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Editorial

## The Politics of Privacy—A Useful Tautology

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### Abstract

While communication and media studies tend to define privacy with reference to data security, current processes of datafication and commodification substantially transform ways of how people act in increasingly dense communicative networks. This begs for advancing research on the flow of individual and organizational information considering its relational, contextual and, in consequence, political dimensions. Privacy, understood as the control over the flow of individual or group information in relation to communicative actions of others, frames the articles assembled in this thematic issue. These contributions focus on theoretical challenges of contemporary communication and media privacy research as well as on structural privacy conditions and people's mundane communicative practices underlining inherent political aspect. They highlight how particular acts of doing privacy are grounded in citizen agency realized in datafied environments. Overall, this collection of articles unfolds the concept of 'Politics of Privacy' in diverse ways, contributing to an emerging body of communication and media research.

### Keywords

agency; datafication; data security; media practices; politics; privacy

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "The Politics of Privacy: Communication and Media Perspectives in Privacy Research" edited by Johanna E. Möller (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany), Jakub Nowak (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland), Sigrid Kannengießer (University of Bremen, Germany) and Judith E. Möller (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands).

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In datafied societies privacy practices are under pressure. Defining datafication as a meta process which "render[s] into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before" (Cukier & Mayer-Schoenberger, 2013, p. 29), and as a "means to *access*, *understand* and *monitor* people's behavior" (van Dijck, 2014, p. 189), we perceive changes and challenges with respect to the politics of privacy—changes and challenges which are intertwined. Private data is col-

lected, archived and used for analytical and strategic means in often opaque ways. From a critical point of view, datafied communication is based on a political-economic formation that "relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond" (Dean, 2005, p. 53), while fighting for dominance over access to useful data. At the level of agents or citizens this implies practical challenges, such as finding new ways to deal with public visibility and par-

ticipation (Birchall, 2016) or developing the ability to reflect on data flows (Kannengießer, 2019).

Considering these changes and challenges, it is worth highlighting that privacy is distinct from data security. Both embrace practices aimed at data protection, but data security denotes the safeguarding of private information from unwanted interference by agents, technologies or legislation. This way, data or information would remain secret unless revealed on purpose by data owners and agents in control of these closed doors. The concept of privacy, in contrast, acknowledges that datafied communication is necessarily interrelated and interconnected (boyd, 2012). Privacy refers to the demarcation of communication flow boundaries. Privacy is embedded in society and neatly interwoven with the everyday communicative action of social and political actors. While data security requires communication and media literacy or adequate data policies, privacy has more profound political implications since, for instance, communication infrastructures determine privacy conditions and, vice versa, so that mundane communicative action can become a form of politics by consumption (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005).

As such we suggest understanding privacy as the control over the flow of individual or organizational information in relation to the action of others. These relations are shaped by the media environment, information infrastructure, and societal or cultural rules in which they are formed. Understanding privacy as ‘control over’ is an ideal. Absolute control is not possible, which means in practice that privacy is understood as the *attempt* to exercise control over the flow of individual or organizational information. To pursue privacy is to seek to realize this control in relation to others—as privacy is relational, collective, context-related and, as a result, constantly evolving (Möller & Nowak, 2018). Speaking of the politics of privacy, thus, is a tautology that, yet, embraces the attempts assembled in this thematic issue to explore these political dimensions.

Communication and media studies, so far, tend to define privacy in close relation to data security. The private is conceptualized as the opposite to the public, for instance, a protected space where opinions are formed (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010). This is equally true of more dynamic cultural studies approaches (Livingstone, 2015). Data security is also instructive for academic work in the realm of media psychology where scholars focus on privacy literacy and related strategies (Masur, 2018; Trepte, Scharkow, & Dienlin, 2020). Researchers in this field point to the paradoxical relation between knowledge about privacy risks and actual data protection practices. For a couple of years now, nevertheless, we have seen a new development. Communication and media researchers have started to re-engage with privacy as a *societal* concept (Matzner & Ochs, 2019; Möller & Nowak, 2018). Understanding privacy as embedded in communicative infrastructures broadens perspectives held by communication and media scholars. Recent studies show

that privacy embraces manifold online and offline, public and hidden social practices during which actors create processes or entities that are closed to others.

