an actor constellation of more than one figuration. For instance, an individual might belong to a family, a group of friends, a workplace, and a neighborhood, thus engaging in a number of publics simultaneously. These different figurations are interconnected because certain individuals are involved in more than one, creating overlapping networks and relationships.⁴

A more complex interrelation between figurations arises when we consider *figurations of figurations*. A figuration of a figuration emerges when an entire figuration becomes part of an actor constellation of another figuration. While this might sound overly abstract, there are clear examples. From a political economy perspective, corporations such as Alphabet (Google) illustrate figurations of figurations. Alphabet is a complex figuration that includes various companies within its actor constellation, each of which with its own internal figurations, such as different departments and divisions. Similarly, a company often consists of multiple departments, each of which functions as its own figuration. Additionally, a company might be a ‘subsidiary’ of a ‘parent company’, creating another level of progressively nesting figurations. The publics we typified are similarly nested within one another. Conversely, a figuration of otherwise unconnected individuals and other figurations can form a supra-individual actor when the practices of those involved “results in an orderly whole and not only occasionally but systematically build upon one another in such a way that an overall objective is pursued” (Schimank 2010: 329, authors’ translation). This

⁴ This perspective is also reflected in differentiation theory, particularly in the concept of “multiple partial inclusion”. According to this view, each member of society is included in various social subsystems (i.e. Schimank 2013 ; Stichweh 1998).

applies to both corporate actors such as companies and state agencies, as well as collective actors such as social movements and communities.⁵

In addition to the relationships of overlapping actor constellations, figurations also relate through *meaningful arrangements of figurations*. This means that figurations and figurations of figurations do not merely coexist beside one another, but are positioned within the larger social framework through discourse. For example, to fully understand the power of a state government, it is insufficient to analyze its actor-constellations, practices, and frames of relevance as well as how its actors relate to the actor constellations of other figurations. It is equally important to consider societal discourses on political decision-making and the legal framework that positions the government at the center of the state executive. It is discourses like these that make governmental decisions binding.

In sum, figurations help us conceptually understand the interweaving of humans and the meaningful orientation of their practices. With deep mediatization, many figurations are closely entangled with digital media and their infrastructures. This enables us to conceptualize media-related transformation processes more clearly as *refigurations*. Broadly speaking, refiguration refers to the transformation of figurations and their interrelatedness to society. Refiguration is also related to questions of power, tension, and conflict: Any refiguration refers to the significance of powerful individual and supra-individual actors as well as the power of discursive constructions about what character figurations should take. It is not just a question of how, for example, media organizations such as newsrooms change when digital media are introduced. It is also the question of how they *should* change—i.e., which “imaginaries” (Jasanoff 2015) of the future orient the implementation of digital media. When dealing with the transformation of public communication, one has to keep different refigurations in mind: that of the media creators, that of their relationship to the media users, that of the users among themselves, and finally that of different publics.

3 Thinking of public communication as a figuration of publics

In this paper we are not concerned with the refiguration of society in its entirety, but with an important aspect of society, namely public communication. In view of the diverse social science discussion on the public sphere (i.e. Butsch 2007; Eisenegger & Schäfer 2023; Calhoun 1992; Ferree et al. 2002a; Gripsrud 2010; Lunt & Livingstone 2013), we want to avoid hasty normative interpretations and argue with a more empirically oriented concept of public communication. When we speak of *public communication* in the following, we use this expression as an umbrella term for spaces of communication that are meant to include groups of people who do not necessarily know each other personally but share an interest in or orientation towards issues that are regarded as relevant for the whole group.⁶ Beneath this general understanding, we regard public communication as taking place in multiple, interconnected arenas or publics, which are themselves rooted in particular social figurations.

Taking this as a point of departure, we define publics as social spaces of communication articulated in a specific figuration. This figuration is characterized by a particular constellation of actors, distinct communication practices, and specific frames of relevance. While we recognize the significance of the “public sphere” as a normative concept (Habermas

⁵ This conceptualization shares similarities with Luhmann’s (1995) nested triad of social systems—interaction, organization, and society—or an extended version that incorporates groups, families, and movements within the interaction and organization types (Kühl 2015).

⁶ For a more extensive argument for the definition of public communication in a practice-theoretical approach, see Adolf 2015.

1989; Peters 2008), our approach does not rely upon it as an underlying framework. Instead, our concept of publics is, first of all, empirically descriptive and normatively open. Based on the three categories that define figurations, we can outline a general definition of publics. Publics are distinguished from other social entities by the following characteristics: a) an actor constellation that extends beyond the sphere of personal associates, b) communication practices that, at least partially, transcend interpersonal communication, and c) an objective to identify, discuss, and address issues of shared concern as a frame of relevance (Hasebrink et al. 2023).

