Beyond mediatization

The importance of non-mediated political and social communication in international comparative research

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Introduction

A cosmopolitan orientation of media and communication studies and the internationalization of scholarship in general must go hand in hand with an expansion of interest in communication phenomena beyond a technology-centric logic. The aim of this chapter is to work out a stronger integration of interactive non-mediated communication in international comparative communication research, to discuss its theoretical potential and fields of application, and to strengthen communication-ecological thinking.

Both aspects—communication ecology and international comparisons—are inextricably linked. International communication research will require a comprehensive understanding of political and social communication if it wants to make meaningful comparisons beyond the boundaries of a mere national understanding of science (see also Badr et al., 2020). A selective view of media developments only, as is usually practiced in media systems analyses, will not suffice but must be accompanied by an understanding of political and sociocultural structures and communication practices in other regions of the world. Thus, non-mediated communication should be taken seriously as an independent form of political and social communication.

Conversely, a comprehensive communication ecology approach benefits from international comparisons, as the functionality of non-mediated communication can be sharpened by comparing their political and sociocultural frameworks. Integrating perspectives from the Global "North" and "South," this chapter aims to conceptualize various arenas of non-mediated political and social communication. It discusses the recent developments of parliamentary plenary, committee, and symbolic communication in consolidated democracies, transformation states, and authoritarian countries. It reflects on the perspectives and deficits of internal communication in political parties, and it engages in a comparative analysis of the quality of governmental decision-making communication across different political systems. Moreover, it also outlines the relevance of publicly hidden private communication encounters and today's "salon"

communication, as well as the communicative use of the street as part of the overall social transformation process.

These arenas are potential counterbalances to hegemonic political or media discourses. Their practices need to be included in any deeper assessment of media and communication freedom around the world. In some countries, where the mediated public sphere is controlled, civil societies and lifeworlds can still be vibrant and politicized. In more free systems, in turn, discourses can become biased and civil society lethargic. The cosmopolitan approach considered here incorporates this openness to learn from what can be regressive and progressive at the same time in transformations across the globe.

Theoretical introduction

Communication ecology and non-mediated communication

Non-mediated communication is included most systematically in the theorization of the school of media and communication ecology. Michael Giesecke (2007), an important scholar in the German tradition, limited the definition of "media" and media communication to written (print) and/or technical mass media. The basic mode of communication of these media is discursive-monological, and they are thus in opposition to non-mediated communication characterized by face-to-face interaction. A broad definition of "media" based on primary aspects such as language, facial expressions, gestures, or non-linguistic mediators such as money would make it more difficult to differentiate between monologic and dialogic social communication.

The metanorm of communication ecology is not "mediatization" (as will be discussed in detail below), but the reflection of the balance and imbalance between media communication and non-mediated communication in modern society. Giesecke (2007) described communication ecological approaches as the study of the "interdependence of elements, of systems and networks" and media and communicators as "equal elements of communicative networks" (p. 256). He also talks of the coevolution of different forms of communication. Depending on the type of communication ecology theory formation (biometaphorical, technical, systemic, etc.), the relationships between the elements are subject to the different dynamics of balance/imbalance, autonomy/interdependence, etc.

Activating the ecological paradigm is essential if we are to better understand the sustainability of communication processes. For Giesecke (2007), technical media have their own specific functions and were developed in the course of the modernization of industrial society. Modern knowledge societies no longer function purely interactively but require text and storage media. However, this equally important interaction is suspended for the time of media consumption. In Giesecke's (2007) view, we now find ourselves in a media-centered imbalance at the end of the industrial age (p. 210). Like capitalism, the entire modern age is oriented toward the accumulation and consumption of information. Non-mediated communication is therefore seen by Giesecke as a "constantly necessary counterweight" (p. 211) to an overly strong media imprint; it should be relearned again when individual medial, written, and image-based and when social information

processing is necessary. From this perspective, the question arises as to why non-mediated communication has not been included to a greater extent in the development of theories in communication and media studies.

Non-mediated communication is either placed solely and autonomously in the focus of microanalyses in communication studies, for example, in sociological communication theories, the study of interpersonal communication, or intercultural communication research, or it is examined as a subordinate process of media communication, primarily in reception and opinion research. Although in media ecology theorization, face-to-face communication can itself be regarded as an environment (Strate, 2017, p. 16), the question of interaction often remains limited to how humans interact with different technical and symbolic media (e.g., Postman, 2000; Scolari, 2012).

The same applies to the related medium theory. Non-mediated contexts, for example, in traditional oral cultures, are taken into account here, but ultimately the social function of media is again prioritized, and a relatively linear leading media imprint from traditional to postmodern societies is assumed (e.g., Meyrowitz, 2018). Joshua Meyrowitz (2018) has self-critically mentioned that too little emphasis has been placed on the co-existence of forms of communication, given that "people in literature societies continue to speak, and those in electronic cultures still read, write, and use print" (p. 636). Thus, by focusing on a supposedly leading media culture, other simultaneous developments in communication cultures are likely to be neglected.

Related approaches to non-mediated communication in international comparisons

A coherent communication ecology theory, which goes beyond a fundamental paradigmatic debate and allows for an operationalization that can be applied to concrete phenomena of social and political communication, does not yet exist. Moreover, a communicative "ecosystem" is sometimes only understood terminologically as a digital extension of communication networks (Yousuf, 2018), which leaves out non-mediated communication.

Comparative media-ethnological studies on communication culture, in turn, pay attention to non-mediated communication but often have strongly essentialist features (e.g., "whining" is described as a German way of speaking; see Winchatz, 2017) and are therefore, in our view, not considered capable of being theorized in the sense of social science. The same applies to parts of intercultural communication, where behavioral patterns and non-verbal forms of expression are sometimes interpreted as characteristics of macrosystems (nation, culture), whereas heterogeneous socialization and cultural learning effects tend to be ignored (see Hafez & Grüne, 2022, pp. 111–112).

