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Both sides of the story

Communication ethics in mediatized worlds

Abstract: Current transformations in the media landscape are challenging contemporary communication and media ethics in at least two ways: on the one hand, the digitization of the media creates new ethical problems that stimulate calls for a re-definition of the norms and values of public communication; on the other hand, new instruments of web-based media observation introduce new possibilities for media (self-)regulation and accountability, thus complementing the initiatives of traditional institutions like press councils. The essay retraces those conflicting developments by reference to two comparative studies, representing the diverging traditions of conventional communication ethics and media accountability research. By trying to bridge the conceptual gap between them, it develops new perspectives for ethical reflection in the mediatized worlds of the digital age.

Keywords: communication ethics, media ethics, media self-regulation, media accountability, journalism, online media, digitization, mediatization

Both sides of the story

Communication ethics in mediatized worlds

I.

In a world which is mediatized to the core, communication ethics take over a key function in the process of evaluating and assessing human behavior: when everyday life is increasingly influenced by various forms of media communication (Deuze, 2012), ethical reflection is hardly possible without taking into consideration the insights of contemporary communication ethics (Ess, 2011). However, the ongoing media transformation also puts many basic ethical concepts to the test. While, up till today, large parts of the Internet-related scientific literature have been focusing on the specific potentials of web-based communication – such as its possibilities to pave the way for new forms of participation (Singer, 2011), more transparency (Eide, 2014), and a general democratization of professional journalism (Steensen, 2011) – more and more counter-examples are suggesting that the promising innovations of digitization are reversed all too frequently. These examples include recurring problems with the quality of digital contents (racism, pornography, violence etc.), copyright laws and their compensation, issues of data security and data privacy, the general data explosion and the challenges of information overload, as well as the uneven distribution of Internet access (Quinn, 2014).

This contradiction provokes numerous questions: Do the ethical problems of online communication outweigh its undisputed potentials? How do problems and potentials relate to each other? What does this mean for the future of communication ethics? And what are possible consequences for the (self-)regulation of digital media? Questions like these are currently being discussed in the light of different analytical concepts, among which the perspectives of

traditional communication and media ethics and the recent research about media accountability and media governance stand out.

Traditional communication and media ethics are usually understood as a sub-discipline of practical philosophy (Rath, 2003). Similar to other sub-disciplines such as political ethics, business ethics, ethics of medicine, or ethics of technology, they focus on human action as their object of analysis, striving to reflect and legitimize universal rules of good and responsible behavior in their specific area of application. In the case of communication and media ethics, this normative approach paves the way for a definition of ideal values like truth, freedom, solidarity as well as order and cohesion, which are regarded as prerequisites for democratic media to fulfill their social function (McQuail, 2013, pp. 54ff). In the Western world, the development of ethical reflection about the media has been strongly influenced by the tradition of (mostly US-based) journalism education that narrowly construed media ethics as individual ethics of professional journalistic actors (Christians, 2000). However, broader concepts of contemporary communication and media ethics also relate to other actor groups besides the producers, e.g. recipients or communities (Ward & Wasserman, 2010), which become ever more important in the mediatized realities of today.

Unlike conventional media and communication ethics, research about media accountability and media governance turns the spotlight from the ideal to the practical level, thus adding an applied perspective to the tradition of philosophical reasoning: by investigating the performance of the different instruments and institutions of media (self-)regulation (e.g., press councils, ombudsperson, media journalism, but also media law etc.), it evaluates if and how the ideals of responsible media communication are realized under the conditions of everyday life (Puppis, 2007). The inevitable conflicts between ideal norms and media practice have been documented and discussed in a large scope of studies (for an overview see [anonymized]). Their practical relevance has been exemplified in the recurring attempts by scholars in this field to act as consultants both for the media industry and media politics.

However, both traditional communication ethics and research about media accountability and media governance seem to suffer from a deficit of empirical studies, as links and antagonisms between the two strands of research are yet to be illuminated and systematized. Compared to other research branches, journalism studies in particular still lack a coherent and integrated approach between normative and empirical ethics. This has impeded their connectivity to the mainstream of communication studies so far..

