

Conceptualizing the Doings and Sayings of Media Practices: Expressive Performance, Communicative Understanding, and Epistemic Discourse

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It has become commonplace to speak of media practices as a nexus of doings and sayings. In our article, we scrutinize this fuzzy account and the forms of articulation it entails. We start by arguing that, to be recognized as social practices, activities—regardless of whether they are verbal utterances or wordless body movements—have to initiate a cultural signification process that turns them into socially intelligible performances. Forming part of social practices in general, communicative practices, then, are modes of sign use that enable us to address recurrent and newly emerging tasks of understanding, accommodating, and comprehending. We shed light on the insights that such a conceptual distinction reveals by interrogating the shades of sensemaking within mnemonic online communities and their nostalgic remediations of the past.

Keywords: social practice, communicative practice, discursive practice, practice theory, praxeology, signification, nostalgia

Practices are, to use a prominent definition by Theodore Schatzki (1996), “a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (p. 89). As such, the notion of media practices is used to shift the attention away from media technology or human interlocutors and direct it toward the ongoing conduct of lived communicative activities. Media practices, in this regard, can loosely be defined as “what people are doing that is related to media” (Couldry, 2012, p. 35). They are taken as the starting point for inquiries into mediated forms of cultural expression and sensemaking. This line of scholarship departs from mainstream production or reception studies in communication research and engages with practice-oriented work in media anthropology, discourse analysis, linguistic ethnography, and sociolinguistics (for overviews, see Askew & Wilk, 2002; Boyer, 2012; Duranti, 2012; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002; Spitulnik, 1993). Rather than being confined to a particular media technology or one aspect of encoding and decoding messages, media practices offer a way

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to engage with processes of social mediation—that is, as Boyer (2012) writes, “social transaction in its broadest sense of the movement of images, discourses, persons and things” (p. 412).

Leaving aside the particularities of praxeological theories, which may come in many inflections, the idea that the unfolding bundle of activities and meaning encompasses, most fundamentally, the use of utterances and more muted kinds of corporeal motions seems intuitively right. Practices are, quite simply, doings and sayings and thus encompass, as Ortner (1984) already noted, “anything people do” (p. 149). Yet when thinking about this more closely, it becomes difficult to state what distinguishes these two sorts of practical accomplishments: Few activities can be performed without using spoken language or other forms of expression such as sign language, and their symbolic dimension is intrinsically tied to what we expect others to do and what we think makes sense in this regard. This is because the phrase *social practices* is actually a tautology (Reckwitz, 2002). To be recognized as a social practice, activities, regardless of whether they are verbal messages or wordless body movements, have to unleash processes of signification—in Giddens’ (1984) definition, “processes of meaning constitution” (p. 29)—through which they become socially intelligible performances. Practices might be asocial, in the sense of disrupting cohabitation and cooperation, but there are no nonsocial practices because this would result in a state of anomie. The concept of social practices in fact presumes that practices will be enacted in sensible ways, which informs processes of understanding that are often nondeclarative (Bourdieu, 1977). Hence, numerous theories of practice stress the expressive performance of doings and sayings (Butler, 1993; Goffman, 1971; Wittgenstein, 1953/2009).

Our mostly conceptual argument starts from some core tenets of practice theory and contributes to the growing interest in media practices in the field of communication and media research (Ang, 2006; Bird, 2010; Couldry, 2004, 2012; Göttlich, 2013; Pentzold, 2020; Postill, 2010). To scholars taking anthropological approaches toward communication and mediation, this effort might seem somewhat inattentive and overdue. To them, media artifacts and practices are necessarily enmeshed with everyday lives, political power, economic concerns, and social connections. They require a holistic inquiry into cultural reproduction and contestation (Abu-Lughod, 1997). Somewhat ironically indeed, Spitulnik (1993) noticed 25 years ago that anthropological investigations “have in some way already bypassed many of the debates within media studies . . . because they implicitly theorize media processes, products, and uses as complex parts of social reality” (p. 307). In comparison, scholars in media and communication research just began not too long ago to tap into this long-standing and rich line of scholarship.

With this article, we argue for a continuation and extension of this engagement. It allows us to specify what practice theory has to offer for conceptualizing media practices that are implicated in communication and the fabrication and dissemination of knowledge. In addition, we are left to ask how signification and epistemic representation feature within practice theory and how they can be made part of its social analyses (Schatzki, 2017). Addressing such questions will help us to redraw the boundaries between discursive and nondiscursive spheres of social life; it also demands that we more clearly define what communication is in practical terms vis-à-vis other forms of meaning making. This touches on debates about what constitutes the primary foundations of sociality and challenges some of its underlying distinctions—such as semantics versus mere matter or lived practice versus social structure—that have fueled the linguistic turn. These debates surface, once again, in the proclaimed paradigmatic shift toward practice (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). In fact, faced with an increasing fragmentation of

social theory during the 1980s, Ortner (1984) maintained that "practice" might serve as a common idiom or "new key symbol of theoretical orientation" (p. 127).

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we approach social practices by investigating the processes of signification that occur within their ongoing accomplishment and that relate to a media manifold. Signification helps us to give apparent symbolic and cultural form to what otherwise would appear to be quite transient performances. We then conceive of communication as a palette of signs using practices that people enact and that offer them the possibility to express themselves, indicate states of knowledge and experience, and articulate feelings and moods as well as aims and actions. We demonstrate the insights that can be gained from such theoretical groundwork by interrogating the shades of sensemaking within mnemonic online communities and their nostalgic remediations of the past. Against this backdrop, we finally draw on work in discourse theory to consider what discursive practices are and propose seeing them as an analytical category, one that stresses the epistemic potential of doings and sayings.

