



**HAL**  
open science

# Where's the Critique? On the Dearth of Critical Theory in German Communication Research

Mandy Tröger, Marlen van den Ecker

## ► To cite this version:

Mandy Tröger, Marlen van den Ecker. Where's the Critique? On the Dearth of Critical Theory in German Communication Research. *Media Theory*, 2023, Critique, Postcritique and the Present Conjunction, 7 (1), pp.258-276. hal-04221566

**HAL Id: hal-04221566**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04221566>**

Submitted on 28 Sep 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0  
International License



**Where's the Critique?  
On the Dearth of Critical  
Theory in German  
Communication Research**

MANDY TRÖGER

*University of Tübingen, GERMANY*

MARLEN VAN DEN ECKER

*University of Jena, GERMANY*

*Media Theory*  
Vol. 7 | No. 1 | 257-276  
© The Author(s) 2023  
CC-BY-NC-ND  
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

**Abstract**

While the influence of critical theory – connected to the Frankfurt School – has been profound, its legacy is almost non-existent in the field of communication research in Germany. In order to address this counterintuitive state of affairs, we first sketch the historical context that led to the dearth of critical in the German field. We then give a brief overview of the current institutionalization of the field and connect it to the founding of the Network for Critical Communications Research (abbreviated: KriKoWi) that aims to (re-) introduce critical theories (that is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School but also other critical approaches). Last but not least, we sketch our understanding of critique which ought to help scholars using different methodological and theoretical approaches to work together. We hope that similar initiatives in other parts of the world might find our endeavours inspiring and join them.

**Keywords**

Germany, Network for Critical Communications Research, KriKoWi, Critical Theory, Critique, Frankfurt School

**Introduction**

German critical thought is commonly associated with the rich and complex theoretical perspectives and methodological practices of the Frankfurt School broadly defined as critical theory (i.e., Honneth, 2007; Hohendahl & Fisher, 2001). However, there is a

general misconception about the role of critical theory in the German social sciences in general and in the field of media and communication research in particular. This misconception, like any understanding of social reality, manifests itself in personal experience: The first time I, Mandy Tröger, became aware of it was in 2010. I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and sitting in a coffee shop reading an English-language copy of Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*. One of my fellow students walked in and asked why I was reading the *Frankfurt School in English in Illinois*. After all, being German meant that I could read the original in Germany. To his surprise, I told him that the Frankfurt School was not required reading in the field in Germany. It was not even optional; it simply did not exist. Thus, the first time I read the Frankfurt School as part of any communication curriculum *was* in Illinois, and I became fascinated with the history and development of critical theory within and outside the field in the United States and in Germany (cf. Tröger, 2021).

At the time when I, Marlen van den Ecker, chose a university major, nothing seemed as intriguing to me as studying Frankfurt School philosophy, as it provided answers for questions that had worried me for a long time: *Why do people vote for representatives who do not represent their own working-class interests? Why do people fall for things they see on TV? Why are we always supposed to spend money, to consume?* I grew up in a precarious household but from a very early age questioned the narrative that it was somehow my mum's *wrongdoing* that we were living in poverty. Encountering Adorno, Fromm, and others helped me gain a new perspective on these feelings of powerlessness, and I had hoped by studying media and communications I would be able to address these questions academically. Thanks to the commitment of a handful of lecturers, I was lucky to occasionally pursue these readings in my degree. But I soon realised that among fellow students and in most classes, this would be a lonely endeavour.

These two stories are our stories. They are, obviously, not representative of the experiences of all scholars working in the field of communications or related disciplines in Germany. However, they have been crucial to us. They have brought us and other junior scholars together to create the research network **Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft** (abbreviated as “KriKoWi”, meaning Network for Critical Communications Research). Its aim is to (re-)introduce critical theories

(Frankfurt School critical theory but also other critical approaches and traditions) to the field in Germany. Because, while critical theory might not be located at the centre of the field in the United States or other national academic settings, it *does* exist if one knows where to look for it. In Germany and in German-language communication research, on the other hand, even looking for critical theory often is a fruitless pursuit. What we find are the deeply rooted influences of critical theory on German society rather than its institutional and/or methodological legacy in academia (Grimm, 2017).

