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Understanding and Stimulating the (Still) Neglected German-French Milieu in Communication and Media Studies

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THE ROOTS OF this special section lie in three joint workshops under the umbrella of the Franco-German University in 2021.¹ Organized at the University of Lyon by Sarah Cordonnier, at the University of Mulhouse by Fabien Bonnet and Carsten Wilhelm, and at the University of Bremen by Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, the workshops took place online due to the constraints of the pandemic. The topics were (1) German-French research in communication studies in the context of the history of communication and media studies (Lyon), 2) German-French design and creation analysis (Mulhouse), and 3) populism and journalism in both countries (Bremen).

Interestingly enough, with these workshops we reached a milieu *beyond the milieu*—colleagues, like Benjamin Krämer, whom we did not initially have in mind when enlisting people to work in German-French environments. Through a “snowball” system, we asked col-

¹ Exploration transnationale des milieux de communication franco-allemands: science, design, culture numérique, journalisme / Deutsch-Französische Kommunikationsmilieus? Wissenschaft, Digitale Kultur und Journalismus: Transnationale Perspektiven [Transnational exploration of Franco-German communication environments: Science, design, digital culture, journalism], project funded by the German-French University, January 7, 2023, <https://fonderie-infocom.net/research/mcfa/>.

leagues to identify who might be interested in our workshops and able to contribute to the topics *and* the languages—French and German exclusively. This was a demand by the Franco-German University, but had the advantage of bringing communication and media researchers together who were able to take on the challenge of reading the other language, whether French or German. The talks were held in both languages and were not translated. For an international, English-speaking public, this is relevant to know: The literature in communication and media studies in France is rarely translated to English, and scholars of both communities, French and German, are largely unfamiliar with the writings on the other side of the Rhine.²

We reached out to and eventually connected with young and also more senior researchers, whose work on French-German topics we had not been aware of before. This in itself was very stimulating and generated some optimism about our aims for a sustainable French-German future, based on the traditions of communication and media studies in both countries, in the face of language barriers and differences in their scientific cultures. Those cultural differences are rooted in distinct historical developments in German and French media and communication studies. We will come back to this point.

We first have to thank our authors, Lisa Bolz (Paris), Nicolas Hubé (Metz), Benjamin Krämer (Munich), and Hedwig Wagner (Flensburg), who have contributed to the workshops and to this special section with new, original work. The four contributions complement each other on a variety of argumentative levels and help us understand the German, the French, *and* the (still underdeveloped) *Franco-German* research field as well. Given that this special section is published in English for an international public, we highly appreciate the commitment to the emerging Franco-German field made by the four articles.

In our view it is no coincidence that all of the special section authors had worked, still work, and/or have studied during their professional life in France *and* Germany. The same is true for the invited peer reviewers—Sabine Bosler, Peter Maurer, Irene Preisinger, and Thomas Weber—who shared their thoughts with the authors in their open reviews.

We view the individual work of each author and reviewer, when assembled together, as greater than the sum of its parts. Read together, the papers make a significant contribution to understanding the history(ies) of communication and media studies and their characteristics. The special section represents Franco-German academic research embedded in the history of the field *in practice*. All of the authors point out and fill in research gaps in the Franco-German field.

² For details, see Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz and Sarah Cordonnier, “French and German Theories of Communication: Comparative Perspectives with Regard to the Social and the Epistemological Body of Science,” in *The Handbook of Global Interventions in Communication Theory*, ed. Yoshitaka Miike and Jing Yin (New York: Routledge, 2022).

Nevertheless, a crucial epistemological question remains: How can we see what is invisible or what is a “gap,” and at the same time identify this gap by naming it? Could it be that the “gaps” themselves are socially and culturally bound? This is not only an epistemological question but also a resource in establishing and pursuing sustainable transcultural scientific debate about it. One step in this direction was represented in our three workshops of 2021. We are grateful to the Franco-German University for financing the English language editing to reach a wider academic public.

Diagnosis and Challenge: The Neglected Long-Term French-German Milieu in Communication and Media Studies

Of course, trans-European research projects have been funded for years.³ But no real German-French research has been conducted along these lines, such that the French SIC (*Sciences de l'information et de la communication*) and German *Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft* would have produced long-term projects in common, with transnational scientific relations that include epistemological, theoretical, and methodological dimensions with outcomes to build on.

There is a strong lack⁴ of systematic and sustainable Franco-German research in communication sciences. The French field is oriented towards the Francophone world, while the post-war German field is geared strongly towards North America.⁵ Within sciences dedicated to communication, German-French researchers are thus scarce and scattered. This is why the German-French milieu is, by now, mostly “invisible” in both countries, and beyond that also to other research communities.⁶ Averbek-Lietz and Cordonnier⁷ had to explain to US colleagues that “French” or “German” communication and media research is not at all integrated in *one* trans-European perspective.