Signification in Expressive Media Practices

Prioritizing practices as the chief objects of cultural analysis has a number of analytical ramifications. First, it steers our attention to the "ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life" (p. vii), as Garfinkel (1967) called it, and thus to the cohesion and reproducibility of practices across time and space. They are understood as key social phenomena, which should be referred to when seeking to understand entities such as institutions, mentalities, or class structures. Consequently, social reproduction and shared cultural orders cannot be explained primarily via intentionality, rationality, or even communication, but, prior to these principles, by the "continuous flow of conduct" (Giddens, 1984, p. 3). In other words, practices bring meaning, intelligibility, and intentionality to action, and not vice versa (Nicolini, 2012). Yet not all body movements or expressive acts count as practices, because they should be habitual and possess a certain currency within a social collective in which they seem appropriate and can usefully be enacted.

Contrary to attempts that seek to locate intentionality in a kind of subjective consciousness that is directed toward outward entities in order to ascribe meaning to them, praxeological accounts assume that each practice, as Reckwitz (2002) posed, "implies a particular routinized mode of intentionality, i.e. of wanting or desiring certain things and avoiding others" (p. 254). This moves us away from determining the intent behind an action and toward appreciating, Suchman (2007) writes, the "interactional work that produces intelligibility in situ" (p. 86).

When people participate in the interweaving of patterns of action and patterns of understanding, they acquire the largely unwritten know-how of skillful participation as "a practical mastery of a technique" (para. 150), Wittgenstein (1953/2009) said. For these reasons, the tacit form by which practical knowledge is circulated and passed on in practice does not employ verbal instruction and abstract explanation, but works, as Lave and Wenger (1991) have shown for communities of practices, through the corporeal habituation of dispositions to act and to evaluate. This practical sense, Bourdieu (1977) explained, cannot exist before activity. Instead, it entails the incorporated abilities of competent practitioners. Yet, the habitualized and corporeal knowing how that is either implicit but can be expressed, or that is implicit and escapes linguistic expression only covers some parts of performative capacity. Expertise must not remain

tacit; indeed, it is often enacted in language. "That is," as Carr (2010) explains, "expertise requires the mastery of verbal performance, including—perhaps most importantly—the ability to use language to index and therefore instantiate already existing states of knowledge" (p. 19). Hence, accomplishing a practice is indicated not only by the ability to skillfully engage in doings, but also usually by the ability to use linguistic registers that intertwine with gestures, mimics, and prosodic features.

Consequently, the dichotomy of explicit knowledge versus implicit knowledge is unhelpful. It seems more plausible instead to interrogate the recursive relationship between situated performances and resources such as propositions, skills, or values that prefigure the agency of practitioners and become actualized in their engagement (Duranti, 2012). Illustrating this point, Goodwin (1994) explicates how a professional vision emerges in diverse fields such as legal argumentation or archaeological excavation. It is predicated on the temporal unfolding of embodied practice and expressive activities. Thus, the professional vision consists of "organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinct interests of a particular social group" (p. 606). It guides collective attention and renders perceptions meaningful. So it resembles, Goodwin suggests, what Wittgenstein (1953/2009) has named a language game, that is, a "whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven" (para. 7).

The praxeological conviction that people gain their ability to act properly through situated learning assumes that social practices happen in public. They have to be displayed, and this public enactment engenders processes of socialization and evaluation, as well as institutionalization. This does not mean that all doings and sayings can be visually perceived. More correctly, we can say that social practices are public occurrences; they manifest, signify, and thus constitute cultural knowledge and social norms, which again guide their formation and make them an element of evaluation and validation (Carr, 2010). In a practice-oriented account, Schmidt and Volbers (2011) have argued, these recursive dynamics cannot be explained by concealed social mechanisms or otherwise unobservable phenomena. Rather, they are grounded in the public occurrences of practices. It is in reference to this "'outer' domain of expression" that Schatzki (1996) advanced the idea of doings and sayings as a "unity-in-difference" (p. 47). Based on this, he went on to argue that "there are no things making sense and no making sense to do something that are not articulated on the background of practices" (p. 111). Any gesture or pronouncement needs to publicly display a semantic dimension in order to be associated with a practice, which is why Giddens (1979) postulated that "there are no signifying practices; signification should rather be understood as an integral element of social practices in general" (p. 39). This departs from other attempts to restrict signification to communication and therefore to innate intentions and meaning objectified in words or images.

Yet because practice theories accentuate the expressive performance of all kinds of socially intelligible activity, they have not had much to say about language. Following Abu-Lughod (1991/2006), this is problematic because practices and the way they employ verbal and nonverbal resources help us "to analyze social life without presuming the degree of coherence that the culture concept has come to carry" (p. 472). Nevertheless, Bourdieu (1991) mainly connected language to symbolic power and thus treated it as a means of social distinction; he did not investigate what people are typically communicating when they speak or write. Meanwhile, Giddens (1991) was especially interested in discourse as it pertains to the public sphere. So, this praxeological ambivalence toward the distinction between doings and sayings has failed to notice, Schatzki (2017) proposed, what these two fundamental manners accomplish and the different contributions they make

to social existence. Collapsing doings and sayings into one monolithic sort of signifying practice undercuts our ability to usefully explore the convergence and divergence across verbal and nonverbal enactments.

