FULL PAPER

Is a theory of media and communication history possible (and necessary)?

Ist eine Theorie der Medien- und Kommunikationsgeschichte möglich (und notwendig)?

Benjamin Krämer & Philipp Müller

Benjamin Krämer, Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Medienforschung, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Oettingenstr. 67, 80538 München; Kontakt: kraemer(at)ifkw.lmu.de

Philipp Müller, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Institut für Publizistik, Jakob-Welder-Weg 12, 55099 Mainz; Kontakt: philipp.mueller(at)uni-mainz.de

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Abstract: While there has been a broad debate on the use of theory in history in general, there are few contributions by historians of communication and the media discussing the role of theory in their particular field. We therefore review and discuss some of the main arguments pertaining to the use of theory in historiography and apply them to the field of media and communication history. Such arguments include the assumption that theories are already implicit in all types of narratives, or the idea that theory amounts to a speculative philosophy of history. We also discuss the controversial question whether deductive explanations and general laws should be applied to history. The article concludes that the use of theories is advisable, perhaps even necessary, given their multifunctionality and their different forms.

Keywords: Media and communication history, philosophy of history, historical 'laws,' historical narrative, metahistory.

Zusammenfassung: Während eine breite Debatte über die Verwendung von Theorien in der Geschichtswissenschaft insgesamt stattfand, liegen wenige Beiträge aus der Medien- und Kommunikationsgeschichte vor, welche die Rolle von Theorie in diesem speziellen Feld diskutieren. Wir arbeiten deshalb die wesentlichen Argumente zum Theoriegebrauch in der Geschichtsschreibung auf und wenden sie auf das Feld der Medien- und Kommunikationsgeschichte an. Zu diesen Argumenten gehören die Annahme, dass Theorien bereits in verschiedensten Arten von Erzählungen impliziert sind, oder die Idee, dass Theorie auf spekulative Geschichtsphilosophie hinausläuft. Wir diskutieren auch die kontroverse Frage, ob deduktive Erklärungen und allgemeine Gesetzmäßigkeiten auf Geschichte angewendet werden sollten. Der Beitrag schlussfolgert, dass der Gebrauch von Theorien ratsam, womöglich sogar notwendig ist, wenn man die Vielfalt ihrer Formen und Funktionen in Betracht zieht.

Schlagwörter: Medien- und Kommunikationsgeschichte, Geschichtsphilosophie, historische ‚Gesetze', historische Erzählung, Metageschichte.

1. Introduction

Even if some would insist that historiography is still an art, it is a practice that should be conducted in a reflective manner. Authors should be aware of their method, standpoint and partiality, the practical use of their writings, or their ideas regarding the general course of history. Such implicit or explicit decisions and predefinitions could have considerable influence on their interpretations of and conclusions from history. Much has been said about these and related questions in meta-historical literature, and scholars who have noticed this discussion can only be sentimental poets, not naïve writers of history, to use Friedrich Schiller's famous distinction. In different meta-historical debates (Wehler, 1997, counted five debates about theory use), some advocates of narrative historiography had to admit that 'narrative' can no longer be taken in its most classical sense (Ricœur, 1983, p. 133, referring to the Annales school), while others have insisted that there can be no theory of history (Lübbe, 1979, in a volume together with members of the theoretically oriented Bielefeld school).

While authors from other specialized historical disciplines have reviewed meta-historical literature and discussed its application to their fields (e.g. Roberts, 2006; Tamura, 2011), historians of communication and the media have only casually referred to this discourse. Of course, there have been many theoretically oriented publications in media history or contributions advocating the use of theories (cf. Pohlig & Hacke, 2008, who refer to theory use as an orthodoxy but also to remaining uncertainties). However, we feel that the field of media and communication history is still in lack of a systematic review of the implications of theory application as it has been discussed in meta-historical literature.

Therefore, it is the aim of this article to review and discuss some of the main arguments pertaining to the use of theory in historiography and apply them to the field of media and communication history. In doing so, we argue against something like a straw man: completely naïve narrative media history. An ideal-typical narrative account would be a chronological representation of events whose granularity and style comes relatively close to the categories and terminologies we use in everyday reasoning and everyday narration of past events: single persons with their doings or groups capable of collective action; statements mostly referring to locatable events unfolding over time spans of days, months, and a few years (such as battles and wars); and sophisticated everyday language (cf. Ryan, 2007; Wolf, 2002, for some of these elements).

Most actual accounts probably depart more or less from this ideal type. For the sake of clarity, however, we sometimes use classical arguments of strong advocates of narrative history and confront them with some of the main arguments on theory in history. We also review whether they have been applied to media history and, if not, discuss how they could be transferred to that field. For argument's sake, we assume that history is knowable, at least in principle, and that the debate is only about the best way to give truth-apt accounts (no matter whether one prefers consensus, coherence, correspondence, semantic, or other theories of truth).

In the course of this article we are dealing with three related questions: (1.) We begin with a review of fundamental arguments for considering theory in writing

media and communication history. These arguments refer to the idea of history itself, the discussion about a philosophy of history, and to considerations about implicit theories in historiography. (2.) We then turn to the question how media historians could make use of theory. We first offer arguments for and against deductive explanations and general laws as one type of theory that has been strongly criticized. While concluding that they can play a role, we argue that there are many different and useful types of theories. (3.) Therefore, we finally discuss the multiple functions that theory and theorizing could have for media and communication history. They show that media and communication history could greatly profit from an engagement with theory. In the discussion section, we summarize our main points and argue for a self-reflective view on the implicit or explicit application of theory in media and communication history.

