“Stratamentation” as a challenge to the public sphere’s function of integration

Our study uses the public sphere’s function of integration (Imhof, 2011) as a starting point: By providing audiences with a common basis of issues and knowledge, the public sphere of the mass media establishes the basis for the self-perception of a heterogeneous society as one social community. If issues are discussed in a pluralistic and discursive manner, mass media constitutes a shared perception of political reality and can even encourage the mutual tolerance of diverse viewpoints in society. In this way, public communication also serves as the basis for identity-building and for citizens’ political participation (political integration). More generally, shared issues and knowledge are necessary for basic modes of social communication. Apart from the democratic performance of the mass media, we also need to look at a nation’s political culture and its citizenry’s heterogeneity. The success of an integrative public sphere depends upon the willingness of politically and socially diverse groups to participate in public discussion and to be aware of and to accept others’ viewpoints. Research on audience fragmentation questions in which parts of society these requirements are still met. In fact, social heterogeneity is perceived as a challenge to an integrated public sphere as we find tendencies of “stratamentation” across the citizenry (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; also see Imhof, 2013; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012; van Aelst et al., 2017).

Stratamentation involves two parallel processes: First, the citizenry is stratified in terms of diverging degrees of political and media involvement (vertical dimension). Based on this, certain social groups avoid news media altogether, or their exposure to political content remains rather incidental and infrequent (Lee, 2009; Mothes, 2017). Such groups might lack the substantial basis needed for opinion-building and expressing their political positions. Consequently, growing political knowledge gaps, as well as diverging degrees of political participation, are to be expected (e.g., Bächler & Bonfadelli, 2012). Second, those who are highly involved are segmented in terms of diverging belief systems (horizontal dimension). In such groups, specific worldviews guide the selection and processing of media content (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Yeo, Cacciatore, & Scheufele, 2015). In
this context, and as a negative equivalent of an integrated public sphere, fragmenta-
tion researchers fear the evolvement of hermetically sealed, politically homoge-
nous spheres of communication, which they describe as “echo chambers” (Jamie-
son & Cappella, 2008; Sunstein, 2007) or “media enclaves” (Webster & Ksiazek,
2012). The situation of social groups in such secluded spheres of mass media and
interpersonal communication may explain biased or polarized attitudes (Binder,

Politico-communicative milieus and conditions for their communicative integra-
tion

In this paper, we suggest to study processes of stratamentation with the help of
the milieu approach. *Politico-communicative milieus* are defined as social groups
in which basic political orientations, and their degrees of political efficacy, accom-
pany specific information repertoires and modes of political communication
(Mahrt & Begenat, 2013; Weiß, 2009). The milieu concept is quite useful, as it
not only allows for describing media use and political participation within social
groups, but also offers theoretical explanations of the complex interplay between
predispositions and information repertoires in lifeworld-specific contexts. Moreo-
ver, we use the approach to examine the state of *two citizen-level conditions of
political integration* across the heterogeneous citizenry. On the one hand, this re-
fers to overlapping information repertoires. The argument here is that there is a
likelihood of a communicative cross-linkage of heterogeneous social groups in-
creases, if milieus use the same outlets. Thus, similar knowledge and information
is mediated into social groups that diverge in other ways. On the other hand, we
discuss milieu-specific issue agendas, because a shared issue agenda serves as a
necessary condition for a common understanding of political reality and for the
crosscutting exchange in interpersonal communication networks. Furthermore,
shared issues are the basis for the mutual recognition of society’s diverse view-
points in political discourse (Katz, 1996; Vlašić, 2004).

Research questions, data and method

Against this theoretical background, and in order to examine the existence and
degree of fragmentation in parts of German society, we address the following re-
search questions:

1. Which *politico-communicative milieus* can be identified in Germany?
2. What are the main characteristics of these milieus?
3. Which patterns of overlapping information repertoires exist between milieus?
4. In which ways do milieu-specific issue agendas overlap?

In May and June 2016, we conducted an online survey (*n* = 1,488, quota sample,
weighted by education and age, respondents’ ages between 18 and 69) to examine
the current distribution of stratified and segmented citizen groups in Germany.
Two groups of items were included in the questionnaire. These groups comprise
1. key typological variables (*internal and external political efficacy* and *political
value orientations) and (2) descriptive variables (e.g., variables on the respondents’ communicative practices, their closeness towards the political and communicative sphere, their socio-demographic background, as well as their issue agendas). We used the former to identify types within the dataset and gathered the latter for the purpose of uncovering closer descriptions of a milieu’s main politico-communicative facets. Based on a hierarchical cluster analysis, we identified twelve distinct milieus. Our typology of milieus is structured according to the two-dimensional scheme of a stratamentation.

Results

The milieu-theoretical approach allows us to make differentiated statements about which parts of society participate in public discourse, and in which manner they do so, based on their distinct political and communicative practices. In addition, we applied the approach to the analysis of two communication-related conditions of political integration. At least with regard to our indicators (i.e., shared news sources and common issues), we cannot declare a crisis scenario of the public sphere’s disintegration. We found that socially and politically clearly distinct milieus still use various mainstream media outlets, especially public-service television. Therefore, public-service broadcasting could function as a main driver of integration through a corresponding media performance. Furthermore, we discovered that common political issue agendas exist across the citizenry, at least for the top issues. Beyond these issues, milieu-specific differentiations are clearly visible. Still, two aspects are causes for concern. First, among our typology, we found milieus that have more or less resigned from public discourse, or which may never have been a part of it at all. These pose a major challenge to the idea of an integrated society. Their dissociation not only involves the danger of increasing knowledge gaps and deepening inequalities in participation, but because of their status as extremely passive groups, their viewpoints might be unheard in the public sphere, leading to a potential disregard in political decision-making. In turn, this could lead to a reinforcement of members’ feelings of political alienation. Second, we identified one milieu in which tendencies towards political polarization and seclusion within politically homogeneous media environments are manifest. However, we can only determine whether or not polarized and non-democratic attitudes exhibit an irreversible state in this milieu by more detailed (long-term) analyses.

Outlook

Taken together, our typology serves as the basis for future projects on the interplay of lifeworld-shaped political media use, the processing of media content, and potential disintegrating effects. For example, with regard to the interplay of media use and media content, milieu typologies could be used to define media outlets with particular relevance for certain social groups. In this case, typological approaches serve as a pre-study of content analyses. By following this procedure, we can conduct detailed analyses of social groups and their degree of received media performance. To address the potential problem of politically homogeneous
media arenas, the distinct political orientations of milieus might be used as a media external benchmark (for a similar approach, see Downey, Mihelj, & König, 2012). The political diversity mediated through media content within milieu-specific information repertoires could then be compared to a milieu’s defining political orientations. Then, we could evaluate if particular milieus stay in their own “political echo chamber” or if media contents exhibit an integrating potential by representing diverse viewpoints in society.

References