There are several reasons for this dearth of critical theory in the German social sciences, some of which we give closer attention to in this article. They relate to 20<sup>th</sup> century German history, the development of the field in (West) Germany within the “German-German” Cold War context and the specificities of the (West-) German academic system. While some scholars have attempted to capture parts of this history (e.g., Meyen, 2004; 2017; Scheu, 2012), its complexity has yet to be fully articulated. Thus, while we cannot tell the full story either, we aim at summarising what is available in German-language literature to make it accessible to a broader international readership. Because, even if fragmented, we believe it *is* a story worth telling – not only because it gives insights into the historical struggles of critical communication scholars in Germany, but also because it allows for drawing connections to other academic fields in other national settings, particularly as it relates to the close interrelations between academia and the broader political economy, as well as corresponding ideological and institutional spaces.

In what follows, we first sketch the historical context linked to the vanishing of critical theory from German communication research. We then give a brief overview of the current state of the field in Germany and connect that to the founding of the Network for Critical Communications Research. Last but not least, we briefly sketch our understanding of critique that enables scholars applying diverse methodological and theoretical approaches to work together in the attempt to broaden the field. For this, we did not reinvent the wheel. Instead, we built on the many critical traditions within and outside the field and updated them for German-language media and communication research. Our leading question was: *What is our common understanding of critique, given our different theoretical backgrounds?* This paper summarises the result of this

process. We hope that similar initiatives in other parts of the world might find our endeavours inspiring, build on them and join them.

## **The history of critical theory in German communication research**

In his attempt to sketch the history of critical theory in the field of German communication research, communication historian Andreas Scheu (2012: 13) defines critical theory as an approach that “questions society, media, and research critically with regard to issues of power and domination, assesses them normatively and thus actively participates in the improvement of social structures” (own translation). While there have been more elaborate attempts to define critical theory (e.g., Honneth, 2007; 2009; Hohendahl & Fisher, 2001), it generally relates to the rich yet fractured body of work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School (and authors such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin or Max Horkheimer, to name a few). Given their intellectual legacy in academic thought (i.e., Hohendahl & Fisher, 2001), as well as that of German scholars such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (and their critique of political economy), it could rightly be assumed that their social criticism must also have a strong intellectual and institutional presence in the field of communication research and its curriculum in Germany. This, however, is not the case.

Scheu in *Adornos Erben in der Kommunikationswissenschaft* (Adorno’s Heirs in Communication Research) claims that critical theory has “seemingly vanished” from the field and that those who advocate it must be regarded as being “on the losing end” in a field dominated by empirical social science perspectives (2012: 12). This is surprising not least because, by the end of the 1960s, different scholars in Germany (e.g., Horst Holzer, Hanno Hardt, Manfred Knoche, Jörg Becker etc.), who were inspired by the Frankfurt School and Marxist theory, aimed to establish a critical approach to communication research. Since then, however, “little is heard” of such perspectives in the field’s literature (Grosse-Kracht, 1991: 12; Scheu, 2012: 12) – a fate shared in varying degrees by other critical theory traditions, such as postcolonialism, queer theory, radical feminist theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism, though the latter do find some influence in the field’s canon (e.g., Reich, 2021; Riesmeyer and Huber, 2011). Still, critical research is generally being “dismissed as being ‘obsolete,’

---

‘refuted’ or ‘utopian’” (Winter & Zima, 2007: 14; as quoted in Scheu, 2012: 12) and, as such, must “fight for its place in textbooks and academic memory”. In fact, Michael Kunczik (2002: 72), former professor at the University of Mainz, states that of all the critical approaches developed during the 1970s, only “the ideas of Habermas, who is to be included with the Frankfurt School”, have had a long-lasting influence on the field through his account of “the structural transformation of the public sphere and the theory of communicative competence” (as cited in Scheu, 2012: 12).

The question why critical theory has experienced such a discriminatory history has been answered differently by different scholars. Scheu (2012: 12), by means of analysing individual biographies of critical scholars working in communication research in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s, traces the field’s “history of displacement”. He shows how critical scholars – losing an “unequal battle” against the field’s institutionalised empiricism – found tenured positions and professorships either in other countries or in neighbouring fields and disciplines. Michael Meyen (2017) adds to this analysis by examining the broader logics of academia within a specific historical context. Looking at the institutionalisation of communication research, he claims that it was political, economic and institutionalised power structures that contributed to the field’s social scientific turn while simultaneously excluding any theoretical and methodological approaches that did not fit its positivist paradigm.