One way of thinking through what signification is comes with the concept of indexicality as discussed in linguistic anthropology. Indexicality refers to the ability of signs to entail social relations and social situations that provide clues for their interpretation. In Silverstein's (2004) account, sensemaking does not so much presuppose the denotative meanings associated with signs—that is, their semantic content—but rather their indexical meanings through which they invoke social identities and relationships. In its connection to a situation, this pragmatic knowledge is defined, it can be negotiated and adapted, and it can be used to redefine a situation. Signification, then, is neither about reading off meaning from signs nor about labeling things. Rather, it rests on the ability to engage in practices that establish and display an intelligible frame through which to make sense. Exemplifying Silverstein's idea, Carr (2010) states that "people emerge as more or less expert not in unmediated relationships to culturally valued objects (such as wine), but instead through the discursive processes of representing them (such as wine talk)" (p. 23). They index a specialized area of knowledge and a type of knowledgeable people.

Moreover, practice theories show not much interest in the ways in which expressive performances become articulated through media technologies. The emphasis on bodily activities and situated copresence has seemingly prevented scholars working with practice theory from acknowledging that practices are increasingly mediated. The scope of media practices would be too limited if narrowed down to communication because the processes of signification that render practices sociable appear in different relations to media that afford multiple ways of expression. Restricting them to the transmission of communicative acts would diminish their significance and systemic impact on contemporary media cultures. In such terms, Couldry (2012) has distinguished different sorts of media-related practices based on their more or less direct orientation to the form and function of media technologies or programs. On one end, there are practices that directly relate to media, most notably to the production and reception of media content. On the other, there is the wide array of activities "whose possibility is conditioned by the prior existence, presence or functioning of media" (p. 36). With this category, Couldry sought to grasp the overarching transformation of mediatization. In this long-term process, media have become to thread through most, if not all, walks of life. In this respect, Couldry and Hepp (2017) have stated that more and more areas of daily practice have become saturated by media, to the extent that there is now an "institutionalized interdependence in everyday practices with media" (p. 57). Along this broad competence, potentially all kinds of social practices, not only communicative ones, can be mediated. This departs from a narrow occupation with the production or reception of media that so far has guided most inquiries in communication research. Following instead a growing number of studies in media anthropology, processes of mediation come into sight. They complicate, Boyer (2012) explains, the tendency to "separate the operation of communicational media cleanly from broader social-political processes of circulation, exchange, imagination and knowing" (p. 411).

Communicative Comprehension, Accommodation, and Understanding

When signification is not bound to communication, but permeates and actually constitutes social practices, the question remains regarding how we define communication in praxeological terms. In other

words, how can we usefully distinguish communication from other kinds of social interaction if we do not do so by signification or by the use of language?

In reference to the rich anthropological literature on communication as a contextualized process situated within the contingencies and contentions of people's everyday lives, we argue that communicative practices can be seen as sociomaterially accomplished and semiotically enacted modes of comprehension, accommodation, and understanding (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1997; Boyer, 2012; Spitulnik, 1993). Communicative practices form a subset within the realm of social practice in general. They happen in direct face-to-face exchange, but also involve all sorts of mediated messages, which orchestrate different semiotic codes, from verbal statements to multimodal audio and visual programs.

In such an arguably loose account, communication does not ultimately rest on preceding attitudes or the subjective intent to transmit propositions. Rather, communicative practices offer us a register of sign-using activities that realize "patterns of intention" (p. vii), to borrow a phrase from Baxandall (1985), which are expressed within ongoing verbal and nonverbal activities. Communicative practices form part of social practices writ large. Communicative practices share with social practices in general that meaning inheres in the process of cultural signification. But in difference to other social practices, communicative practices have to be publicly performed in order to be noticed and recognized as communicative practices that directly address or at least imply an audience (Goffman, 1971).

In essence, it can be said that, for all their incongruities, what unites theories of practice is their critique of language as the paramount source of intelligibility (Ortner, 1984). Alternative praxeological accounts have approached sensemaking as a facet of all sorts of social practices. These do not necessarily have to include verbal utterances in order to allow practitioners to generate and circulate meaning, though language often plays a role as an empratical aspect of expression and representation in communication (Bühler, 1934/1990). Instead of favoring one paradigm, the emphasis is on different, but commensurate, semantic modes and the ways they are achieved with embodied, technological, and symbolic resources that become enrolled in the process of signification. Although few practice theories have paid attention to media in particular, their technologies and cultural forms are nevertheless crucial in these dynamics because of their capacity to construe social existence and its material environments.

Arguably, when attempting to specify practices of communication, it is not useful to pit linguistic and nonlinguistic domains against each other in terms of their different ways of giving meaning to the world. Instead, we can start by appreciating how the semiotic, grammatical, and semantic properties of sign systems intertwine with the performance of voice, sight, gesture, and facial expression within the various media, spatial, and temporal settings that are woven together in communication. Admittedly, we are not the first to attempt such an intertwining—for even given all the differences between practice theory and social phenomenology, Schutz and Luckmann (1989) have provided a similar argument and stressed the role of the body in making communicative acts reciprocally perceivable and experienceable. Being more than a mere carrier, the body, its gestures, and its sounds, as well as material objects and instruments, serve as public objectifications of signs and therefore meaning (Hymes, 1974; Knoblauch, 2013). Yet the focus here is still on language as the chief container and conveyor of knowledge.