We will not give an *ex ante* definition of 'theory' because as the argument unfolds, different understandings, each with different implications, will become clear. However, when discussing theory use in media and communication history, we have to clarify in advance how to define that field. By 'media and communication history,' we refer to a very broad field without committing ourselves to disciplinary boundaries or paradigms. Unfortunately, there is no neutral umbrella term for research on phenomena related to media and communication in the broadest sense. By referring to, e.g., 'media history' or 'communication history' in a particular way, one is almost inevitably categorized as belonging to certain schools. Studies in 'communication history' address the past or change of technologies of communication, the corresponding institutional structures, actors, and practices along the whole process of communication. They may include historical audience and reception research (Koszyk, 1989). However, they often concentrate on a 'concept of the media as it is customary in communication research': 'the media of distribution since Gutenberg' (Stöber, 2015, p. 53). Therefore, 'media history' is not necessarily the narrower concept (as many scholars in communication history would suggest). Some media historians use a broader conception of the media (e.g., Faulstich, 2006) or are interested in the technical a priori of the media instead of their communicative function in the narrower sense (such as in German media theory, Ebeling, 2006, or the Toronto school, e.g., McLuhan, 1962). In the present article, we do not mean to emphasize one or another tradition but, rather, believe that the meta-historical discourse is relevant for all historians that deal with phenomena of media and communication in their broadest sense.

2. Why media and communication history should consider its theory

2.1 The (analytical) argument from the idea of history

If by definition, history was the opposite of theory, the whole debate would be futile, but this would be the easy way out. We have to differentiate between history-as-happenings and history-as-representation (*res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*). The assumption that those happenings can only be described in one way would be a case of exaggerated disciplinary imperialism. If, according to Braudel (1969) 'chaque science sociale est impérialiste,' no single discipline can exclusively

claim a part of reality for itself. However, the now-classical idea that 'history' is a 'collective singular' (Koselleck, 1979, p. 321), or that there is only one history-as-happenings, seems to lead to the conclusion that, as a whole or in its individual constituents, it can only be 'understood historically' (Lübbe, 1979) and can only be narrated, as this is the form that is structurally adequate to past happenings (Carr, 2008). If historical happenings are unique and so is the individual (according to idealist folklore) and if some happenings are even more original, media history should create biographic or monographic accounts of great journalists and individual media outlets (cf. Langenbucher, 2008): some kind of monumental history (Nietzsche, 1964). But cannot past happenings involving media also be described in terms of media politics, economics, ethics, and technology? In what way(s) can they only be described 'historically,' and would those ways exclude theory?

Even if it is conceded that everyday experiences are already structured by cultural forms that are pre-narrative, history does not narrate itself, and furthermore, scientific historiography is more than everyday narrative (Ricœur, 1983). Theoretically informed accounts would lead to a convergence of social sciences and history (Burke, 1992; Skocpol, 1987) without necessarily following 'a doctrine of the unity of method; that is to say, the view that all theoretical or generalizing sciences make use of the same method, whether they are natural sciences or social sciences' (Popper, 1960, p. 130). Therefore, by supporting a 'scientific' historiography, we do not refer to the more narrow meaning of 'science' that only comprehends the natural sciences, but to an understanding that includes the social sciences, as well as the humanities (like the German concept of 'Wissenschaft') if they engage in methodic interpretation (see Rüsen, 1983, p. 110f., on the 'methodization' of historiography). White (1984) has argued that history cannot be a science because its epistemological and metaphysical implications are controversial and closely linked to ideological perspectives. However, following his critique of historical reason and his reflection on the implicit structures of historical knowledge, history can be a science or 'Wissenschaft' in the larger sense just because it systematically reflects its basic assumptions and sets itself off against everyday narratives.

Whether history is categorized as science highly depends on national and disciplinary traditions (Oexle, 2000). For example, when the field of German communication history became established, scholars have been optimistic that historical accounts can be scientific if they build on the theories of mainstream communication research and on social history as the state of the art in historical research (see most of the contributions in *medien & zeit*, 1998, issue 3; Botz, 1992; also see Nord, 2003; O'Malley, 2002).

However, this attempt at scientification departed from a narrow understanding of science that could be challenged by cultural history which has only been reluctantly adopted in German communication history (cf. Gries, 2007; Depkat, 2009, but see, e.g., the programmatic contributions by Carey, 1974, on journalist reporting, or Chartier, 1989, on reception). If it consists in the theoretically informed and systematic analysis of meaning or subjectivity (see Burke, 2004, and Hunt, 1989, for an overview), thus complementing structural and causal analyses, it requires a more abstract concept of science.

Still, communication historians have rightly been skeptical toward another branch of media history that seemed to long for a legitimation by 'hard' science and a last, unsurpassable turn toward the things-in-themselves (Mißfelder, 2000): the anti-interpretive school of German media theory (and, similarly, the Toronto school). It aims to uncover media technologies as the a priori of communication and perception, with content, culture-as-meaning, and practices of media use as epiphenomena and the functions of transmission, registration, storage, and sensual stimulation as quintessence of media history (Mißfelder, 2000; Morat, 2008). Instead, a history of the media based on theories of communication, approaches from science and technology studies, social and cultural history, etc. and guided by meta-historical reflection could clarify how culture or society, technology, and historiography are mutually constitutive.

Historians have also shown an interest in the role of historical representations in the media and in other products and practices of popular culture (e.g., de Groot, 2009). History in the media, whether narrative or argumentative, includes references to the media's own history: they often write their own history or at least reproduce historical material. Therefore, meta-historical reflection should make clear how multiple descriptions of history can coexist and whether there are distinct properties and functions of scientific media historiography and historical accounts in the media themselves. However, the differentiation between scientific historiography and other cultural practices and products is itself historical and can be theorized differently both from a normative or a descriptive perspective. Arguments in favor of a distinct status of scientific history could be, for example, that historians have to struggle for explanations or interpretations even if they seem self-evident. Scientific historiography demands an epistemic break and critical reflexivity; the entities or actors of history are not necessarily the classical 'heroes' but rather collectives and complex organizations, such as the working class as media audience or media corporations, cultural interpretations and practices, or forms of individual agency that run counter to common expectations.