The articles assembled in this thematic issue contribute to the reinvigorating communication and media privacy research and prepare the ground for further research on the often surprising and far-reaching political and societal implications of privacy. The contribution of media psychologist Philipp K. Masur (2020), for instance, illustrates this shift in perspective. Offering a holistic model of critical online privacy literacy, he critically addresses notions of privacy as freedom from intrusion. Academic and data artist Luke Munn (2020) queries the widely shared assumption that decentralized data collection is privacy friendly by nature and offers more control to individuals. Instead, edge computing apparently circumvents data protection and continues centralized data collection. Grażyna Stachyra (2020), to mention a final example, carefully carves out the political nature of contemporary radio practices. While radio has a history of and reputation for safeguarding individual data, in its current converged form, it may affect the privacies of unintended participants in radio shows around the globe.

Privacy is an interdisciplinary field of research by default. Historians (Igo, 2018), sociologists (Lyon, 2018) or information scientists (Nissenbaum, 2010), just to name some disciplines, have made substantial contributions to advancing understandings of its political nature. But what can communication and media scholars contribute to this? Communication and media researchers observe people’s mundane communicative action. They understand how deeply this action is interwoven with its structured surroundings. While datafication and commodification substantially transform political, economic and societal environments (Hintz, Dencik, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017; Lyon, 2018), researchers explore how individuals accompany and co-carry these processes through their interrelated communicative networks. Also, communication and media scientists benefit from “polymedia” perspectives (Madianou & Miller, 2012), whereby they embrace analyses of communicative action across media repertoires and non-mediated communication. This helps to avoid techno-centric perspectives that easily emerge in privacy research. Moreover, communication and media scholars stress critical reflection and agency, both incremental drivers for people’s conceptions of privacy. Means and perspectives in the field are designed to make it possible to grasp these conceptions’ contextual roots in culture or patterns of power. Privacy has become the very center of what it means to be a citizen nowadays, affecting how people act in private and in public, and how they socialize. Therefore, privacy has a deep political meaning that leads authors in articles assembled in this thematic issue to reflect on the theoretical quality of the ‘Politics of Privacy.’

Conceptualizing privacy and its political dimensions calls for theoretical work. Johanna E. Möller and Leyla Dogruel (2020) offer a theoretical framework to map fur-

ther empirical work in the field. These authors closely review the field of media privacy research focusing on its political dimension and on this basis leverage Barry's (2002) differentiation between politics and the political. The concepts of the political and politics lead them to differentiate between individual and structural dimensions of privacy and develop a matrix through which political implications of media related privacy can be investigated. Within this matrix they distinguish between privacy as: 1) emerging rules; 2) discourses; 3) programmed privacy; and 4) media practices. Acknowledging these dimensions, media and communication scholars can position themselves in the complex research field of privacy while at the same time theorizing and analyzing the politics of privacy.

Another article in the issue that critically approaches the prevailing discursive constructions in contemporary debate on privacy and surveillance is Heikki Heikkilä's (2020) contribution. The author questions the dominant discursive dialectic opposition of surveillance and privacy ('moral coupling'), in which both phenomena are depicted as mutually oriented contradictions with opposing normative evaluations—surveillance being wrong and privacy being good. This simplistic discursive position, Heikkilä argues, does not respond to how privacy is approached and realized nowadays, as it overlooks the ambiguities of how people construct their online privacies and underlying definitions of both privacy and its intrusions. Therefore, more nuanced and context-related notions should be elaborated and pursued, also taking under consideration very personal experiences and life situations of individuals. Heikkilä proposes a framework for such empirical privacy studies that acknowledges these ambiguities, and, thus, has the potential to go beyond discursive moral coupling of privacy and surveillance.

In his theoretical contribution, Philipp K. Masur (2020) challenges the dominant paradigm of privacy protection by proposing a holistic model of critical online privacy literacy. Masur grounds his argument in critiquing the negative perspective of privacy, and presents a model of online privacy literacy that comprises privacy knowledge, privacy-related reflection abilities, privacy and data protection skills, and critical privacy literacy. This combination of knowledge, technical abilities, and the conscious recognition of sociopolitical relations shaping technological environments, the author argues, enables individuals not only to protect themselves more against privacy violations, but also may motivate them to critically challenge the dominant individualistic paradigm of privacy that necessitates the need for protection in the first place. As a result, this shift in perspective, as described in Masur's article, correlates to an increased motivation to participate in democratic processes that may affect how privacy is approached or realized also on the levels of discourse or politics.

