



COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,
Nico Carpentier**

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Table of Contents

- 7 Introduction: Communication as the intersection of the old and the new
Maria Francesca Murru, Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Nico Carpentier

Section 1. Theories and Concepts

- 19 What kinds of normative theories do we need? Ideal and non-ideal theories in communication research
Kari Karppinen
- 31 Friends, not foes: Integrating structuralist and agentic perspectives on media consumption
Alyona Khaptsova, Ruben Vandenplas
- 45 The rise of the alternative: Critical usefulness of the “Alternative Media” notion in the Czech context
Ondrej Pekacek
- 59 “The closest thing to teleportation”: The concept of *liveness* in the age of connectivity
Ludmila Lupinacci
- 71 Crisis of liberal democracy, crisis of journalism? Learning from the economic crisis
Timo Harjuniemi

Section 2. Media and the Construction of Social Reality

- 85 The construction of the homeless in the Greek street paper *shedia*
Vaia Doudaki, Nico Carpentier
- 105 Mediation and place: The sharpening and weakening of boundaries
Magnus Andersson

- 115 “Yay! I am officially an #estonian #eResident!” Representations of Estonian e-residency as a novel kind of state-related status and affiliation on Twitter
Piia Tammppuu

Section 3. Mediatizations

- 129 Situational analysis as a research method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations
Karsten D. Wolf, Konstanze Wegmann
- 141 Football and mediatization: A serious academic pursuit or just scholars playing silly games?
Michael Skey

Section 4. Media, Health and Sociability

- 155 Tradition and the digital: A study of dating attitudes among Australia-based Chinese dating app users
Xu Chen
- 173 Visual matters in health communication: A systematic review
Fatma Nazlı Köksal, Fatoş Adiloğlu
- 185 Power to the patient? Studying the balance of power between patient and GP in relation to Web health information
Edgard Eeckman

Abstracts

- 199 Spanish TV fiction and social networks: Tweeting about *Cuéntame como pasó*
- 200 Repressed identity: Negotiating normality in the Balkan cinemas
- 201 Place of communication in territorial construction of “metropolitan public space”
- 202 Losing the critical edge: Why journalism has been unable to challenge the austerity hegemony
- 203 Professional and personal performances: Case studies of how selected photojournalists use conflict-related images on Instagram
- 204 Live, here and now: Experiences of *liveness* in everyday engagements with connective media
- 205 Audience experiences of interactivity in contemporary Lithuanian theatre: Production and evaluation

- 206 The telling of femicide in the voice of the Mexican press 2017
- 207 The evolution of the terms referring to people on the move:
A discursive analysis of media discourse in French and Dutch
- 208 The politics of participation in WhatsApp communities in rural Kenya:
Discursive-material analysis
- 209 Czech media and the refugee crisis: Media populism and journalistic culture
in mainstream and alternative news outlets
- 210 A digital public space: Just a theory? Or how social network sites are
perceived by their Norwegian users?
- 211 Mnemonic resistance to instant history: Polish contemporary feminist
movement and its practices of historical visibility
- 212 The concept of ‘virtual residency’ and digitally enabled translocality: The
case of Estonian e-residency
- 213 Digitizing our sense of touch: The social construction of haptic technologies
- 214 Revisiting media repertoires: The media use of the Flemish population
- 215 Young adults’ learning about sustainable consumption in informal ‘situations’
- 216 The rise and fall of a critical paradigm in media research and communication:
analysis elite western periodical publications 1935-2015
- 217 Michael Moore and documentary as persuasion
- 218 Dating apps and cultural contexts: Investigating how Australia-based
Chinese users engage with Tinder and Tantan
- 219 Individual values a basis for selective media exposure
- 220 The #Girlbosses of YouTube: Manifestations of feminism in the era of social
media and entrepreneurial femininity
- 221 How the blockchain technologies may impact the digital media content
creation and consumption
- 222 The role of cultural mind-mapping in intercultural business communication
between European and Chinese associates
- 223 The ideology of enjoyment: Images of enjoyment on Instagram

Situational analysis as a research method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations

Karsten D. Wolf, Konstanze Wegmann

Abstract

This article proposes *Situational Analysis* as a method for the reconstruction of *communicative figurations*. The meta theory of mediatization serves as a frame for arguing why new methods for analysing relations between media and society are needed. Communicative figurations are introduced as an analytical concept for opening these media-related changes on the macro, micro and meso level for analysis, and Situational Analysis is suggested as a research method, respectively a theory-method-package, for this. situations include all aspects of communicative figurations and make all of these elements, the relations between them and the complexity of the situation visible and analysable. By explicitly also considering non-human actants, Situational Analysis is opening up and helping to answer questions about the intertwining of media and society in a mediatized everyday life by reconstructing media environment, ensembles and repertoires¹ not centred on one medium (but on a ‘network’ with other media) or on media as such (but on the intertwining with society). Additionally, discourses and implicated actors are taken into account and open the data for the analysis of power relations within and between communicative figurations/social worlds. This article aims to contribute to the methodological discourse of media and communication studies and to introduce Situational Analysis as a method helping to analyse relations between media and society, for example by using communicative figurations as an analytical concept.