The idea of an epistemic break (or *rupture épistemologique*) has been introduced by Bachelard (1938) to emphasize the difference between everyday experiences or even un-theorized scientific observations as opposed to the explicit construction of scientific problems and accounts. Bourdieu (1997, pp. 271–276; 1994, pp. 91–93), while advocating a social science that breaks with spontaneous 'everyday sociology' also warned against a scholastic construction of social facts that does not consider the perspectives of the different social actors. Therefore, a double break is necessary: away from traditional interpretations (in our case, including mediatized ones) and from formalist models or idealist representations of science – two steps toward a reflexive science that performs an 'Aufhebung' of everyday understanding, transcending and preserving it at the same time. Scientific history then allows for an interpretative and explanatory surplus, the defamiliarization of the familiar and *vice versa* (which, however, can also be achieved by literary techniques).

Very different schools have developed a contrary position to a unique perspective on history: Their approaches allow for different, complementary accounts of the same past happenings (Droysen, 1977; Danto, 1968). By combining and com-

paring different systematic accounts, a 'scientification' of history by means of theory would be possible. Common sense and tradition should be made explicit, reasonable, inter-subjective, and criticizable (Rüsen, 1979; Schnädelbach, 1979). As media and communication scholars should be familiar with the idea of the construction of reality by and in the media, the idea of multiple, theoretically controlled and reflected perspectives on history should also be evident to them.

Historiography, to sum up, cannot rest on the assumption that there is only one history-as-representation, a unique apriori of all historical events, or that everyday narration is sufficient. The scientific norm of 'organized skepticism' (Merton, 1973, pp. 277–278) as well as a multi-disciplinary and multi-paradigmatic environment do not allow for simple disciplinary imperialism, for arguments from the definition or nature of history as such and for unreflected common-sense narratives. The means, it may then be argued, to come to terms with this increased contingency are found in theory, both meta-historical and 'historical.' This position is also strengthened by the argument that some kind of theory is already implicit in historical accounts (cf. the section below on hidden theories).

2.2 The rejection of a philosophy of history

It has been argued in earlier meta-historical literature that the use of theory in history converges with speculative philosophy of history (Berlin, 1969; for the opposition between history and philosophy cf. also von Ranke, 1942/1830). Popper (1960) warned us against the temptations of historicism: to prophesy the course of history. At the same time, however, he strongly advised the use of some type of predictive theory. Instead of trying to explain or prophesy one-time transitions between incommensurable epochs with changes of social 'laws,' developments may well be explained by general social laws and extrapolated trends or cycles (it should also be kept in mind that epochs are constructed, either implicitly – with an inherent risk of reification – or in a systematical way that is controlled by theoretical aspects; on epochs and cycles in media history, cf. Stöber, 2008).

Theory, then, does not necessarily make unfalsifiable predictions about the whole of history, but it may well consist in hypotheses that allow for predictions of restricted sets of events, even if such predictions are incomplete or imprecise. Speculative philosophy of history is not wrong in assuming that there can be predictions in history, but it is wrong in maintaining that these predictions differ from those in the natural sciences (Popper, 1960). Surely, it is often tempting to over-generalize regularities that are specific to one epoch. But if 'laws' radically differ between singular epochs, any prediction is impossible. However, different historical contexts should not *a priori* exclude the idea that hypothetical relationships can be transferred from one epoch to another. Instead, just as in the natural sciences, it has to be shown by theoretical arguments and empirical investigations what is to count as 'replication' or 'comparable conditions,' and whether an explanation is valid and generalizable over different instances.

Just as the distinction between these types of predictions, another differentiation between types of philosophy of history contributes to countering the intuition that the use of theory amounts to metaphysical speculation. This does not

necessarily mean that commitments to beliefs on the course of history have to be abolished (see section 1.3). Furthermore, parts of history can safely be theorized and this requires a specific type of philosophy of history. It would only be wrong to confound these types, not to generally use them. Analytical philosophy of history deals with the multiple forms and with the truth of historical assertions. Among other, it argues that there are more descriptions of historical events than we can presently conceive (Danto, 1968). Historical statements – some of them descriptive or interpretive, others explanatory – may describe events in relation to later events or in light of knowledge that is only available at later times: 'What [James Franklin] did, although he did not know it at the time, was to launch the first newspaper crusade in America' (Emery & Emery, 1978, p. 33). One does not escape the problem that there can be no account of the whole of history by turning to 'smaller,' specialized fields, such as media history. Their objects still remain unattainable wholes; the totality of possible descriptions cannot be exhausted.

Communication historians have often tended to construct a hierarchy among types of historical accounts (e.g., Lerg, 1977; Langenbucher, 1985): 'communication history' considering the whole process of communication is favored over a 'media history' that focuses on the technical and institutional aspects of the media. The latter is in turn considered more meritorious than the history of single media (Schmidt, 2003, p. 140). Certainly, the historical study of reception cannot be replaced by a history of specific media institutions, and particular insights may be gained from an analysis of the whole ensemble of media or the media repertoire of some group in a period of time. However, the history of any entity or complex of entities is still an unattainable whole and the universe of possible descriptions is inexhaustible. Furthermore, the turn toward microhistory, cultural history, and the history of everyday life (e.g. Darnton, 1984), although it has not gone uncriticized for the lack of relevance of its topics (Wehler, 2001), has at least called into question the superiority of seemingly holistic descriptions. We would therefore argue that both is necessary: micro histories of specific media institutions or technologies, as well as cross- or trans-media histories that jointly consider different media channels or institutions, or even broader analyses of communication taking place within society without a specific focus on concrete media. These different approaches can lead to completely different insights, demand different types of theories or different integrative frameworks and, thus, complement each other.

