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## Theorizing media, communication and social change: towards a processual approach

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## **Theorizing Media, Communication and Social Change: Towards a Processual Approach**

Sabina Mihelj and James Stanyer

### ***Abstract***

*Debates about the role of media and communication in social change are central to our discipline, yet advances in this field are hampered by disciplinary fragmentation, a lack of shared conceptual language, and limited understanding of long-term shifts in the field. To address this, we first develop a typology that distinguishes between approaches that foreground the role of media and communication as an agent of change, and approaches that treat media and communication as an environment for change. We then use this typology to identify key trends in the field since 1951, including the sharp downturn in work focusing on economic aspects of change after 1985, the decline of grand narratives of social change since 2000, and the parallel return to media effects. We conclude by outlining the key traits of a processual approach to social change, which has the capacity to offer the basis for shared language in the field. This language can enable us to think of media, communication and social change across its varied temporal and social planes, and link together the processes involved in the reproduction of status quo with fundamental changes to social order.*

**Keywords:** social change, media, communication, process, modernization, mediatization, democratization, transnationalization

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## **Theorizing Media, Communication and Social Change: Towards a Processual Approach**

Questions about the role of media and communication in social change have an enduring appeal for media and communication scholars, and have regained prominence in recent years in response to rapid technological innovation in the sector. The digital and mobile transformation and the growing impact of large-scale data, as well as the rise of ‘smart’ devices and the ‘internet of things’, have given rise to both theoretical speculation and empirical research on the social impact of new communication technologies, including their ability to stimulate economic growth and foster citizen empowerment, but also their potential for political manipulation, erosion of privacy, and commercial exploitation. At the same time, the combined effects of the 2008 financial crisis, terrorist threats, and the rise of populist politics and nationalism in a range of Western democracies, are challenging long-established narratives of social progress and calling for new ways of understanding our changing social environment and its links with new media.

While this confluence of technological, economic and political developments has created a fertile intellectual environment and stimulated important theoretical and empirical advances, it is becoming increasingly difficult to gain a sense of key overarching arguments and open questions in the field. This is to a large extent due to the fragmented state of media and communication studies and the disparate intellectual sources of theories in the field, as well as to the fact that research on media, communication and social change is being conducted across a range of subfields that have each developed their own specialist languages and methods. As we argue in this article, this fragmentation created several gaps and is detracting attention from key theoretical questions concerning the understanding of social change as a process.

To address these problems, we first develop a typology of approaches to media, communication and social change, and then use this typology to identify trends in the field since 1951, and highlight the main gaps. Both the typology and the mapping are based on a systematic survey of articles published in five media and communication journals between 1951 and 2015. We conclude by outlining the key traits of a *processual approach to social change*, drawing inspiration from the framework for processual sociology proposed by Andrew Abbott (2016), and building on the wider literature which foregrounds the processual nature of social phenomena. We argue that this approach has the capacity to offer a shared conceptual

language and create conceptual bridges between the disparate subfields and intellectual traditions that investigate media, communication and social change.

### **Approaches to media, communication and social change: A typology**

For some readers, the reference to social change might imply that we intend to focus on the subfield of ‘development communication’, also known as ‘communication for social change’ (e.g., Servaes, 2008; Unwin, 2017). Originally rooted in theories of modernization, and spurred by post-World War Two decolonization, this subfield is explicitly concerned with the use of communication as a means of facilitating social change, typically in the context of the Global South. As such, it obviously constitutes one of the academic traditions that are of interest to our review. Yet, even a cursory look at recent issues of leading journals in our field reveals that research on media, communication and social change extends far beyond development communication, and tackles topics ranging from the micro-shifts involved in the changing effects of information on political attention all the way to the mezzo- and macro-level processes associated with the hybridization of journalism cultures and the transition to digital television. This diversity reflects the wide range of specialist sub-fields and intellectual traditions in our field, and bears the imprint of distinct national and regional academic cultures, including differences between US-based and European traditions of communication and media studies. The sheer range of topics and breadth of theories mobilized across this vast terrain led us to adopt an inductive approach to typology development, and build our typology based on a systematic review of work published in a selection of media communication journals. While this approach is not without its weaknesses, it has significant advantages over one that would rely on a convenience sample informed primarily by our own pre-existing knowledge about approaches to media, communication and social change. That said, the overview that follows also situates the typology in wider literature, and refers to some of the classic studies for illustration.

The sample of literature surveyed includes articles published in five journals between 1951 and 2015: *Journal of Communication* (1951-, hereafter JoC), *International Communication Gazette* (1955--, hereafter ICG), *Media, Culture and Society* (1979--, hereafter MCS), *Political Communication* (1980--, hereafter PC), and the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (1981--, hereafter HJFRT). This selection includes the two oldest journals in the field, as well as three more recently established specialist journals, which span the

qualitative/quantitative divide and cover a range of specialist topics. We should acknowledge that this sample has some in-built biases; most notably, these are all English language journals, and two of them are linked to US-based communication research, which has consequences for the scope of the review that follows. Due to restrictions of space we were not able to delve into differences between national and regional traditions evident from our sample, evident in particular from the disparity between work published in, JoC and PC, on the one hand, and MCS and ICG, on the other hand.