In a practice-oriented perspective, communication is not primarily an abstract system of rules. That means, as Hanks (1996) has explained, that "in order for people to communicate it is neither sufficient nor necessary that they share the same grammar" (p. 229). People might not be able to express their implicit knowledge of how to communicate in order to be able to act communicatively. Communicative capacities must not be part of what Giddens (1984) has called "discursive consciousness," but reside in "practical consciousness" (p. 4). This analysis mirrors Wittgenstein's (1953/2009) skepticism toward the idea that language can best be described as a set of specifications or references that endow signs with a certain sense. Instead, the meaning of a word, he wrote, "is its use in the language" (para. 43). Likewise, Hanks (1996) has posited that the ability to communicate is not rooted in our knowledge of abstract linguistic categories: People manage to accomplish comprehension and accommodation without depending on preexisting and conventional forms such as speech acts. Their performative effectiveness when engaging in communication hence rests on their proficiency to orient themselves verbally, physically, and perceptually in relation to each other or, in the case of one-way monologue, in relation to an assumed common cultural background shared by the speaker and audience. The signs they use are not necessarily symbolic and arbitrary in nature. Comprehension, accommodation, and understanding as the basic aspects of communication can also be established through iconic signs and indexical references and through corporeal exposure and performance (Schatzki, 1996). Strictly speaking, communication does not even necessitate conventions. Of course, agreements over syntax or semantics facilitate a conversation, and communicative practices can range from highly prescribed and sanctioned scripts, such as we find in call centers, to playful or improvised exchanges on social media. Yet understanding actually requires, as Davidson (1986) has asserted, skills and presuppositions that are not necessarily linguistic, such as imagination and attentiveness. Such skills and presuppositions have to be continually adjusted; indeed, they are part of a broader ability to get on in the world and in relation to others.

Understanding, then, is not based on shared language, but on a shared sense of "what is going on." In this vein, conversation analysis has zoomed in on the minutiae of communicative routines as means of conveying messages or making statements and, more fundamentally, as the basic elements of sociality (Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Schegloff, 1997). That is not to say that an explicit knowledge of linguistic features is redundant. Yet when people communicate, this knowledge necessarily becomes intertwined with more tacit understandings about the relations and implicit norms that characterize what Hymes (1974) has termed a "speech community" (p. 50).

This, then, also departs from the standard definition of communication, which assumes that communicators express intentions, and audiences attribute intentions to those speakers based on the observable messages produced (Grice, 1957). In communication research and media studies, various theories share this claim that human communication depends on the existence of intentions, about which the addressed individuals draw inferences. More precisely, this encompasses both an informative intention "to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 58), and a communicative intention, namely to make it manifest that a communicator has an informative intention. In communicative practice, where meaning and accountability are reflexively attributed, intentionality thus serves to ascribe directionality and what can be called "aboutness" to public patterns of sign use and not to human minds or the operations of nonhuman agents. Through and in their participation in communication, they can establish accountability—that is, according to Garfinkel (1967), they make

themselves and their activities “visibly–rational–and–reportable–for–all–practical–purposes” (p. vii). Therefore, to communicate is to articulate agency and occupy the world, and not just to present propositions.

As socially rooted modes of sign use, communicative practices bear some similarity to what Luckmann (1998), drawing on Bakhtin, identified as “communicative genres” (p. 159). What this concept advances is that these patterns are ways of constituting interaction, personhood, and social order that are often domain specific and media related. They allow people to adjust their perspectives, they convey cultural conventions, they are characterized by unequal capabilities of engagement and attention, and they are interlaced with various dynamics of differentiation and stratification (Luckmann, 2009). They cannot be enacted as a reproduction of fixed schemes; instead, they require spontaneity, improvisation, and modification to cope with contingencies and emerging conditions (Pennycock, 2010).

Communicative practices give rise to a plethora of participation frameworks that go far beyond the dyad of speaker and listener. For example, practices such as quoting involve absent actors, while some people in communicative situations aim to exclude others who are present by alluding only to adepts. There are ways of deflecting agency from a communicator and delegating it to the “textual agency” (Cooren, 2004, p. 373) of organizational documents. And, likewise, there are modalities of integrating nonhuman partners. Furthermore, communicative work can be divided, as in practices such as ghostwriting, or in contexts where responsibility for content and for the actual formulation is separated, as found in journalism newsrooms.

The communicative practices described here are, however, not congruent with the notion of communicative genres. With a strong focus on verbal and, especially, dialogical communication, Luckmann (2009) has treated genres as formalized, overarching “vehicles of meaning” (p. 270) that co-occur with smaller communicative units, such as sequences of turn-taking, categorical formulations, or proverbs. Unsurprisingly, communicative genres such as job interviews, political debates, or police interrogations do not prearrange every instance of communication. Rather, they are seen as enclaves of structure that rise to the surface within a flow of less structured communication. By contrast, communicative practices capture a more flexible scale of sign-using routines that allow people to attune and coordinate their states of knowledge, their affects, and their actions (Schegloff, 1997). In Couldry and Hepp’s (2017) account, communicative practices are “groups of communicative actions that together constitute a larger unit; for example, the practice of discussion. Various actions—‘questioning,’ ‘replying,’ ‘contradicting,’ etc.—may come together, sometimes in a single flow and sometimes as part of wider practices” (p. 31). These practices are threaded through different fields of society and are adapted for relevant interactional constellations and sociomaterial requirements. They are also shaped by the levels of publicness and reciprocity prevailing in an arena.