The idea of multiple descriptions of historical events leads to a higher level of complexity if statements refer to historical knowledge both of media producers and researchers. Media have often been a main platform of historical representations (i.e., the representation of phenomena that were already historical to them) and have often enough argued from implicit philosophies of history. Furthermore, media have represented phenomena that were contemporary to them but that are historical to today's researchers. Genuine media and communication history is mainly interested in these types of representations because they reveal the functioning of the media in the past, not as sources for the analysis of these phenomena themselves. In both cases, research has to choose between two types of descriptions. Historiographical accounts can produce historical statements that relate these references to historical phenomena in the media to the researcher's

knowledge: An actor 'correctly describes,' 'already knew,' 'anticipated' that . . ., in a period where 'it was still believed that' . . .. One may also feel that 'true' beliefs of historical actors should be explained differently from 'false' ones. Alternatively, a neutral and agnostic perspective would describe and explain knowledge of historical actors without any reference to present-day beliefs. The theoretical choices are similar to those in the sociology or history of science where problems of symmetrical or asymmetrical descriptions and explanations, and of self-referentiality with its paradoxes, self-fulfilling or -destroying prophecies, etc. arise. Approaches from analytical philosophy of history and the sociology of knowledge then help to disentangle these types of statements.

Concrete historiography is always unfinished, but it needs different forms of theory (including philosophy) to come to an end and to reflect upon what it can say about its objects. For example, some authors have described media history as a succession of 'media revolutions' (inspired by Toronto media theory; cf. Käuser, 2006) while others have proposed cyclical theories of media innovations (Stöber, 2004; Lehman-Wilzig & Cohen-Avigdor, 2004) or trends such as mediatization (Krotz, 2007). This, however, does not necessarily represent some kind of speculative philosophy but a perspective of interest or a theoretical template for case studies. What is at stake in debates over these approaches is their empirical fruitfulness and their generalizability. Is it really possible to describe all important happenings in media history in the terms of revolution, evolution, or otherwise? Or, more fundamentally, which are the important happenings in media history? Or, as we have argued against a single description of history, what are the criteria of interest guiding one's analysis as opposed to others? What becomes visible and what remains hidden if one chooses a certain conceptual framework over another? And finally, somewhat dissolving the distinction between substantial narratives or theories and philosophical orientations in a Duhem-Quinean logic, what parts of a framework are introduced as assumptions that one does not want to falsify, that are not eve dropped in the case of inconsistencies, and what parts are adapted during or after the research process?

In some fields, it may be easier to be naïve when it comes to select such a framework because traditions suggest that theories are over-determined by data. In the case of media and communication history, the contrary is suggested by the fact that 'the media' (in different meanings) are objects, sources, and products of media historiography at the same time. Thus, authors should perhaps not rejoice so easily about the recent disenchantment with grand theory in historiography, as some have done:

> "But although this situation [of fragmentation and failure of grand 'narratives,' i.e., theories] is not good for theorists, it's good enough for historians. Historical practice doesn't need theoretical coherence beyond what is required to be able to tell a compelling story. In fact, the failure of grand theory is one condition that impels scholars to turn to historical research." (Nerone, 2006, p. 260)

However, White (1973; 1984) has shown what it takes to write a 'compelling story': a philosophy of history that is able to provide a narrative structure, with criteria of plausibility and for the selection of main actors or forces that drive his-

tory, and with a 'moral' that ensures that stories come to an end. Behind the different narratives, the grand narratives are lurking. White sees the distinction between history and philosophy as a pre-critical cliché. He argues that there is only a distinction between explicit and implicit philosophy or theory.

2.3 The hidden theories: Implicit assumptions in narrative history

It has been argued that even a-theoretical historical narratives contain a number of elements that correspond to elements of theories and that their choice and construction should not remain uncontrolled and unreflected (Patzig, 1979; Wehler, 1979; Mergel & Welskopp, 1997; as opposed to apologists of historiography as inexplicable art, Mann, 1979). Not only laypersons but also scientists observe their subjects on the basis of their pre-existing cognitive structure, which consists of interindividually different presumptions, standpoints, and perspectives (Furnham, 1988, pp. 207–208; Kruglanski, 1989, pp. 223–246). Among these are abstract concepts, explanations or 'laws' (see section 2), and commitments to philosophies of history.

Even if one assumes that history is about individual events, and not about 'laws' (see below) or theoretical concepts, avoiding abstractions would be a sign of misguided positivism, and abstractions in history are not more real or unreal than those in the natural sciences (Bloch; 1961, p. 74). Everyday speech and historical narratives use abstracta. Even if we continue to define history as narratives relating singular events, those narratives are full of abstractions, such as 'kings' or 'journalism.' We can only try to use abstractions more systematically and reflectively and to make use of 'conceptual evidence,' i.e., categories that contribute to the understanding of subsumed phenomena (Danto, 1968, p. 126).

Narrativists have often denied the ability of 'scientific' theories to capture the historical development of concepts and the multiple perspectives on historical events. However, this criticism might be due to an outdated understanding of 'theories' as timeless, logically consistent sets of hypotheses referring to unequivocal data based on universal categories, not interpretive frameworks that, at the same time, constitute the data and are adapted to it, and that, in their own structure, can reflect multiple perspectives (cf. Müller, 2000).