We surveyed every fifth year of each journal, starting with 2015 and working backwards,<sup>i</sup> which yielded 1597 articles. In the second step, the 1597 articles were scanned to identify those dealing substantively with communication and change, meaning that change had to be mentioned in the abstract and/or the introductory paragraphs. Short editorials and commentary pieces were excluded. This procedure yielded 377 articles, or 23.6% of all articles published in the sampled period. The proportion of articles dealing with change was highest in the ICG (30.9%) and MCS (30.6%), followed by PC (28.8%), but significantly lower in the HJFRT (20.2%) and JoC (15.7%).

In the third step, the 377 articles were analysed to establish the key dimensions of variation between approaches. Four such dimensions were identified: the perception of the role of media/communication in social change, the understanding of the relationship between social change and social order, the time-span of change, and the social scale of change. Based on this, we developed a distinction between two main approaches – ‘media/communication as an agent of social change’ and ‘media/communication as an environment for social change’ – as well as identified several sub-categories of each (Table 2). Let us immediately add that these two approaches constitute ideal types, and that several articles combined elements of both.

In the final step, we have used this typology to categorize all the 377 articles, and map trends over time. In what follows, we first introduce the two approaches, and then proceed with mapping the field.

[Table 1]

### ***Role of media and communication in social change***

The key difference between the two approaches lies in their understanding of the role of media and communication in social change. The agent for change approach foregrounds media and/or communication themselves as a central agents of change, focuses on explicating the generic

process by means of which media and/or communication foster change, and pays limited attention to the nature of social developments resulting from these changes. In contrast, the environment for change approach focuses on specific social changes – for instance, democratization or transnationalization – and seeks to explain how media and/or communication participate in these specific processes, either as part of the broader environment that fosters change, or as part of the environment that is itself affected by wider processes of change.

As one might expect, several articles in the environment for change category fell within the remit of the already mentioned field of development communication, or communication for social change. Typical examples from our sample include studies of the use of different media forms and genres for educational purposes (e.g., Borra, 1960; Papa et al., 2000) as well as more general discussions of media in the context of cultural, economic or political modernization in the Global South (e.g., Chu and Alfian, 1980; Tomaselli and Shepperson, 2000). Yet, work in this tradition constituted only one part of a larger body of work concerned with the relationship between communication and the rise of modern societies. This larger body included work that tackled the involvement of communication in the advent of modernity not only in the Global South, but also in the Global North (e.g., Matheson, 2000; Nerone and Barnhurst, 1995). For our typology, we included both the work in the of development communication tradition and other literature that investigates the link between media and modernity under the common heading of ‘modernization’.

Also common in our sample were articles that adopted a narrower focus and tackled the involvement of media/communication in specific processes of change affecting modern societies. We can divide these into those that focus on processes of political change, those that pay attention to economic changes, those that foreground different aspects of transnationalization, and those that tackle the phenomenon of mediatization, i.e. the process by which different social spheres are themselves increasingly determined by the logic inherent to modern media. Each of these bodies of work mobilized a plethora of different concepts, but for the sake of simplicity, we shall use a single label for each of them. The category ‘democratization’ thus encompasses work that ranges from debates on the decline of censorship and emergence of free speech to the analysis of media and democratization and the shifting nature of mediated politics in the contemporary world, across a range of political and historical contexts (e.g., Giffard, 1990; Lee and Chan, 1990; Taylor and Kent, 2000). The category ‘commercialization’ covers debates on the changing political economy of communication systems, work tackling processes such as ownership concentration, privatization, the rise of

consumerism and similar. Typical studies in this category examined processes of commercialization in the context of specific media sectors, from the press (e.g., Zhao, 2000) and broadcasting (e.g., Traquina, 1995) to telecommunications (e.g., Mody, 2005). Work in the ‘transnationalization’ sub-category typically traced the evolution of different transnational aspects of media and communication, from transnational flows of media content and formats (e.g., Chalaby, 2015) and audience reception of imported content (e.g., Volz et al., 2010) to transnational media organizations and ownership (e.g., Fejes, 1980). Finally, work in the ‘mediatization’ cluster covers both recent work that explicitly uses the term mediatization (e.g., Hutchins and Lester, 2015) as well as older work that develops kindred arguments but without using the term mediatization (e.g., Entman and Paletz, 1980). We should also note that some articles in the environment for change category examined several processes of change (‘Mix’), focused on other processes of social change not captured by the five most prominent approaches, such as the rise of information society (‘Other’), or adopted no clear conceptual language to describe the process of change in question, and instead resorted to a descriptive account of change in context (‘None’).

The different sub-categories of the environment for change approach have several traits in common. These traits become particularly clearly apparent when contrasted with work that falls in the agent of change category, and specifically with the literature concerned with the societal effects of media content. Studies of the impact of media campaigns on changing voter attitudes and behaviour during elections, research on the role of the media in processes of socialization, and studies of the violent effects of television are only some of the examples of work in this long-established and internally diverse body of work (for an overview see Perse, 2001). Unlike the environment for change approach, work in the media effects tradition conceives of media/communication as the central agent of change, and the focus is on demonstrating and explicating the generic process by which media/communication exerts effects, regardless of the precise social consequences of these effects. The initial motivation for conducting such analysis may well come from concerns over specific social changes presumably induced by media/communication, such as the rise in violence or loneliness, but this does not constitute the main focus of research. To take a couple of examples from our sample, one study examined whether the exposure to health information alters individual behaviour (Tan, Lee and Chae, 2015), while another analysed whether heavy TV viewing is linked to violent behaviour (McCarthy et al., 1975), but neither theorized the processes of social change that may result from such content-induced change. Instead, the focus of work in this category was either on providing rich empirical description of media-induced changes, or on

honing the conceptual apparatus that helps understand how such change occurs, e.g. by drawing on theories of framing, agenda setting, uses and gratifications, or others.