This general definition leaves room for the analysis of a wide range of different publics, characterized by varying figurations. This flexibility is a key strength of a relational and process-oriented approach. Recent research has highlighted the multiplication of publics (Breese 2011), a phenomenon that is frequently characterized as fragmentation (Davis 2019: 185-187; Van Aelst et al. 2017). The growing fragmentation of publics is often seen as a threat to the integrative role of public communication (Fletcher & Nielsen 2017; Webster & Ksiazek 2012). However, rather than merely noting fragmentation, our approach considers disintegration as a natural outcome and explores the distinct characteristics of individual constellations. We investigate how these constellations interact, forming a network of networks that collectively shape public communication with all its intricate arrangements. This acknowledges that *different dynamics and levels* of integration or disintegration may arise depending on the types of publics involved. To capture these dynamics more accurately, we distinguish between three basic *types of publics*: polity publics, topic publics, and group publics.

The term *polity public* refers to a socio-spatial communicative space typically related to a territorially bound political entity, where citizens inform themselves and deliberate on issues deemed relevant for this geopolitical sphere (Lunt & Livingstone 2013). Previous research and theoretical discussions around public spheres often centered on this type of public (i.e. Calhoun 1992; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht 2002b; Schlesinger 2020).

Polity publics differ in scope based on geopolitical entities, such as (sub-)local, regional, national, transnational, or even global publics (Fraser 2007; Risse 2010; Volkmer 2014). Despite their differences, all polity publics are based on constitutional and administrative rules that define their actor constellations, communicative practices, and frames of relevance. For instance, actor constellations specify who is a citizen, who the key political actors are, and who can participate in elections. Communicative practices include elections, conventions, journalistic production, media use, and other forms of political participation. Frames of relevance encompass political objectives and values, constitutional rules, and expectations regarding opinion-building.

A key characteristic of polity publics is the *normative* assumption that individuals, as citizens of a city, state, or confederation of states, should engage in each respective public sphere (Dahlgren 2006). Belonging to polity publics is not a matter of choice but rather a consequence of being part of the associated political entity. Consequently, individuals' information-seeking practices within polity publics are primarily driven by "undirected information needs" (Hasebrink 2017a: 370). These needs reflect people's desire to remain well-informed about the news agenda typical for the political public to which they feel connected. Undirected information needs lead to monitoring the environment for new issues relevant to their polity public(s) rather than seeking specific information.

In socially and culturally differentiated societies, journalism is the primary institution responsible for fulfilling this need by offering news on issues relevant to the respective political entity, independent of individual interests and orientations (Benson 2006).

However, from the perspective of younger generations, journalism and news are increasingly seen as detached from their realities (Eddy 2022; Wunderlich et al. 2022).

Topic publics are based on individual orientations and preferences concerning certain topics or subject areas; any aspect that might be relevant for the related topic and contribute to expertise in this subject area defines the frame of relevance. The actor constellation within topic publics includes journalists, professional communicators, and individuals who share interest and expertise in a particular topic. Communicative practices in topic publics primarily utilize media specializing in the respective topic, such as special interest magazines (Nelson 2018) or platforms serving as “media-for-searching” (Geiß et al. 2016) like Wikipedia.

While polity publics are normatively inclusive and open to all citizens of a geopolitical entity, topic publics are expressions of choice (Hartmann 2009). Individuals differ in their interests, and a topic public is defined by the distinction between those who are interested in the topic and those who are not. Therefore, topic publics are primarily based on “thematic interests” (Hasebrink 2017b: 371) leading individuals to seek out specific information media that cover their fields of interest. These are active orientations towards certain topics and aspects of life, where people tend to specialize to acquire expertise and to distinguish themselves from others. As a result, there is a wide variety of targeted communication and specialized media channels (Zillmann & Bryant 1985).

Finally, *group publics* refer to social communities that are particularly significant to a person’s identity, such as those based on gender, ethnicity, chronic diseases or disabilities. Individuals feel a strong sense of belonging to groups that share this aspect of their identity (Hepp et al. 2022). The actor constellation in such publics typically includes affected individuals as well as professional communicators. The frame of relevance encompasses any aspect that might be relevant to this group and that strengthens the respective identity.

Group publics are based on specific information needs termed “group-related needs” (Hasebrink 2017a: 371), which reflect people’s desire to understand their reference groups’ perspective on the world and themselves. The exchange within these groups, including discussion about common interests and objectives, fosters trust and a sense of belonging. This is a core factor in community-building and a crucial prerequisite for an individual’s identity and position in society (Morley 2000).