Narratives become meaningful only if a historian claims the authority to tell a coherent and correct story whose organizing principle traditionally has to remain latent in order to preserve the appearance that the story directly flows from the events or the sources (White, 1984). One may simply remark that the selection and organization of historical material is impossible without perspectives of interest (Popper, 1960), or one may refer to White's (1973) argument that there cannot be a narrative without a commitment to a philosophy of history. Today, an ironic (as opposed to romantic, tragic, or comic) view of history as a rarely reflected philosophical commitment has become an orthodoxy. History is not seen as the rise and/or fall of some actor or entity, a progress toward some end, or the lifecycle of organic social wholes but as an irregular sequence of happenings without a clear direction and moral. This perspective has become commonplace to the degree that many (but not all) historians of the media begin their account with a

historist credo while using more or less theoretical elements of a different type, proposing theses on trends and regularities, and implicitly or even explicitly judging events in term of progress or regress (here, 'historism' refers to the position that social and historical phenomena are completely distinct from natural ones and that each historical epoch is unique and can only be understood by intuitive interpretation; for a critical history of historism, see Iggers, 1968).

However, despite its appearance of realism, complexity, and critical reflection on a meta-level, this ironic view still represents just another commitment to a philosophy of history and an implicit or explicit rejection of others. Thus, White (1973) invites us to leave behind the idea of irony with its moral agnosticism as a necessity and instead actively choose strategies of interpretation and explanation that fit one's well-understood ideological and aesthetic preferences (White refers to Mannheims, 1929, concept of ideology as a worldview with a claim to be systematic and justifiable that structures a social group's practice and its relationship to the social world with its possible transformations). Authors could try to write ideologically neutral histories, but just this type of distanced attitude always seems to carry some bourgeois values of realism and tolerance that are possible in a privileged position from where one does not have to regard historiography as an ideological battlefield, a symbolic revenge, or a confrontation with the sublimity or terror of history (White, 1982).

Thus, without any regulative idea of the whole of media history, how can anyone speak of a history of 'the media'? Why should authors write 'media history' or communication history or journalism history at all? What do different media have in common, why write narratives that include, for example, both early printing and television? What is their relevance, if not, for example, to know whether things have gotten or can get better or to show that they cannot? Do media historians not entertain implicit notions on the function of the media, assume chains of causality or path dependencies among them, or use other generalizations? What are the practical functions (cf. Rüsen, 1983, p. 46) of media history, the interests behind it, e.g., in terms of ideological partisanship, educational purposes, or even the profits and gratifications of 'pure' research (Bourdieu, 1984)? Or take, for example, authors who propose evolution as a 'neutral' concept to analyze media history, as opposed to 'philosophical' conceptions such as progress, enlightenment, modernization (Schmidt, 2003), or criticisms of 'Whig history' or 'liberal narratives' toward a free and objective press (Broersma, 2011). Such positions are certainly not in favor of naïve narrative historiography, but still inclined to the idea that it is possible to avoid certain commitments at another level of theories of history. However, such arguments for 'neutrality' should in turn be reflected as a commitment to historico-philosophical irony and ideological distance, a position with its own 'moral,' and to certain perspectives of interest.

So, if history is more than a chronicle or annal, and if narratives relate events and make sense of them (Danto, 1968), the organizing principles of even the most a-theoretical story, its concepts, explanations, and abstractions should be reflected, as should the meta-historical implications of theoretically informed historical works. Otherwise, they are still existent but remain hidden. This can only be regarded as the worse choice.

3. How media and communication history could make use of deductive explanations

The use of theory in the social sciences is often associated with nomothetic explanations. If their use in history could be convincingly criticized, theory in history at least could not include general relationships that can then lead to deductive explanations. However, it will be argued that nomothetic explanations have a role to play (maybe also as provocative mechanicist heterodoxy as opposed to the prevalent contextualist explanations, cf. White, 1973). Yet they do not have to be at the center of theories in media history: We have already mentioned historico-philosophical commitments, and we will refer to other types and functions of theory in the subsequent section. First, we review the arguments on deductive explanations in history.

In the classical paradigm of historical explanation (Hempel, 1942; Popper, 1960), a historical event is explained by showing that it has certain properties that are mentioned in a general hypothesis and that there were previous events of a particular type also specified in the same law-like sentence. From this hypothesis, it can then be deduced that this event was bound to happen, as it has been successfully subsumed under a hypothesis that postulates the occurrence of such events, given some antecedents of a certain type. There have been various qualifications of this approach. Most historical accounts provide only 'explanation sketches' (Hempel, 1942) and 'laws' may be very trivial (Popper, 1960) and formulated only loosely (probabilistic, idealized, local, and so on) (Leuridan & Froeyman, 2012). In the context of controversies over *historical* explanations, it seems quite important to note that laws never mean and never were meant to explain events in their individuality but simply as one instance of a type. This also accounts for an asymmetry between explanation and prediction. It can only be predicted that an event with some typical properties will occur, but past events can be described in many details. Those events can then demand further explanation that may only be available afterward: "There's nothing wrong with being wise after the event; it is just that we can't be wise after the event, before the event" (Mink, 1968, p. 697).