Several communication theories at least reveal similarities to a communication ecology approach that includes the various forms of communication equally. For example, Jürgen Habermas's (1995) theory of communicative action can be interpreted as communication ecology insofar as "society" is conceptualized here in a duality of system and lifeworld and the juxtaposition of "strategic" and "communicative action." Accordingly, the lifeworld can be thought of as a primarily non-mediated sphere of interaction, as it is based on everyday social experiences. Moreover, Habermas's (1962/1992) critique of the

"colonization of the lifeworld" in his work on the structural change of the public sphere outlines a critique of the imbalance between the social levels of communication.

Jürgen Gerhards and Friedhelm Neidhardt (1990) also conceptualized public communication on three levels, whereby, in addition to the media, theme-centered public assemblies (*Versammlungsöffentlichkeiten*) and encounter publics (lifeworld encounters) play a role and thus include non-mediated communication. In his concept of the "networked society," Richard Münch (1995) also assumed that communication must take place at all levels (in different publics and also non-mediated) in order to bring the basic communicative logics (e.g., theatrical/conflictual vs. rational) to bear and thus enable a link back to the lifeworld (pp. 104–107).

In addition to public sphere theory, approaches to political communication consider the relevance of interpersonal communication. The role of social interaction has already been emphasized in the idea of the "two-/multi-step flow of communication" in research on opinion leaders (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Merton, 1968) and has also been recently discussed in the context of the communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2017). However, the actual influence of the different levels of communication in political opinion making and civic action has been contested (e.g., Chaffee, 1986), and we still lack a comprehensive theoretical integration.

Cultural studies-inspired audience research also assigns an important role to the non-mediated communication processes that follow the reception of media in shaping social discourse (media appropriation). However, even in canonical texts, non-mediated communication remains diffuse, less studied, and not conceptually refined (Hall, 1980). Something similar could be said about the fields of development communication and urban communication.

In non-Western communication studies, a critical examination of linear media effects and a discussion of "alternative" or "indigenous" communication have been found in Latin American debates since the 1960s. This tradition is also linked to the philosophy of Buen Vivir and highlights the important role of dialogue, listening, and participation in social communication processes (Calderón et al., 2018; Huesca & Dervin, 1994). The Latin American school of "mediaciones" (e.g., Martín-Barbero, see below) in particular turned away from media centrism and examined popular communication practices of the population at large (Saucedo Añez, 2019, pp. 5–6). In this view, media representations do not displace other forms of communication but are closely linked to non-mediated communication as social communication. Only where they displace indigenous, non-literate cultures, for example, are modern media understood as invasive. A new communicative hybridity (in line with communication ecology) is then called for to rebalance them.

We can find similarities to African debates here. According to Ngũgĩ (1986), every language conveys a specific cultural sign system and thus ensures its survival. For example, the much-discussed African philosophy of Ubuntu is stored in African proverbs (Sesanti, 2022; see also Radue et al. on "prefix journalism" in this book). Language and thus orality (especially in the case of high illiteracy) becomes the core of community, nation-building, and social development, according to Ngũgĩ (1986), who also noted that although writing is not rejected, it tends to be seen as a colonialist impulse that separates people from oral traditions (p. 17). Alternative forms of communication, such as so-called "oramedia" (e.g., talking drums) in African societies, are also interpreted in this sense as interactive and

independent techniques whose community-building function is especially emphasized in contexts in which access to modern media is exclusive or fragile due to inequality (e.g., Ugboajah, 1982; Wilson, 2008). The "exaggeration of writing" (Bergermann, 2012, p. 268) at the cost of oral communication becomes a widespread topos of postcolonial media theory.

Postcolonialism and anti-colonialism are often closely linked to communication ecology thinking, even if not explicitly. Nevertheless, it is lamented that an independent communication theory is still in its infancy and often exhausted in diffuse demands for de-Westernization (Mano & milton, 2021a, p. 7)—which, however, makes little sense if one also considers the communication ecology tradition as part of the Western sciences.

Cultural recentering in the tradition of Ngũgĩ (1986) also includes a repositioning of communication and media strategies, which comprise digital media in opposition to mass media (Frassinelli, 2021, p. 51). Critics of Ngũgĩ have pointed out that culture should not only be understood as verbal language but also as observational and imitative communication (Issa, 2022). Non-mediated communication, then, is to be understood as a complex act that includes observation as well as interaction (Hafez & Grüne, 2022, pp. 8–17).

Lastly, contributions on the "Arab street" from the last few decades are also interesting for a communication ecology approach. A change in the concept of the "street" is recognizable, whereby the theoretical debate has reacted to political changes instead of theoretically integrating them into an overall concept. Originally, the term "street" was equated with public opinion in authoritarian Arab states (Pollock, 1993). Since the 2003 Iraq War, transnational Arab television (e.g., Al-Jazeera) has been included in the analyses, as the informal political meetings of Arab anti-war protests resonated with the new media (Lynch, 2003, p. 69; see also Zayani, 2008). During the Arab Spring following the year 2010, a further shift of the concept toward non-mediated communication became apparent: "virtual and public spaces came into a mutual synergy and produced a formidable potential for mobilizing a broad variety of actors" (Salvatore, 2013, p. 225).

Thus far, non-mediated communication is already part of theory formation in Western and non-Western research traditions. However, this comes along with a general lack in conceptualizing the interplay between different forms of communication, and comprehensive attempts to more precisely define the balance between the various modes of communication in society are rare.