Before deep mediatization, these information needs were primarily met through personal networks, face-to-face communication, or personal forms of mediated communication like letters and telephone calls (Goffman 1981). However, the advent of new communication services, such as social media, instant messaging, and search engines, has significantly expanded the opportunities for communication practices that serve group-related needs and the constitution of group publics (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015).

This distinction between polity publics, topic publics, and group publics is primarily an analytical tool. Empirically, these figurations often overlap and build hybrid forms. This overlap results from the intersecting actor constellations, which include media professionals such as journalists who contribute to both polity publics and topic publics, and media users who, driven by their information needs, participate in multiple publics simultaneously.

This nesting and layering of different publics is not simply relational but involves ongoing struggles over their *meaningful* interrelation. For example, public debates frequently question whether a particular topic should be included in the polity public or not.

Similarly, there are debates regarding the societal space that should be allocated to specific thematic or group public spheres.

In addition, certain discourses can unfold across different publics. For instance, so-called “issue publics” (Bruns 2008: 74), extensively studied in the field of political communication (Bennett, Lang, & Segerberg 2015; Bolsen & Leeper 2013; Krosnick 1990), represent a combination of characteristics of polity publics and topic publics. When current issues of public concern turn out to be particularly relevant and secular, the Covid-19 pandemic, for example (Merten et al., in prep.), a specific issue public emerges from the general polity public. As long as the issue is unresolved, the issue public includes members of the local, regional, national, and global polity publics who develop a specific interest in the topic, and members of existing topic publics who have already been interested in the scientific, social, economic, and political details of the related issue.

Depending on the theme, issue publics can also emerge from group publics. For instance, the “Black Lives Matter” movement brought together group publics and polity publics worldwide (Dunklin & Jennings 2022; Edrington 2022). These examples illustrate that the distinction between polity, topic and group publics does not correspond to the separation of political and non-political issues. Topic publics can become highly politicized, as can group publics.

4 The refiguration of public communication in a relational and process-oriented perspective

We have reached the point in our argumentation where we must address how the transformation of public communication is to be theorized from the perspective outlined so far. This question calls for integrating the various building blocks formulated above into an overarching analytical approach. Referring to figuration theory, we propose that the transformation of public communication is to be understood as a process of its refiguration. More specifically, this means a structural change in the actor constellations, practices, and frames of relevance that characterize the various publics and their interrelations as typified in the last section. This process of transformation is driven by the trends of deep mediatization: the increasing differentiation of media, their growing connectivity and omnipresence, and the pace of innovation and datafication, including the automation of communication upon which it is based. Even if there are such overarching trends, it cannot be assumed that transformation is a uniform process.

That said, the crucial question is where to start in order to investigate such a multi-layered process of transformation. Empirical studies researching the transformation of publics often focus on content or discourse analyses when dealing with this question. Since research on the public sphere is mostly concerned with political communication, the “structural transformation of the public sphere” (Habermas 1989) is typically examined with regard to changing discourse patterns within mass media. In this context, the interplay of topic conjunctures, speaker distributions as well as their evaluation, addressing and framing is analyzed (e.g. Donges & Jarren 2010; Koopmans & Statham 2010; Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-v. Königslöw, & Sifft 2008). With the digitization and transnationalization of the public sphere, the focus is increasingly turned to the resulting shift in discourse dynamics as well as the changed constellation of speaker roles in network public spheres (e.g. Neuberger 2014; Pentzold, Hoffmann, & Donges 2023; Raetzsch & Lünenborg 2020; Schäfer 2015; Waldherr et al. 2023). As we already highlighted, this is also the process-oriented and relational path we want to take in our investigation of the transformation of public communication. However, we are not interested in capturing these actors

as speakers at the level of discourse, but as actors in their respective social relations: groups, communities, and organizations.

We can capture the strength of this perspective through the basic terms of figuration theory. First of all, it is the *constellations of actors* which fundamentally changes in today's media environment. For instance, journalists are now cooperating within and beyond their newsrooms (Wahl-Jorgensen 2009) and using certain media technologies to connect with people in software-development to produce the latest media products (Deuze & Witschge 2019; Diakopoulos 2019; Manninen 2022; McMullen Cheng & Bélair-Gagnon 2022; Usher 2016). Additionally, in a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick 2017), other actor interrelations transform as politicians, influencers, and experts can bypass the traditional gate-keeping role of professional journalism by using social media to reach their audiences directly. Similarly, users now have new ways to participate in public communication, such as through their own comments or self-made content such as blogs, leading to the emergence of new roles in "produsage" (Bruns & Schmidt 2011; Carpentier 2011; Hill 2020). By focusing on the interrelations of actors, we can better understand how the latest media and communication technologies are reshaping public communication at an early stage.