A classic example of media effects research that falls squarely within the agent of change category is Comstock et al.'s (1978) model of the impact of television. This model presents the effects process as a sequence of repeated exposure to television representations of behaviour, which can act as an incentive for imitating the represented behaviour in real life. The likelihood of the imitation taking place depends on several factors, including the extent to which television offers representations of alternative behaviours and portrays the consequences of specific behaviour, the degree of arousal accompanying the exposure to representations, the degree of perceived reality of these representations, and the extent to which the individual concerned has an opportunity to enact the behaviour represented. The social consequences of this process are of marginal importance to the analysis; the nature of these consequences can vary considerably depending on the nature of the act represented, and the extent to which all the conditions for learning are met. It is quite possible that repeated exposure to television has no effect at all, or that the learning that takes place results in a reaffirmation of existing social rules and norms, rather than bringing about a fundamental change to social order.

### ***Relationship between change and social order***

This brings us to the second key difference between the two approaches, which concerns the relationship between social change and social order. The environment for change approach always focuses on social changes that entail fundamental alterations to the existing social order – the replacement of traditional with modern societies, the shift from authoritarianism to democracy, etc. In contrast, the agent of change approach tackles changes that can hold diverse relationships with social order, and can either contribute to its dismantling or to its reproduction. Work concerned with the involvement of the media in socialization (e.g. Rosengren, 1994) provides a case in point. Socialization is, above all, a process by which a society reproduces its established rules, norms and hierarchies by means of passing them on to new generations, and it has been widely accepted that the media constitute a key socialization agent. From the perspective of individuals concerned, socialization is clearly a process of change, which involves a transition from childhood to adulthood and entails the gradual adoption of social roles, statuses and appropriate modes of behaviour associated with each. From the perspective of society, however, processes of socialization tend to result in stability and continuity rather

than change. The roles, statuses and modes of behaviour can change from generation to generation, and these changes may constitute part of a more fundamental process of change, but this is by no means necessary. A similar argument can be developed in relation to changes initiated by the effects of campaigns during routine elections; while such campaigns do have capacity to provoke changes among voters, and these changes can eventually lead to more profound social shifts, they can also end up consolidating the status quo.

It is of course possible to envisage the media playing a role in socializing youth into a radically new social order, as for instance after a major political upheaval such as the advent of communist rule in post-World War Two Eastern Europe. However, existing research and theorizing on media and socialization – perhaps because of being conducted in the context of relatively stable societies of the Global North in the post-World War Two decades – tends to emphasize the conformist role of the media (McQuail, 2005: 494). Indeed, many of the classic theories on media effects, including those that seek to move beyond short-term effects and theorize the cumulative effects of communication over long term – such as Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence (1974) or Gerbner’s (1998) cultivation theory – emphasize the involvement of the media in reproducing the status quo or at best in fostering incremental change, rather than initiating a fundamental transformation. As such, they clearly differ from work in the environment for change category.

### ***Social scale and time-span of change***

Two further areas where notable differences exist between the two approaches are the social scale and time-span of change. Typically, the focus in the agent of change approach is on micro changes that affect individuals – changes in behaviour, attitudes, values etc. – and on processes occurring over a relatively short time span – usually a few months or even days in case of election campaigns, or up to a decade or two in the case of socialization. As noted earlier, some media effects work does take a more long-term approach, and seeks to address the cumulative effects of communication and its contribution to broader social processes, such as the rise of societal violence or decline in public civic engagement. However, these are either processes that ultimately contribute to the reproduction of the existing social order, or result in changes that are more limited in scope compared to the ones associated with modernization, democratization or globalization. In contrast, research falling in the environment for social

change category is concerned with macro processes which typically take several decades or centuries to complete.

So far, we have focused only on one subset of work that takes media/communication as a key agent of change – namely, research that examines the effects of media/communication content. We use the category ‘content’ here broadly, to encompass the themes, values or frames embedded in media texts, but also aspects that relate to the structure or form that the content takes, such as genre, narrative and plot, or camera angles and shots in the case of visual media. There is, however, a parallel tradition of research that foregrounds the effects of communication technology. This tradition is often traced back to the work of the Canadian political economist Harold Innis (2007 [1950]; 2008 [1951]) who distinguished between space-based and time-based communication technologies, and argued that each had elective affinities with different modes of social organization and governance.

Approaches that, like Innis’s, foreground the societal effects of the technology of communication rather than its content, have been adopted by a range of other authors. Marshall McLuhan, among many others, has focused on the shift from oral to written communication, arguing that the introduction of literacy affected social organization and stimulated the rise of a different mode of consciousness as well as a new conception of the individual (McLuhan, 1994). In a related manner, Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) examined the consequences of print technology, showing its involvement in the growth of modern science, nationalism and the rise of Protestant Reformation. Work in this tradition appears also in our sample (e.g., Eisenstein, 1980; McLuhan, 1975). Of course, not all the literature concerned with the impact of communication technologies has emphasized its transformative potential. Brian Winston’s (1998) work, for instance, underlines the involvement of ICTs in reproducing the status quo: while recognizing their innovative potential, Winston argued that new technologies become widely adopted only in so far as they can be put to the service of maintaining status quo.