Sensemaking Within a Mnemonic Online Community

To illustrate how such a concept of practices in relation to media can help us to better grasp expressive performance and communicative understanding, we will revisit a study of mnemonic communities that formed around nostalgic Facebook groups (Menke, 2019; Menke & Kalinina, 2019). In the project, which was completed in 2016, 18 German Facebook users aged between 21 to 66 years were interviewed about their engagement in collective commemoration on the platform, about the media they use for recollection, and about their retrospective views on changes in media, which were intertwined with profound social

transformations during German reunification. The project investigated how they partake in mnemonic practices that reframe bygone media environments and social settings in nostalgic terms. Our respondents subscribed to generation-based Facebook groups (e.g., “We the kids of the 80s”) and media-centered groups (e.g., “Vinyl” or “Retrogames”), and they participated in groups dedicated to the reality of life in the German Democratic Republic (e.g., “We grew up in the GDR”). Given the general scope of our argument so far, arguably any kind of social setting could be respecified along its social practices, and communicative practices in particular. We return to this study because it enables us to highlight the role of indexicality in communicative sensemaking and the material and social grounding of practical signification. In discussing elements from the study, we treat our conceptual ideas as presuppositions rather than hypotheses. The empirical case is meant to exemplify and contextualize our more conceptual points, but cannot and is not meant to conclusively validate our claims.

The interviews indicated how a nostalgic online community engaged in mediated memory work that involved social practices of memorializing media and practices of communicative remembering (Figure 1). Together they fostered a critical discourse about the perceived consequences of an interloping social, cultural, and technological transformation across ideological and political cleavages (Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014). The collective yearning for the past proved to be a way to cope with the fundamental transformation they had witnessed. Interestingly, this especially involved a nostalgia for past media technologies and programs that were seen as epitomizing the full gamut of loss, but also the value of a shared experience.

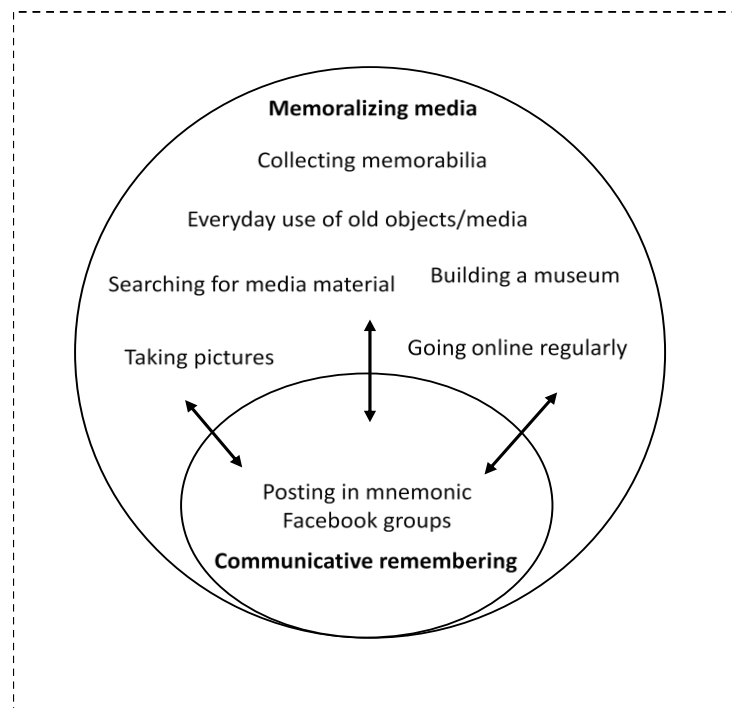


Figure 1. Communicative remembering and media-related memorialization in the mnemonic Facebook community.

Communicative remembering

Remembering is fundamentally a communicative affair, and much of the growing scholarship in memory studies has built on the idea that the past takes shape and is actively envisioned in present conversations (e.g., Middleton & Edwards, 1990). What the interviewees communicatively remembered was manifested in the form of posts and comments intended for a community of fellow group members. These statements indexed a broader historical context and drew on a nostalgic frame of reference that was semantic in nature, but also highly material. Hence, while Facebook's settings seemed to favor texts and visuals and thus abstracted away the corporeal and material elements of remembering, these aspects were still very much present in the communicated memories. For our respondents, the motivation to enter into communication within the group came from their firsthand experience of having lived through these times or having been told about them by contemporary witnesses, which also involved a great familiarity with the lost media environment of old-style television, popular radio shows, or magazines. The main reason for joining such past-oriented groups was to engage in communication. This involved the sharing of personal reminiscences through texts or visuals; it also encompassed a more phatic dimension of nostalgic conviviality that was constantly written into being.

The materiality of past media technologies was not only treated as a reference for conversation, since these objects were often digitally converted to make copies of them accessible on the platform. The social practices of digitizing and curating media—such as pictures, movies, and music—thus reintroduced these outdated carriers into the networked environment, often through images, GIFs, or visual memes. Within the communicative practices, these digitized materials were swathed in mnemonic narratives. The personal stories helped to render them socially meaningful within the group, and they reaffirmed the social similarities of a perceived shared background among members.