In Germany, communication research (*Kommunikationswissenschaft*) has historically been institutionally separate from the field of media studies (*Medienwissenschaft*): while the former developed as a social science out of journalism research (*Publizistik / Zeitungswissenschaft*), media studies, as an interdisciplinary field, developed out of the humanities. Until today, both fields have their own institutions, journals, academic associations, and research foci. However, it was the need of communications research to distinguish itself in its own right and – at least partly – in contrast to media studies, that, in the 1960s, contributed to its “conservative turn” (Meyen, 2017). Heavily shaped by the research methods practised at the University of Mainz and leading figures such as Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (cf. Holtz-Bacha and Kutsch, 2002; Löblich, 2010), communication research became a useful academic tool for market research or political communications rather than a means of critical analysis. Thus, in its “struggle for significance,” Matthias Karmasin, Matthias Rath, and Barbara Thomaß

(2013: 481) underline, “the identity of the field and its marketing [counted] in addition to its innovative power and supposed usefulness” (own translation). While this was true also for the development of the field in other countries (i.e., Simpson, 1994), it received more impetus in a divided Germany at the epicentre of the Cold War. The proximity of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) to its socialist counterpart, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), made German-German (cross-border) media and communications (and the research thereof) important political tools in the legitimising of an entire political economy to East *and* West Germans likewise (Lindenberger, 2006). For, while the capitalist political economy was brought closer to East German audiences by means of broadcast media (Meyen, 2003), the constant comparison with an alternative socialist state also made it necessary to legitimise the West German social order to the West German population (Ruck, 2013).

Geopolitically, this was added to by strong ties between the United States and the FRG (Schumacher, 2002), which – in academia – played out by means of transatlantic research and exchange programs, transnational grants and financing and a growing US-centrism (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann had been trained in public opinion research at the University of Missouri). As a consequence, critical theory and its questioning of the state, power and ideology was displaced by the political project of legitimising “the West” and the West German state in particular.

An example of the far-reaching implications of these broader political conditions in (West) Germany was the so-called *Radikalenerlass* (Anti-Radical Decree) of 1972. Its aim was to prevent any so-called “enemies of the constitution” to be employed in civil service positions. Between 1972 and 1985 a total of 3.5 million people were checked for their eligibility; of these, 1250 teachers and university lecturers, most of whom were regarded as left-wing extremists, were not hired, and around 260 people were dismissed (Feldmann and Ölkrug, 2019). Communication researcher and Marxist Horst Holzer was one of them (Wiedemann, 2019).

Simultaneously, the field of communication research was growing and new jobs and institutions were being created – mostly in the line of empiricist, positivist research. In fact, Michael Meyen (2017) speaks of a “double conservative turn” in the field in the 1980s. He argues that it was conservative political influences on appointment decisions at the Free University of Berlin, a last stronghold of critical theory, which then had

---

further repercussions for the marginalisation of critical theory in the entire field. Thus, the already strong quantitative and method-driven approach to communications gained further dominance by winning continuous struggles over economic, political and institutional resources (Meyen, 2017). After the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the subsequent unification of Germany, this dominance became an all-German standard (Hecht, 2002).

In fact, communication research in Germany is dominated by four universities, namely Mainz, Berlin, Munich and Münster (in that order) (Meyen, 2004). Looking at the number of university professors active in the field who have also studied it (or one of its sub-disciplinary varieties), Meyen (2004) concludes that eighty percent of them come from one of these four institutions. In particular, the Institute for Journalism in Mainz, which has only existed since the mid-1960s, has overtaken the other three founding institutes in Western post-war Germany. Not surprisingly, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, who had worked in Mainz, is still considered to be one of *the* most important protagonists of field (cf. Holtz-Bacha and Kutsch, 2002), while also her students (e.g., Wolfgang Donsbach, Werner Früh, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, Winfried Schulz, Jürgen Wilke) and her students' students (e.g., Hans-Bernd Brosius, Frank Esser, Patrick Rössler, Helmut Scherer) have made their own contributions to the field through the institutional legacy of Mainz (Wendelin, 2013).

## **Conceptualising critique in German communication research**

Given the strong legacy of empirical social science research in the field of communication research and underlining the need for critical approaches, Christian Fuchs and Marisol Sandoval (2008) distinguish between three notions of critique: First, a Marxist understanding of critique that is dialectical and materialist. Taking the perspective of the oppressed, of exploited classes and individuals, this understanding of critique aims at fundamentally changing social relations. Second, a positivist understanding of critique, according to which freedom of value is a higher good and theoretical propositions are (only) true (for the time being) if they withstand attempts of empirical falsification. It is a positivist understanding of critique that does not fundamentally question society's underlying power dynamics and structures. Third, a

postmodern understanding of critique that challenges hierarchies, power relations, and claims to truth and objectivity by means of deconstructing these truths and advocating a radical pluralism of identities, perspectives, and opinions (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2008).