And yet, we are convinced that long-term cross-border communication research is needed: While reinforcing mutual understanding, it would also contribute to the intelligence of scientific, social, political, and cultural communication in both countries. This conviction led us to produce joint academic endeavors and, finally, to take a more active and hopefully more visible path over the last few years. Through workshops and regular meetings aimed at advanced students and researchers from France and Germany, our goal has been both to understand *and* to develop a sustainable, truly interconnected transnational, transcultural Franco-German milieu.

At any rate, several contributors to this special section are active in institutional as well as in scientific roles for the national associations of communication scholars in France and Germany, the SFSIC

³ Sophia Volk, *Comparative Communication Research: A Study of the Conceptual, Methodological and Social Challenges of International Collaborative Studies in Communication Science* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022).

⁴ As already noted by Ursula E. Koch, “Zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland vermitteln,” in *Ich habe dieses Fach erfunden: Wie die Kommunikationswissenschaft an die deutschsprachigen Universitäten kam; 19 biographische Interviews*, ed. Michael Meyen and Maria Löblich (Köln: von Halem, 2004).

⁵ Michael Meyen, “The Founding Parents of Communication: 57 Interviews with ICA Fellows; An Introduction,” *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012); Stefanie Averbek-Lietz, “Sciences de l'information et de la Communication in Frankreich: Über eine fehlende Grenzüberschreitung zwischen zwei Wissenschaftskulturen in Deutschland und Frankreich,” *Lendemains: Etudes Comparées sur la France*, no. 39 (2014).

⁶ Stefanie Averbek-Lietz, Fabien Bonnet, Sarah Cordonnier, and Carsten Wilhelm, “Communication Studies in France: Looking for a ‘Terre du milieu’?” *Publizistik* 64 (2019).

⁷ Averbek-Lietz and Cordonnier, “French and German Theories of Communication.”

(*Société Française des Sciences de l'information et de la communication*) and the DGPK (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft*), including international relations of both academic societies.

Usually, work on transculturality and the international circulation of knowledge explores its institutionalized and/or organized modalities, often neglecting the practical foundations of a professionalized activity.⁸ The emblematic word “milieu” suggests other approaches, with cross-border and cross-disciplinary forms of inquiry.⁹

This term “milieu” is “all-purpose,” with “its fuzzy logic and its character as an intermediary object, allowing for dialogue between human sciences, serving in fact as a revelator of the said and unsaid of disciplinary choices.”¹⁰ For us, Franco-German milieus are a form of “localization,”¹¹ a social space with practices of thinking, writing, and “doing” science. Thus understood, Franco-German milieus connect bodies of ideas (methodologies, theories, and concepts on communication, journalism, and media) and social and professional bodies of work.¹² They engage us to articulate and to contextualize our research and those of colleagues, while paying attention to their scholarly,¹³ academic,¹⁴ and media-based mediations.¹⁵

In this special section, we mainly consider two related milieus: the scientific and the journalistic ones, two milieus constantly observing each other professionally (see the contributions by Bolz and Hubé). In these two cases, we are faced with marginal research fields as far as a German-French point of view is concerned. Indeed, some topics are studied in France and Germany, but very often without any comparative or transnational reference to the neighboring scientific community.¹⁶ This neglect is mentioned in all of the articles published in this special section, so it is a shared social reality we deal with. At the same time, the articles collected here fill research gaps in this very field of Franco-German research, while maintaining a deep interest in the disciplinary background of communication and media studies from a comparative angle.¹⁷

The communication sciences themselves could be seen as a kind of scientific meta-milieu. This perspective allows us to think about the situation in both countries by integrating the history of these disciplines and research fields. In our German-French workshop, we took communication sciences in their broad, internationally common sense of “media studies” as a factual object and as a kind of epistemological tool of analysis in terms of the *social* and the *cognitive* body of science.¹⁸ We aimed to discuss and consolidate the conditions for a critical and situated apprehension of the international environments in which we are involved. In what ways are they constraints

⁸ Pierre Moeglin, ed., *Industrialiser l'éducation: Anthologie commentée (1913–2012)* (Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2016).

⁹ Hartmut Wessler and Stefanie Aeverbeck-Lietz, “Grenzüberschreitende Medienkommunikation: Konturen eines Forschungsfeldes im Prozess der Konsolidierung,” in “Grenzüberschreitende Medienkommunikation,” special issue, *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* 2 (2012).