So at one level, communicative comprehension and accommodation were established based on a communicated register of common past experiences and familiar media materials. This evocative setting was both activated and negotiated in the Facebook posts and comments. In this regard, Lisa Risch, a 27-year-old student, explained,

Well, when you come across a meme or GIF that is about the past, I share it specifically with people who can relate to it. Then we talk about how the childhoods of today's kids are different from ours and I have to say that we start to judge; that we think our childhood was definitively better.¹

A reminiscent mood was therefore constituted through the content of communicative practices that mobilized digital materials and recollections. They conveyed an important past that was contrasted with a profoundly different present. Even when this shift was not part of an individual's biography, as was the case for Lisa, who was born around the time of reunification, it was still part of a familial postmemory shared with older generations (Hirsch, 1997).

¹ All interviews were translated by Manuel Menke.

The more poignant insight, however, was that nostalgia also pertained to former modes of communicating themselves. It was as much a mediated nostalgia as it was a media nostalgia (van der Heijden, 2015). Hence, meaningful comprehension, accommodation, and understanding in the transgenerational mnemonic community were not only about the content posted, but also about the ways in which communication used to be conducted. Hence, our respondents bemoaned the lack of attentiveness, trust, and reliability in current interactions, which were contrasted with the more genuine and integral communicative manners of the past. Interestingly, they did not apply this negative assessment of networked exchange to their own Facebook groups. Instead, they regarded their regular posting and commenting activities as creating a shared understanding of what was going on in the community. Through continuous engagement in the communicative practices offered by the platform, which they had repurposed for a nostalgic endeavor, community members connected with each other and entered into meaningful companionship based on a repertoire of habitual cultural references and assessments, including both outdated and active modes of communicating. They thus constantly revived media-related skills and knowledge. For example, Detlef Stumpf, a lifeguard in his 60s, said,

We share the music from the past that comes to our minds. We evaluate, this is good, that is not good anymore, and everybody has something to add or memories connected to it: first dance, first girlfriend, or something else. This is how we remember these times.

What is evident is that a practice-oriented approach cannot be reduced to the explicit or implicit content communicated. Rather, the report indexes a context in which the sharing of music from the past makes up for a meaningful occupation for group members. Detlef Stumpf's remarks thus presuppose and create "the contexts for their interpretation, as well as the relationships of participants to the event of communication" (p. 297), as Spitulnik (1993) described such form of indexicality. When we analyze communication only as objectified propositions, our interest lies in what is written or shown, and less often in the acts that bring such objectifications about. But as the example of the nostalgic Facebook community shows, what people communicate rests on processes of sensemaking that risk disappearing behind the manifestations we find on the platform. Such obfuscations would risk isolating content from practice, and practice from context. Yet if we separate either of these elements from what people do and say in their everyday life, we exclude insights about the context they index or the acts they perform when engaging in communication. Consequently, we suggest contextualizing propositions, their denotative content, and their connotations in communicative practices that emerge amid a broader array of social practices of memorializing media.

Memorializing Media

The people we spoke to mentioned a set of social practices that were related to their use of media devices to access the Facebook groups, to browse online resources for new content to post to the group, or to follow routines of navigating social media sites connected to their mediated memory work. These common activities centered on modifying and refashioning media items to relay them to the community. Many posts involved digitized versions of obsolete media and popular culture products, such as movies or music, which served as anchors for their communicative appeal to the shared past. Usually, social practices that were once coupled to these outmoded instruments and programs were also invoked in the posts; group members referred back not only to past media, but also to the vanished doings and sayings they afforded. Some

reported going to flea markets to acquire vinyl records and print items or described rummaging through their attics for old media products and devices they could then present in the group. In this respect, Amelie Meiser, a 37-year-old nursery school teacher, declared,

That is very important to me. That we wallow in the past together. I want the members to say: "Wow, I haven't seen that for ages, right, that existed," and then they search in their own belongings at home again. And I think it is great that we collectively share this.

This kind of media-related social practices prefigured communicative practices. In the Facebook groups, they constituted the material focus of communication. They thus helped to order and orient ongoing activities by encouraging persistent attempts to integrate media memorabilia in the joint nostalgic undertaking.

This concentration on media as a catalyst for collective memory making was suggested by our respondents' preoccupation with the cultural significance and mnemonic relevance of media. Rather than starting from the assumption that media are core resources of meaning per se, we noted the ways through which they became essential elements of sensemaking (Morley, 2009). In the interviews, people therefore reasoned about their nostalgic longing for the past as an inherently media-bound enterprise, and at the same time, they enacted their expertise by employing acronyms and technical terms (Carr, 2010). So the language used in the interviews was, as Duranti (2012) called it, "indexically rich: i.e., it evokes attitudes, feelings, and memories and connects our actions to real and imaginary contexts" (p. 19). Commemoration revolved around the reflexive appropriation of out-of-date media devices and outlets and the pleasure of sharing these digitized souvenirs. In this regard, for example, Erwin Elsen, a 59-year-old retailer, wanted to contribute to the circulation of GDR objects as representations of the everyday life he considered valuable and worth remembering positively.

It is my dream to present a large collection of GDR objects publicly to the people in a museum. This would be a way to pass this memory on to the following generations to say: "Look at that, this is what we had."

