Challenges of Doing Historical Research in Communication Studies: On the Necessity to Write a Methodologically Informed History of the Methods of Communication Studies

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IN THE FOLLOWING essay, I want to outline the challenges of *doing* historical research in communication studies. A pair of challenges, in particular, affect media and communication studies and their overall history:

1. The history of methods is not yet written in the field of communication research, beyond studies of "great figures" and their outstanding contributions with a focus on paradigm history, as in the case of Paul F. Lazarsfeld.¹ In addition to Lazarsfeld, in the German-speaking context at least, a great deal of attention is given to Max Weber and his early twentieth-century plan for a presseenquête, a proposed mixed-method scheme of content analysis, document analysis, interviews, and participatory observation. Weber never managed to realize this plan, but interestingly enough, anticipated Lazarsfeld's model of teamwork conducted by research groups.²

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¹ Wolfgang R. Langenbucher, ed., *Paul F. Lazarsfeld* (München: Ölschläger, 1990); and Jefferson Pooley, "Lazarsfeld, Paul F.," in *The International Encyclopedia in Communication Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Robert T. Craig (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

² Michael Meyen and Maria Löblich, Klassiker der Kommunikationswissenschaft (Konstanz: UVK 2006), 145–61; Siegfried Weischenberg, Max Weber und die Entzauberung der Medienwelt: Theorien und Querelen – eine andere Fachgeschichte (Wiesbaden: Springer

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2. The Weber's idea had already inspired empirical research by students and doctoral candidates in sociology and newspaper studies by the early Weimar period.³ More recently, Herta Herzog's methodological innovations in early uses-and-gratifications research has attracted interest.⁴ lack of a methodologically reflective history is—paradoxically—still more glaring for the subfield of communication history, with its double inheritance from communication studies and from disciplinary history.

Fully aware that the leading (trans-)national associations of communication studies include divisions devoted to communication history (like the ICA, IAMCR, ECREA, and the DGPuK in Germany), the focus of this article is exclusively on Germany, with particular attention to the subfield of communication history.

After a promising start in 1916, German newspaper studies [Zeitungswissenschaft] cooperated with the Nazis after Hitler's 1933 seizure of power. For the regime, newspaper studies were helping to legitimate the dictatorship and educate journalists.⁵ After 1945, German newspaper studies scholars found themselves discredited for their collaboration. As a break with the past, the field adopted a new label, Publizistikwissenschaft, and sought to emulate the US's quantitatively oriented communication research.

Maria Löblich, in her analysis of the German discipline's reconstruction during the 1950s and 1960s, traced the ascendant social science paradigm, with its strong focus on positivism and critical rationalism and a special interest in standardized content analysis.⁶ Petra Klein's foundational work on Henk Prakke and Publizistikwissenschaft at the University of Münster points in the same direction: A new social science orientation, in conscious contrast to the historicalphilosophical orientation of the 1920s, prevailed.⁷

It should be highlighted that, from an institutional viewpoint, communication studies [Kommunikationswissenschaft] and media studies [Medienwissenschaft] in Germany are two different disciplines. Media studies developed during the 1970s out of literature, language, and film studies, with its own professional association, Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft. Furthermore, degree programs in communication and in media studies are typically separated from each other (though the Universities of Leipzig and Bremen are exceptions).

Löblich's groundbreaking work on the history of German communication studies was broadly adopted internationally to understand the postwar shift toward positivism in German communication studies, but in fact the historiography of the field of communication studies as well as of its methods remains a marginal topic within the discipline. Academic positions in the German field of communica-

- VS 2012), 78-164; Michael Meyen and Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, "Nicht standardisierte Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Eine Entwicklungsgeschichte zur Einführung," in Handbuch nicht standardisierte Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft, ed. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz and Michael Meyen (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016).
- ³ Stefanie Averbeck, Kommunikation als Prozess: Soziologische Perspektiven in der Zeitungswissenschaft 1927–1933 (Münster: LIT, 1999).
- ⁴ Elisabeth Klaus and Josef Seethaler, eds., What Do We Really Know about Herta Herzog (Frankfurt: Peter Lang,
- ⁵ Arnulf Kutsch, "Die Entstehung des Deutschen Zeitungswissenschaftlichen Verbandes," Jahrbuch für Kommunikationsgeschichte 12 (2010); and Jochen Jedraszczyk, "Politische Überformung: Hans Amandus Münster und die Instrumentalisierung der Leipziger Zeitungswissenschaft im Nationalsozialismus," in Die Entdeckung der Kommunikationswissenschaft: 100 Jahre Kommunikationswissenschaft in Leipzig, ed. Erik Koenen (Köln: Herbert von Halem, 2016).
- ⁶ Maria Löblich, Die empirischsozialwissenschaftliche Wende in der Publizstik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (Köln: von Halem, 2010).
- ⁷ Petra Klein, Henk Prakke und die funktionale Publizistik: Über die Entgrenzung der Publizistik- zur Kommunikationswissenschaft (Münster: Lit, 2006).