One constructive example is the media dependency theory (Ball-Rockeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Here, the authors tried to integrate both the interdependencies of the media with other social systems (politics, economy) and their reciprocal relationship with interpersonal and individual logics on the part of the media audience into one model. This approach has also been extended to new media environments, such as the Internet. It has been shown that interpersonal communication in networks of acquaintances and relatives can influence mediatized communication on Internet platforms and must therefore be regarded as an influential component of the overall communication environment (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003). However, the relevance of these communication levels for cultural and political developments (democratization processes, values, ideologies, etc.) still represents a major research deficit.

A critique of the mediatization approach

In some respects, the natural antagonist of communication ecology is mediatization research. In contrast to communication ecology, mediatization research does not focus on the entirety of communication processes, only on media communication, which creates the impression of techno-capitalist determinism. While non-Western criticism of public sphere theory remains largely within the framework of mediatization thinking in its critique of Western philosophy, rationality, and the social categories of citizenship (e.g., Gunaratne, 2006; Kang, 2021), there are numerous critics of the mediatization approach worldwide. Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993) essentially denied that a social and political movement is shaped by media logic. In his view, it is not so much that the media shape society as that they bring the long-term cultural and structural driving forces of society to bear. Mikhail Buralkin and Svetlana Chernenkaya (2020) also argued that mediatization theory does not recognize the social dynamics of society. According to the authors, media are less subject to their own functional logic than to the logic of other social systems. In a similar vein, Marko Ampuja (2014, pp. 353–369) denied that media logic is a central social meta process, as it is too radically conceived and overlooks social continuities—above all, the role of capitalism. However, he also accused critics of a strong media impact of not having worked out their alternative concepts.

Functions of non-mediated communication

To understand the significance of communication ecology, it is important to describe the functions of non-mediated communication and its interactions with media communication in more detail. We therefore propose eight balance functions below, which can be divided into a narrower political dimension and a broader sociocultural dimension. This list, of course, is not exhaustive:

1. *Inclusion–exclusion balance:* Media discourses are necessarily limited in their participatory function. Mediatization is often more exclusion than inclusion. Non-mediated communication, in contrast, offers extended opportunities for participation for those who would otherwise not be heard.
2. *Consensus–difference balance:* Non-mediated communication offers social compensation for discursive deformations, especially in the mass media. If media are too consensus-oriented, it offers an arena for differentiation; if media are too polarized, new social consensuses can be created in the realm of non-mediated communication. Non-mediated communication is thus part of the social pluralism of opinions and knowledge.
3. *Transparency–opacity balance:* Authors such as Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990) and Jay Blumler (2002) have emphasized the necessity of permeability and connection between the social micro, meso, and macro levels of the public sphere, as otherwise the abbreviating media logic endangers social stability. Non-mediated communication, however, tends to move to invisible backstages, which enables necessary routine communication (e.g., of the political system) but at the same time makes transparency and linkage of the levels of media communication and non-mediated com-

munication more difficult. Communication ecology asks for the rules of a "healthy" rebalancing.

4. *Strategy–dialogue balance:* While media communication often reinforces discursive-monological and even persuasive communication, non-mediated communication can promote a dialogical, understanding-oriented exchange. Interactive and dialogic communication are not the same thing, but non-mediated communication can help stabilize the formation of opinion in a society.

5. *Community–society balance:* Communication ecology is not about a romantic relapse into the days of small interactive communities, but it is about strengthening the sense of community in the larger social context. If non-mediated communication is neglected, a loss of trust in the media threatens to escalate into a loss of trust in society. If, in turn, non-mediated communication is practiced too excessively, tribalism and polarization may be the result.

6. *Diversity–sustainability balance:* The communication-ecological society generates fewer infodemics but ideally finds a balance between information generation and knowledge production made possible by non-mediated communication.

7. *Innovation–reproduction balance*: Societies must both ensure their stability and enable necessary development, reform, or even transformation. In this interplay, a balance between different forms of communication is crucial. While media communication relates to a hegemonically formed archive of social knowledge, non-mediated communication offers alternative storage patterns through oral traditions, reconfigurations of oblivion, and knowledge production through dialogue (Flusser, 2003).

8. *Aesthetic/ritual–utilization balance:* Media communication is always subject to certain logics of utilization and exploitation (information, entertainment, education, profit, etc.) due to its integration into systemic production contexts. In contrast, aspects of non-mediated communication are more independent if we consider that the production of society itself is its purpose. Its social benefits can range from ritualized community communication to aesthetic commentary on the world. These forms of communication can create a residue of unused special knowledge, which can be called up in crises.