Historical facts can always be subsumed under different descriptions, and only some have a law-like form (Danto, 1968). While there can be no universal theory of history that explains everything, 'mere' descriptions or narratives are also part of an infinite set of possible true sentences, not the only way to account for individual happenings (cf. the argument that the perfect map would be identical to the territory itself, and the abovementioned argument that some descriptions are only possible at later times; Danto, 1968; Baumgartner, 1979). History as the description and explanation of 'individual' events cannot simply be pitted against nomothetic sciences, even if it concentrates on the more fine-grained analysis of single occurrences instead of broad generalizations. Descriptions remain as incomplete as explanations. Even if explanations seem to be tailored to single events by combining many *explananda* and 'laws,' there must be some general principle, even if it is not made explicit, that accounts for their intelligibility and plausibility, their advantage over others. Reading a narrative explanation of single events, we may al-

ways ask ourselves why it sounds so compelling, what tacit knowledge, which schemata and which tropes of narration account for its persuasiveness.

Proponents of nomothetic social or historical sciences have been accused – ironically already by critics of metaphysical, speculative philosophies of history, such as Berlin (1969) – to negate agency and human freedom. The cultural turn has been described as a turn toward frameworks (e.g., Foucauldian, cf. O'Brien, 1989, or Geertzian, cf. Biersack, 1989) that emphasize interpretation, thick description, or the study of epistemic breaks without causal analysis, and human agency and resistance over structural determination. However, others have interpreted this as an equally one-sided overreaction to social history (at least in fields where it has become dominant; Mergel & Welskopp, 1997).

Therefore, when considering nomothetic or explanatory analyses, it has to be differentiated between different understandings of 'laws' and the freedom they allow for (Gewirth, 1954). One may postulate very pervasive general laws that cannot be changed but whose conditions of application can be avoided. Furthermore, correlations can be based on knowledge and volition, which may again be subject to causal influences, so the 'laws' may be self-destroying prophecies. Finally, one may search for some more or less general conditions of freedom itself, if one's non-metaphysical definition of 'freedom' allows such an analysis.

If media history is partly a history of technology (cf. Hickethier, 2003), it may have to theorize the relationship between agency or intention and causality. If they are seen as opposites, laws can be formulated as restrictions of what can technologically be done if one does not want to deny that it makes sense to speak of 'laws of nature' (cf. Popper, 1960). Alternatively, one can choose conceptions of agency that, simply put, include technological artifacts (e.g., Latour, 2005) or again resort to theories on the compatibility of multiple descriptions, so the same events can be described in terms of causality and intentionality or both (e.g., Davidson, 1980), or to theories on the construction of causality and technology by historical agents.

Some accounts of media history use very broad explanations, such as the 'climate' and 'protestantism' theories of cultural development (Emery & Emery, 1978), or factor theories of history in more or less pure form, such as technological determinism (for a discussion, see Blondheim, 2009; Hickethier, 2003; Smith & Marx, 1994; Winkler, 1999) or theses on the political 'creation of the media' (Starr, 2004). The literature on 'new media' or 'media change' sometimes also makes generous use of generalizations (Neuman, 2010; Schmidt, 2003; Schmolke, 2007), while their period of validity is not always clear. Even if authors use inductive generalizations rather than deductive explanations, it has been argued that media history should collect and describe before making premature generalizations (Frei, 1989). However, the alternative could be an unreflected accumulation of facts (Koszyk, 1989) or maybe rather an unreflected construction of facts guided by tacit principles.

Finally, one should not equate nomothetic explanation with overly simple, linear, or even monocausal relationships between isolated events. Different authors have described relationships between complex forms of societal structures and dominant media (Faulstich, 2006; Merten, 1994; Ziemann, 2011) or historical conditions of the emergence of media (Wersig, 2001). To different degrees, these

authors have discussed the general principles that allow for the co-existence of the phenomena under analysis and their reciprocal influences. Counterfactual analyses have also been used to demonstrate social restrictions of technological potentials (Dröge & Kopper, 1991; Thorburn & Jenkins, 2004; Wersig, 2001).

As a consequence of the present argument, hermeneutic and narrative branches of media history should reflect on and theorize the nomothetic components of their accounts while, for example, those scholars who see the nomothetic mainstream of communication research as their main point of reference should acknowledge the historicity of their theories and build genuinely historical theories (cf. Dröge, 1992).

More recently, those who fear that historiography fades into a different genre have probably been more concerned about cultural history, postmodernism, and literary theory instead of speculative philosophy or nomothetic science (cf. Habermas, 2000). However, this can only further increase our sense for the contingency of historical genres and accounts (whereof scientific history is only one – albeit fruitful and desirable – form), the implicit theoretical implications, and the nature of truth claims in historiography (Kittsteiner, 2000).

4. How media and communication history can benefit from the many functions of theory

By allowing for theory in media history, one is not committed to any specific type. Theory comes in many forms and fulfills different functions upon which one can draw (Mommsen, 1979; Pohlig & Hacke, 2008). In addition to general laws or historical explanations – or even counterfactual reasoning – historical research needs heuristics for the constitution and selection of its objects and sources and concepts that guide interpretations (on different forms and functions of theories see Baumgartner, 1979; Danto, 1968; Leuridan & Froeyman, 2012; Patzig, 1979; Rüsen 1983).

Even if historical analyses remain open to new discoveries and try to avoid preconceptions, scholars need heuristics, i.e., theoretical concepts and rules that help to preliminarily define the objects of study and that convey an idea where to find relevant sources (cf. Rüsen, 1986, pp. 102-107 Theories also allow for an 'interpretive surplus' by the use of ideal types (Patzig, 1979; Rüsen, 1983), such as Habermas's (1962) concept of the public sphere, and other theoretical devices for sensemaking. Interpretive media history could make much more use of the rich traditions of interpretive sociology (with its method of Weberian ideal types) or cultural anthropology (Sokoll, 1997). Such frameworks can render the process of *verstehen* more systematic and transparent and combine the theoretical and methodological rigor of social history with cultural history's emphasis on subjectivity, agency, practice, or meaning.