tion studies oriented to the discipline's history or to communication history have declined in numbers over the last decade.⁸ Currently, university departments do not undertake many efforts to establish historical analysis at the heart of the discipline, and most neglect the history of communication studies. Indeed, the legitimacy of doing historical communication research and historicizing the field of communication studies is under extreme pressure in German communication studies. There are only a few professors still working in this field and they do it often in addition to other subjects. There are few resources and restricted career opportunities compared to other subfields of communication studies. In response to such conditions, the German Yearbook for Communication Research [Jahrbuch für Kommunikationsgeschichte] is slated to publish a debate on the legitimization of the historical field within communication studies. Contributors include well-known authors in the field of the history of communication and of communication studies, such as Maria Löblich, Erik Koenen, Michael Meyen, Simon Sax, Josef Seethaler, Jürgen Wilke, and others. They discuss the lack of attention to history in German communication studies in a broad manner—the historiography of media and communication as research objects—but also the history of the discipline. This debate is very relevant, but it also illustrates the problem once more: The small milieu of historically-oriented communication researchers in German, Swiss, and Austrian communication studies is—in that debate yet again—more or less isolated from the broader field of communication studies in German-speaking countries.9

This isolation of the historical field is mirrored when it comes to methods. The remainder of this essay is not on methods in the subfield of communication history as such, but instead on the theoretical and methodologically relevant problem of how to produce a research project in applied historical communication research that has limited resources available and is restricted in terms of time and people-power, but also restricted regarding knowledge on how to transfer methods of communication research to historical research topics and objects. At least in the Germanophone context, these problems are so fundamental that the more ambitious project of thinking about methodological meta-reflection seems far off indeed. Knowing more about the history of methods and their underlying methodological reflections—this is my argument—might help us to advance methodologies in general and to close the gap between historical and systematic lines of communication research. I will not fulfill that task in this short article; my aim here, instead, is to highlight the problem.

In an ongoing project on the communication history of the League of Nations (financed by the German Research Foundation or DFG),

⁸ Michael Meyen, "Die historische Perspektive in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Spuren einer Verlustgeschichte," in Geschichte, Öffentlichkeit, Kommunikation: Festschrift für Bernd Sösemann, ed. Patrick Merziger et al. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010).

⁹ I do not refer to the discipline of history and its subfield of media history here.

including a team of three researchers (project leader, postdoc, and doctoral student) and supported by two student assistants (from the BA program in communication studies at the University of Bremen), we sketch a collective biography, archive analysis, and a historical content analysis.¹⁰ Only the content analysis is discussed here.

Content analysis is one of the classic methods in communication studies, not only since the days of Harold Lasswell and Bernard Berelson in the quantitative realm, but also with Siegfried Kracauer as a precursor of qualitative content analysis. A review of standard German literature in the field shows that there are only a few overviews on the historical paths and development of the methods available, and that they mostly come with a narrow Germanand also English-language focus.¹¹ There are, moreover, only a few methodological hints as to how one can apply this method to a historical research object, typically the printing press—especially related to the question of how to combine non-standardized and standardized methodologies in historical content analysis. 12

In our project, we learned that not only content, but also *context* (as Kracauer told us) is relevant.¹³ Furthermore, the practice of coding by coders without sufficient background knowledge is challenging: In historical research, student assistants and even other coders often lack knowledge of the historical context, not least with regard to media, communication, and journalism history, which was only rarely taught in German BA and MA programs in communication studies over the last several decades.

How was the League of Nations covered by the press? We wanted to learn about this by historical newspaper analysis, operationalized by the standard method of content analysis, conducted by a team of people with diverse knowledge in German and global history, in media and communication history, as well as in methods and their history. So, we faced the daily challenges of research projects when it comes to historical research in communication studies of any kind: a lack of contextual knowledge and a lack of clear-cut methodology.