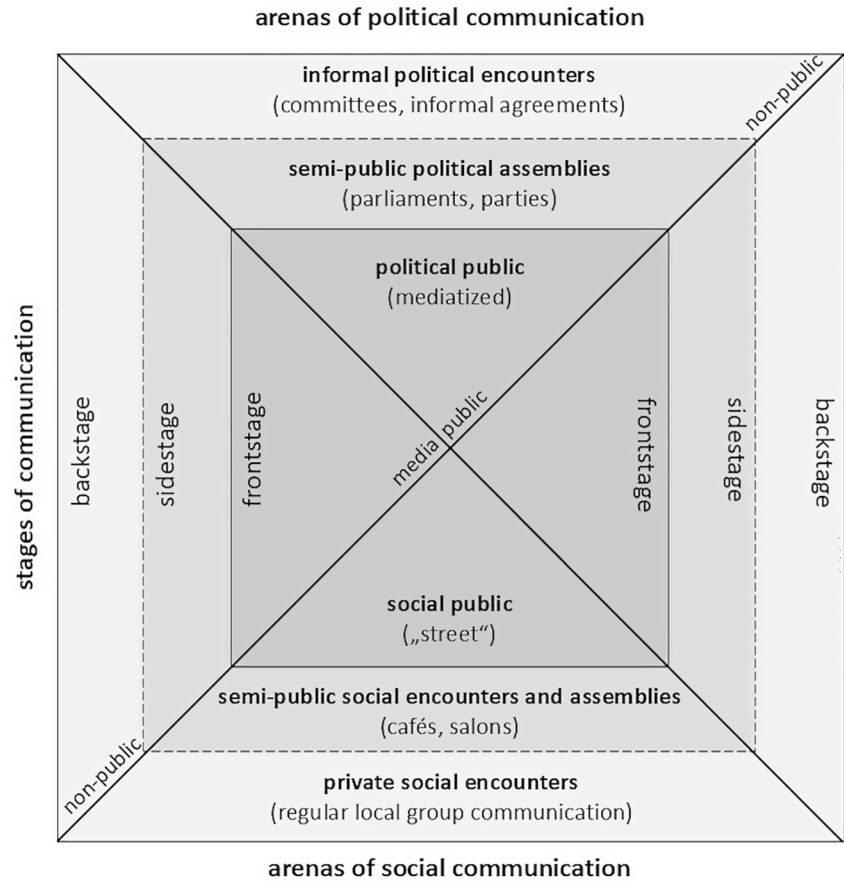## Stages and arenas of non-mediated communication

Erwing Goffman (1959) introduced the concept of "stages" to communication science. We also use the term "stage" in the context of communication ecology. Stages in our approach can be characterized as public as well as non-public and medial as well as non-medial, and on each stage, we find several arenas of communication, as the following figure (see next page) illustrates.

While the mediatization thesis assumes a shift of social and political communication to the frontstage of the media, communication ecology focuses its attention on: 1) the nonpublic backstage of the political system (e.g., political decision-making communication) and everyday social encounters (e.g., private households) and 2) public or semipublic ("admission-controlled") and more or less organized sidestages of assembly communication.

At its core, the concept of communication ecology assumes that all stages must be used effectively and connected with each other, on the one hand, through personal networks (e.g., opinion leadership or the multi-step flow of communication), and on the other hand, through technical and spatial conditions (e.g., digitalization, street communication). The following contribution on comparative non-mediated communication focuses in particular on the sidestage, but includes interactions with the frontstage (media) and the backstage.

Figure 1: Communication stages and arenas of social and political communication (source: author's compilation)

Non-mediated communication in international comparative research

The analysis of many arenas of non-mediated communication lacks country-specific and international comparative research worthy of the name. Handbooks on political communication as well as on communication studies in Africa, for example, are, with a few

exceptions, such as PR and propaganda research, very media-centered; comparative approaches are rarely found there (e.g., Mano & milton, 2021b; Olukotun & Omotoso, 2017). Political science has a more comparative orientation but only marginally deals with communication issues (e.g., Boix & Stokes, 2007). The same applies to sociology, where comparative analyses can be found, for example, on family and friendship structures or urbanization developments, but with minor interest in communication.

This chapter certainly cannot fully compensate for such deficits, but it is intended to provide examples of the theoretical benefits that international comparative research in the field of non-mediated communication can generate. It must be made clear that we can neither cover all continents and countries nor all problem areas but can only show a certain panopticon of the academic potential of current and future research.

We devote ourselves to the following arenas in the two main areas of political and social communication:

- Political communication:
  - Parliamentary communication
  - Party communication
  - (Government) decision-making communication
- Social communication:
  - Regular local group communication
  - Salon communication
  - Street communication

We address some of the central issues of non-mediated communication that take place both on the sidestages of semi-public assemblies and encounter communication (parliaments, parties, salons, streets) and on the backstages ([government] decision-making communication, private regulars' meetings).

Our theoretical orientation is largely based on the functional catalog of communication ecology developed above. Other conceivable fields of research such as political opinion leaders, political advertising, political campaigns, or socialization are omitted due to space constraints.

Arenas of political communication

Parliamentary communication

Parliamentary communication takes place in various ways and in diverse locations. In the plenary chamber, discursive and strategic communication is predominantly cultivated, often with theatrical accompaniment; interactive communicative action generally takes place on the backstage in committees and informal circles, where even political opponents can negotiate compromises in dialogue (Patzelt, 1998). To understand parliamentary communication, it is therefore essential to research not only visible plenary communication but also invisible committee communication. Unfortunately, this rarely happens because these areas are not easily accessible to most researchers.

The increased public presence of parliaments in the contemporary media age has ironically led to an ever greater shift in real decision-making communication from par-

liaments to committees and backstage; the plenary sessions resemble pseudo-dialogical productions (Burkhardt, 2016). These productions are only part of non-mediated communication to a limited extent; they are more of an intersection of media communication and non-mediated communication. However, the actual communicative substance of many parliaments as problem solvers and legislators is found on the backstage of parliaments, where interpersonal communication is predominant.

Most of today's studies of parliamentary communication are analyses of speeches, rhetoric, and discourse in plenary sessions (e.g., Proksch & Slapin, 2014). In terms of communication ecology, they are interesting insofar as they represent an arena for the public that provides deeper insights into the actions and thoughts of elites than media analyses are generally able to do. In addition, a comparison of different countries would provide interesting insights into whether, for example, "unparliamentary expressions," as Amakali (2016) determined for Namibia, have become a global standard. Such analyses are important for an understanding of political cultures worldwide, but, as already noted, they say little about the effectiveness of the institution of parliament, as this often takes place in inaccessible committees and informal circles and needs more research for clarification.