Keywords: Mediatization; communicative figurations, situational analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis

¹ The term “media environment” describes the current entirety of all media potentially available for everybody within society, “media ensemble” refers to the media used by a social domain, and “media repertoire” includes all media used by an individual for his/her everyday social practices (see e.g. Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012).

1. Introduction – Mediatization as a meta theory

Nowadays, technical process and its pace of innovation become especially obvious through everyday (digital) information and communication technologies, and these developments transform our lifeworlds, experiences and practices within. Parts of media and communication studies research this continuing process of change as *mediatization*. Mediatization is not to be understood as a concept for describing an increasing spread of technical media in society and its influences. It is rather defined as a meta theory for researching how our communicative practices and contexts/situations of social practice transform through media, as well as how these media, in turn, are reshaped through communicative practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Krotz, 2007). Mediatization as a process can be retraced back far to the beginnings of modernity, and is not linear but contradictory and depends on the local/cultural context (Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2014; Meyen, 2009; Thompson, 1995). Mediatization Theory mediates between the two extreme positions *How do media influence people?* vs. *What do people do with media?* (Hjarvard, 2013) on the macro level (media influence on e.g. communicative practices, attitudes), the micro level (people's influence on the development of media through their actual use) and the meso level (reciprocal influence of media, culture and society). Media are part of all social spheres, like politics, religion and education. Thereby, media should not be seen as central agents of change but rather as an element of the whole system which should be considered and integrated into theories in order to be able to analyse, understand and model communicative, and therefore all social, processes. At the same time, media are so deeply integrated in our society and culture that analytically separating them from the context/situation doesn't seem possible anymore. The following chapter will introduce *communicative figurations* as an analytical concept for analysing media-related changes. Building on this, this article aims to suggest *Situational Analysis* by Adele Clarke (2005) as a method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations.

2. (Researching) Communicative figurations

As a consequence of Mediatization Theory, the Communicative Figurations Research Network (CoFi) by the Universities of Bremen and Hamburg developed the research paradigm of a non-media-centred analysis of communicative processes (Hepp & CoFi Research Network, 2017; Moores, 2012; Morley, 2009; Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014). *Social domains* here, like groups, communities, organisations or even whole social fields, serve as elements of analysis, or respectively, empirical starting points (Hepp & CoFi Research Network, 2017; Moores, 2012;

Morley, 2009; Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014). They include concepts like social fields (Bourdieu, 1993), (sub)systems (systems theory; Luhmann, 2012), (small) life-worlds (social phenomenology; Luckmann, 1970; Schütz, 1967) and social worlds (symbolic interactionism; Clarke 2011; Shibutani, 1955). Every social domain has a typical constellation of actors (Schimank, 2010), which describes all relevant actors and their relations to each other. For analysing the communicative processes, it's important that the social domain's actors share *practices* relating to one another. By taking social domains as elements of analysis, it's possible not to analyse just one-way media 'influences' but rather 1) how communicative practices, under conditions of deep mediatization, transform; 2) how media also change to adapt to these communicative practices; and 3) what consequences this has for the social subsystem(s) that the social domain is part of.

The CoFi Research Network describes these networks of communicative practices, in recourse to the *process sociology* approach by Norbert Elias (1978), as *communicative figurations*. This concept of figurations was the result of the confrontation with two fundamental problems of sociological analysis: on the one hand, the autonomy of the individual while the individual and society, at the same time, are dependent on each other; on the other hand, the distinction between social change and structural change. According to Elias, every structural change can be understood as a transforming interrelation between individuals and society; and these dynamic relations, these networks of individuals, he calls *figurations* (Elias, 1978). From a communication and media studies perspective, communicative figurations describe the processes of the communicative construction of social reality within different parts of society, different social domains – symbolically constructed by their constellation of actors and media ensembles. Communicative figurations can include the perspectives of individuals, communities and organisations. Describing, for example, the community of a family and its crossmedia practices, like the use of the smartphone and of different apps, landline calls with grandparents or handwritten notes on the fridge, as well as their constellation of actors, like members of patchwork families and their reciprocal communicative relations, shows that these communicative practices are essential for the construction and dynamic stability of family structures (Hasebrink, 2014).