The technology-centred approaches to social change outlined so far combine elements of the two master-approaches discussed earlier. While they conceive of media/communication as a central agent of change, they also pay attention to specific social processes of change, and while some approaches foreground the role of new communication technologies in fostering fundamental changes to social order (e.g. Eisenstadt) others emphasize their contribution to status quo (Winston) or note the differential affinities between various technologies and social order (Innis). Furthermore, in contrast to content-centred literature on media effects, this body of work examines social change on a macro scale, and over long-term. To put it differently, while the four dimensions of comparison we have introduced offer a useful basis for comparing

such technology-centred work to other approaches to media, communication and social change, this work does not fit neatly into the two-fold typology we have proposed.

Yet, only a minority of the technology-centred work in our sample was of this kind. Rather, articles centred on the effects of communication technology usually paid little attention to specific processes of social change, focused on changes at micro or mezzo levels, and covered a short span of time. Typical examples include a study that examined whether the use of Twitter during an election campaign altered voter attitudes and preferences (Kobayashi and Ichifuji, 2015) and an article that investigated whether the multiplication of broadcast channels has led to audience fragmentation and polarization (Webster, 2005); neither developed broader arguments about the nature of societal changes accompanying such technology-driven changes. As such, both articles fit within the agent of social change category. Due to that, the mapping outlined below treats technology-centred work as a subset of the agent of change category.

### **Mapping the field**

Of the two approaches we have identified, the environment for change approach was considerably more common, taking up 79 percent of the whole sample (Table 2). Among the five main sub-categories of the environment for change approach, transnationalization was most widely used, followed by commercialization, democratization, modernization and mediatization. Also notable was the proportion of articles that adopted the environment for change approach, but without using any conceptual language to explicate the process of change investigated. Of the two sub-categories of the agent of change approach, work focused on technology was somewhat more common than research focused on content.

[Table 2]

Our mapping also confirmed that the key approaches differ in the time span covered (Table 3). On average, the time span covered in the agent of change category was considerably shorter; this was particularly clear in articles focused on content effects, where an overwhelming majority (86.1%) covered a time span of up to 9 years. In contrast, articles in the environment for change category were more varied, with 40.3 percent covering a span of twenty years or more and 32.9 percent tackling changes of up to 9 years. It is worth adding that articles in the latter subgroup – which approached media/communication as an environment for change but covered a shorter time span – typically dealt with recent and sudden changes associated with democratization or economic liberalization (e.g. Taylor and Kent, 2000). As expected, articles that took technology as an agent of change fell between the two extremes.

[Table 3]

The two approaches also differed with respect to the main location(s) of change – an aspect that also offers an indication of the social scale of change examined (Table 4). As one might expect, articles focused on content as an agent of change typically examined micro-changes affecting individual members of audiences, while articles treating media/communication as an environment for change privileged macro-changes in the realm of production. Work foregrounding technology as an agent of change was closer to the environment for change category on this dimension, although the proportion of articles tackling micro-changes among audiences was higher than in the environment for change category.

[Table 4]

The popularity of different approaches fluctuated considerably over time (Table 5). While we need to be mindful of generalizing from what is a rather small sample – especially as far as the period up to 1970 is concerned, when the number of articles addressing social change totalled five or less per year<sup>ii</sup> – the key trends are nonetheless worth reflecting on. First, the adoption of theoretical frameworks, even if only for descriptive purposes, has become more common over time, and especially since 1990. That said, we should note that the proportion of articles in the environment for change category without a theoretical framework has increased again in recent years, a fact that can be interpreted as a consequence of disruption and disorientation caused by waves of technological innovation, which challenged established conceptual language and prompted a return to descriptive accounts of change. Of interest in this context is also the surge in the agent of change category, especially in 2015, when this category accounts for over a third (36.54%) of the sample. This result indicates that the field, faced with changes that cannot be fitted into existing master narratives of change, is returning to theories of media effects, be they grounded in media content or technology. Also worth noting is the sharp decline in the ‘commercialization’ category, which reached the height of its popularity between 1975 and 1985, and then declined dramatically. Given that concerns surrounding the consequences of growing commercialization and market concentration show no signs of abating, this decline presents a worrying trend.

[Table 5]

Second, one may be surprised to find that modernization and the effects of media content – often cited among two foundational approaches in our field – appeared in our sample at a relatively late stage. The first articles employing modernization as a central concept are found only in 1970, while the first studies discussing media/communication content as an agent of change appeared only in 1975, along with the first articles examining media/communication

in relation to transnationalization. Instead, the earliest articles in our sample were either concerned with democratization, or addressed the role of technology as an agent of change (both from 1960) or focused on commercialization (from 1965).

### **A field in search of a new paradigm? Towards a processual approach**

The mapping presented above offers several points for reflection. To start with, it is worth noting three significant blank spots. First, no article combined both the content and technology strands of the ‘agent of change’ approach. Technologies and content were occasionally discussed together in the context of environment for change approaches, especially in articles that discussed change in relation to modernization or mediatization. However, the relationship between technologies and content as distinct yet inter-related agents of change was not explicated. Of course, there is a growing body of literature addressing these questions outside of our sample – see, for instance, Strömback’s (2004) call for a conceptualization of media influence that recognizes the interactions between media content, media forms, media systems and other factors, or Hepp’s (2009) discussion of the different ‘moulding forces’ that contribute to mediatization. Yet as our review suggests, the proposals developed in this literature have yet to evolve into a shared language with capacity to exert decisive influence on how we approach communication and social change.