¹⁰ Paul Arnould, “Milieu,” in *Dictionnaire des sciences humaines*, ed. Patrick Savidan and Sylvie Mesure (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 775–76 (our translation).

¹¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹² Stefanie Aeverbeck-Lietz and Maria Löblich, “Kommunikationswissenschaft vergleichend und transnational: Eine Einführung,” in *Kommunikationswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich: Transnationale Perspektiven*, ed. Aeverbeck-Lietz (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017).

¹³ Stéphane Olivesi, *Sciences de l'information et de la communication: Objets, savoirs, discipline* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2006); Stefanie Aeverbeck-Lietz, Jacques Bonnet, and Fabien Bonnet, “Le discours épistémologique des Sciences de l'information et de la communication,” *Revue Française des sciences de l'information et de la communication* 4 (2014).

¹⁴ Sarah Cordonnier and Hedwig Wagner, “Déployer l'interculturalité: Les étudiants, un vecteur pour la réflexion académique sur l'interculturel: Le cas des sciences consacrées à la communication et aux médias en France et en Allemagne,” in *Interkulturelle Kompetenz in deutsch-französischen Studiengängen*, ed. Gundula Hiller et al. (Wiesbaden:

and/or spaces of freedom, and how can they be recognized and developed?¹⁹

The reflection on international scientific environments confronts us with the complex relationship between what belongs to our common frameworks (academic institutions, themselves increasingly Europeanized and internationalized), and what belongs to individual interactions or affinities—whether intellectual, professional, thematic, or personal.²⁰

We paid attention to academic contexts, to the history of communication sciences in France and Germany, to their disciplinary characteristics, to their convergences and divergences, and to their challenges today (digital methodologies, etc.)—to the practices and ways of doing science in Franco-German environments, with a particular attention to the experience and subjects of young researchers.

We took special care to invite doctoral students to our workshops, in order to share their German-French research projects. Furthermore, all guest editors of this volume had been involved in the Franco-German-Swiss “Doctorales,” organized in 2019 in Mulhouse by the SFSIC, in partnership with the German DGPuK and the Swiss Communication Research Association (SGKM). This long-term dimension of supporting young researchers is crucial to our work. For example, one of the authors of this special issue, Lisa Bolz, obtained her PhD through a German-French “cotutelle de thèse”; she holds a joint degree PhD from the Universities of Paris and Münster—a practice still rare in German-French scientific education, at least in the field of communication and media studies.

Focal Points in this Special Section: Media Studies, Journalism Studies, and the Fields of Political Communication and Populism

As it gathers contributions resulting from our workshops and discussions, the present *History of Media Studies* special section is one outcome of our overall project. At the same time, it marks a new step in our collective enterprise. Indeed, its production involved many participants from our milieu: first, the *authors* of course, but also the *reviewers*; all of them hail, as pointed out, in different ways from German-French environments, where they act as researchers and as teachers with comparative and/or transnational/transcultural topics. And, hopefully soon, some *readers* will be able to identify our group and, if they so wish, nurture our “milieu” by joining it: The process of producing knowledge is inseparable from the process of producing the “milieus” where this knowledge is relevant and useful. Or: to

Springer VS, 2017); Sarah Cordonnier and Hedwig Wagner, “L’interculturalité académique entre cadrages et interstices: Une enquête franco-allemande sur les sciences consacrées à la communication,” in *France-Allemagne: incommunications et convergences*, ed. Gilles Rouet and Michael Oustinoff (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018).

¹⁵ Carsten Wilhelm and Olivier Thévenin, “The French Context of Internet Studies: Sociability and Digital Practice,” in *Kommunikationswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich: Transnationale Perspektiven*, ed. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017).

¹⁶ See also Susanne Merkle, *Politischer Journalismus in Deutschland und Frankreich: Ein Vergleich systemspezifischer Einflüsse und der Debatte um TTIP in der Presse* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019); Viviane Harkort, “Traduire l’intraduisible: Les correspondants allemands face à l’élection présidentielle française,” in *L’élection présidentielle de 2022: vers une réinvention des processus démocratiques?*, ed. Philippe Mark and Nicolas Pélissier (Paris: L’Harmattan, forthcoming).

¹⁷ Concerning the need for comparative research, see also Carsten Wilhelm, “Comparer les imaginaires sociaux du numérique en SIC: vers une théorie critique située des rationalisations numériques,” *Approches Théoriques en Information-Communication* 3, no. 2 (2021).

¹⁸ See also Averbeck-Lietz and Löblich, “Kommunikationswissenschaft vergleichend und transnational.”

