Università
della
Svizzera
italiana

**Facoltà
di
comunicazione,
cultura
e società**

Syllabus
Traditions of Communication Sciences

Spring 2025
Course director: Prof. Katharina Lobinger
3 ECTS

Aims

The term "communication sciences" (mind the plural!) highlights the fact that communication is studied and theorized from various disciplinary angles, including very different approaches and theoretical lenses that stem from e.g., sociology, psychology, semiotics, linguistics, informatics, and many more. This leads to the question whether communication is actually a discipline, a transdisciplinary field, or an area of contact (and thus also of friction) where different disciplines meet and overlap. Another related question is when communication sciences were actually "born" or established: With the advent of technically mediated communication and mass communication, as many social scientific approaches argue, or with the use of symbolic exchange, as often argued in approaches stemming from the humanities?

This high interdisciplinarity of communication sciences can be considered the beauty and the beast at the same time: The beauty because it gives researchers great flexibility in thinking about social, cultural, and technological aspects of communication and focus on these aspects from different perspectives. This certainly allows for more complete views on complex issues. The beast because transdisciplinarity complicates situating and locating one's own research without getting lost in interdisciplinarity and the theoretical complexity of the field. It is thus important for Ph.D. students to be aware of the different traditions, be able to locate their own approach, identify the field of reference and its relevant publication outlets, associations, and experts. From their "home" paradigm and position they can then comfortably enjoy the flexibility the transdisciplinarity that communication sciences allow for.

This course will tackle these questions and has two main aims:

- to foster the creation of common ground among Ph.D. students in communication and
- to help students locate their own work
- to identify transformations and challenges in current communication sciences

Topics

The course is divided into three main themes: 1) *Basic terms of communication sciences*, 2) *Mapping the field and locating the own research* and *3) Current challenges of (doing research in) communication sciences.*

1. Basic terms of communication sciences

After a general introduction into the course contents, the main concepts of communication sciences will be discussed and deconstructed. Among other questions, we will focus on the concept of communication itself. We will elaborate on what communication is – and what communication is not. This is important to limit and narrow the field of inquiry. We will also discuss the key notion "medium". What is a medium? What are different definitions of media? Are communication sciences necessarily concerned with mediated communication? This session will be based on selected readings that are announced in the preparatory session. Students will prepare short oral presentations that summarize these texts. Moreover, students will be asked to discuss how they use these basic concepts in their own research.

2. Mapping the field and locating the own project

In a second step, we will look at some of the involved disciplines, various "founding texts" or "founding approaches" and selected core theories of communication sciences and put them in relation to each other. This mapping exercise shall help create an overview of communication sciences. We will particularly focus on research that is located at the intersections of the involved disciplines. It will be of particular interest which interrelations do exist between the involved interdisciplinary traditions, how concepts migrate between disciplines and what the involved disciplinary approaches can learn from one another. Starting from the mandatory readings, participants will locate their own approach within the conceptual map.

After this conceptual work, Ph.D. students will position their own research. They will be asked to discuss which other approaches are related to or could be helpful for their project(s). They will be asked to write a short comment (approx. 500 words) that sums up these reflections.

3. Current challenges of (doing research in) communication sciences

In a third step, current challenges and trends in the communication sciences will be discussed. This serves to assess which (highly heterogeneous) competencies are currently required to conduct research in various fields of communication sciences and how these competencies are transforming. Following this, it will be discussed what it means to conduct "good research" in the communication sciences. This discussion is based on an analysis of important or thematically relevant journals, associations, and conferences, as well as on critical movements that address the requirements for "good research", "academic excellence" and the challenging career paths in academia.

Upon concluding the course, PhD students will be requested to compose a brief comment (approx. 500 words) that incorporates their reflections on future directions into their earlier statements.

Course structure and organization:

The course structure is as follows:

1) A preparatory meeting of approximately 2 hours is intended to discuss the course objectives. Additionally, during this meeting participants are assigned selected texts based on their disciplinary backgrounds and PhD topics. Each year, the course bibliography consists of a fixed portion of standard texts from which these readings are selected and a flexible part that is adjusted according to the background of the students.