Symbolic non-verbal communication in parliaments has also been studied in numerous countries. It has been shown that the non-verbal level is a central universal code of political communication (Abélès, 2006; Pietsukh, 2021). The importance of rituals and symbols in political territorial demarcation and in a battle of opinions, which can (but do not necessarily have to) represent social struggles, should not be underestimated. Non-mediated communication can only be captured here anthropologically and through observational research, which to date has largely been available for individual countries only and not for global comparison.

The number of existing studies is significantly larger at the intersection between non-mediated communication and media communication. European studies have shown that parliamentary debates are strongly influenced by the media agenda (Vliegenthart et al., 2016). While this seems to confirm the mediatization thesis, it is completely unclear whether such effects really play a role worldwide, that is, also in so-called "flawed" democracies, where oligarchs or even authoritarian elites more strongly shape parliaments. In this context, an integrated analysis of another intersection between non-mediated communication and media communication, that of the digital (interactive?) exchange between citizens and parliaments, so-called e-parliamentarianism, would also be valuable. Parliaments are not only related to the media environment, but they also act on the sidestage of direct contact with citizens and can open up in this direction precisely through digital means. The interactive quality of parliamentary websites is relevant here. Ideally, it would be possible for the strong media influence of the plenary debates to be reversed into a strong citizen influence of the members of parliaments, which could in principle be noticeable in decisive committees. However, such complex communication flows have not yet been recorded by science. The existing website analyses merely show that consolidated democracies can lag just as far behind in terms of interactive design as transition states and autocracies, for example, in the Arab world and Africa (e.g., Arrif, 2020; Oni et al., 2016), and that some young democracies are clearly ahead in this respect (Joshi & Rosenfield, 2013). A global parliamentary report has also shown

that a country such as Uganda, which has received little attention from international research, now holds citizen hearings in parliament, that is, it incorporates elements of oral, non-mediated communication (Power, 2012, p. 32). Without overemphasizing the compensatory function of parliamentary communication in (pseudo-)parliaments, it is nevertheless possible that in some societies with severe restrictions on freedom, political non-mediated communication takes on a kind of valve function and compensates for deficits in public participation in media. To sum up, more research is needed.

Overall, even this brief overview shows that numerous phenomena can and should be examined in terms of communication ecology. The internal communicative logic of parliaments to mediate between plenary and committee communication is just as important here as the external logic of engaging on different levels of encounter, assembly, and media publics. In particular, these interactions, interdependencies, balances, and imbalances between non-mediated communication and media communication play a role in the communicative understanding of politics and have hardly been researched to date. Only by taking a communication-ecological view of parliaments can their roles in the functional areas of participation, transparency, innovation, and promoting transformation (see the section entitled Functions of non-mediated communication) really be assessed.

Party communication

Political parties have multiple functions in political systems. They organize the formation of political opinion, and the personnel for government offices are recruited from their midst. They are important links between the state and civil society and are therefore central arenas of the social public sphere. Internal party communication serves to inform the party members, develop new policies, coordinate activities, and mobilize emotions (Osei-Kufuor, 2016, p. 11). In addition to written texts such as party manifestos and advertising, oral negotiations in all party branches—from districts to the national leadership—are of central importance. In terms of communication ecology, non-mediated communication on the sidestage of parties is therefore important for balancing media communication and for social functions, such as inclusion, participation, compensation, etc.

Intuitively, the type of political system seems to be decisive for assessing the global conditions of party communication. Accordingly, intraparty communication should flourish in consolidated democracies, while it would be much more limited in defective democracies, hybrid systems, and authoritarian states. This is supported, for example, by the fact that parties are very unpopular in most Arab states (Hegasy, 2000) and have remained of little relevance in the Arab Spring of 2010. The strong role of Islamists in Egypt, for example, and the imbalances in the revolutionary process that led to the overthrow of President Mursi were the fault not only of the military but also of communication problems in political movements and parties that were unable to consolidate their own policies and bridge the strong rivalry between them (Hafez, 2017; Mustafa, 2021). Parties neither developed clear committee structures to enable internal participation nor did they generally succeed in professional external communication via press releases or social media marketing (Kassem, 2016). Such studies cannot be generalized without larger comparative studies that have not yet been conducted. However, many

authors have come to similar conclusions for sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya, namely that the parties here generally do not communicate inclusively and are often enough no more than mobilization tools in the hands of oligarchies. Therefore, disregard for internal party communication leads to a loss of trust (Kipronoh et al., 2017; Osei-Kufuor, 2016). In Nigeria, party leaders are not elected at elective congresses but are preselected by so-called "god fathers" (Simbine, n.d., p. 9). Processes of argumentative exchange in the plenary and of dialogue within and between groups and factions are thus blocked, and opinion forming is shifted from the formal to the informal level, which makes parties dysfunctional if such developments become too strong.

All of this is reminiscent of Huntington's (1968) thesis of the lack of institutionalization of developing societies. Overall, therefore, party communication around the world appears to be in an even worse state than communication in relatively state-related institutions, such as parliaments, where at least in some countries positive approaches can be seen. A conclusive judgment is not yet possible, especially not for Latin America, large parts of Asia, or Oceania, which are not discussed here.

It is important to note that the contrasts between consolidated democracies and other political systems need not always be absolute. Thomas Meyer and Lew Hinchman's (2002) criticism of what they called "mediocracy" bemoaned the decline of internal party democracy in Germany in favor of media tactics exploited by small leadership levels. According to the authors, party conferences are staged and "Americanized" for the media and are thus increasingly losing genuine participation, even in established democracies. Other analyses come to a mixed conclusion: the Obama election campaigns in the USA in particular were evidence of lively parties, although media pressure was also evident (Cohen et al., 2008). However, none of the studies to date have analyzed the entire communication flow from the grassroots to the party leadership from a communication science perspective. The internal democracy of parties is considered to be functioning when party elections work; however, the communication culture that precedes these elections is not examined. In reality, even in the "Global North," party leaders often have (too) strong an influence on the party agenda and personnel development; grassroots democracy functions in acclamation mode. The fact that young people in particular tend less toward parties and more toward political movements could indicate that even in established democracies, internal party communication is often not optimal and that the hoped for participatory and compensatory function of non-mediated communication is not realized effectively enough. It is therefore unfair to point the finger at Asia, Africa, and Latin America, because the actual deficits of party communication tend toward global universality (see also Thomass in this book).