Overall, the mnemonic practices were conditioned by Facebook's technological infrastructure and algorithmic settings. Thus, the users sought to exploit its affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association—that is, its capacity to form connections between users and posts. Consequently, they engaged in some of the regular activities offered by the platform, notably, posting material, recommending and linking content, and linking to sources. In the heritage groups, such functions facilitated the communicative remembering and the modes of memorializing media. The Facebook groups therefore enabled the circulation of media remnants from different private owners among a circle of enthusiasts. This process then fostered conversations about sentimental feelings and their resonance with wider perceptions of lost belonging and a somewhat wistful look back that glossed over the many flaws of the bygone political system and its media.

Representation in Epistemic Discourse

A praxeological approach that starts from situated activity is not limited to explaining ephemeral instantiations, but usually inquires into the enactment of semantic and social structures that transcend the

spatial and temporal here-and-now of their realization. This becomes especially evident when we turn to discourses as more enduring epistemic representations.

In the nostalgic communicative remembrance and media-based memorializations we encountered on Facebook, the GDR played a prominent role. Not only did the long-gone state act as a pivot for recollection and a rich source of vintage media, but our respondents accentuated a nostalgic view and positioned their wistful accounts as part of a much more unanimous memory of the GDR (Saunders & Pinfold, 2013). Hence, the bittersweet GDR nostalgia was achieved by recognizing, but at the same time suspending, a more critical engagement with the oppression, injustice, and control that taint public commemorations of the former state. Hence, the users' memory work assimilated an ongoing wider discourse about the adequate modes of remembering the GDR and the legitimacy of favorable commemorations of their everyday life by GDR citizens. In this discourse, the nostalgic recollections of the GDR and their reformulation as an ostalgia—a nostalgia for the old East (Ost in German) stripped of the connection to the many wrongs of the regime—were met with strong criticism (Berdahl, 1999).

Resisting these concerns, the members of the mnemonic Facebook community shared positive stories about their pasts and articulated a profound discomfort with the way their accounts were delegitimized in the hegemonic version of GDR history, which had been mainly written by West German historians and institutions (Menke & Kalinina, 2019). In this regard, the creation of Facebook groups dedicated to reviving the GDR also had an epistemic dimension. They gave substance to the users' felt need to provide anecdotes and reports that painted a more affirmative picture of their former personal lifeworlds. Taken together, these accounts were seen to legitimize a nostalgic, or ostalgic, so to speak, retrospection that would otherwise seem partial and quite ill founded given the troubled past deliberately ignored.

Our respondents were aware of this discursive dimension of their practices, which they understood as providing alternative positions and ways of dealing with life in the GDR that challenged hegemonic opinion. In this respect, Erich Schuler, a 64-year-old journalist educated in the GDR, explained,

I had the idea to found a Facebook group that is mainly concerned with a historical bottom-up perspective. These were experiences of the members that lived during GDR times and who already worked back then. Their way of looking at things, their depiction of experiences, how it was at the time, by posting their own everyday pictures so we can write history bottom-up. And we think that because we lived during these times we are allowed to have an opinion about it. Because it is our own lives. And this is what we also share in the group.

The communicative rendering of personal or familial experiences and the digitization of authentic material in the form of texts, images, videos, or animations delineated an epistemic stance. The users sought to add to the knowledge and evaluation of the GDR by providing nuance to the spectrum of representations. Their ambition to paint a richer and more appropriate picture was further justified as fulfilling an educational purpose. Hence, Erich Schuler went on to argue,

There are hundreds of comments from people who did not even live in the GDR but still have a personal viewpoint that is not historically accurate. Often you realize that especially the younger people are influenced mainly by the media and educational material. But not the actual picture, so to speak, of our lived past. This makes the whole thing very exciting.

In this way, the activities of the mnemonic community acquired an instructional quality. Because the statements were ultimately based on eyewitness accounts, their accuracy or authority were not challenged. On the contrary, they were valued because they were deemed more fitting depictions that could help to rectify biased versions supported by the media or official agencies. The controversial ambition to correct GDR commemoration was not only based on personal experience; it was also supported by everyday products that were collected by group members as tokens of a material culture that is gone. The digital copies of these items were linchpins in the discussions and references for a lamenting of the past.

Reflecting on the discursive dimension of communicative remembering and media memorials, we suggest that treating doings and sayings (and writings) as part of a discourse is actually an analytical decision (Figure 2). This decision stresses the epistemic significance of both verbal and nonverbal activities. Discursiveness in this regard is an attribution, one that highlights the statement-making aspects of doings and sayings. Thus, Reckwitz (2008) suggests understanding discursive practices as sign-using practices viewed from the point of view of their production of representations (p. 203).

In this account, discursive representations are formative of social reality and not mere duplicates of an already existing reality. Discourses, Schatzki (2017) argued, are not confined to text and talk; they span the bundles of practices, participants, media, and other technological settings through which they are "suffused by articulated meaning" (p. 140).

Seen this way, discursive practices generate knowledge and make it explicit. In the process, they contribute to what makes sense to people and to the meaningful existence of things in the world. Hence, they complement other modes of sensemaking that are nondeclarative and carry implicit understandings, cultural affects, and routinized attributions of sense. "An order of discourse," Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) have thus written, "is a socially structured articulation of discursive practices which constitutes the discursive facet of the social order of a social field" (p. 114). This praxeological conceptualization can be traced back to Foucault, who defined discursive practices as "a way of acting and thinking at once, that provide the intelligibility key for the correlative constitution of the subject and the object" (Florence, 1998, p. 461). With this, he escaped a paradox of textualism, that is, reconstructing the many formative conditions of a discourse only through its observable regularities, a problem Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) termed the "illusion of autonomous discourse" (p. xii). Instead, he sought to attend to the discursive dimension of practices through which orders of knowledge become articulated.