'Historical theories,' in turn, are a 'mixed type' that combines different functions and both a theoretical and a narrative approach. They provide narratives that are falsifiable, use general explanations or temporally restricted relationships, preserve the historical and individual character of structures or events without

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completely eliminating them by *ceteris paribus* clauses, reflect upon historical perspectivity, and interpret their material in an interplay between the individual 'content' and the general 'form' of history (Mommsen, 1979; Patzig, 1979). While it may be criticized that such an approach is highly idiosyncratic and syncretistic, naïve narratives run the risk of hiding a plethora of unsystematic *ad-hoc* explanations, uncontrolled generalizations, undefined concepts, and pseudo-philosophical wisdom behind a seamless and stylistically impeccable 'realistic' story. Conversely, any historical account that is openly theoretical can more easily be judged with regard to its inconsistencies. The result may still be called a 'narrative,' if the term includes theoretically construed entities other than single persons as well as quasi-events and -actions that unfold during timespans up to the *longue durée*, and if it is acknowledged that this kind of narrative can only be followed because it contains scientific explanations (Ricœur, 1983). Conversely, the function of narrative form can then be more than rhetoric and ornament: it conveys an idea of a history that can, for example, be understood as a tragedy or farce (White, 1984).

So far, our argument has been quite ahistorical: it has neglected the socio-historical context of historiography and the politics of theory. Some historiographers of the media are not committed to an ironic perspective, but at least to some more romantic or comedic liberalism, if not to Marxist, feminist, and other critical approaches. Since the days of the 19th-century historiographers analyzed by Hayden White, history has become a discipline, an increasingly autonomous field (on the precarious autonomy and dependencies see Bourdieu, 1995) with its orthodoxies and mechanisms of exclusion. Its own function is defined in internal struggles rather than being completely determined by political or other demands. Historist scholars deny that the discipline can provide any practical guidance (on the topos of *historia magistra vitae*, see Koselleck, 1979), but only some knowledge on unique past epochs. However, different movements have been dissatisfied with the perceived fruitlessness of descriptive and narrative, person-centered political histories.

Among the alternatives that have since been proposed, we would like to emphasize two ways of dealing with the potentials of autonomy. (1.) The first is a politics of pure theory or research: the scientification and epistemic break attempted by the movements of social history (e.g., the Annales, or Bielefeld school with their precursors) and pursued further by some strands of cultural history. This type of closure is to be distinguished from the marginalization of concrete theoretical schools (cf., e.g., Scheu, 2012, on Marxist or critical theory in German communication studies) and the resulting unification of the field: An autonomous field should remain pluralistic.

However, theoretical generalizations have also been described as a bridge towards a non-historical, empirical, and theoretical core of a discipline by specialized historians who consider themselves as part of another scientific community (Tamura, 2011; for media history: Arnold, 2008; Saxer, 1987). Therefore, the use of theory can be both a factor of differentiation and closure, and an indicator of heteronomy in relation to other disciplines. According to Nerone (2006), communication scholars are still attracted by great narratives which, for example, express themselves in Whiggish histories of the freedom of the press (while they

strive to abstain from value judgments in their analysis of historical data, their interest is strongly guided by value-laden concepts). Conversely, scientification attempted by social history only lead to a shift from Whiggish theories (e.g., modernization theories, Mergel, 1997) toward an ironic orthodoxy instead of a post-ironic reflection and choice of historico-philosophical commitments. Resistant toward such reflection, many scholars from both groups merely follow the prevailing doctrines of their respective fields.

Insofar as cultural history is theory-driven, it has replaced the theorists and theories appreciated by social history, but often maintained a historist outlook (Depkat, 2009, with the exception of the literary theorists such as White if they are to be counted among the cultural historians). Dispersive accounts and theoretical bricolage as well as the unchecked generalizations, sometimes portraying culture as a conflict-free totality, sometimes over-emphasizing resistance and deviation, have also attracted criticism (according to Fass, 2003, cultural history often lacks scientific rigor in comparison to social history). In sum, the movements and schools mentioned here have used the potential of an autonomous scientific, theory-driven history to a certain degree, but not exhausted it.

(2.) Autonomous theorizing can also unlock a potential of political reflection that is partly independent of the political field proper. Non-orthodox critical approaches to (media and communication) history have sought to realize this second way of dealing with autonomy, but there are also different risks that should be avoided.

Some currents have legitimately emphasized particular perspectives, subaltern groups, and a critique of grand universalistic narratives (see, e.g., Curran, 2009, for a typology of ideological orientations). However, these forms of criticism cannot simply close the gap between historiography and other social fields – even on the contrary: they rely on the partial autonomy of theoretical reflections and cannot strive for a simple de-differentiation between history and (the diversity of) everyday narratives without some kind of performative contradiction. While the great merit of many 'particularistic' schools has been to increase the visibility of oppressed groups in society, pure particularism would be paradoxical and conservative as it cannot provide principles that commit other groups to do justice to unprivileged groups and to social transformations (Laclau, 1996). For example, an ahistorical rhetoric of multiculturalism has been criticized from a postcolonial perspective (Shome & Hegde, 2002), and feminist media studies, as other progressive studies of media and culture, face the problems of relativism and populism (Van Zoonen, 1991).

On the other hand, different forms of alleged universalism have become deeply discredited. Therefore, one may come back to the revived interest in narrativity that breaks with irony and with the naïve realism of seemingly universal perspectives, and that has a sense for theoretical construction and contingent historico-philosophical commitments. If we resume the search for a practical meaning of history, for its relationship to our life world (cf. Rüsen, 1983), we may for example find that (media and communication) historiography can contribute to communicative rationality by committing itself to a (scientific and more encompassing) community that is not bound together by a unified understanding of science

or by cultural similarity but striving for a more abstract ideal of universality (an idea that resonates with Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere also discussed in media and communication history). Or, in Bourdieu's (1994, pp. 223–227, 1992, p. 558) words, a reflection on historical perspectivity can uncover the false assumptions and pretensions of universality, and contribute to an 'universalization of the conditions of access to the universal' – a 'Realpolitik of reason' that can be based on the reflexive potential of autonomous science.