This categorisation is helpful in that it shows that the term “critique” in and of itself is without much meaning. Scholars from different theoretical traditions claim to be working “critically” based on their own backgrounds, assumptions and (potentially) methods. Thus, regardless of the dearth of critical theory in German communication research, it can rightly be claimed that there has been critique in the field all along, for instance in the positivist tradition (e.g., Schneider, 1992). However, Fuchs and Sandoval (2008) also underline the political implications of the different understandings of critique. While postmodern and Marxist approaches help analyse the structural and ideological institutionalisation of social and individual power, the positivist variant entails a stabilising character for the political economic system in place.

As a consequence, in recent years, there has been a growing demand for more varied critical perspectives in the field. For the success of these demands speaks to the growing body of work on critique and post-critique (e.g., Felski, 2015; Anker and Felski, 2017). Its aim, as Felski (2015: 2) puts it, is “to redescribe this style of thinking: to offer a fresh slant on a familiar practice”. This adds to the growing canon of literature on larger issues of inequality and power – such as cultural studies, feminist, post-structuralist and constructivist approaches, etc. These perspectives have successfully challenged long-held assumptions on the merits of positivism. They have opened spaces for social theory and analyses of capitalism, for issues of domination and power, for understanding the historicity of social relations and the need of their transformation. In their totality, this body of work has had some resonance also in German-language communication research (e.g., Reich, 2021; Kannengießer, 2020; Kannengießer et al, 2022).

The increasing demand for critical perspectives is also due to new challenges in media and communication and the field’s seeming impotence to respond to pressing (structural) issues, like its failure to address and critique issues of power (in capitalism), structures, and ideologies, within and outside the field. Further, since the research in the field in Germany rarely links micro-study results to macro-level issues, it tends to

disregard overarching social, political as well as economic contexts. Due to these gaps, the field is often unfit to play any formative role in developing alternative visions for communication systems or practices through research and teaching.

As part of this broader push towards more diverse research practices and thoughts, junior scholars founded the research Network for Critical Communications Research (KriKoWi) in 2017. In doing so, they neither aimed at using the term “critical” exclusively nor did they offer an exhaustive definition of “criticism” or “critique”. Also, the network does not aim at establishing a “critical competition” within the field or at signalling any such competition to the outside world. Rather, the network’s understanding of critique is based on a critical reflection of current modes of knowledge production within and outside the field, and its underlying processes and practices. In this sense, its critique is inclusive and self-reflexive, driven by the overarching goal to broaden German-language communication research and to diversify its methods and theories. This is not least because media and communications are *the* central nodes of current rapid economic, political, and social transformations. Still, in the face of “global ‘multiple crises’ (financial, ecological, political, and social) and the related increase of inequality and experiences of alienation” (Sevignani, 2017), the field often fails to address underlying structural issues (e.g., the monopolisation of digital communication, the privatisation and commercialisation of data, surveillance, etc.) in research or teaching. Thus, in order to provide research-based, sustainable solutions to these challenges, it requires a broader, self-reflexive understanding of research and an increasing awareness of the socio-political role and responsibility of its socio-political role and the responsibilities of researchers (cf. Kannengießer, 2020). The KriKoWi network fosters exchange and collaboration between different perspectives, methodological and theoretical approaches. It aims at accommodating the societal challenges we are facing by bringing together diverse concepts of critique which are all committed to these.

## **Towards a pluralist concept of critique**

*By Critical Communication Research, we mean research that relates to social theory and the analysis of capitalism, that focuses on forms of domination and imbalances of power, that has an understanding of the historical development of social relations and perspectives*

*on their transformation* (Founding Document of the Network for Critical Communications Research, 2017).

The KriKoWi network gathers hundreds of members of the German-language research community from across dozens of universities, different research fields, theoretical backgrounds and with diverse research objectives. To claim a homogenous understanding of what *critical* is (and, in turn, what it is *not*), is therefore inconceivable. Yet, we share an understanding of critique being an *attitude* as well as a *means*: that is, critique is more than a “thought style” (i.e., Felski, 2015: 2) but is also a central tool to analyse social conditions and to work towards their transformation. Further, even if we differ in theoretical approaches, methodological foci, and academic or social visions, we meet in the conviction that communication and media criticism must be understood as a form of social criticism that should be pursued cooperatively.

Some of our members have a background in the critical political economy of media and communication, some in cultural studies, some in autonomous Marxism or in postmodern and feminist media theories. Some feel closer to the tradition of the Frankfurt School, or to critical psychoanalytical approaches. Neither one strand of theory is preferred to another. In the conviction that these critical traditions can complement each other, we welcome diversity, highlight commonalities and do not argue in long debates over their legitimacy. Even if this kind of theoretical synthesis can be criticised, we are convinced that only in forming alliances can we do the kind of emancipatory and transformative work that meets current socio-political challenges. Accordingly, KriKoWi sees itself as a rallying movement for researchers and students aiming at building bridges to practitioners, activists and civil society groups.