¹⁹ In this sense, see also “Exclusions in the History of Media Studies/Exclusiones en la historia de los estudios de medios,” special section, *History of Media Studies* 2 (2022).

²⁰ Yoshitaka Miike and Jin Ying, eds., *The Handbook of Global Interventions in Communication Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

be more aware that the lingua franca English is fine, but that translation alone is not abolishing all barriers stemming from distinctive, long-term histories in the field.

The individual value of each of the four contributions in this volume comes from the important expertise of the authors, who have deep insights in comparative research (and teaching and learning) in French-German contexts. Nevertheless, the present contributions do not cover or represent the whole German-French communication milieu, even if this latter domain is small.²¹ But together, they provide an understanding of the ways and conditions that allow milieus to be both a resource and a complex topic for research: They are an enactment of research about cross-border milieus, while being situated within an (albeit thin) German-French milieu.

It is, then, a unique mixture of texts that would, at first glance, seem to be heterogeneous—but which, in their combined force, gives a sense of this “always-under-construction,” ever-evolving German-French milieu. The texts overlap, not only by the shared German-French milieus of their authors, but also by topics and by at least some perspectives. The emphasis on a Bourdieusian perspective in this special section, for example, had not been anticipated by the guest editors.

As Benjamin Krämer puts it, at the University of Munich there is a milieu focusing on Bourdieu. But this is not the case in German communication studies as a whole. Krämer shows that Bourdieu is still underestimated and also partly unknown in Germany with regard to political and populist communication. When it comes to journalism research and its history, the Bourdieu School is still a leading one in France but not in Germany, as highlighted by Lisa Bolz and Nicolas Hubé.

We have to take into account that Bolz, Hubé, and Krämer focus more on communication studies. Hubé is situated at the crossroads with political science, while Hedwig Wagner invites the reader to learn more about the—also neglected—French-German milieu in media studies. Nevertheless, Wagner highlights some French-German research programs, as Bolz does for journalism research—both integrated not least in broader aims to strengthen European outlooks and affiliations. The Franco-German University is involved in some of these programs, which include a broader normative viewpoint of German-French reconciliation after World War II.

From a more theoretical and methodological viewpoint, it is interesting to see that not only Pierre Bourdieu but also Norbert Elias is mentioned as a key to historically sensible research (see Hubé’s contribution). In our estimation, not only Bourdieu but also Elias are

²¹ For media systems and media content research, see Merkle, “Politischer Journalismus in Deutschland und Frankreich”; for media usage research, see Wilhelm and Thévenin, “The French Context of Internet Studies”; for media pedagogics, see Sabine Bosler, “Politiques publiques et légitimité des savoirs en éducation aux médias: une approche comparative franco-allemande,” *Revue Française des Sciences de l’Information et de la Communication* 22 (2022).

widely neglected in German communication studies—for Elias, with the exception of the figurational approach developed by Andreas Hepp, Uwe Hasebrink, and others.²²

Some other standard references from the German side are also mentioned in both milieus: Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas (in the texts of Bolz and Hubé). Both references as such would—as with Bourdieu and Elias—need more research on their German-French interlacing, in what is a mostly divided history of ideas, at least in communication and media research. For the Weber adoption in France—also mentioned by Hubé—it is obviously relevant that Weber is coming from the theory of social action and *verstehende Soziologie*, close to some paradigms in French sociology and SIC.

Niklas Luhmann (referenced by both Bolz and Hubé)²³ is mentioned more as an antipode to the more process-oriented research on communication practices and representations in the French tradition. This tradition (see Wagner and Krämer on this point, too) is much closer to critical schools of thinking than the German one, which, after the Nazi era, aimed for a “value free,” non-normative approach to social research, isolating itself not least from the Frankfurt School tradition,²⁴ but also from British Cultural Studies (mentioned by Wagner as an influence on German media studies). British cultural studies came to German communication research relatively late, around the year 2000.²⁵ A late adoption of Cultural Studies is also true for the French tradition, but for other reasons: The French SIC’s traditional socio-semiotic approach included cultural views—and helped inspired the British scholars.²⁶

We can observe some main common traits among the articles published in this special section:

First, in their own way, the four approaches involve epistemological, methodological, and historical vigilance, as well as a clear knowledge of the “risks” (Wagner) taken when diving into intersecting histories.