This does not necessarily imply that media historians have to write some Whiggish history that narrates how society has progressed in that direction (although it would be legitimate to be interested in all the progressive tendencies in media history). One can combine a distanced, purely theoretical (i.e., contemplative), or even appreciating approach with Nietzsche's (1964) 'critical history' that seeks liberation from history, resulting in a theory of the historical as the (partly) understandable, but also as a strange and awful other that has to be overcome.

In sum, we have attempted to show that theory can have different functions in media history: selecting, defining, interpreting, and explaining historical processes in an interplay with more or less narrative elements; and the reflection of both epistemic or historico-philosophical as well as sociopolitical commitments and implications.

5. Conclusion

This article was intended to highlight different arguments in the discussion about the application of theory in media history. We first drew together arguments from three different perspectives which demonstrate that media history *could* not only make use of theory but even *should* do so (and as far as it already does so, should extend its systematic use of theory to further levels of reflection). We argued that (1.) there is more than one history-as-representation which means that there have to be several (theoretical) historical standpoints, (2.) a separation of history and philosophy is only seemingly possible while (3.), in fact, there is only a distinction between implicit and explicit theory. Theoretical assumptions are always present in one way or another in historiography; the only question is whether they are reflected upon or whether they remain implicit. In the next step, we have discussed the ways in which historians could apply theory and, more specifically, the difficulty of developing deductive explanations which are neither undercomplex nor too far-reaching. In the final paragraph, we have discussed the multiple functions that theory could have for historical works as well as for history as a discipline.

Even as we often use the singular of theory, it should have become clear that there cannot be a single theory of media history even if we should have a rather precise idea what this whole is like to us. Theories have also been shown to be inextricably linked to 'interests' or 'morals' in the sense of what one is interested in and what one thinks the course of history to be.

We have mainly dealt with the epistemic function of theories as elements and frames of historical accounts. We did not discuss other levels of meta-historical reflection, such as the full range of practical implications or methodological, poetical, and didactic aspects (Droysen, 1977; Rüsen, 1983; 1986; 1989; White,

1984). Attempts of a more detailed typology of historical and meta-historical theories in media history or candidate theories for an application in the field have been discussed elsewhere (Krämer & Müller, 2013; also see the contributions in Kinnebrock, Schwarzenegger, & Birkner, 2015, especially Wilke, 2015).

Nevertheless, one methodological argument may be added here because it contributes to our understanding of the role of theory and because it addresses a particularity of media history. 'The media' may be said to represent, at the same time, (some of) the sources, the objects of historical inquiries in this field, and the devices to communicate their results. However, this equation rests on the polysemy of the term 'the media.' While two of the functions refer to materiality, the substrate, devices, or traces of communication, the object of research is most often the social structure and the sequences of action surrounding the means of communication. Still, media historians have to reflect how these means are shaped by their social uses and how they support social structures and agency. Questions may include, for example, why sources took their present form and what authors do when writing books or articles or delivering lectures on media history. In other fields, theoretical assumptions can be easily introduced *ad hoc* in order to deal with the sources, the object, and questions of presentation. While this is not impossible in media history, it seems nevertheless advisable to construct a more integrated theoretical framework. This should increase the coherence of historical accounts and provide a starting point from which one can deal with the circular structure of the task.

Just as in any other case, no single step of historiographical practice can take precedence over another because they stand and fall together with their consistency. However, in the case of media history, the object of inquiry is even more intimately linked with the process of inquiry, for the sources can only be evaluated and interpreted in terms of the structures that explain their existence and forms but that are themselves explained and interpreted by analyzing those sources. (This idea may work similarly for the medium of representation.) A theoretical framework can then serve as a starting point to unfold this self-referential structure of media historiography that would include the elaboration and modification of theories. For example, theorists of media revolutions have assumed that perception and knowledge are radically dependent on an epoch's dominant media, while many would intuitively take a less radical position on the question of a medial apriori (Hickethier, 2003).

The use of theories in media history may also sometimes appear as a burden. However, theories provide guidance, serve to justify decisions and conclusions, and may even help to avoid rude surprises without eliminating the possibility of the unforeseen. Thus, we would like to conclude by highlighting these functions as summarized by White (1987, p. 164):

> "If one is going to 'go to history,' one had better have an address in mind rather than go wandering around the streets of the past like a flaneur. . . . If you are going to 'go to history,' you had better have a clear idea of which history, and you had better have a pretty good notion as to whether it is hospitable to the values you carry into it. That is the function of theory in general – that is to say, to provide justification of a stance vis-à-vis the materials being dealt with that can render it plausible. Indeed, the function of theory is to justify a notion of plausibility itself."

A theory of media and communication history is therefore not only possible, but even quite necessary, if authors want to write scientific (i.e., more reflexive, methodic, etc.) histories instead of naïve or sentimental ones. As human beings, authors of media history cannot escape the fact that implicit assumptions and particular perspectives might guide their historical narrations. Therefore, they should try to make themselves conscious of these processes and aim at also making them transparent to their readers. However, 'a' theory cannot mean that the field can have or ought to have only one, and our argument for the use of theories does not exclude other, even experimental forms of historiography, but its aim is to question the assumptions behind the association of history with narrativity and to broaden the perspective of those who have already embraced theories in the field of media and communication history.

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