Furthermore, changes in the topics and discourses addressed in public communication reflect the *evolving practices* of the actors involved. Analyzing these practices helps draw conclusions not only about the topics that are negotiated in the public sphere but also about the *relevance* attributed to these individual topics and discourses in everyday life, whether by media professionals or media users. According to figuration theory, it is crucial to view the actor constellation as a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon. Figurations are continuously created and maintained *through the practices* of these actors, making them inherently fluid and subject to change.

Finally, adapting a process-oriented and relational path also allows us to grasp how the *frames of relevance* in public communication shift and evolve. This shift is evident in the overarching orientations of the actors involved. From the perspective of figuration theory, this represents a crucial aspect at which the transformation of public communication is most sustainable, namely when comprehensive orientations in and of public communication change. Such a relational and process-oriented point of view transcends the subjective standpoint of single individuals, offering a broader understanding of how public communication is reshaped over time.

A relational and process-oriented approach to the refiguration of public communication must address *which* interrelations and practices should be considered. First, the relationships between media professionals and their audiences should be examined, with a particular emphasis on *journalists* since they are still expected to play a principal role in the production of public communication. Second, understanding the relationships between *journalists and their audiences* is crucial, as this dynamic is decisive for the figuration of public spheres in general. Third, the relationships among *media users* as well as their interactions with various public figurations, since it is only through users' appropriation that the communication process is completed. In analyzing these three sets of relationships, it is essential to account for the most recent changes and trends to avoid excluding any relevant developments from the outset.

When examining the relationship among journalists, it is important to consider the expansion of the journalistic field, as discussed under the concept of "beyond journalism" (Deuze & Witschge 2019): Many contemporary journalistic actors no longer work within traditional newsrooms or have had a formal journalistic education. This transformation, particularly in the context of journalism's evolution, is highlighted by the concept of

“pioneer journalism” (Hepp & Loosen 2021). Pioneer journalists experiment with new forms of journalism, shaping future practices and visions within the field.

The journalism landscape itself is changing with the integration of new actors such as “startups” (Carlson & Usher 2016), “innovation labs” (Hogh-Janovsky & Meier 2021), and “accelerators” (Cohen 2013). These entities introduce specific new figurations with distinct actor constellations, practices, and frames of relevance, and in so doing contribute to the transformation of public communication. Experimental practices and emerging imaginaries from these actors filter into established journalistic organizations, influencing their traditional structures. The *projections* of an ever-evolving journalism reconfigured by technology, a growing emphasis on *product* development, project-based work organization, and the increasing importance of *prototyping* are all significant patterns driving the transformation of journalism’s organizational foundation.

Crucial is also the “journalism-audience relationship” (Loosen & Schmidt 2012), which constitutes a relatively enduring social connection because journalism inherently relies on its audience. Consequently, journalism cannot be conceived in isolation from its audience, highlighting its relational nature. At the same time, this relationship embodies a media-tized connection that evolves with the expansion of the media landscape upon which it depends (Loosen 2023).

Currently, a refiguration is emerging as new figurations of the journalism-audience relationship become possible in a changing media environment. In today’s digitally networked media landscape, “journalists must confront the matter of what to do with their audiences” (Holton et al. 2016 : 850). The range of potential interrelations between journalists and their audiences has expanded, leading to various *forms of relationships* and creating diverse *relationship repertoires*. This illustrates a further disaggregation of what was historically imagined as a mass audience (i.e Ang 1991; Butsch & Livingstone 2014) into distinct social groups and individual users. This shift aligns with an expansion of journalists’ practices to manage these relationships and to understand and engage with their audiences. If we understand publics as co-constructed by journalism and audiences, the differentiation is closely related to the differentiation of publics, whether these are polity, topic, or group publics.

From the point of view of media users, questions of interrelations pertain to their “public connection” (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham 2007) and the social relations they maintain between each other. A public connection is built alongside figurations of particular publics to which individual users connect through their media repertoires. In relation to these publics, individual media users both refer to and co-construct a public’s specific actor constellation, frames of relevance, and communicative practices. This brings into focus the communicative construction of different figurations of publics from an audience perspective. For instance, it raises questions about how users engage in these processes and how this contributes to the refiguration of public communication as a whole. Viewed from this perspective, publics are figurations comprising an actor constellation of people who relate to one another through mediated communication.

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