This approach requires constant negotiations within an ever-changing social environment. In this, KriKoWi members are guided by an important basic principle: Because critique should also include the possibility of self-criticism and because the practice of change can only be effective *with* and not against those affected, we must first approach each other with respect and the willingness to understand each other. This seemingly simple assumption is reflected, for example, in the *Principle of Charity* (a principle of benevolent interpretation; i.e., an attitude which, by means of intellectual openness and honesty, makes it possible to take theories and findings dissimilar to one’s own seriously without having to agree with them). Only by means of serious

confrontations with contradictory positions can one's own theory be sharpened, adjusted and updated, not merely confirmed. Without this basic principle, *any* critical-transformative project, and, thus, the goal of critique itself (critique becoming practice) would be led *ad absurdum*, as would be the work of our network as such.

In their transformative endeavours, KriKoWi members share a few basic assumptions of social critique: First, the epistemological insight that any kind of critical research is *socially grounded and has developed historically*. Humans perceive and deal with the world around them through explicit and implicit patterns of thought. Thus, objects of knowledge are conceived in specific ways and researchers shape practices of knowledge production (e.g., through standardised publications) and help shape what they consider to be correct, progressive and important (e.g., the indexing of these publications) (Löblich, 2020). These considerations come close to a social constructivist view in that we assume that nothing in our world is natural or self-evident. Everything has developed historically. It also follows that our thinking can be shaped, maintained, or changed by social contexts. Pragmatically, then, we assume that it is possible to conceive change and that people are in principle capable of action. Therefore, they can have a formative – and possibly transformative – effect on their own situation as well as on the society within which they find themselves, in and through theory and practice.

Based on these premises, critique secondly involves the disclosure of prevailing patterns of thought and norms because by clarifying and, if necessary, adjusting them, one becomes aware of one's own attachment to them. In this way, critique steps out of its abstract, theoretical setting and becomes practice-oriented, therefore *materialistic* and *emancipatory* at its core. Several authors of different theoretical traditions underline this emancipatory aspect of critical thought and research (cf. Bohmann et al, 2010). Following Michel Foucault (2005), for example, critique for the sake of enlightenment “is to be understood as an attitude, as an ethos, as a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at once a historical analysis of the limits set for us and a test of their possible transgression” (707). Philosophical life here is neither exclusive, theoretical, nor elitist, but understood as a constant practical act of negotiation and questioning.

Here lies an important implication for theoretical and practical actions of researchers: Critique must not be exhausted “by merely saying that things are not good the way they are. Critique means to find out on which findings, habits and ways of thinking, acquired but not reflected, any accepted practice is based” (Foucault, 1981: 221f.). That is, the focus of critique is not just the symptoms (actions) but their underlying structures and ideologies, and they can only be revealed by means of critique. It follows that researchers aiming to overcome internalised social reproduction mechanisms must themselves become part of the analysis, for by producing symbolic goods, we are part of the discourses we help shape (cf. Lagasnerie, 2018). This also makes clear how (contrary to current academic gratification processes) teaching has to take a central role in the process of emancipation.

In our understanding, knowledge production is always political, for *all* researchers position themselves through the kind of research they do. Following these premises, researchers have a choice. They can, as already discussed, willingly participate in hegemonic discourses and practices by means of “functional research” (Lagasnerie, 2018: 61), or they can decide to oppose them in a dysfunctional manner. The latter, according to Lagasnerie (2018: 76), means to question dominant discourses and practices while seeking to overcome systems of exploitation through “transformative action.” Accordingly, transformation is the goal of critique. This also means that researchers who choose to conduct research that stabilises systems of power position themselves in the same way as do those who critically question them. In both cases, researchers are politically acting subjects (cf. Zinn, 1994; Lagasnerie, 2018). However, any sort of transformation requires normative assumptions about its desired outcome. The question is: according to which standards should any action have a changing effect? This question points to a value system, and since research by and of itself cannot be value-free (Zinn, 1994), it is only a self-reflexive disclosure of values, norms, and motivations that can protect any research against its undesired instrumentalisation. In the analysis and critique of current social structures, we therefore distance ourselves from reductionisms and dogmatisms and open up complexity through *self-reflexive research*, which must also be *self-critical*.