Following these theoretical considerations, Luke Munn (2020) critically investigates the privacy implications of edge computing and showcases the importance

of interdisciplinary approaches to the question of privacy. From a technical perspective, edge computing is often hailed as a way to guarantee privacy while still granting users all the convenience of personalized services. If the data is not transmitted to a central data processing service in the cloud but stays on the device, privacy risks should be minimized. Munn, however, finds that the affordances of edge computing sidestep established safeguards, because edge data, after privacy 'sterilization,' can still be stored in conventional data centers. This leads to new risks and requires new responses both on the regulatory and the citizen-led level.

Grażyna Stachyra (2020) offers another in-depth empirical study of privacy policies and practices in radio—a medium that has a history of and a reputation for being a privacy friendly medium. In contrast to this ideal, Stachyra's analysis shows how contemporary converged and transnational radio practices affect the privacies of unintended participants in their shows. In December 2012, Jacintha Saldanha, nurse at London's Royal King Edward VII Hospital committed suicide after two Australian radio presenters had made a prank phone call pretending to be Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles showing concern about the state of Duchess Kate's health while expecting her first child. The case reveals three conditions which have implications for persons unintentionally involved: 1) digitization renders radio content archivable; 2) the division of radio related labor leads to a loss of journalistic responsibility and sensitivity with regard to private information; 3) legal frameworks continue to apply legacy radio privacy measures and do not correspond to these new working conditions.

The contribution by Yannic Meier, Johanna Schäwel and Nicole C. Krämer (2020) points out that although privacy is often regarded and measured as a general privacy concern, it is challenged in specific situations. A typical situation is when users are asked to provide data online. Data protection regulation such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires websites to display privacy policies and ask for active consent to minimize privacy risks. The authors question the extent to which this consent is meaningful, given that users often do not engage with the lengthy privacy policies, let alone process the information they obtain. Using a survey experiment they find that readers of shorter policies spend less time reading but learned more about the content through an indirect effect mediated by time spent per word. Shorter policies can thus be both more efficient and more effective.

Two more contributions complete these insights as they shed light on culturally specific discursive contexts of privacy. Łukasz Wojtkowski, Barbara Brodzińska-Mirowska and Aleksandra Seklecka (2020) take on a previous research gap by investigating privacy frames in the Polish media discourse. This debate meets all requirements for an intense and in-depth debate of privacy related issues in its manifold contextual, relational, cultural and political aspects. Poland looks back on a com-

unist history with invasive surveillance practices, also Polish media debates are characterized by heavy polarization and the contemporary government favors privacy unfriendly policies. Against this background it is surprising that the authors find the Polish privacy debate seems to be still in its early stages. Across the Polish media landscape, outlets mainly address political challenges resulting from European data protection politics. Not uncommon are complaints about how the GDPR restricts election campaigning or governmental projects.

In her analysis, Tetyana Lokot (2020) contrasts Russian state officials' and digital rights advocates' privacy constructions as found in their public discourses. Based on an extant analysis of online documents provided by the state's telecom regulator "Roskomnadzor" and digital activists "Roskomsvoboda," Lokot shows that diverging conceptualizations of privacy are a key indicator for conflicts about how to approach the political. More than that, struggle for access to individual data is one of the arenas in which the fight for power and control in the Russian hybrid political system takes place. Lokot, not least, contributes a valuable methodological proposal. Her study offers an example of how to use corpus linguistics tools for privacy-related discourse analysis.

The articles assembled in this thematic issue on the politics of privacy show the diverse sites and often unexpected dimensions of societal struggle over control of data. By means of theoretical debate and empirical analysis they illustrate that and how the challenges and changes related to privacy set a political stage. Not least, the Covid-19 pandemic—as we are writing this editorial in June of 2020—has provided another, new and surprising, context for privacy research and for this volume. State-corporate surveillance aimed at hampering the virus' spread or radical datafication of family, education and work environments aiming at physical distancing have highlighted privacy as a critical issue for which a final definition remains open. Thus, in this sense, our collection offers various and nuanced accounts on privacy, its diverse realizations and contexts. Researching the politics of privacy in communication and media studies is obviously just about to start.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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