Other research fields such as management, economics or medicine have already re-thought the dichotomy between research and applied ethics. Eisenbeiss (2012, pp. 791; see also Weaver and Klebe Trevino 1994 or Donaldson and Dunfee 1994) for instance analyzed business ethics with regard to leadership, by addressing “recent calls for more collaboration between normative and empirical-descriptive inquiry of ethical phenomena by developing an interdisciplinary integrative approach to ethical leadership”. She concluded that an integrative approach, which combines normative and empirical ethical considerations, besides offering new insights with regard to the significance of *responsibility* for ethical leadership, represents a starting point for the leadership education in terms of how to deal with ethical dilemmas. Similar efforts can also be observed in bioethics, where innovative research methodologies are used to shed light on new ethical issues, which, in turn, leads to a greater understanding of ethics *in practice* (Frith 2012, p. 205ff; see also Borry, Schotsmans and Dierickx 2005). The so-called “empirical turn” from purely normative ethics to one that includes empirical approaches has occurred in medicine as well, as Salloch, Schildmann and Vollmann (2012) have demonstrated.

This “empirical turn” in ethics, albeit partial implementations in the wider field of communications research such as cultural or technological studies (reference) have happened, has not yet occurred in the specific area of journalism studies. Even if some media researchers such as Nick Couldry support a neo-Aristotelian approach to media ethics, which is “guided by the eminently practical insight that right behavior cannot be identified in advance, abstracted

from the often competing requirements of specific contexts” (Couldry 2012, p. 189; see also Couldry 2013), the empirical exploration remains limited.

The following sections of this essay are supposed to clarify these differences between normative and empirical based ethics as well as the interdependencies between the two with regard to journalism. By searching for a superordinate concept that can help to connect the diverging research traditions, they take the aim of “getting the discipline in communication with itself” literally, hoping that it may be useful to demonstrate the relevance of normative approaches to communication and the media. The starting point for the line of argument is constituted by two comparative studies, which were conducted by the authors and included qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey among media practitioners in twelve European countries as well as a content analysis of relevant codes of ethics. The implications from these studies are sure to broaden the comprehension of ethical reflection in communication and media research – which is more important than ever in the network societies of the digital age.

II.

Digitization has not only had a huge impact on the journalistic practice, it was a fundamental cultural transformation affecting the media industry (Boczkowski, 2005, p. 187). Due to the process of convergence that brought up new types of multi-, cross- or even transmedia storytelling, journalists had to adapt to the new characteristics of the Web and develop new skills and procedures (Pavlik, 2001). However, these transformations were not limited to the “techniques” related to everyday editorial practice. They asked for a new journalistic mind-set, as central qualities of journalists’ role-conception in society are challenged on the grounds of new concepts such as networked journalism, a fusion between traditional news journalism and different forms of participation by the audience (Beckett, 2010, p. 1). These changes lead to new ethical challenges that transcend those that strictly refer to the journalistic practice and

can be best described by what Stephen J. A. Ward calls the *ethics of how to use new media* (2014, p. 51).

Ethical principles are built to last and journalism is no exception to this rule. Such principles change slowly and only upon extensive empirical evidence, which leads, as Friend and Singer (2007) state, to an inherent conservatism. This might be helpful in the everyday practice of the journalistic profession, as these guiding principles set a framework of rules, but they can become an issue if the whole system is confronted with structural changes such as the impact of new and social media on journalism. Moreover, professional journalists are no longer the sole authority to define good practice, which allowed them to largely ignore calls for greater responsibility and accountability (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007, p. 274). As virtually everyone can become an information provider – being at the same time also a source or part of the public – journalists cannot ask anymore to be regarded as the only stronghold of credibility and trust when it comes to the news production.

Overall, the digital age has radically changed the journalistic practice and profession, and the ethical principles are essentially coupled to the evolving dynamics within the newsrooms as well as the tools and technologies used in the news production (Boczkowski, 2005, p. xxiv), confronting news organizations with new ethical problems, which have been unknown – and subsequently ignored – in analog newsrooms. Hence, the medium – and the technology related to it – matters, because it changes the way journalists interact and deal with the publics (Singer, 2010a, p. 118). This means that some principles will remain unaltered, others have to be adapted and some of the ethical decision-making in journalism has to be developed from scratch. New principles have to take into account that different actors such as the public now cover an increasingly significant role, as audience interaction becomes paramount in a network society.

A critical scrutiny of the performance of traditional institutions of media self-regulation such as press councils shows that they have increasingly been forced to deal with complaints about

web issues in recent years. In order to analyze specifically how the Web and new media technologies such as linking and online comments but also social media like Facebook and Twitter are affecting professional journalistic norms, the authors carried out a content analysis of journalistic codes and guidelines in twelve countries in Eastern and Western Europe (Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom). The aim of the project was to investigate in how far the ethical problems of digital journalism are really accounted for and whether press and media councils are in the position to act as competent judges responsible for ethical concerns in a digital media world.