Our concept of critique is furthermore based on the normative premise of human beings developing freely under the condition of their *universal plurality*. We advocate a

radical pluralism of identities, perspectives, and opinions for the goal of collective emancipation. In this, we work towards the goal of socio-ecological transformation, which can only be understood intersectionally, i.e., including discrimination based on race, gender, class, etc. We aim for a more just society within which, as Elik Olin Wright (2017: 53) has put it, “all people have roughly equal access to the material and social resources necessary to lead fulfilling lives.” Put more simply, we strive for the improvement of the conditions in which people live. A critical research practice is, therefore, able to examine precisely those social processes that produce, maintain, and justify suffering of whatever kind. Methodologically, this requires a critique of ideology; i.e., those forms of thought and language that maintain given relations of power and domination (cf. Jaeggi, 2009).

Since progress under monopoly capitalist conditions means the increase of suffering (exploitation of nature, destruction of the planet, alienation of people, etc.), we ask for alternative interpretations of progress. Only in this way can intellectual maturity be achieved. In doing so, critique must constantly renew itself in view of the problems it identifies.

Based on these principles, the goal of critique is to offer solutions for structural problems and their sustainable transformation. By “sustainable,” we mean that we do not merely seek to alleviate individual symptoms in the short term, but to address the roots that cause them. In this sense, we pursue an “emancipatory social science” (Wright, 2017: 50 ff.) that corresponds at its core to the manifold concepts of a democratic post-growth society (cf. Krüger and Meyen, 2018: 348; Buchstein, 2018). Our points of orientation are the real utopias of a post-capitalist, radical democratic and egalitarian society in which social and political justice are realised in the best possible way (cf. Krüger and Meyen, 2018).

Since contemporary capitalist media and communication infrastructures are closely interlinked to various processes of inequality, domination, and violence, this critical project can only be done by uncovering structural and intersectional relations of power in media and communication. In this sense, *being critical* means to uncover the ways in which power, domination, discrimination, control, and inequality are constructed and maintained in society (cf. Wodak, 1996: 204).

Conversely, approaches are *not critical* if they dismiss the goal of intellectual openness and honesty, if they disregard that research is socially grounded and has developed historically, if they overlook that researchers are actively involved in shaping society, if they omit the practical act of negotiating and questioning one's own theoretical assumptions, and ultimately, if they refuse to take part in a collective struggle against suffering and for a sustainable transformation.

## Conclusion

*If we want to produce oppositional thinking,  
we must create oppositional spaces*  
(Lagasnerie, 2018: 92).

Critique focuses on the reasons that prevent intellectual maturity (*Mündigkeit*); it questions “assiduous adaptations to what is valid” (Adorno, 2020: 484) and breaks down the divide between theory and praxis. This concept of critique requires oppositional spaces within which the state of the world is not accepted without resistance. Our network aims at offering this kind of space. We support critical research and teaching that are part of a broader, self-reflexive social critique that aims at combining critical analyses of current media and communication infrastructures with visions about alternative systems in a democratic society.

We criticise power structures (in capitalism) as well as their duplication within academia. For this, we connect with fractured critical scholarly traditions and advocate for critical communication scholarship. Specifically, this means in our publications, talks, workshops, retreats and conferences, we ask questions about ownership and control, about the agenda-setting function of media, about the role of media and communication in the formation of social consciousness, about the relationship between media and other institutions and between communication processes and other social processes as well as international communication patterns. We further question communication policy and decision-making processes as well as journalistic values (cf. Halloran, 1980: 31). In doing so, we see and problematise our own social positions and privileges (global, ethnic, gender, etc.) and acknowledge them as having an influence on our understanding of research.

However, we believe that critical communication research must also be public, inter- and trans-disciplinary, and transformative: *Public* means that we reach out to practitioners (e.g. journalistic, political actors, activists) and participate in public debates. Our research is *interdisciplinary* (i.e., it transcends disciplinary boundaries), *transdisciplinary* (i.e., we operate across the boundaries between academia, society or politics) and *transformative* because we aim at overcoming current social conditions. The guiding principle in these endeavours is our concept of critique, which, regardless of our theoretical and/or methodological differences, provides a shared understanding for the work we do. Fundamental to this is respect for each other and for diverse philosophical, theoretical, and historical traditions. We believe much can be learned from this approach.

In the hope that some readers might share these premises and might consider them for their own research and actions, our concept of critique might serve as a template for other academics who want to escape hegemonic positivist tendencies. It is our conviction that it cannot be the goal to support current (social, political, economic, and or academic) reproduction processes based on the exploitation of humans, animals, and the environment, or by means of unreflective research practices. This holds even more true due to the growing individualisation and competition among researchers, leveraging collaboration and collective resistance necessary to adequately confront key crises (climate, concentrated economic power, etc.). While we focus on the German-speaking field and scholars' experiences thereof, the implications of our endeavours are broader and – we surmise – at least partly applicable to other national academic settings.

