

Call for Papers

for a Special Issue in M&K

Futuring Communication Research: Communicative AI as Methodological Toolbox and Research Companion

Guest Editors: Stephanie Geise / Marko Bachl / Merja Mahrt / Annie Waldherr

Communicative artificial intelligence (ComAI) is defined as AI systems that are directly involved in communicative processes—machine-based systems that perceive their environment via input data and, on this basis, generate, process, and shape communication (Hepp et al., 2023). In this way, they become socially meaningful and embedded in communicative constellations. ComAI can thus be understood not merely as a technical tool but as an actor within mediated communication processes that co-structures meaning, interaction, and knowledge production (Guzman & Lewis 2020; Hepp et al., 2023). If ComAI co-structures meaning, interaction and knowledge production, communication research cannot simply respond by adopting new tools. Instead, it requires what we refer to as *futuring communication research*: a forward-looking and reflective approach to how knowledge in the field will be produced, interpreted, and validated in conditions influenced by communicative AI.

This perspective is not merely programmatic: it responds to a rapid and ongoing transformation of the methodological landscape itself. The current surge in generative ComAI-driven research, particularly with large language models (LLMs) and agentic AI, opens up new technical possibilities and challenges established methods. With this special issue, we aim to critically engage with this transformative evolution within an ongoing trajectory of methodological advancement. This evolution is most obvious in content analysis research: from classical dictionaries and bag-of-words-based machine learning to semantic embeddings and encoders, and now to large generative models, the field has seen a steady enhancement in analytical power, contextual sensitivity, and interpretive depth. In this context, LLMs do not simply replace manual content analysis; they enable iterative, context-aware theme generation, cross-case comparison, and dynamic interpretation at scale—building on the foundations of traditional content analysis while introducing new possibilities for both qualitative and quantitative analysis (De Paoli, 2024; Bachl & Scharrow, 2026). More recently, agentic AI systems, which assist in or even take over large parts of the research process, have caught the attention of social scientists (Messing & Tucker, 2026).

At the same time, the use of commercial “black box” ComAI systems in the research process poses significant methodological and ethical challenges (Spirling, 2023). The opaque logic of the underlying machine-learning processes, which are often inaccessible to users, undermines transparency, interpretability, and epistemic control. This is especially true when ComAI-generated outputs, such as codings, categorizations, thematic clusters, or synthesized summaries, directly inform key research decisions, from data annotation to interpretation. This opacity complicates efforts to ensure methodological rigor because researchers cannot fully verify or validate how these outputs were generated, raising concerns about reproducibility and accountability. Furthermore, ComAI systems may produce flawed outputs containing hallucinated or misattributed statements, references, and other factual inconsistencies, typically without signaling uncertainty (Huang et al., 2025).

These challenges underscore the need for greater methodological reflexivity, documentation of ComAI use, and the development of audit trails, source verification mechanisms, and critical evaluation frameworks—in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches alike, each with their respective challenges such as traceability, interpretive integrity, and epistemic accountability. Taken together, these developments affect not only specific methodological approaches but also fundamental epistemological questions concerning scientific work in the age of communicative AI. Addressing these questions is, in our view, at the heart of futuring communication research: not waiting for standards to emerge, but actively shaping them.

In line with this futuring perspective, we invite communication researchers who use ComAI tools in their (empirical) work to publish their innovative research designs, methodological concepts, experiences, and learnings. We welcome contributions that use ComAI as a methodological tool and research companion and that consider the epistemological, ethical, and practical implications of its increasing role in qualitative, quantitative, computational, and mixed research designs. We particularly welcome work that combines critical reflection with empirical analysis and addresses the following fields and questions, among others:

Innovation and Integration: Bridging ComAI with Established Methods

- How can ComAI be innovatively combined with established qualitative, quantitative, computational, and mixed methods?
- In what ways does ComAI-supported research differ from earlier generations of digital or computational methods?
- What contribution can communication research on ComAI make to neighboring disciplines—and where can we learn from others?

Epistemology and Reflexivity: The Changing Role of the Researcher

- To what extent do ComAI tools influence researchers' positioning, reflexivity, and interpretive practices?
- How does ComAI as a “research companion” challenge notions of authorship, agency, and epistemic authority?
- How can researchers maintain epistemic control while leveraging generative capacities?

Ethics, Bias, and Accountability

- Who is accountable when ComAI outputs are misleading yet plausible?
- How do ComAI systems reproduce or amplify inequalities?
- How can innovation be balanced with environmental responsibility?

Methodological Expectations and Emerging Standards

- What strategies enable transparency in ComAI-supported workflows?
- How can validity, reliability, reproducibility be ensured?
- What standards are emerging or need to be developed (e.g., for prompt documentation, model versioning, and audit trails)?

Scholars wishing to contribute to this special issue are invited to submit an extended abstract of their proposed manuscript (in English, max. 6,000 characters including spaces)

to the editorial team by **November 30, 2026**. Based on the submitted abstracts, the editorial team, together with the guest editors, will develop the concept for the special issue and notify authors of their decision by **December 17, 2026**. Selected authors will then be invited to submit full manuscripts by **March 15, 2027**. All submitted manuscripts will undergo M&K's standard double-blind peer-review process. The initial review is expected to take approximately three months, depending on the number of submissions, followed by a two-month revision period. Revised manuscripts will subsequently undergo a second round of peer review. The special issue is scheduled for publication in Issue 4 (Q4) of 2027.

Address: Editorial Office Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft, Christiane Matzen, c.matzen@leibniz-hbi.de

References

- Bachl, M., & Scharnow, M. (2026). Computational text analysis. In L. Shen (Ed.), *Quantitative research methods in communication science. Volume 2: Data analysis* (pp. 319–340). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10/hb7m7d>
- De Paoli, S. (2024). Performing an inductive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with a large language model: An exploration and provocation on the limits of the approach. *Social Science Computer Review*, 42(4), 997-1019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393231220483>
- Guzman, A. L., & Lewis, S. C. (2020). Artificial intelligence and communication: A human-machine communication research agenda. *New Media & Society*, 22(1), 70-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819858691>
- Hepp, A., Loosen, W., Dreyer, S., Jarke, J., Kannengießer, S., Katzenbach, C., ... & Schulz, W. (2023). ChatGPT, LaMDA, and the hype around communicative AI: The automation of communication as a field of research in media and communication studies. *Human-Machine Communication*, 6(1), 4.
- Huang, L., Yu, W., Ma, W., Zhong, W., Feng, Z., Wang, H., Chen, Q., Peng, W., Feng, X., Qin, B., & Liu, T. (2025). A survey on hallucination in Large Language Models: Principles, taxonomy, challenges, and open questions. *ACM Transactions of Information Systems*, 43(2), Article 42. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3703155>
- Messing, S., & Tucker, J. A. (2026). The train has left the station: Agentic AI and the future of social science research. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-train-has-left-the-station-agent-ic-ai-and-the-future-of-social-science-research/>
- Spirling, A. (2023). Why open-source generative AI models are an ethical way forward for science. *Nature*, 616(7957), 413-413. <https://doi.org/10/gsqx6v>