Also rare were articles bridging the two core approaches, and treating media as both agents of, and environments for, change. In such articles, one theoretical approach typically prevailed, and we have therefore classified them under the dominant theoretical frame (i.e. under the relevant subcategory of either ‘agent of change’ or ‘environment for change’). Most of these articles foregrounded media technologies rather than content; examples include studies of new communication technologies as vehicles of democratization, civic engagement or dissent (e.g., Carpini, 2000), commercialization and market concentration (e.g., Compaine, 1985), and modernization (e.g., Eisenstein, 1980). Articles emphasizing content as an agent of wider changes were less common; examples include studies of televised education and social change in the context of ‘developing’ nations (e.g., Borra, 1960; Papa et al., 2000), and a couple of studies of media content as factors contributing to transnational identifications (e.g., Lindell, 2015). These results suggest that the diagnosis of the field presented 25 years ago by Lang and Lang (1993: 95) is still valid: according to their assessment, the main challenge faced by communication research at the time lied in connecting the study of effects with the analysis of

links between the media system and the society in which it is embedded. Looking ahead, Lang and Lang (1993: 95) saw the best prospects for advancing the field in ‘an even more definitive reorientation of research away from media behaviour and responses of individuals and towards the cumulative consequences of media behaviour over time’. Surveying the field a quarter of a century later, we can say that such a definitive reorientation has not yet occurred: while theoretical speculation on the cumulative consequences of micro-changes is becoming more common, especially in the context of debates on mediatization (e.g., Lundby, 2009, Couldry and Hepp, 2017), studies that would systematically integrate such macro-reflections with the findings of micro-level effects research remain an exception.

Third, we should also note the lack of synthetic studies that tackle multiple processes of social change in the environment for change category. Typically, debates about democratization, commercialization, transnationalization, modernization and mediatization are evolving independently from one another, with little clarity on how the processes relate to one another. Exceptions are found in articles in the ‘Mix’ category, which discuss multiple processes of socio-cultural change and their contribution to shifts in the world of communication and media. One such study, for instance, examined the rise of educational media goods in the UK as a result of globalization, growing media ownership concentration and market competition, re-regulation, and technological convergence (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2005). Yet, such articles remained within the confines of individual case studies and subject areas – in this case, media and children – rather than seeking to develop more general arguments about the inter-relationships between various processes of socio-cultural change and communication. We should note that macro-reflections of this kind are not absent in the field, but are rare and typically take a book-length form (e.g. Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Thompson, 1995).

Arguably, these blind-spots are all manifestations of a shared problem – namely, the fragmented nature of the field, and the lack of shared conceptual language that would enable us to think of media, communication and social change across its varied temporal and social planes, and link together the processes involved in the reproduction of status quo with fundamental changes to social order. To make things worse, longitudinal trends revealed by our mapping suggest that this lack of shared language is becoming more acute in recent years. If the post-World War Two decades have seen a rise of theoretical frameworks anchored in theories of modernization, the twenty-first century is marked by an absence of grand narratives of change. Instead, each subfield is seeking to develop its own conceptual solutions to tackle the present predicament, or is instead returning to the investigation of media effects and

eschewing the theorization of social changes altogether, thereby leaving the field fragmented and in lack of an over-arching framework.

It is tempting to address this fragmentation by proposing new grand narratives, and we could argue that some of the recent debates – most notably those surrounding mediatization – are seeking to do just that. While we do appreciate the importance of such efforts, we argue that they need to be paralleled by conceptual innovation of a different kind, one addressing the nature of social change as a process. In what follows we briefly outline the key traits of what we refer to as a *processual approach to social change*, inspired by the framework for processual sociology proposed by Andrew Abbott (2016), and rooted in the wider sociological, historical, and political science literature that foregrounds the processual nature of social phenomena (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Sewell, 2005; Thelen and Mahoney, 2015). We should note that the processual approach we advocate here is not entirely new to communication research. Its elements are present in some of the classics of communication studies – an issue we return to below – as well as in parts of recent literature that tackles social change, most notably the work on communication and social movements (e.g., Mattoni and Treré, 2014) and research inspired by historical institutionalism (Bannerman and Haggart, 2015), but also our own work on researching change over time (Stanyer and Mihelj, 2016). Yet so far, the broader understanding of social change that underpins this work has not been made explicit, nor presented in generic terms that would allow its translation to other subfields of research.

At first sight, emphasising the processual nature of social change may seem superfluous: social change, after all, involves a process of change, and it is this process that constitutes the focus of analysis in the field. Yet, most often, research on communication and social change is not concerned with understanding the process of change as such, but with establishing its final outcomes: Has the proliferation of social media contributed to the creation of echo-chambers and the spreading of fake news? Did the growth of transnational media corporations lead to the demise of locally produced content? Did a particular media campaign result in changes to voter attitudes or behaviour? While research is often interested in identifying the causes of change, the precise succession and interaction of these causes, and the ways in which they combine to create a process of change over time, is of marginal concern. Exceptions do exist, most notably in the field of communication history, but the majority of research in the area tends to privilege outcomes over processes.