The analysis was systematized along the lines of two major ethical dimensions, providing a coordinate system for contemporary communication ethics that can also structure future analyses: first, we looked at the shift from gatekeeper ethics to relationship ethics (Singer, 2010a): . *Gatekeeper ethics* largely focuses on the journalists' role to decide what is going to be published or not. In this case, professional norms such as ethical principles serve as a specific way to both articulate and safeguard this gatekeeper role. Ethical principles, in this respect, become mainly an instrument to cultivate an essential role in society – one of fundamental importance to democracy, allowing citizens to be self-governing thanks to their information: “In short, the underlying rationale for the ethics of the journalist in a traditional media universe both stems from and depends upon this traditional role and the traditional view of that journalist as central to the flow of information” (Singer 2010a, p. 119).

On the other hand, as the Internet changes the way journalists are perceived (more as individuals) and interact with their publics as well as with one another, *relationship ethics* has all sorts of implications due to its emphasis on connections to colleagues, communities and publics. Being part of a network, the journalist has to develop his reputation as a trustful information provider first because it allows the publics to participate far more actively in a collaborative journalistic production process (Beckett 2010, p. 1). Particularly if you are engaging

in interactions – more importantly also for collaborations – building trust is essential: “The answer lies in the function of the networked professional journalist to act as a filter and facilitator and the potential power of the citizen to hold them to account. [...] In the end trust is secured by connectivity. Interactivity leads to accountability through a new conceptualization of trust based on the networked journalist as a reliable hub of connectivity” (Beckett 2010, p. 15). . Both journalists working in a traditional news environment and those working in a network rely on trust. However, in the case of traditional news organizations, trust is largely based on the reputation the media outlet gained over decades – and the ethical principles support this performance. “Trust us because we know what we do”, according to Singer (2010a), is a lot to ask, perhaps even too much if we take into account the dwindling trust in the media. A networked media ecosystem, on the other hand, requests journalists – be they bloggers or reporters working in established news firms - to establish a new connection with their publics in order to build trust, which is, “generally, the ethical thing to do in a relationship” (ibid., p. 119). The same goes for the second differentiation between monomedia and multimedia ethics that have distinctive implications for journalists in terms of ethics for news gathering, production, content and the relation with the public (Pavlik, 2001, pp. 82ff; Ess, 2014).

The study showed that most of the prevalent journalistic codes of ethics in Europe have not yet reached the Internet era. In the majority of cases, they do not – or only to a limited extent – contain any references to ethical problems that result from the distinct features of online communication.¹ Exeptions can be found in the guidelines by the Dutch *Raad voor de Journalistiek* (2010) or the Finnish *Julkisen Sanan Neuvosto*, which include specific rules relating

¹ E.g. the code of ethics (“Ehrenkodex”) of the Austrian Press Council contains no references to the Internet at all (http://www.presserat.at/show_content.php?hid=2). In Switzerland, the Directives related to the Declaration of the Duties and Rights of a Journalist contain some rules with regard to online comments and the right to be forgotten (<http://bit.ly/10QxQj6>), while the German Press council has just recently updated its code of ethics (“Pressekodex”) with regard to user-generated-content (<http://bit.ly/1cA7PXP>). In Italy, with the exception of the Charter of Treviso (<http://www.odg.it/content/minori>), where the protection of minors is regulated, the Ordine dei Giornalisti does not have any directives for ethical issues in the case of digital journalism. However, this is no European phenomenon: the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists in the U.S. makes no references to digital journalism either (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>).

to the editorial handling of web archives, of corrections in online media or to the moderation of discussion forums on the Internet. Particularly the Finnish Council for Mass Media created a specific Annex to its Guidelines for journalists, which concerns materials generated by the public on a website (2014). The result demonstrates that communication ethics in professional media has not yet reached – with some exceptions – the digital era.

