

Editorial

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Dear Reader,

This issue of *Studies in Communication Sciences* (SComS) brings you a general section, two thematic sections – one on political communication and one on storytelling and journalism – as well as news about changes in the editorial team. Geographically, the different contributions in this issue cover China, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. Two studies use a comparative design and two focus on different aspects of online communication. Taken together, the contributions in this volume are evidence of the work and the engagement of a vibrant research community, and they also show that *SComS* adds a distinct European voice to the communication research community, while retaining a cosmopolitan attitude.

The general section opens with Hua Pang's article, which provides a detailed breakdown of the uses and gratifications of social media platforms in mainland China (QQ, WeChat and Weibo). Based on an online questionnaire answered by a sample of 258 university students with an average age of 23, the analysis shows that respondents make extensive use of social media platforms (41% said they visit their social media more than nine times per day). The analysis also reveals several aspects of the gratification users obtain, including the need to maintain relationships, and amusement purposes. Pang's study offers insights into digital forms of sociability tied to social aspects in mainland China.

Daniela Marcantonio's study on the role of gestures in intercultural communication takes a comparative approach, contrasting Italy and Germany, and shows that gestures are deeply interwoven into everyday communication practices and are, as such, emblematic of the corresponding cultural context. At the same time, peo-

ple who have moved to another cultural setting (Italians who live in Germany and vice versa) use gestures to underline and express specific concepts regardless of the surrounding context. Intercultural contact thus expands the speakers' repertoire, and while gestures always refer to the cultural context, they are not determined by it.

Jörg Räwel examines contact list communication on the Internet employing a systems theoretical perspective. From this viewpoint, social media platforms such as Facebook, business and employment services such as LinkedIn, or online dating websites are designed in such a way to reduce the problem of double contingency. In other words, these applications facilitate the initiation of communicative interaction between users, because they reduce the risks involved in taking the first step that are characteristic of face-to-face communication. But as Räwel points out, this comes at a price. Examining the communicative interaction on dating websites, he shows that these platforms impede the stabilisation of interaction patterns as they are designed merely to initiate non-committal contacts.

This issue also includes two thematic sections. The first thematic section includes four articles that address current and important topics in political communication. The digitalisation of politics has profound consequences for the political process, it offers new communicative possibilities to political and civil society actors, challenges the role and status of journalists and the media as gatekeepers, multiplies the complexity of the communicative environment and reconfigures the relationships between citizens and political institutions. These transformations are liable to highlight and accelerate the social changes that have led to a declining trust of citizens in politics as a means to



effectively process questions of common concern, to pose the question of how citizens are able to make informed decisions on increasingly intricate issues. Moreover, these transformations challenge journalists to redefine their roles against the rapidly changing demands of audiences and markets.

Against this background, the four articles in this section examine different aspects of the political process and they can be read as calls to accommodate conceptually new forms of political communication and to re-examine the roles of actors, their relationships and the contexts in which they are located.

The first article follows precisely this line of thought: Marco Kovic, Adrian Rauchfleisch, Marc Sele and Christian Caspar argue that the digital transformation of political processes has led political actors to use fake grassroots efforts that mimic the online behaviour of regular citizens in order to mobilise for their cause. Extending Chadwick's (2007) analysis of digital repertoires and organisational hybridity in the digital age, Kovic et al. show how political actors have come to embrace digital technologies less for their deliberative potential and more for the pursuit of their strategic ends. Because of the far-reaching implications of digital astroturfing for the political process, not least as witnessed during the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, the authors also discuss possible countermeasures that could be implemented by social media platforms and that might be able to create more transparency with regard to the identities of their users.

The second article asks whether the use of legacy media as a means of staying informed has a negative (media malaise hypothesis) or positive (virtuous circle hypothesis) effect on people's trust in government. Drawing on a series of studies carried out in 2016 on a sample of 1 115 German respondents, Frank Marcinkowski and Christopher Starke endorse the latter hypothesis (Norris, 2000). Furthermore, their results show that the more respondents use media to access political information, the more they trust the national govern-

ment. Marcinkowski and Starke's article helps the reader understand the role legacy media play in citizens' trust in government and how that role functions. It also reminds us that politicians can increase or lessen citizens' trust in government by the way they behave.

Laurent Bernhard's article tackles another important question in political communication: what is the effect of voters' socio-economic status on how well they know the topics they are asked to vote on? The author assumes that the discriminatory effects of socio-economic status on understanding disappear when propositions of low-issue complexity are at stake. To test his hypothesis, the author carried out an empirical analysis of panel survey data on three votes at the federal level that took place in Switzerland between 2006 and 2008 on the topics of asylum, naturalisation and corporate tax. The analysis results suggest that voters' level of knowledge of the topics is not always dependent on their level of education.

In the final article in this section, Filip Dingerkus, Annik Dubied, Guido Keel, Vittoria Sacco and Vinzenz Wyss re-examine an enduringly popular research subject: journalists. Their research demonstrates that there is no typical journalist in Switzerland. Based on a study carried out in 2015 involving 909 respondents, they paint a picture of Swiss journalism in the context of a media sector undergoing profound changes (see Meier, 2017). Compared to 2008, the year of the previous study, the number of journalists has further decreased, although it now includes more women, and the sector is generally marked by a higher level of qualifications. The study's results are particularly striking when we compare the journalists' answers to questions on the perception of their role in society and on their job satisfaction across the different linguistic regions where they work.

The second thematic section is presented in the guest editors' introduction by Daniel Perrin and Marta Zampa (pp. 133–134). It presents four articles that address the relationship between journalism and storytelling and are authored by Gilles

Merminod; Karl Renner; Marta Zampa and Daniel Perrin; and Wibke Weber, Martin Engebretsen, and Helen Kennedy.

We wrap things up with news about changes in the editorial team. We warmly welcome on board Katharina Lobinger from the Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI), who is taking over from Lorenzo Cantoni. She is already fully involved in all editorial activities and we are happy to have her, as *SComS* can only profit from her enthusiasm, knowledge and professionalism.

The last words of this editorial are reserved for Lorenzo Cantoni, who served twice as an editor of the journal, from 2003 to 2006 and from 2013 to 2018. During this time, Lorenzo has played a great part in developing *SComS* into what it is today: in his first spell he guided the editorial process of *SComS*, when it was still exclusively a journal of USI, up until its merger with *Medienwissenschaft Schweiz*, the journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Researchers at the time. In his second spell, up to this year, he was instrumental in seeing through the transition process that has seen *SComS* become a platinum open access journal. But Lorenzo is not only the longest-serving editor of *SComS*, he has also contributed several editorials and articles to the journal. We are grateful for the time he has invested in the journal and our meetings, for his expertise, initiative and his dedication to help put *SComS* on a track where it can progress and prosper. True to his spirit, he remains connected to the journal and will be guest-editing a thematic section on fashion communication in a future issue. It is thus less a goodbye than it is an *arrive-derci*, and all that is left for us to say in the meantime is “Thank you, Lorenzo!”