What we developed is a semi-standardized procedure to analyze the coverage of the League of Nations in the historical press of the Weimar Republic in Germany. Why semi-standardized? We are still at the stage of learning inductively from our material, the former German daily Vorwärts, the official newspaper of the Social Democratic Party, founded in 1878. Fine-tuning our categories and sensitizing our coding practices has taken longer than we thought. Doing this kind of research is not free from difficulties and, again, contextrelated decision-making. At first, our aim was to conduct a comparative content analysis on the coverage of the League of Nations in different national contexts: Switzerland (for the news factor of locality,

10 Arne Gellrich, Erik Koenen, and Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, "The Epistemic Project of Open Diplomacy and the League of Nations: Co-evolution between Diplomacy, PR and Journalism," Corporate Communications 24, no. 4 (2020). The student assistants are Gina Franke and Miriam Sachs—many thanks for the important work they do.

11 Heinz Bonfadelli, Medieninhaltsforschung (Konstanz: UVK 2002), 82-86;

Werner Früh, Inhaltsanalyse, 9th ed. (Konstanz: UVK 2017), 11-13; Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, "Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse und Diskursanalyse: Überlegungen zu Gemeinsamkeiten, Unterschieden und Grenzen," in Diskursanalyse für die Kommunikationswissenschaft: Theorie, Vorgehen, Erweiterungen, eds. Thomas Wiedemann and Christine Lohmeier (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 90-91. 12 Jürgen Wilke, "Quantitative Methoden in der Kommunikationsgeschichte," in Wege zur Kommunikationsgeschichte, eds. Manfred Bobrowski and Wolfang R. Langenbucher (München: Olschläger 1987); Wilke, "Quantitative Verfahren in der Kommunikationsgeschichte," in Kommunikationsgeschichte: Positionen und Werkzeuge: Ein diskursives Hand- und Lehrbuch, eds. Klaus Arnold, Markus Behmer, and Bernd Semrad (Münster: Lit, 2008); Ute Nawratil and Pilomen Schönhagen, "Die Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Rekonstruktion der Kommunikationswirklichkeit," in Qualitative Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Ein Studienbuch, ed. Hans Wagner (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009); Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz, Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, 2019; Rudolf Stöber, "Historische Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Die Standards einer Triangulation," in Handbuch nicht standardisierte Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft, eds. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz and Michael Meyen (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016), 314-15. 13 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis," Public Opinion Quarterly 16, no. 4 (1952).

as the League was established in Geneva), France and Great Britain (the superpowers in the League), and Germany (as the newcomer in 1926 and an early departee in 1933 with the rise of the Nazi state). With only three people and three student assistants (all also involved in the other parts of the project, the collective biography of journalists mostly done by Erik Koenen and Arne Gellrich, and the document analysis from the Geneva archives of the League's Information section mostly done by me), it was not possible. We failed to conduct an extensive content analysis of several European newspapers. But the time restrictions were only one of the challenges.

In official German digital newspaper databases, most of the historical newspapers are not sufficiently prepared for standardized content analysis. The database of scanned newspapers is small and often—due to the variant-rich traditional typefaces like Fraktur—not well-suited to Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software.¹⁴ In fact, the newspaper under analysis, the Vorwärts, is available in an OCR format, but only page-wise and not by article (what we would have needed). So we first identified—this step was OCR-based—the relevant articles by searching for the keyword Völkerbund (League of Nations), but then had to extract on our own the PDFs per article without being able to rely on automated forms of content analysis. This process of selection and curation of our material under analysis represented a huge workload, even before any codebook could be developed. Fortunately, Koenen, an expert in historical text- and data-mining, was part of the team—so we knew what was not possible to do. Our process in this project was and is analog content analysis. 15

Our codebook started with methodological reflections and the adoption of standard categories from prior work by Meyen and Schweiger as well as by Rössler, with particular attention to the deductive categories authors, sources, topics, actors named per article, and places and organizations named per article. 16 Nevertheless, our codebook of now seventeen pages grew inductively while we did the coding. During a process that lasted more than a year, we fine-tuned the codes and also extended them via close reading. To give an example: The coverage of 1920 (in which World War I, peace, and the general aims of the League were reported) was significantly different from the coverage 1925 (in which the preparation of the German entrance to the League is the dominant topic). Compared to 1920, the 1925 coverage in Vorwärts confronted us with the task of coding new individual actors, new corporate actors, and other states as actors. Jürgen Wilke highlighted the same problem, the volatility of content items, and opted for "pragmatic solutions" 17—to standardize coding without losing the hermeneutic relation to the journalistic article under