## References

- Adorno, T.W. ([1977] 2020) 'Lehrer und Philosophie', in: R. Tiedemann, ed., *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 10.2. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II*, 8th ed. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 474–494.
- Anker, E. S. & R. Felski (Eds.) (2017) *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bohmann, U., Gertenbach, L., & Laux, H. (2010) 'Ein Spiel zwischen Nähe und Distanz. Modelle der Kritik unter nachmetaphysischen Bedingungen', in: K.

- Becker, L. Gertenbach, H. Laux, and T. Reitz, eds., *Grenzverschiebungen des Kapitalismus: Umkämpfte Räume und Orte des Widerstands*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, pp. 56–75.
- Buchstein, H. (2018) ‘Auf dem Weg zur Postwachstumsgesellschaft – Von der Resonanztheorie zur aleatorischen Demokratie’, *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* (28): 209–236.
- Feldmann, D., & Ölkrueg, P. (Eds.) (2019) *Wer ist denn hier der Verfassungsfeind!: Radikalenerlass, Berufsverbote und was von ihnen geblieben ist*. Heinz-Jung-Stiftung. Köln: PapyRossa Verlag.
- Felski, R. (2015) *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (2005) ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, in: Foucault, M., ed., *Schriften*, Vol. IV. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 687–707.
- Foucault, M. (1981) ‘Ist es also wichtig, zu denken?’, in M. Foucault: *Schriften in vier Bänden*. (trans. M. Bischoff). Dits et Ecrits , Vol. IV: 1980-1988, edited by D. Defert and F. Ewald with the collaboration of J. Lagrange. 2005, pp. 219–223.
- Fuchs, C. & Sandoval, M. (2008) ‘Positivism, Postmodernism, or Critical Theory? A Case Study of Communication Students’ Understandings of Criticism’, *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 6: 112–141.
- Grimm, M. (2017) ‘Zur Aktualität Kritischer Theorie’, *Zeitschrift für Politische Theorie*, 8(1): 113–121.
- Hecht, A. (2002) *Die Wissenschaftselite Ostdeutschlands. Feindliche Übernahme oder Integration*. Leipzig: Verlag Faber.
- Hohendahl, P. U. & J. Fisher (Eds.) (2001) *Critical Theory. Current State and Future Prospects*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Holtz-Bacha, C. & A. Kutsch (2002) (Eds.) *Schlüsselwerke für die Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Honneth, A. (2009) *Pathologies of Reason. On the Legacy of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Honneth, A. (2007) *Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jaeggi, R. (2009) ‘Was ist Ideologiekritik?’, in: R. Jaeggi and T. Wesche, eds., *Was ist Kritik?*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 266–295.

- 
- Kannengießer, S., P. Gentzel, C. Wallner, & J. Wimmer (Eds.) (2022) *Kritik (in) der Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Bremen: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft e.V.
- Kannengießer, S. (2020) 'Nachhaltigkeit und das „gute Leben“. Zur Verantwortung der Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft in digitalen Gesellschaften', *Publizistik*, 65: 7–20.
- Karmasin, M., Rath, M. & Thomaß, B. (Eds.) (2013) *Normativität in der Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Krüger, U. & Meyen, M. (2018) 'Auf dem Weg in die Postwachstumsgesellschaft. Plädoyer für eine transformative Kommunikationswissenschaft', *Publizistik*, 63(3): 341–357.
- Kunczik, M., (2002) 'Medien und Gesellschaft', in: P. Viallon and U. Weiland, eds., *Kommunikation – Medien – Gesellschaft. Eine Bestandsaufnahme deutscher und französischer Wissenschaftler*. Berlin: Avinus 2002, pp. 67–101.
- Lagasnerie, G. (2018) *Denken in einer schlechten Welt*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.
- Lindenberger, T. (Ed.) (2006) *Massenmedien im Kalten Krieg. Akteure. Bilder. Resonanzen*. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag.
- Löblich, M. (2010) *Die empirisch-sozialwissenschaftliche Wende in der Publizistik- und Zeitungswissenschaft*. Cologne: Herbert von Halem.
- Löblich, M. (2020) 'Eine grundlegende Neugestaltung. Die Westberliner Wissenschaftspolitik und die Publizistikwissenschaft in den 1980er-Jahren', in: M. Löblich and N. Venema, eds., „Regierungszeit des Mittelbaus“?. *Annäherungen an die Berliner Publizistikwissenschaft nach der Studentenbewegung*. Cologne: Herbert von Halem, pp. 490–544.
- Meyen, M. (2017) 'Die (doppelte) konservative Wende der Kommunikationswissenschaft'. *Founding Conference of the Network for Critical Communications Research*. December 1, 2017. University of Munich.
- Meyen, M. (2004) 'Wer wird Professor für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Journalistik?' *Publizistik* 49(2): 194–206.
- Meyen, M. (2003) *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland. Mediennutzung in der DDR*. Ch. Links: Berlin.