The standard argument for the lack of success of many parties in young democracies is their frequent character as clientelist parties that gather around a leading figure, often an oligarch (Hagopian, 2007). Accordingly, parties in transition societies would not be able to function as mass parties beyond social cleavages and moderate internal social conflicts. From this perspective, hopeful experiments in democracy, such as in Tunisia, fail due to a lack of internal electoral procedures and dictatorial top-down mechanisms in political parties (Brody-Barre, 2013, p. 222). This politological and sociological argument is certainly valid. However, the appeal of an additional communication ecology analysis

lies in the fact that it can show that this is not only about power structures (e.g., oligarchs) and institutionalization deficits (clientelism) in developing states, but that a lack of internal party communication also contributes to the decline of parties in the center of consolidated democracy in North America, Europe, and parts of Asia. There is also a growing trend toward the development of populist one-person parties (from Trump in the USA to Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany), which enable new feelings of community and turn parties back into spaces of experience—albeit with a tendency toward neo-authoritarianism. Loss of trust in established mass parties is therefore not only a question of power and social structure but also a factor that depends on the communication cultures of non-mediated communication, the balancing of which is extremely important for the stabilization of democracy worldwide.

(Government) decision-making communication

Political decision-making by governments is a complex process with numerous communication science facets, which are, however, hardly acknowledged by the discipline of media and communication studies. Instead, they are left to political science, which still has a limited understanding of communication as a resource. Although the influence of media coverage on government action has often been discussed—in the field of foreign policy, for example, in the debate on the so-called "CNN effect" (Robinson, 2002)—these are more external influences. Yet, the internal aspects of the decision-making process play a major role in the so-called "policy cycle" of decisions. For example, political decisions go through the following stages: problem definition (agenda setting), policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, revised problem definition, etc. (Knill & Tosun, 2011). In addition to agenda setting and framing itself, the influence of actor networks, group communication, and information processing is decisive. Once again, one could ideally assume that the freer and more democratic a political system is, the more qualified the individual action steps are: democracies would therefore have to make more rational decisions than authoritarian systems, which are characterized by numerous limitations and increments (censorship, limited actor access, limited scientific rigor, etc.).

However, we now know that democratic governments also proceed very differently—often depending on the leadership style of the top decision-makers (e.g., Donald Trump's uninformed populism), so that rationality can be limited across systems (referred to as bounded rationality; Knill & Tosun, 2011, p. 376). At the same time, it can be assumed that processes of non-mediated communication also take place in hybrid and authoritarian political systems, which may not be transparently visible, but may nevertheless exist and are important for a comparative assessment of existing communication ecologies worldwide. China's NGOs, for example, are not as publicly active as they are in direct communication contact with Chinese government agencies. Even when they operate as digital activists, their activities are often based on multimodal communication, including non-mediated interactions and networks. Moreover, online–offline relationships are explicitly described by some authors as the basis of complex "media ecologies" (Cheong & Gong, 2010; Cheong & Yang, 2017, p. 8).

Even clientelism, which is generally considered to be pronounced in authoritarian systems, is a form of communication. The specific form of (neo-)patrimonialism, for example, is explicitly based on personal networks that must not be patriarchal—that is,

characterized by ethnic or tribal affiliation. At the same time, even where the theory of patrimonialism is comparative and examines authoritarian or hybrid states, such as Iraq and Pakistan, it has so far paid too little attention to the communicative competencies of consultative authoritarianism, focusing instead, for example, on the personality traits of the top decision-maker (Kinne, 2005). A more detailed examination of a) the networks and b) the modes of interaction within these networks (for example, how openly do they speak?) would be highly relevant (even if they are unfortunately hardly accessible methodologically). Communicative access to the authoritarian decision-maker is certainly extremely limited, but it is by no means certain that authoritarian communication flows must always and everywhere be inferior to democratic procedures. On the contrary, a policy logic can gain even more direct validity, while interests perceived as irrelevant, which must be represented in a democracy, can be more easily ignored. At the same time, however, this suppression also quickly leads to undercomplexity and development deficits in politics and society.

Whether there are national policy styles that can be distinguished, for example, as "liberal-pluralist" vs. "statist" (Knill & Tosun, 2011, p. 383), remains a matter of debate from a communication science perspective. After all, it cannot be ruled out that compensatory elements of communication ecology can also occur in certain "soft" forms of authoritarianism. While "transparency" is certainly no longer a function, authoritarian systems can certainly open up communication channels in the area of non-mediated communication that provide them with important information and allow subjects a hidden form of participation. This can be done without, at the same time, generating undesirable legitimization through publicity, which would undermine the character of the regime and generate domino effects up to and including revolutionary upheavals because more and more people appear as claimants. Perhaps understanding non-mediated communication better is the only way to explain the functionality of certain, often long-lasting, authoritarian systems. Of course, this is not a justification of such systems, but merely a proposal for better analysis in the sense of a more targeted criticism of them.