Arguably, this neglect of the process of change stems from the legacies of classic functionalist and conflict approaches to social change, rooted in the work of authors such as Talcott Parsons and Karl Marx, which played a decisive role in shaping debates on

communication and social change in the early post-World War Two period. While starkly different in their understanding of the social causes of change, functionalist and conflict approaches both take structure and order as their starting point, and see change merely as a transitory phase that leads from one form of social order to another (cf. Harper and Leicht, 2007: 44-55). Indeed, from the perspective of both approaches, the causes of social change are themselves entailed in social order – either in the strains resulting from sudden changes in the system’s environment, or from internal inconsistencies between different parts of the system, or in the systemic conflicts arising from the inherent scarcity of resources. As Sewell (2005: 83) puts it, classical sociological theories see historical change as ‘the temporal working out of an inherent logic of social development’, driven by ‘transhistorical progressive laws’ that inevitably lead societies from one state to another: from mechanical to organic solidarity, from feudalism to capitalism and socialism, etc. From this vantage point, it seems logical to focus on order and structure rather than change, as it is there that one can find all the clues to processes of change.

In contrast, a processual approach starts from the notion of society as a process, emphasizes change itself as the fundamental reality of social life, and sees social structure and order as merely temporary by-products of change. Or, as Abbott (2016: 2) argues: ‘Change is not something that happens occasionally to stable social actors. Change is the natural state of social life.’ As a result, the conception of causes of change differs, too. Rather than searching for the causes of change in the inherent qualities of the preceding social order, a processual approach assumes that change can only be understood by looking at the precise elements and stages of the process of change itself: the events and actions involved in the process, their specific ordering and sequence, and the multiple influences that result from them. The preceding social order and structures remain an important factor in the equation, but do not themselves have the power to determine the course of change entirely. Social change, and social life more generally, can therefore be seen as ‘composed of countless happenings or encounters in which persons and groups of persons engage in social action’; these actions, in turn, ‘are constrained and enabled by the constitutive structures of their societies’ (Sewell 2005: 100). Arguably, such a perspective inevitably leads analysis to focus on describing and explicating the logic of process, as opposed to its outcomes.

How can such a perspective be applied in the study of media and social change, and what benefits does it bring to the field? First, the emphasis on processes as opposed to outcomes is better suited to investigating the contingent, unpredictable, and multidirectional nature of contemporary change. In a context where any outcome of change is inevitably short-lived and

quickly superseded by new developments, research focused on explaining outcomes is bound to become outdated very quickly. Take, for instance, the body of research developed over the course of the 1990s to account for the involvement of communication in processes of rapid democratization and economic liberalization in post-communist Eastern Europe; much of this work can shed little light on present developments in the region, which are marked by political polarization, rise of populism, and democratic deconsolidation. Instead, these trajectories call for an approach that does not take democracy as a stable outcome of a unilineal and irreversible process of transition, but instead seeks to account for the involvement of communication in transitions to and from different types and levels of democratization, over time.

A similar argument can be developed in relation to work on media effects, where a processual approach would entail shifting attention from explaining particular audience decisions or attitudes at a single point in time (for instance, voting decisions) to understanding the gradual shifts in audience attitudes, biases or behaviour over a longer period (for instance, over an electoral campaign as a whole, or over several successive elections). As Abbott (2016: 171-172) points out, some of the classic US studies of voting and audience behaviour already adopted such a processual approach, and can hence serve as useful models: examples include the Berelson et al.'s (1954) study of the 1948 US election, which is concerned with explicating the gradual shift in attitudes towards Truman over the course of the campaign, as well as Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) *Personal Influence*, which examines the flow of influence that shapes individual preferences and choices in shopping, fashion and public affairs. In both cases, the focus is not on the outcome itself, but on the dynamics of the process that leads to outcomes. One can envisage how such studies could be extended over time to encompass several successive elections, shopping decisions, or fashion choices, treating each of them as one occurrence in an ongoing sequence that makes up the political and economic life of the nation (cf. Abbott, 2016: 172).

A processual approach also enables us to look anew at the relationship between media and communication, social order and social change. As noted earlier on, social order, too, involves processes of transformation – a fact that inevitably blurs the line between periods of social stability and periods of social change. Rather than treating social order as the direct opposite of social change, we should therefore seek to understand how media and communication processes involved in the reproduction of status quo may, under certain circumstances, also be laying grounds for fundamental changes. For instance, as recent research on communist Eastern Europe suggests (Mihelj and Huxtable 2018), television was immensely successful at weaving communist ideals into the very texture of everyday life, yet did so

without necessarily inspiring a commitment to the communist agenda. As such, television had an ambiguous relationship with the communist social order: it served as an ‘anchor of normality’ (Mihelj and Huxtable, 2018: 16) and contributed to the stability and longevity of communist rule, while at the same time allowing its ideological message to become ever more blurred. As the political infrastructure underpinning the established routines of viewing started to fall apart, the taken-for-granted habits and rituals that sustained the presence of communist ideals in everyday life were disrupted. Without them, belief in communism lost its bearings, too – not because people were unambiguously opposed to it, but rather because they have long ceased to take the messages promoted through television literally. Such an approach, which acknowledges the simultaneous involvement of communication in sustaining status quo and paving the road for change, can also provide the basis for bridging the gap between theories that emphasise the conservative impact of communication, typically found in the agent of change category, and research that foregrounds the contribution of media and communication to change, more common in the environment for change category.