- Network for Critical Communications Research (2017) *Founding Document*. Available here: [https://kritischekommunikationswissenschaft.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/2017-03-netzwerk-krikowi\\_aufruf-zur-gruendung.pdf](https://kritischekommunikationswissenschaft.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/2017-03-netzwerk-krikowi_aufruf-zur-gruendung.pdf).
- Reich, S. (2021) 'A systematic Gender Perspective on Entertainment Theory', in: P. Vorderer and C. Klimmt, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 80–101.
- Riesmeyer, C. & Huber, N. (2011) *Karriereziel Professorin Wege und Strategien in der Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.
- Ruck, M. (2013) 'Vom „geplanten Wunder“ zur „Pleite der Praxis“'. Wahrnehmungen der DDR-Planwirtschaft in der westdeutschen Wirtschaftspresse während des Jahrzehnts der Entspannung', in: M. Niemann and D. Brunner, eds., *Die DDR – eine deutsche Geschichte*. Leiden: Brill | Schöningh.
- Scheu, A. M. (2012) *Adornos Erben in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Eine Verdrängungsgeschichte?* Cologne: Herbert von Halem.
- Schneider, B. (1992) 'Die ostdeutsche Tagespresse – eine traurige Bilanz', *Media Perspektiven* (7): 428–441.
- Schumacher, F. (2002) *Kalter Krieg und Propaganda. Die USA, der Kampf um die Weltmeinung und die ideelle Westbindung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1945-1955*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag.
- Sevignani, S. (2017) 'In der Kommunikationswissenschaft ist der Kalte Krieg auch heute noch nicht zu Ende'. Interviewed by M. Klöckner, *beise*. <https://www.telepolis.de/features/In-der-Kommunikationswissenschaft-ist-der-Kalte-Krieg-auch-heute-noch-nicht-zu-Ende-3772790.html>.
- Simpson, C. (1994) *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945–1960*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tröger, M. (2021) 'Medienrealität ist konstruiert, egal in welchem System'. *Berliner Zeitung*, July 20, 2021. <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/medienforscherin-troeger-das-westfernsehen-passte-nicht-zu-meiner-wirklichkeit-li.171818>.
- Wendelin, M. (2013) 'Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann', in: M. Meyen and T. Wiedemann, eds., *Biografisches Lexikon der Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Köln: Herbert von Halem. <https://blexkom.halemverlag.de/elisabeth-noelle-neumann/>.

- Wiedemann, T. (2019) 'Horst Holzer', in: *Biographisches Lexikon der Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Köln: Herbert von Halem. Available here: <http://blexkom.halemverlag.de/horst-holzer/>.
- Winter, R., & Zima, P. V. (Eds.) (2007) *Kritische Theorie heute*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Wodak, R. (1996) *Disorders in Discourse*. London: Longman.
- Wright, E. O. (2017) *Reale Utopien. Wege aus dem Kapitalismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Zinn, H. (1994) *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*. Boston: Beacon Press.

**Mandy Tröger** is a Walter Benjamin-Fellow of the German Research Foundation (DFG) at the University of Tübingen, Germany. She obtained her PhD at the Institute of Communications Research (ICR) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) (2018). Her research focuses on media and communication history, and critical theory. She joined the organising committee of the Network for Critical Communications Research in 2017, and also works as a media columnist for the Berlin newspaper *Berliner Zeitung*.

**Email:** [mandy.troeger@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:mandy.troeger@uni-tuebingen.de)

**Marlen van den Ecker**, M.A., is a research fellow at the Collaborative Research Centre "The Structural Change of Property" at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany. She is working towards a PhD in sociology on the topic of intellectual property in the digital economy. Her theoretical focus lies on Critical Theory, philosophy of technology, and public sphere(s) on the Internet. Within the Network for Critical Communications Research, she has been an active member of the organising team since its founding in 2017. To promote a public sociology, she contributes to science journalism on topics such as digital economy and AI.

**Email:** [marlen.van.den.ecker@uni-jena.de](mailto:marlen.van.den.ecker@uni-jena.de)