In summary, every communicative figuration can be described by the following three elements (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2017):

1. The structural basis of every communicative figuration is a **constellation of actors**, a network of actors who are interrelated by communicative practices and a specific balance of power;
2. Every communicative figuration is signified by a **frame of relevance**,

which is guiding the practices of its actors and their reciprocal alignment with each other. This frame of relevance defines the communicative figuration's "topic" and its orientation (e.g. concerning dominant values, attitudes, interpretations)

3. Communicative figurations are constituted by **communicative practices**, which are intertwined with other social practices and based on an ensemble of different media.

The concept of communicative figurations, and Mediatization Theory, add a link between the macro level (media, communities, organisations) and the micro level (individuals and their goals and practices), and thereby enable the analysis of the reciprocal communicative construction of social processes.

But how does one research communicative figurations? In general, qualitative methods are a typical choice for research projects in the context of mediatization. Examples for data collection methods are individual or group interviews, media diaries, visual artefacts, online texts, like comments or blog posts, as well as ethnographical studies; Grounded Theory, Qualitative Content Analysis or Discourse Analysis are often used for analysing the data. Additionally, multi-method designs and multi-site studies are found in projects of mediatization research. Depending on the project, the integration of quantitative methods, for example when it comes to collecting data for a large scale of users, may also be reasonable. Another method for the research of communicative figurations is qualitative network maps (Hepp, Berg & Roitsch, 2012). Here, data is collected by the use of media diaries and qualitative interviews. While being interviewed, the interviewee draws maps of his or her own communication repertoire, including media, communication partners and information about how different ways of communication are used.

In the following, we will suggest *Situational Analysis* as a method for data analysis for the reconstruction of communicative figurations.

3. Situational Analysis by Adele Clarke

Situational Analysis (SA) is a method by Adele Clarke, which she herself describes as "Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn" (2005), also respectively known as "Grounded Theory After the Interpretive Turn" (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2018). Historically, Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss² (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), successfully aimed at establishing a qualitative research method in the context of a quantitative research para-

2 Anselm Strauss himself studied and worked with Herbert Blumer, the father of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), who himself referred to his academic teacher George Herbert Mead.

digm of 1960s sociology. A central goal was to disprove the quantitative research establishment's critique of qualitative methods – being subjective in their hermeneutic interpretations – by developing systematic processes of data collection and analysis, as well as by transparently documenting the inductive/abductive processes of theory formation. Research in the tradition of GTM focuses on social processes and mainly uses interviews, observations and field notes as data, being abstracted and systematized for developing fragmented theories from the data – the *theory* is *grounded* in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). By comparing results from different GTM studies with similar research interests, formal theories with a larger social scope can be developed. A characteristic of GTM is – similar to Research Based Design (Koppel, 2017) – an iterative and mainly explorative proceeding. In this process, theory is formulated and further – at this point of theory formulation – missing units for analysis are identified. GTM therefore is to be understood as a style of research rather than a strictly defined method set or sequence. *But then why a new method?*

Adele Clarke studied and worked with Anselm Strauss in medical sociology at UCSF (University of California, San Francisco) since the 1980s and later took over his chair. She integrated constructivist, interactionist, feminist and later also postmodern, poststructuralist and interpretive perspectives in her own research and, from these perspectives being confronted with GTM, developed Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005). In summary, Situational Analysis aims at the following five main goals:

(1) Reconstruction of situations

The main goal of SA is the reconstruction of the complexity of situations.³ Clarke dissolves the dichotomy of situation and context – found in the “conditional matrix” of GTM – by arguing that the conditions *of* the situation are *in* the situation and are *constituting* the situation *from the inside*, instead of influencing it from the outside as context (Clarke et al., 2018). In recourse to postmodernism, Clarke focuses on complexity, for example contradictions, heterogeneity and “situatedness”, in contrast to thinking in clear and linear causalities. As a consequence, she moves away from the coding paradigm of axial coding (GTM) and, in her own version of the “conditional matrix” (the “situational matrix”, Clarke et al., 2018: 45), integrates two central new aspects into SA – discourses and non-human actants.

(2) Integration of discourses

For analysing structural processes, Strauss (e.g. 1978) and others developed Social Worlds/Arenas Theory. Strauss himself, however, never connected it with GTM.

3 Situations, in the context of SA, can be defined as “no fixed, i.e. locally-temporally defined entities, but relational structures which include everything made relevant through the interactions taking place” (Strübing, 2018: 687; own translation).