Second, they show how such inquiries require a careful selection, and then combination, of various scales, entries, and parameters, such as the role of scientific disciplines, influence of places (be they region, country, city, etc.), practices and dynamics of production, circulation and/or reception, etc. In their own ways, all four contributions intermingle the observation of research, teaching, and professional fields, seized through the observation of national disciplines and their international influences, and/or through various travels of theories, authors, concepts, or topics. These processes require a subtle and refined methodological approach. As noted for instance by Hubé, who writes:

²² See Andreas Hepp, Andreas Breiter, and Uwe Hasebrink, eds., *Communicative Figurations: Transforming Communications in Times of Deep Mediatizations* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

²³ See also Wilhelm, “Comparer les imaginaires sociaux.”

²⁴ Hanno Hardt, “Am Vergessen scheitern: Essay zur historischen Identität der Publizistikwissenschaft,” in *Die Spirale des Schweigens: Zum Umgang mit der nationalsozialistischen Zeitungswissenschaft*, ed. Wolfgang Duchkowitsch, Fritz Hausjell, and Bernd Semrad (Münster: LIT, 2004); Andreas Scheu, *Adornos Erben in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Eine Verdrängungsgeschichte?* (Köln: von Halem, 2012).

²⁵ Katja Schwer, “‘Typisch deutsch’? Zur zögerlichen Rezeption der Cultural Studies in der deutschen Kommunikationswissenschaft,” *Münchner Beiträge zur Kommunikationswissenschaft* 2 (2005); Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz, and Tanja Thomas, eds., *Schlüsselwerke der Cultural Studies* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2009).

²⁶ See Olivesi, “Sciences de l’information et de la communication”; Averbeck-Lietz, “Sciences de l’information et de la Communication.”

Far from confronting French and German approaches, this investigation was only made possible by taking advantage of each national one.

Third, the contributions of this volume could not exist outside the assumption that all knowledge is situated, but in ways that are particularly difficult to untangle in such contexts. This implies that the articles provide access to their relations with a given research, but also with the researcher dealing with them (and the thickness of their inquiries), and, finally, with the social role of science in different (national) societies and historical periods.

In this sense, the four contributions (and the ones to come afterwards!) furnish a better understanding of various (inter or trans-) national contexts and traditions: theoretical, methodological, academic, (inter)disciplinary, etc.

Outlook: Why and How to Strengthen the German-French Communication Milieu?

How can we develop theoretical and methodological foundations in order to “densify” the concept of “milieu” and expand it beyond the thematic fields? And why should we pursue our efforts towards a German-French milieu (rather than any other random combination of countries)?

More than a decade ago, and after a comparative analysis of the state of communication studies in various countries, two researchers pointed out a crucial problem about the “internationalization” of sciences:

While we will note some significant exceptions to this rule (e.g., to a certain extent, *Germany and France, insulated by stronger national traditions*), the general tendency, particularly for smaller countries, has not been towards internationalisation in a genuine sense. On the contrary, it has been towards an increasing “provincialisation,” as a hegemonic centre progressively transforms and reshapes its peripheries in its own image. Given the reliance of communication and media studies upon national traditions in other disciplines, fields and areas, this development raises troubling questions about the capacity of contemporary research projects to play an active role in their contemporary societies, above and beyond standards imposed by an artificial “international” benchmark.²⁷

Our concerns echo this statement quite directly. For us, it is crucial to maintain epistemic diversity, as well as an anchorage of academic practices within their social and political contexts. This implies a resistance to a dominant Anglo-American perspective, which imposes itself in a standardized and non-satisfactory way (even for many researchers working in the countries in question)—not necessarily

²⁷ Juha Koivisto and Peter D. Thomas, *Mapping Communication and Media Research: Conjunctures, Institutions, Challenges* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2010), 11 (our italics).

through a direct opposition, but mainly by putting our focus towards what is of importance in (trans-)regional contexts.

France and Germany are, indeed, good places to resolutely sustain the construction of a “milieu”—a (trans-)regional cooperation between countries that are geographically in contact but do not share the same language. (In this way, what is at stake here differs from, for instance, the case of Latin America as a world-regional field of communication and media studies.) Both countries host a “communication science” and/or “media science” discipline, developed in a very original and situated way. Far from being peripheral in an economic or political sense, these European countries have nonetheless lost their centrality over the past decades, due to transversal movements that also affect them internally, and which reflect within our disciplines as partly also shown with this special section: the rise of populism, the European unification process, the digital transformation, and an increasing visibility of de-colonial and post-colonial voices, to name just a few. The strength of a solid and reputable academic system, combined with the relative weakness of our disciplines in the “conversation of disciplines”²⁸ as well as in the international communication study field, could be turned into an advantage as we build new paths towards transnational and transregional research.

²⁸ Robert T. Craig, “Communication in the Conversation of Disciplines,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2008).

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