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Introduction to the second issue

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In the first issue, numerous authors explored aspects of ‘society in crisis’ and thus also outlined areas for further research. Issues of public communication and disruption of the public sphere have been repeatedly touched upon. This second edition is now devoted to the actors, institutions and goals of this public crisis communication. In doing so, strategies of societal opinion formation and behavioral governance, the struggle for interpretive sovereignty and the limitation of the discursive space, as well as their connection to power structures and interests, but also their tense relationship to fundamental democratic principles of communication, will be illuminated.

For many years already, profound divisions can be observed with regard to the perception and evaluation of societal processes and subsystems – for instance, with regard to the institutions of representative democracy, but especially also towards the media as central actors of public communication (Köcher 2015; Köcher 2017, Arlt/ Wolling 2017). The current thematic focus of the conflict in Ukraine, which in 2022 escalated into open war, the energy crisis in Europe triggered by political reactions to it, the climate crisis discourse, which is increasingly represented in the media and in politics, and cultural-political topics related to gender identities have deepened this rift. The media reaction to the sale of the Twitter platform and the subsequent revelations about far-reaching state censorship practices has once again profiled and dramatically sharpened the social relevance of the discussion about freedom of expression, censorship and the legitimacy of different political perspectives.

In the context of the above-mentioned crisis discourses, a strong moralization and polarization of positions can be observed. Communicative strategies seem increasingly to take recourse to antagonistic patterns and to demand the fundamental exclusion of the opposed political perspectives in each case. It remains to be investigated to what extent this is actually the case and how the lines of discursive alliances and separation are organized, or whether there are contexts in which actors and institutions follow agonistic communicative practices in the sense of Mouffe (2014) – such communication, that is, that basically dignifies proponents of dissenting perspectives as legitimate opponents in the dispute. In this context, for example, the analysis of both the history and the changing patterns of use of delegitimizing slurs – i.e., terms that are used to exclude persons, positions, and patterns of argumentation from public discourse, to divide them into discursive camps, or even to profile them positively – would be of particular interest. For instance, the argumentative patterns invoking solidarity, the sense of responsibility, and scientificity on the one hand, but also the topoi of conspiracy theory, denialism, irrationality, and right-wing radicalism on the other hand could be identified as effective instruments of inclusion and exclusion (Kaltwasser 2022, Broecker 2022, Nicoletta 2022).

Among the strategies of public communication that have assumed increasing prominence in the context of the ongoing crisis discourses of recent years are direct and indirect practices

of censorship. For instance, in the context of the public debate around the sale of Twitter, but also through changing conceptualizations and practices with reference to the concepts of “mis-, dis-, and mal-information” (youtube 2022; twitter 2021; EU vs. Disinfo; Trusted News Initiative; Gräser 2021; Schreyer 2021; Meyen 2021), it has further become clear that this change in practices is also accompanied by a shift in norms and normative conceptions with regard to the necessary public (and scientific) sphere in democracies. A case in point is the open letter by scientists in the New York Times calling for tougher censorship of so-called “misinformation” related to the Covid pandemic (Alvarez 2020). Where traditionally freedom of expression and diversity of opinion were considered core components of a democratic public sphere, perspectives on the use of these concepts are increasingly subjected to a categorization of such information as positive for society and public health vs. their being negative and potentially dangerous (Barry et al. 2020; Fink 2021; see also Szymanski 2022 in the first issue).

Thus, strategies of political communication based on fear were already examined in the first edition (Gansel 2022). In this context, societal foundations of journalistic ethics are also being renegotiated. These communicative strategies exist in mutual dependence with both changing legal guidelines for public communication and institutionalized structures. They include new legal frameworks for reporting, such as in the case of Germany the criminal offense of denying war crimes and more recently the ‘delegitimization of the state’ relevant to constitutional protection (BfV 2021; see also Warweg 2023) but also institutional innovations such as the expansion of fact-checker networks on a state or inter-state basis and in the context of media houses and NGOs.

Another area of communicative strategies refers to the deliberate use of perception- and behavior-modifying strategies in public communication. In the first issue, fundamental connections between technocratic tendencies in political philosophy and practice with the approaches of nudging but also more advanced behavioral economics were identified already as a key area of investigation for strategic public communication (Broecker 2022; Behavioral Insight Team 2022). Issues related to the interconnectedness of politics, academic (media psychology) research, and the media construction of socially shared knowledge also become relevant in this context.

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