Clarke understands SA as a methodological development of GTM and Social Worlds/Arenas Theory as such, as well as an integration of both (Clarke et al., 2018), and identifies parallels between Strauss' Social Worlds/Arenas Theory and Foucault's Discourse Theory. Foucault argues that power circulates in the form of discourses and gets reproduced and confirmed as 'truth' through people's everyday practices according to the ideas of a social 'norm' ("Technology of the self", Foucault, 1988). Individuals as well as collectives, in this sense, are constituted by discourses through actively behaving according to these discursively circulating ideas. Clarke et al. (2018) state that discourse formations as well as social worlds are constituted by contradictory discourses that are permanently negotiated, evaluated and positioned within these discourse formations/social worlds. Both can be understood as mergers of more powerful, or respectively influential, and less powerful people who share certain interpretations, values and norms. As a consequence, SA – different from GTM – explicitly considers discourses and discourse positions in data analysis. Like Foucault (see e.g. the concept of the "dispositif"⁴), and like Mediatization Theory as well as the concept of communicative figurations, Clarke (et al., 2018) aims to focus on the analysis of relations (e.g. power relations, ascriptions) between elements (discourses, media, people), not on the analysis of the elements themselves.

(3) Integration of non-human elements and actants

As a next step, Clarke adds poststructuralist considerations about the agency of non-human elements – relating to pragmatism, interactionism and Science & Technology Studies (STS), especially Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)⁵ (Clarke et al., 2018) – to her 'theory-method-package'. Clarke emphasises that objects have been considered in pragmatism and interactionism ever since and that the analysis of relations – like in Discourse Theory and SA – has always been central to them. However, she argues, objects have never explicitly been included and the analysis of their agency has never really been developed methodologically. Bösch, Gläser, Meister, & Schubert (2015) also state that most publications on material agency – from different disciplines and relating to different social phenomena⁶ – focus on theoretical conceptualising rather than on developing methodological approaches. However, finding ways of analysing the intertwining of material and human agency, they argue, is the central requirement as well as the central challenge for empirical efforts and considerations.

4 Understood as "the system of relations that can be established between these [discourses, institutions, laws; remark of authors] elements" (Foucault, 1980).

5 Actor-Network-Theory was developed by, above others, Latour (e.g. 1987).

6 For example human-machine interaction (e.g. Fink & Weyer, 2014), tourism (e.g. Ren, 2010), workplace (e.g. Suchman, 2007) and environmental social movements (e.g. Lockie, 2004).

Kirchhoff (2009) contrasts two positions within Material Agency Theory; When a material object and a human actor constitute an activity together and thereby fulfil the same functions, the “*weak view*” understands the material object and the human actor as a “*causally coupled system*”, leading to a necessity of also considering the material object in the analysis of the activity; the “*strong view*” (e.g. ANT), in contrast, goes one step further and states that there is no principled difference in their contribution to the outcome based on their *materiality*. In the “*strong view*”, categories like “*technological*” and “*social*” therefore are seen as fluent; the focus is on the relationality between these categories and the activity is understood as the result of the cooperation within the network (Latour, 1999). Another strong view on material agency is the framework of Material Engagement Theory (Malafouris 2013), which argues “*the built environment plays an active role in the structure of agency*” (Ransom, 2017: 2). Malafouris states that “*material signs do not represent, they enact*” (Malafouris 2013: 118). For the scope of this chapter, the explicit integration of non-human elements and actants (as formulated in the strong views) represents an important fit between Situational Analysis and mediatization research.

The growing distribution of media based on software makes the difference between human actors and non-human actants even smaller. Software is encoded agency in the form of (software) code created by the act of human programming. When a program is running, what/who is the actant/actor? The software that is running or the programmer’s intentions while coding it? And because software is materialised in the hardware (processor design, algorithms realised in hardware, etc.), defining and extending the practices of (hardware) use in the form of apps – which can be updated or downloaded – one has to question the difference between hardware and software. All technical media (not only the digital ones) have to be considered in the analysis. Situational Analysis here seems to be a suitable method for analysing all elements (whether human or non-human) relevant for the situation – and especially for interaction within the situation (see Strübing, 2018) – as a communicative figuration. In recourse to Discourse Theory, power relations are also explicitly considered and made analysable. Abstract objects such as norms and values contributing to discourses and power relations, which are in SA, are conceptualised as actants with agency.