Arenas of social communication

Regular local group communication

The idea of the "regulars' table" (similar to the German *Stammtischkommunikation* or "kitchen talks") is intended to metaphorically describe the private backstages of social communication, whereby the focus is not on arbitrary forms of private interaction but rather on the aspects of everyday communication in which political and social topics are negotiated. In this context, the appropriation of media and their content takes a prominent place. However, from a communication ecology perspective, non-mediated forms of communication are also relevant, in particular, the rather informal private communication in small groups and communities that refer to social discourses or even prepare them. While interpersonal follow-up communication is the subject of international comparative media appropriation and reception research, there has been limited comparative research on non-mediated everyday communication.

Initially, media domestication research at least contextualized the use of media within the realm of everyday private encounters. Research has indicated how social

structures are reflected in the domestic appropriation of media, such as gender and power relations or concepts of privacy (e.g., Berker et al., 2006; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Non-mediated communication always remains a part of this social context in everyday life and thus provides explanatory potential for private media practices. For example, the appropriation of media by women in patriarchal societies can only be interpreted against the background of how patriarchal structures translate into social interactions. However, if non-mediated family or couple communication has already emancipated itself from patriarchal social structures, the private realm stands in stark contrast to visible public or media culture. Consequently, women's emancipative media practices cannot easily be attributed solely to the potential of technical media, as it might be merely part of previous social transformation in the everyday social world.

The consideration of non-mediated communication can thus differentiate the relationship between social micro- and macrostructures. This is particularly helpful in international comparisons, where media effects, for example, in democratic transformations, can tend to be overestimated. This was obvious in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, when academic debates highlighted the role of Internet platform communication ("Facebook revolution") in the dynamic of the revolution. Nevertheless, everyday communication about dissatisfactions with politics in interpersonal networks and on the streets, as well as protest actions of civil society, have played at least as decisive of a role as new media tools (Anas, 2016; Badr, 2015; Hafez, 2015).

This also applies to regressive development trends in consolidated democracies, where social media communication shows destructive effects, although media communication can by no means be the only explanation for anti-democratic behavior. Social cohesion is a comprehensive process that involves multiple layers of communication behavior (e.g., Bürgel et al., 2019). Two things become clear here. On the one hand, political contexts affect the function of socially mediated communication. One would hardly want to interpret privatized hate speech and conspiracy narratives on social media as a resistant and emancipative media practice of democratic citizens, while loud criticism of the political system is certainly understood as such in authoritarian contexts. On the other hand, the question arises as to whether social innovations or regressions do not have a more sustainable precursor in non-mediated communication cultures than new technologies suggest. These are embedded in a wide variety of communication patterns and are shaped by them. Critics of the mediatization thesis, such as Martín-Barbero (1993), Ampuja (2014), and Buralkin and Chernenkaja (2020), have suggested precisely these connections (see the section A critique of the mediatization approach). In the current situation where various democracies are under threat, we can ask whether the non-mediated communication cultures of right-wing extremist groups in nonpublic encounters were overlooked for too long before they were able to develop their potential on social media.

Even more clearly than the complex social contexts of media practices, media follow-up conversations show their potential for social analysis by targeting the interpretative resources within and between societies. Particularly in the context of global media entertainment, a series of international comparative studies have uncovered the patterns of interpretation contained in private lifeworlds (e.g., Gillespie, 1995; Grüne, 2016; Liebes & Katz, 1990/1994; Wagner & Kraidy, 2023). These not only reveal global similarities and

differences but document everyday interactions about values, imagined identifications, and image constructions, which can be in harmony with media discourses or in discrepancy with them (in the sense of our function of the consensus–difference balance, see the section Functions of non-mediated communication). However, in this field of research, media content remains the central reference even for interactive non-mediated interpersonal and group-related negotiation.

Purely non-mediated communication on backstages is central to strengthening community and cohesion on its own. Angela Keppler's (2008) work on "table talks" continues to be an important reference for how communication can take on a social orientation function in private groups, such as the family. Even without the simultaneously shared orientation toward media, this lifeworld microcosm at the dining table becomes an important space in which the small group reassures itself in solidarity and practices social roles and positioning. In accordance with the basic sociological relevance of everyday dialogue in private encounters for mutual understanding and social cohesion, these can also initiate irritations with common senses and hence, become the nucleus for social change.

For international comparative communication studies, these encounters have important research potential. For here lies the yet undeciphered repertoire of invisible and silent opinions, the analysis of which could enrich our understanding of social transformation. This is particularly evident in authoritarian systems, where public criticism is prevented, but where it can be assumed that hidden dialogues in the lifeworld still contain a heterogeneity of political knowledge (e.g., Wolfe, 2018). Revolutions in recent decades suggest that lifeworld transformations must have preceded the mobilization of civil society. Without at least a subtle practice of critical readings, the approval and participation of mass protests can hardly be explained. However, the potential of this prepolitical arena of communication for understanding change has not yet been sufficiently realized in research. Although the relevance of kitchen talks is apparent, we know far too little about the dinner table conversations in the context of today's crises—ranging from opinions in Russian homes in the current state of the war in Ukraine and state propaganda, patterns of hidden criticism about the Chinese government to the non-mediated conversations of right-wing extremist groups in Europe, or the many young peer groups trying to challenge climate politics. A consistent inclusion of non-mediated communication could break up some essentialist equations of political regime types and the actual sensitivities within societies.

This is not to deny the difficulty of methodically recording private communication, which certainly contributes to the fact that this relatively inaccessible area of social communication ecology is given less attention. At the same time, however, enormous efforts are being made in the research of digital media (e.g., big data tools and digital humanities), which in turn invalidates the argument made above and makes the development of methods itself an accomplice to the gap in recognizing the backstages in communication ecology.