Finally, a processual approach also requires us to pay greater attention to the temporal organization of change. Such temporal sensitivity can take different forms, and given that we have written on this topic elsewhere (Stanyer and Mihelj, 2016) we shall limit ourselves to briefly recapping some of the key points here. First, temporal sensitivity entails acknowledging that the temporal location of causes and outcomes is itself an important factor shaping the process of change. To put it differently, the nature of social causality is ‘temporally heterogeneous, not temporally uniform’ (Sewell, 2005: 101) meaning that the impact of causal factors can change over time, and as a result, the same outcomes occurring at different points in time may well be explained by different constellations of factors. Furthermore, temporal sensitivity also requires us to acknowledge the potential impact of the duration and pace of change. Depending on the pace of change and duration of interim outcomes, a process of change can either approximate a model of gradual change, where change takes place slowly and incrementally, or a model of a punctuated equilibrium, in which long periods of stability are punctuated by short bursts of rapid change (Thelen and Mahoney, 2015: 22). At the very minimum, such temporal sensitivity means that we must pay attention to the sequencing of events, and cannot treat changes that take place at different points in time as if they occurred simultaneously. More ambitiously, we could seek to identify different temporal patterns of change, and examine the factors that contribute to them. Such patterns could be observed both at the micro-level of election campaigns and at the macro-level of processes of democratization,

globalization or similar, hence allowing for shared concepts to be used across the two main approaches to communication and social change we have identified in this article.

In sum, the processual approach we have outlined has capacity to bring several benefits to the field of media, communication and social change. First, it can offer conceptual links between the otherwise disparate specialist subfields as well as the different intellectual and national traditions, and thereby help overcome fragmentation in the field. Second, it can also help bridge key gaps in the field: first, the disjunction between the micro-studies of content and technology as agents of change, and the macro-studies that consider communication and media as an environment for broader social shifts; and second, the disjunction between work that emphasizes the conservative impact of media and communication and their contribution to status quo, and research that foregrounds their transformative potential. Most importantly, a processual approach is also better suited to studying the complex, contingent and unpredictable processes of change we are witnessing in recent years, which require us to shift attention from explaining outcomes to understanding the logic of processes of change themselves.

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**TABLES**

	<b>Media/communication as an environment for social change</b>	<b>Media/communication as an agent of social change</b>
<b>Role of media/communication in social change</b>	Media/communication provide an environment for broader social changes; focus on explicating the involvement of media/communication in specific social changes	Media/communication are a central agent of change; focus on the generic process by means of which media/communication-change occurs, regardless of the nature of change
<b>Relationship between the process of change and social order</b>	The process results in fundamental change to social order	The process can result in fundamental change to social order, but can also contribute to status quo or bring incremental changes
<b>Time-span of change</b>	Medium- to long-term	Short to medium-term
<b>Social scale of change</b>	Mezzo to macro	Micro to mezzo
<b>Subcategories</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modernization</li> <li>• Democratization</li> <li>• Commercialization</li> <li>• Transnationalization</li> <li>• Mediatization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content</li> <li>• Technology</li> </ul>

Table 1: Two approaches to media, communication and social change.

		JoC	ICG	PC	MCS	HJFRT	<i>Total</i>	
<b>Communication as an agent of change</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>17</b> <b>(18.3%)</b>	5 (4.9%)	<b>13</b> <b>(26.5%)</b>	0	0	35 (9.3%)	79 (21%)
	<b>Technology</b>	<b>17</b> <b>(18.3%)</b>	8 (7.8%)	5 (10.2%)	13 (13.4%)	1 (2.9%)	<b>44</b> <b>(11.7%)</b>	
<b>Communication as an environment for change</b>	<b>Modernization</b>	8 (8.6%)	10 (9.7%)	1 (2%)	6 (6.2%)	1 (2.9%)	26 (6.9%)	298 (79%)
	<b>Commercialization</b>	<b>20</b> <b>(21.5%)</b>	5 (4.9%)	2 (4.1%)	<b>14</b> <b>(14.4%)</b>	0	41 (10.9%)	
	<b>Democratization</b>	2 (2.2%)	<b>19</b> <b>(18.5%)</b>	6 (12.2%)	12 (12.4%)	1 (2.9%)	40 (10.6%)	
	<b>Transnationalization</b>	6 (6.5%)	<b>17</b> <b>(16.5%)</b>	3 (6.1%)	<b>16</b> <b>(16.5%)</b>	<b>4</b> <b>(11.4%)</b>	<b>46</b> <b>(12.2%)</b>	
	<b>Mediatization</b>	3 (3.2%)	2 (1.9%)	2 (4.1%)	6 (6.2%)	0	13 (3.4%)	
	<b>Mix</b>	1 (1.1%)	6 (5.8%)	2 (4.1%)	7 (7.2%)	<b>2 (5.7%)</b>	18 (4.8%)	
	<b>Other</b>	3 (3.2%)	1 (1%)	<b>6</b> <b>(12.2%)</b>	4 (4.1%)	1 (2.9%)	15 (4%)	
<b>None</b>	16 (17.2%)	<b>30</b> <b>(29.1%)</b>	<b>9</b> <b>(18.4%)</b>	<b>19</b> <b>(19.6%)</b>	<b>25</b> <b>(71.4%)</b>	<b>99</b> <b>(26.3%)</b>		
<b>Total</b>		93 (100%)	103 (100%)	49 (100%)	97 (100%)	35 (100%)	377 (100%)	

Table 2: Frequency of key approaches to media, communication and social change in five media and communication journals.