On the other hand, problem-centered interviews with international experts from the fields of journalism, social media and media self-regulation enabled us to verify that similar amendments of ethical codes are actually being discussed or prepared in various European countries – even though not in all of the possible areas of conflict. While some press councils like the Swiss or German one still concentrate their deliberation on areas such as online comments, sourcing and transparency, other institutions of media self-regulation like the Dutch or the Finnish press council are well beyond tackling complex issues such as social media and audience participation.² However, the issue of journalism ethics cannot be assigned to institutions of self-regulation such as press councils only. If news organization want to invest in quality management, they have to establish forums for debates as well. Not only audience members, but also professional journalists wear many hats, as they can be editors, bloggers, citizens commenting on social media, media critics etc. Such conflicts can become even worse if entrepreneurial journalists are launching start-ups, where there might be additional clashes between commercial and editorial interests. These overlapping roles demand for clear guidelines. However, codifying ethical principles and transform them in abstract guidelines may be useful for the purpose of general considerations. The more specific the guidelines, the less context sensitive they can be, which makes them hard to apply in specific circumstances. In a networked journalistic ecosystem, besides clear guidelines, in which news organizations define general conditions of how they react to ethical issues, it is necessary that media organiza-

² Particularly the Finnish Annex that deals with material generated by the public on a media website makes includes a statement about the interactivity, since “the public must be given the opportunity to inform editorial offices of inappropriate content in such a way that the informant receives due confirmation” (Julkisen Sanan Neuvosto 2014).

tions foster their practices by which journalists connect with their publics. Such forms of participation – and interaction – would not only embrace the wider notion of relationship ethics, allowing citizens or the civil society to hold the news media to account. An enhanced participation would also allow news outlets to get an immediate feedback on their performance and to know whether they are “on the right track to satisfy the needs of their most important stakeholders, namely the public who consumes their products” (Meier 2011, p. 165).

III.

Whereas traditional communication and media ethics focuses on the normative level of how media actors *should* behave, research on media accountability and media governance is related to the practical level. It explores what impact different institutions and practices of media (self-)regulation such as media law, ombudspersons or media journalism etc. have on the everyday routines of the journalistic production process and how media organizations can be held to account for the quality of their media performances (de Haan & Bardoel, 2011, p. 232).

Claude-Jean Bertrand, who carried out one of the first comparative studies on media accountability, defined the concept as “any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public” (2000, 108). It can be noted that the concept of media accountability transcends the previously dominant focus on the media’s general responsibility towards society. Instead, it concentrates on the media’s obligations towards their stakeholders and, specifically, their publics. According to Hodges (1986, cit. in McQuail, 2010) the difference between responsibility and accountability is simple: “while responsibility has to with proper conduct, accountability with compelling it” (for an overview of definitions see [*anonymized*]).

Media governance on the other hand is similar to the concept of media accountability, but encompasses a stronger focus on governmental action – although it is often described as

“government without politics” or “governing beyond government” (de Haan & Bardoel, 2011). Unlike strict media regulation, media governance involves a networked form of coordination that expresses the intention of a constrained role of the state in the field of media policy, particularly with regard to press freedom, journalistic independence and actors of the private market (Puppis, 2007; Donges, 2007).

Them again, media accountability is not a concept based on rigid structures. It must be seen as a process of different but interrelated practices in a sequence that range from journalism education to quality management systems during the production process until specific practices of interaction with the audience after the publication of the news.

Lately, the closer relationship with the public has become one of the most important aspects of media accountability, given that the Internet has increased the opportunities for the public to get in touch with news organizations and journalists. What is generally called *responsiveness* denotes the idea of receiving feedback from users that expect news organizations to reacting to their concerns and wishes in reference to the media’s performance (Domingo & Heikkilä, 2012; Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004). The interactivity and immediacy of the Web 2.0 has even further expanded the opportunities for members of the audience to critically observe and criticize media content, for instance through blogs or, generally, citizen journalism. This can be particularly important in media systems operating under a tight political control. Furthermore, the online realm potentially allows users also to take part in the actual news production by means of user-generated content, allowing for new and innovative practices of editorial co-production such as participatory journalism.

While the online realm enhances the scope of media critique, providing users with a means to reinforce journalistic norms (Fengler, 2008), it also increases the number of stakeholders the media have to deal with in terms of media accountability, generating a complex framework of media accountability practices offline and online. This is of vital importance, as traditional

institutions of media accountability such as press councils or ombudsmen suffer from distrust and skepticism with regard to their efficiency.

This is also confirmed by the second study called “Media accountability and transparency in Europe” carried out by the authors ([*anonymized*]).³ The quantitative survey of more than 1,800 journalists in twelve European and two Arab countries demonstrated that in the eyes of professional communicators, traditional institutions of media self-regulation (such as press councils, ombudspersons, or media journalism) regularly fail when it comes to addressing the pitfalls of digital communication ethics.