2) In two blocks of two days respectively, the aforementioned course topics will be explored

Pedagogical approach

After an introduction by Professor Katharina Lobinger, Ph.D. students will present the mandatory and assigned readings that serve as the basis on which the further work and discussions in class are grounded. Besides these short presentations, the sessions will be organized in discussion groups and workshops. At the end of each session, students are given time to prepare their written statements. Additional space will be dedicated to bottom-up requests stemming from discussions in class.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the course will be based on the following items:

1. A **preliminary 300 words statement** containing the following information: 1) topic of the Ph.D. research, 2) mention of the tradition of communication science the participant is most familiar with and 3) a list of three publications that are most relevant for the Ph.D. research. (If possible, please include the PDF files.) The statement must be submitted one week before the preparatory meeting on iCorsi. Students are also asked to indicate in which of the following languages they feel comfortable reading scientific texts (English, German, Italian, French). The aim is to provide insights from different academic traditions.
2. **In class-resentations** (approx. 10 minutes, around 5-8 slides per assigned text). The presentations should summarize the main concepts of the readings that are individually assigned during the preparatory meeting.
3. **Discussion in class** and contributions to **the course Wiki**.
4. Two **short comments (approx. 500 words).**

Readings

Mandatory readings:

All participants are requested to read the following articles before session 1. Related task: Searching for information regarding who the authors of the text are and what tradition of communication sciences they represent.

Donsbach, W. (2006). The identity of communication research. *Journal of Communication, 56*(3), 437-448. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00294.x

Craig, R. T. (2016). Traditions of communication theory. In K. Bruhn Jensen, R. T. Craig, J. D. Pooley, & E. W. Rothenbuhler (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (pp. 1-10): John Wiley & Sons.

Further reading will be assigned during the preparatory session.

Individual readings: (assigned in the preparatory meeting; list to be adapted to participants needs and backgrounds)

Braman, S. (2004). Technology. In J. D. H. Downing (Ed.), The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies (pp. 123-144). Sage.

Bruhn Jensen, K. (2002a). Introduction: The state of convergence in media and communication research. In K. Bruhn Jensen (Ed.), A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies. (pp. 1-11). Routledge.

Bruhn Jensen, K. (2002b). The humanities in media and communication research. In K. Bruhn Jensen (Ed.), A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies. (pp. 15-39). Routledge.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing mediatization: contexts, traditions, arguments. Communication Theory, 23(3), 191-202. doi:10.1111/comt.12019

Hilbert, M., Barnett, G., Blumenstock, J., Contractor, N., Diesner, J., Frey, S., et al. (2019). Computational Communication Science: a methodological catalyzer for a maturing discipline. International Journal of Communication, 13, 3912–3934.

Mansell, R. (2017). The mediation of hope: Communication technologies and inequality in perspective. International Journal of Communication, 11, 4285-4304.

McQuail, D. (2010). McQuail's Mass Communication Theory (6th edition). Sage. (The Future of Mass Communication pp. 539-547).

McQuail, D., & Deuze, M. (2022). McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory (7th edition). Sage. (Introduction to the book pp. 3-28).

Meyrowitz, J. (1994). Medium theory. In D. Crowley & D. Mitchell (Eds.), Communication Theory Today (pp. 50-77). Stanford University Press.

Murdock, G. (2002). Media, culture and modern times. Social science investigations. In K. Bruhn Jensen (Ed.), A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies. (pp. 40-57). Routledge.

Schwarzenegger, C., Lobinger, K., & Balbi, G. (2020). Academic traditions in communication: Expanding the field and redrawing the boundaries. ECREA 2018 special panel report. Studies in Communication Sciences, 19(2), 233–237. https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2019.02.010

Shah, D. V., Cappella, J. N., & Neuman, W. R. (2015). Big data, digital media, and computational social science: Possibilities and perils. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 659(1), 6-13.

Siles, I., & Boczkowski, P. (2012). At the intersection of content and materiality: a texto-material perspective on the use of media technologies. Communication Theory, 22(3), 227-249.

Sterne, J. (2006). Communication as techné. In G. J. Sheperd, J. S. John, & T. Striphas (Eds.), Communication As...: Perspectives on Theory (pp. 91-98). Sage.

Strippel, C., Bock, A., Katzenbach, C., Mahrt, M., Merten, L., Nuernbergk, C., et al. (2018). Die Zukunft der Kommunikationswissenschaft ist schon da, sie ist nur ungleich verteilt. Publizistik, 63(1), 11-27.

Williams, R. (1974). Communications as cultural science. Journal of Communication, 24(3), 17-25. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00385.