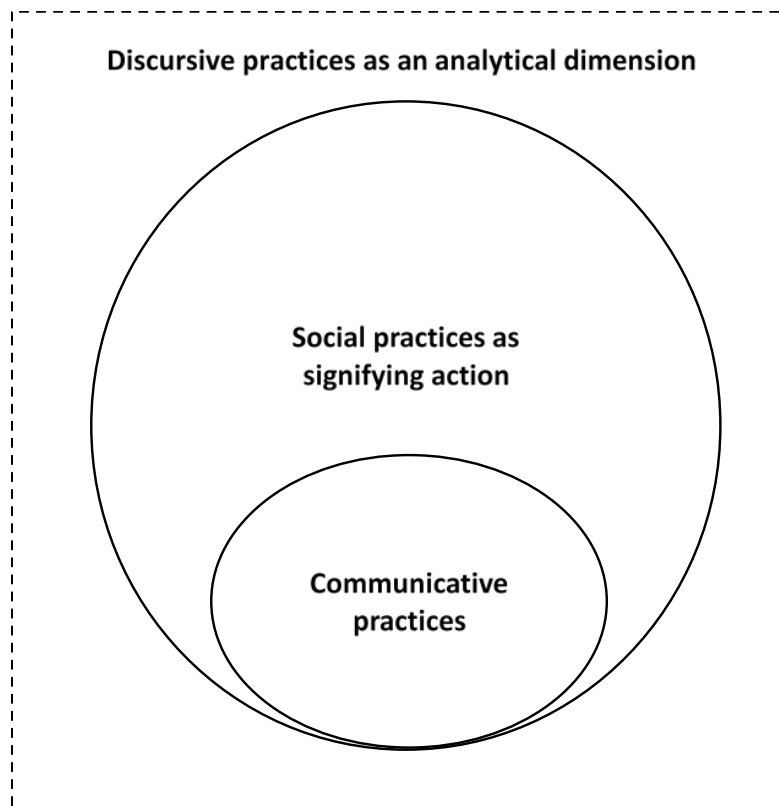


Figure 2. Schema of social, communicative, and discursive practices.

The decision to ascribe an epistemic potency to practices again transcends the boundaries of linguistic versus nonlinguistic forms of sensemaking (Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 1990; Scheffer, 2007). In their performativity and iterability, discursive practices have the “capability to (unavoidably) constitute rather than simply represent the world” (para. 8), as Macgilchrist and Van Hout (2011) posit. In a way, discourse is therefore “bigger than language” because it constitutes the epistemic conditions of social interaction, subjectivation, and sensemaking.

Conclusion

In the groups we studied, a sense of community emerged among the members who continuously participated in the discussions and in the forms of exchanging discovered media items and their subsequent communicative appreciation. They cherished their shared horizon of biographical experience and awareness of what was going on in the group. A collective association of meaning and action came into being through the sum of congenial practical doings and sayings and the archive of posts and digitized media. Besides its thematic focus, this refuge of nostalgic digital memory emerged from the members’ recurrent activities of retrospective communication and their efforts to revive past media.

Our respondents indexed a frame of nostalgic references that was informed by the materiality of preserved media. These were not abstract references, but underwent a digital transformation, which made them accessible via networked communication. The memorializing work of digitizing and curating media, such as pictures, movies, and music, thus reintroduced analog media into the digital environment. In the process of communicative remembering, this digitized material was enriched with personal narratives and memories. In subsequent postings, the members added to the constitution of the community's collective spirit, which was rooted in the practically evoked commonality and a mutual past. In this setting, comprehension, accommodation, and understanding were established through the users' engagement in distinct communicative practices in which they conjured up a repository of bygone experiences and materialities. Moreover, they criticized mnemonic power divides and adopted a stance against the hegemonic discourse still surrounding the GDR in present-day Germany.

Interrogating the interplay of expressive performance, communicative understanding, and epistemic discourses has allowed us to appreciate what might be called the phenomenological surface of sensemaking. More precisely, practice-oriented concepts are especially interested in the materially grounded and embodied ways through which signs are generated and displayed. This involves the expressive potentials of bodies through voice, gesture, and facial expression as well as the representational affordances of media interfaces with their visual, tactile, or auditory modes of encoding. It likewise helps us to embrace a more holistic concept of understanding, one that extends comprehension beyond intellectual interpretation and seeks to include the more tacit conditions of affect and emotional cultivation, somatic apprehension, and habitual attitudes in order to perceive and appreciate cultural meanings. Furthermore, it invites us to rethink notions of agency and intentionality that are employed in order to define communicative acts and the capacities of actors to communicate.

Considering signification in praxeological terms, we must consequently challenge methodological approaches that focus on objectivations in their analysis and only aim at reconstructing the verbal layer of a multilayered phenomenon. Regarding sayings and writings as the sole manifestations necessary to identify and comprehend cultural sensemaking restricts the analytical sensitivity required to empirically grasp what constitutes sayings and doings—our study is no exception in this respect. Ideally, a methodological triangulation would combine content analysis with observations and interviews. This means including the actors, their actions, and the contexts in which they act, while also being aware of all the difficulties that would accompany such a venture.

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