At the same time, large numbers of innovative instruments of media accountability (e.g., media watchblogs, cyber-ombudsmen, or media criticism on social networks like Facebook or Twitter) are currently emerging online all around the globe. By hinting at and discussing minor and major journalistic flaws in public, these instruments help create a novel kind of *participatory media regulation* which every media user can contribute to and which seems to be all the more attentive to the specific features of digital communication. The survey also showed that the participatory potential of online communication offers multifaceted new chances for quality management within the newsrooms. Digital communication must not only be seen as a source for new ethical problems, but also as a viable strategy to correct them – but only if media managers are prone to implement such measures. Frequently there is still a gap between the positive assessment of such practices, and the implementation of accountability practices within the newsrooms and it thus seems that journalists do not practice what they preach ([*anonymized*]).

As effective the concept of participatory media regulation might be, it is not free of controversies. The rise of the Web 2.0 has not only given rise to an augmented inter-activity between journalists and users, it has also brought along new forms of incivility in communication such as threats, name-calling, hate speech (see Papacharissi 2004) or trolling (Cho &

³ Further information about this study can also be found on the project website ([*anonymized*]).

Acquisti 2013; Steele 2013; Turner 2010). Incivility and trolling are widespread phenomena on the Internet and are not limited to websites of media outlets, but they occur wherever users interact and exchange their views. Even if trolling may always exist up until a certain degree, news organizations have different tools at hand to limit the dysfunctional impact of digital misbehavior: gamification, moderation or removing the anonymity of the posters can both limit the impact of trolls and encourage constructive postings (Binns 2012, p. 559). But even if these tools bring more civility to the interactions between journalists and users, they are by no means cure-alls. Such walled gardens may bring “more civil, cohesive, and diverse discourse; yet, on the other hand, the lingering danger of designing new systems that perpetuate old problems such as fragmentation, filter bubbles and homogenization” (Zamith & Lewis 2014, p. 569ff).

Nevertheless, for all the problematic side-effects that an increased digital interactivity entails, hindering participation means precluding accountability and responsiveness and shutting out an increasingly assertive public (see de Haan & Bardoel 2012). The potentials of the Web in terms of being accountable to the public are by no means fully exploited by news organizations (*[anonymized]*). But the online space is becoming increasingly important particularly because of its immediacy, versatility and capacity to reach a lot of users. Under these circumstances it is very likely that news organizations will have to cope with increasing pressure from the audience in terms of being held to account for their performances.

IV.

The empirical studies presented in this essay illustrate two conflicting developments of media and communication ethics in the mediatized worlds of the digital age:

On the one hand, they indicate that the digitization of the media creates new ethical problems that are a direct result of the hypertextuality, multimediality, and the increased interactivity of

the Internet. Various examples can be found in the daily workflow of professional journalistic newsrooms which still have to find new quality standards for verifying online sources, providing adequate hyperlinks in their coverage, handling user comments, or integrating other user-generated contents such as mobile photos and videos – to name just a few of the fields of action that are currently being discussed. Although the innovations of the digital age have stimulated calls for a re-definition of the norms and values of public communication, there still is considerable uncertainty about what constitutes good and responsible online journalism – or which traditional norms may remain unaltered. Our analysis demonstrates that – despite a few exemptions – most of the contemporary codes of ethics throughout Europe have not yet been adapted to the realities of a digital media world, hence offering hardly any assistance when it comes to assessing the potentials and perils of online communication. By uncovering gaps in the evaluated codes, our research may also serve as a practically relevant collection of recommendations to suggest amendments to the current codes and guidelines – from which not only journalists but, by and large, also the audience will benefit.

On the other hand, our empirical studies also gather new impulses for the practice of media (self-)regulation and accountability. Especially our comparative journalists survey clearly demonstrates that the digitization of communication must not only be regarded as a danger for ethically justified behavior in journalism and the media; at the same time, it can also be a motor for promising innovations in this field. In recent years, in fact, there has been a stunning growth of new instruments of web-based media observation (such as media watchblogs, cyber-ombudsmen, or media criticism on platforms like Facebook and Twitter), which are not only supported by the media industry, but also integrate the voice of the audience. This new type of participatory media regulation seems to be particularly beneficial in the media landscape of today, since many of the traditional institutions of media self-regulation are a matter of growing dispute within in the profession as they are criticized for being ineffective and outdated. In contrast, as our survey suggests, participatory media accountability instru-

ments can unfold a noteworthy sanction potential when they use the possibilities of attention management offered by the Web – particularly in those journalism cultures without a long tradition of media professionalism and self-regulation. Therefore, they constitute a valuable complement to the initiatives of traditional institutions like press councils, whose approach to journalistic quality management they transform and extend, thus adapting it to the requirements of the digital age.