(4) Identification of implicated/silent/hidden actors

Throughout the whole research process of SA, questions should be asked about *who* or *what* could be relevant but hasn’t been mentioned yet in the data, and *why* is this actor or actant not mentioned. Clarke (e.g. 2005) calls these actors and actants “*implicated/silent actors/actants*”. These can, on the one hand, be actors or actants physically present but not heard, ignored and/or overlooked; on the other hand, actors or

actants physically absent but being discursively constructed within the social world. Central analytical questions are: “Whose constructions of whom/what exist? Which are taken as the ‘real’ constructions or the ones that matter most in the situation by the various participants? Which are contested? Whose are ignored? By whom?” (Clarke et al., 2018: 77). The concept of implicated actors and actants should help to analyse power relations within social worlds, as well as the “situatedness” of less powerful actors and actants and the consequences this has for them within the situation.

(5) *Visualising through maps*

Considering all aspects discussed, Clarke develops three kinds of maps that should open the data for analysis:

Situational Maps:

Developing situational maps is a process of mapping everything relevant in the situation. These may be individual (e.g. friends, media actors, colleagues, politicians) and collective actors (e.g. on- or offline based communities, organisations, political parties/groups) as well as non-human actants (e.g. media, economic elements, discourses, symbols, conflicts, sites of action), always also the implicated ones. The goal of situational maps is to analyse the relations between these elements and show the complexity of the situation (Clarke, 2009). Situational maps, as most other kinds of maps as well, should be updated and reworked throughout the whole process of analysis. To make the process transparent, the initial maps should be saved and memos should be written.

Social Worlds/Arenas Maps:

Social Worlds/Arenas⁷ maps include all discourses, identities, shared values, sites of action, relations, etc. that are found in the data. Clarke et al. (2018: 148) define social worlds as “*groupings of varying sizes, each of which has ‘a life of its own’ that is distinctively collective [...]. Participants in social worlds generate shared perspectives that form the basis for both individual and collective identities.*” There are not only differences between distinctive social worlds (interworld differences) but also within a social world (intra-world differences), in terms of some perspectives and characteristics. These differences can lead to split-ups, Bucher (1962) calls “*segments*” or “*subworlds*”. Arenas consist of diverse social worlds and within arenas diverse conflicts are carried out (Strauss, 1978). As many different social worlds meet in one arena, arenas consisting over a long period of time, can be described as ‘sites’ of diverse and complex discourses. To be able to understand a specific social world, it is necessary to *1) understand the arenas the social*

7 Social Worlds/Arenas is a theory developed by Strauss (e.g. 1978) and others, which he himself never combined with Grounded Theory.

world is part of; 2) understand the other social worlds they meet in the arenas as well as; 3) the discourses negotiated there (Clarke et al., 2018).

Positional Maps:

Positional maps visualise positions in discourse (and those not mentioned) within relevant discourses and focus on analysing similarities and differences. Positional maps help to show heterogeneities and conflicts within a discourse, and also within individuals and groups. Questions guiding the analysis of discourse are (Clarke et al., 2018: 168): “*What is X about? Why do people keep talking about it? Why does it seem to matter so much? Who or what in Y arguing against in this quote from my data.*” While situational maps aim to show complexity, positional maps focus on contrasting different positions and identifying hidden ones, which should, in the sense of theoretical sampling (GTM), lead to further data collection.

4. Conclusion – Situational Analysis as a research method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations

This article introduced Situational Analysis as a method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations. The meta theory of mediatization served as a frame for arguing why new methods for analysing relations between media and society are needed. Communicative figurations were introduced as an analytical concept for opening these media-related changes on the macro, micro and meso level for analysis, and SA – a method from the context of Health Sciences – was suggested as a research method, respectively a theory-method-package, for this purpose. Situations, defined as “*no fixed, i.e. locally-temporally defined entities, but relational structures which include everything made relevant through the interactions taking place*” (Strübing, 2018: 687; own translation), as a concept include all aspects of communicative figurations (constellation of actors, frame of relevance, communicative practices) and make all of these elements, the relations between them and the complexity of the situation visible and analysable. By explicitly considering non-human actants also, SA is opening up and helping to answer questions about the intertwining of media and society in a mediatized everyday life by reconstructing the media environment, ensembles and repertoires not centred on one medium (but a ‘network’ with other media) or on media as such (but intertwined with society). Additionally, discourses and implicated actors are taken into account and open the data for the analysis of power relations within and between communicative figurations/social worlds.

This article aimed to contribute to the methodological discourse of media and communication studies. Although not all aspects and potentials of SA could be discussed in depth in this article, for example by clarifying some aspects or the dif-

ferent kinds of maps using examples from our own research (see Wolf & Wudarski, 2017), it introduced Situational Analysis as a method helping to analyse relations between media and society, for example by using communicative figurations as an analytical concept.

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