Salon communication

We define salon communication as the semipublic and access-restricted space between the mere private spheres as described above and the visible public spheres, thus alluding

to the sidestages of social communication. In salons, communication is already linked to regulated organization and role allocation and thus serves to illustrate the transition from pre-civil private communication to active civil society action. The simple encounters of the lifeworld today include far more salons than was the case with Habermas's (1962/1992) bourgeois public sphere. Clubs, social movements, religious communities, especially in their local manifestations, assemblies, and fan communities represent multi-layered theme-centered social institutions in which non-mediated communication rituals structure social order. Here, we can once again focus on the function of dialogical opinion forming, social knowledge production, and innovation.

As early as 1980, the MacBride Report emphasized the importance of interpersonal communication over mass media in the context of democratization tendencies worldwide, as it has a special function for the exchange of information and coordination in communities (MacBride Commission, 2004, especially part II; Rawan, 2001). In this respect, the argument has not lost much of its relevance when one considers the numerous worldwide contexts in which media communication remains unfree. It can be assumed that under these conditions, social negotiation spaces either adapt to systemic pressure or retreat into salons in which understanding-oriented communication is possible without the interference of power structures.

It is, then, worth looking at opinion leader research, which is part of a certain communication ecology tradition, as it examines the reproduction/innovation patterns of social interaction. In the evaluation of social issues, local opinion leaders also have important functions beyond media communication. Especially in supposedly traditional societies, opinion leaders have been studied, for example, in Iran, Pakistan, or Afghanistan, where they are crucial for the dissemination of information (Rawan, 2001, 2002). In the Islamic world, the importance of mosques and markets has been well documented, as they play an important role in the oral transmission of information. Especially before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, these encounters provided a non-mediated communication system that was crucial for the mobilization of people and the black market of information and propaganda (Rawan, 2001; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1990). The role of traditional opinion leaders also reemerged recently, not least in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and it has been studied in various contexts such as Indonesia or Nigeria (e.g., Agwu et al., 2020; Limilia et al., 2022).

We must assume that even in seemingly modern industrial societies, the conversations about and orientation toward opinion leaders still play an important role. Here, too, new communities have hierarchical communication rituals. From sports clubs to religious communities, from cultural projects to cafés—all these institutions of a broader cultural public sphere offer non-mediated arenas in which social developments of all kinds can be negotiated.

Even now, we find a research impulse in revolutionary contexts that debates the role of the media. This could be observed in the Arab Spring, in protests in Turkey, and also in right-wing populist movements, whose potential for manipulation through social media is often the focus of debate. However, again, it is notable that the question is rarely asked as to whether the revolutions were perhaps heard in the café conversations long beforehand. In any case, the marginalized theory of social change emphasizes that change is a continuum rather than a crisis phenomenon (Tjaden, 1972, pp. 122–124). There are many

indications of the non-simultaneity of media and social discourses that can be helpful in explaining scenarios of social change. If mass media, as well as social media, are subject to disruptions, the question must be asked as to how this is reacted to in non-mediated communication contexts.

Street communication

While we have outlined the communication logics of social groups and communities in their sidestages and backstages in previous observations, the consideration of street communication now focuses less on concrete human relationships and more on the public space of everyday life. Here, people have the opportunity to observe society and interact with "strangers," which is, in line with Habermas (1995), an important communicative foundation for the development of knowledge about society, the coordination of actions in everyday life, and social cohesion.

In this respect, the use and interaction of public spaces can teach us much about the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Neighborhood networks develop their communal cohesion in the space between the aforementioned street and the salons, for which they need common communication rituals and a continuous exchange. Studies have discussed the generation-specific exclusion of young people from public spaces, although for this group, direct communication with strangers and "loitering" are important experiences for learning sociality (Lieberg, 1995). However, it is not only for young people but also for all groups in society that places where people come together become relevant; the example of the information function of markets has already been mentioned.

In addition to everyday unplanned encounters, there is also organized, non-mediated communication on the street, for example, at protests. Interactive communication can even be demonstrated in international protest movements by so-called "movement brokers," who bring the movement together and keep it together (Hafez & Grüne, 2022, pp. 139–144). In local contexts, a variety of communication modes are used, ranging from the choreography of people, tents, and barriers to symbolic articulations that can be expressed in poetry, disguises, body painting, and music. In this respect, it is not enough to discuss mediated networks of protests, as social forms of protest are also connected in other ways, and their performative aesthetics have a formative effect in public space. Pnina Werbner et al. (2014) expressed this concisely: "It is not simply that social networks have spread transnationally even as they 'aggregated' massive numbers of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical national spaces, using modern means of communication; it is that non-verbal images, music, and bodily gestures too have traveled across borders and been incorporated into local vernaculars" (p. 14).

Marjorie Mayo (2005) also drew attention to the importance of local and international encounters between members of different social movements, not with reference to the aesthetic forms of articulation but to the people-to-people exchange of social movements. Using the example of meetings of NGO participants in India, South Africa, and the USA, she argued that the direct exchange of experiences is an important key to new knowledge as well as the emancipative development of a local expert identity among the participants. This confirms the understanding and knowledge promoting character of non-mediated communication in both international and local contact between social movements.

Even if we count artistic forms of articulation such as street art, theater performances, or ritual performances as media communication in a broader media-ecological sense, their mode of communication comes closer to the characteristics of non-mediated communication: here, orality, and direct physical contact are foregrounded. These artistic forms of expressing opinions are only loosely subject to the principles of media discourse production. In this respect, these alternative media conversations also provide a basis for social communication. The existence of street art and graffiti, for example, can be a further indicator of social resistance or a politicized culture. In their everyday presence, it is precisely not a direct utilization in social dynamics that unfolds but possibly an emotional marginal commentary or symbolic reminder. In sum, there is communication whose social benefit sometimes only becomes apparent in retrospect, which can remain hidden. However, if the multiple transformations in a polycentric world need to be analyzed from a communication perspective, we should no longer rely on mediated dynamics alone.

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