By addressing both sides of the story, we intend to develop a new notion of digital media and communication ethics, which is no longer limited to traditional concepts of professional norms and (self-)regulation, but is apt to tackle and explain the implications of digital and convergent communication. On the grounds of the systematic disruption of journalism and the enormous changes in the media (eco-)system caused by the digitization of communication, the elaboration of a new digital media ethics (Ess, 2014) becomes an inevitable necessity in a globalized and increasingly interconnected world.

However, the strands of research which are relevant for such an objective seem to have failed to engage in a mutual discourse up till today. Indeed, both traditional communication ethics and research on media accountability and media governance focus on the same objects of analysis, sometimes even posing similar research questions. However, most of the studies in one field or the other have successfully been ignoring the findings and traditions of the respective opponents for a long time, although reciprocal references would be all the more reasonable, since the practical insights of media accountability research are nothing but a natural follow-up to the philosophical arguments of traditional communication ethics. By interlinking both disciplines, they would be able to clarify their theoretical claims and their practical utility, which are often overlooked in the discussions about the current transformations of the media. Other than their lack of mutual integration, the reputation of communication ethics and media accountability within the larger field of communication studies seems to suffer from their ambivalent relationship to empirical research as well as the absence of a larger

theoretical concept to explain their role in the mediatized worlds of today. This is a deplorable condition, since a normative approach becomes ever more important at present, in order to make sense of the massive reconfigurations of the global media landscape that are currently taking place.

Communications ethics' hostility towards empiricism, of course, is a direct result of its philosophical roots. Traditionally, ethics is supposed to evaluate decisions about the 'ought' of a certain action, which is usually done on the basis of logic thinking, in such a way as to clarify which preferences can be normatively legitimized. Under ordinary circumstances, there is no need for empirical proof in this context. Quite the contrary, the attempt to deduce normative principles from empirical evidence has already been criticized in David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume, 1738/2005), and George Edward Moore described such an attempt to move from 'is' to 'ought' as a "naturalistic fallacy" (Moore, 1903/2002). From the perspective of communication and media ethics, this suggests that a legitimization of professional journalistic norms must not be based on the insights of empirical media research, but rather on plausibility and reason.

Following Matthias Rath (2014, pp. 37ff), however, we contend that contemporary communication and media ethics must not dispense with empirical research either. In fact, communication ethics needs empirical data as touchstone, in order to test the practicability of its normative parameters in the real world. For example, if communication ethics is expected to help develop rules and guidelines for digital journalism, it needs reliable information about this field of action and its protagonists, in order to be relevant for them and adequate to reality – even more so if this field of action is in a state of change like the media landscape of today. Such an understanding of communication ethics, of course, has methodological consequences: scholars in this area of research must not solely rely on philosophical reasoning any longer, but have to develop an appropriate interest in and knowledge of empirical communication and media studies, too. Accordingly, contemporary communication and media ethics

turns into an integrative discipline which combines its philosophical foundations with the practical orientation of empirical media research, thus also bridging the gap between traditional communication ethics and applied research on media accountability and media governance.

In order to improve its connectivity, however, this new approach to communication and media ethics also needs a theoretical framework to clarify its place within the broader system of communication studies. One of the most promising candidates for such a theory is offered by the concept of mediatization, as specified by Friedrich Krotz (2007) and others, which reconstructs the dynamics of change in culture and society and the historically varying influences of (new) media on them. From the perspective of communication and media ethics, which is struggling most vehemently right now to cope with the current transformations of the media, mediatization theory seems to be a valuable vehicle which can help to differentiate the determining factors of this process of change, thus also outlining the key fields of discourse of a future digital media ethics. Unfortunately, the normative dimensions of the mediatization approach have not yet been probed into with due diligence – and many of the pressing questions with regard to the relationship between communication ethics and mediatization theory are still unanswered: What are the most problematic forms of mediatized communicative actions, communication technologies and communication structures from a moral point of view? How can we, for example, discuss responsibility for and resistance against these forms of mediatization? Which normative principles can be made plausible in this context? Evidently, the scholarly debate about communication ethics in the mediatized worlds of the digital age has only just begun – and, considering the difficulties to assess the future direction of the ongoing media transformation, it is high time to move this debate into the center of our discipline.

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