¹⁴ Erik Koenen, "Digitale Perspektiven in der Kommunikations- und Mediengeschichte: Erkenntnispotentiale und Forschungsszenarien für die historische Presseforschung," Publizistik 63, no. 4 (2018); and Lisa Bolz, "Nachrichtenpräsentation im 19. Jahrhundert: Der Wandel von Nachrichtenproduktion und Berichterstattung durch technische Innovationen," Medien & Zeit 35, no. 1

¹⁵ Erik Koenen, Falko Krause, and Simon Sax, "Die Berliner Volkszeitung digital erforschen: Digitales Kuratieren, Metadaten, Text Mining: Praktiken und Potentiale historischer Presseforschung in digitalen Kontexten," in Digitale Kommunikation und Kommunikationsgeschichte: Perspektiven, Potentiale, Problemfelder, ed. Christian Schwarzenegger et al. (in press, 2022). 16 Michael Meyen and Wolfgang Schweiger, "Sattsam bekannte Uniformität? Eine Inhaltsanalyse der DDR-Tageszeitungen Neues Deutschland und Junge Welt (1960-1989)," Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft 56, no. 1 (2017); and Patrick Rössler, Inhaltsanalyse, 3rd ed. (Konstanz: UVK (UTB), 2017).

¹⁷ Wilke, Quantitative Verfahren, 335.

analysis. At first we were frustrated by this process of constantly adapting the codebook, but then we learned its deeper meaning: We saw how a now-historical journal was dynamically reporting, driven by events but also by its own partisan views on German politics, not least in relation to France, and touched by normative views on multilateralism, peace-building, and humanitarian problems in interwar times. Interestingly enough, the Vorwärts was pro-League, but nevertheless often denounced the League, ironically, for having been more of a club to talk than to act—maybe underestimating the "soft power" of communication which, nowadays, is counted as one of the League's great achievements.¹⁸

We are sure that, when we change our focus, object, and material when we switch to Swiss or French papers, for example—we can use our codebook developed for analyzing a German newspaper. But the codebook will probably have to be adapted again, to new individual and corporate actors, additional reference nations, national goals, and normative views that come to the fore in the reporting.

What can we learn from this example and from our research experience for the history of communication and media studies? There is, first, not much reflection on the methodology of historical communication research. A second, related issue is the dearth of published work on the history of the field's prevailing methodological frameworks for historical research questions and historical media texts.

Now we are especially interested in learning how other research teams handle such problems. We are planning a workshop on the methodology of communication history in spring 2022, together with the DGPuK History Section and the Institute for Newspaper Research at Dortmund, headed by the press historian Astrid Blome. The history of methodology—and therefore the history of communication studies—is included as a main topic. The workshop is intended as a step toward institutionalizing reflection on historical methodologyto restore such reflection (again) to the milieu of scientific organizations.¹⁹ It is sobering to realize that, more than 35 years ago, at a DGPuK conference on communication history in Vienna, this was a crucial demand.20

It is not accidental that I name a number of colleagues and scholars, and often name the same ones whether I am referring to communication studies history or to methods in historical analysis. This shows again the narrowness of the German-speaking milieu of historical communication research, at least in comparison to the field in the US and in broader European contexts. The German niche needs very much to integrate into transnational networks like the History of Media Studies working group of the Consortium for the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine (CHSTM). This will, hopefully,

¹⁸ Joseph S. Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

¹⁹ For further information, see "Erkenntnisperspektiven und Methoden der Kommunikations- und Mediengeschichte: Anwendungsfelder, Herausforderungen, Innovationen, Praxis," Dortmund Überrascht (website), accessed September 13, 2021. 20 Manfred Bobrowsky and Wolfgang R. Langenbucher, eds., Wege zur Kommunikationsgeschichte (München: Ölschläger, 1987).

strengthen the German milieu, not least with the aim to advance international visibility and career paths for young German-speaking researchers. As a result, writing and talking in English is a challenge, but a must to support the whole subfield—in Germany and beyond.

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