Note: Top three approaches in each journal in bold.

		<b>Up to 9 years</b>	<b>Up to 19 years</b>	<b>20 years or more</b>	<b>Unclear or N/A</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Media/communication as an agent of change</b>	Content	30 (85.7%)	3 (8.6%)	2 (5.7%)	0	35 (100%)
	Technology	20 (45.4%)	9 (20.5%)	14 (31.8%)	1 (2.3%)	44 (100%)
<b>Media/communication as an environment for change</b>		98 (32.9%)	70 (23.5%)	120 (40.3%)	10 (3.4%)	298 (100%)
<b>Total</b>		148 (39.2%)	82 (21.8%)	136 (36.1%)	11 (2.9%)	377 (100%)

Table 3: Time-span of change

		<b>Production</b> campaigning practices, media systems, forms of broadcasting, organizations, industries, policies	<b>Texts</b> agendas, bias, content styles, discourses, emotions, frames, soundbites, representations	<b>Audiences</b> audience habits, attitudes, opinions, participation, media effects on audiences	<b>Total</b>
<b>Media/communication as an agent of change</b>	Content	3 (8.6%)	12 (34.3%)	28 (80.0%)	35 (100%)
	Technology	33 (75.0%)	3 (6.8%)	12 (27.3%)	44 (100%)
<b>Media/communication as an environment for change</b>		220 (73.8%)	88 (29.5%)	39 (13.1%)	298 (100%)

Table 4: Location of change

Note: Some of the articles investigated change in several locations, e.g. at the level of both texts and audiences, or at the level of both production and texts.

	Media/communication as agent of change		Media/communication as environment for change								Total
	Content	Technology	Moderniz	Commerc	Democrat	Trans	Mediat	Mix	Other	None	
<b>2015</b>	<b>10</b> (19.23%)	<b>9</b> (17.31%)	2 (3.85%)	2 (3.85%)	5 (9.62%)	5 (9.62%)	<b>4</b> (7.69%)	1 (1.92%)	2 (3.85%)	12 (23.08%)	52 (100%)
<b>2010</b>	7 (13.73%)	2 (3.92%)	3 (5.88%)	1 (1.96%)	3 (5.88%)	<b>13</b> (25.49%)	1 (1.96%)	4 (7.84%)	1 (1.96%)	<b>16</b> (31.37%)	51 (100%)
<b>2005</b>	3 (7.32%)	<b>11</b> (26.83%)	0	5 (12.20%)	2 (4.88%)	<b>6</b> (14.63%)	0	4 (9.76%)	0	10 (24.39%)	41 (100%)
<b>2000</b>	1 (2.22%)	3 (6.67%)	<b>5</b> (11.11%)	5 (11.11%)	<b>7</b> (15.56%)	<b>8</b> (17.78%)	2 (4.44%)	3 (6.67%)	<b>3</b> (6.67%)	8 (17.78%)	45 (100%)
<b>1995</b>	<b>9 (18.37%)</b>	5 (10.20%)	<b>5</b> (10.20%)	5 (10.20%)	<b>7</b> (14.29%)	4 (8.16%)	<b>3</b> (6.12%)	0	<b>4</b> (8.16%)	7 (14.29%)	49 (100%)
<b>1990</b>	1 (3.70%)	0	<b>3</b> (11.11%)	3 (11.11%)	<b>7</b> (25.93%)	3 (11.11%)	0	2 (7.41%)	<b>2</b> (7.41%)	6 (22.22%)	27 (100%)
<b>1985</b>	0	2 (6.45%)	2 (6.45%)	<b>6</b> (19.35%)	4 (12.90%)	3 (9.68%)	0	2 (6.45%)	1 (3.23%)	<b>11</b> (35.48%)	31 (100%)
<b>1980/1</b>	1 (2.13%)	<b>9</b> (19.15%)	3 (6.38%)	<b>9</b> (19.15%)	1 (2.13%)	3 (6.38%)	<b>3</b> (6.38%)	0	0	<b>18</b> (38.30%)	47 (100%)
<b>1975</b>	<b>3 (16.67%)</b>	2 (11.11%)	0	<b>3</b> (16.67%)	1 (5.56%)	1 (5.56%)	0	1 (5.56%)	2 (7.41%)	5 (27.78%)	18 (100%)
<b>1970</b>	0	0	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	0	0	0	0	0	5 (100%)
<b>1965</b>	0	0	0	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	0	0	1 (25%)	0	1 (25%)	4 (100%)
<b>1960</b>	0	1 (25%)	0	0	1 (25%)	0	0	0	0	2 (50%)	4 (100%)
<b>1955</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3 (100%)	3 (100%)
<b>1951</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	35 (9.3%)	44 (11.7%)	26 (6.9%)	41 (10.9%)	40 (10.6%)	46 (12.2%)	13 (3.4%)	18 (4.8%)	15 (4%)	99 (26.3%)	377 (100%)

Table 5: Approaches to media, communication and social change over time.

Note: Top three periods for each journal in bold (from 1975 onwards only).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Two exceptions to this pattern were *Journal of Communication*, which was launched in 1951, and the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, launched in 1981; in both cases, we included the first volume in our sample.

<sup>ii</sup> No articles dealing with change were published in 1951.