

“Radio Activity – The Role of Technical Objects and Agency for Participatory Practices of Radio Communication”¹

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Introduction

In this short report on the progress of my PhD project, I will give some insight in the emergence of my project instead of providing a project exposé along a clear outline of theory, methodology and/or findings. For one, because my project is in a very early phase with many (theoretical) clarifications and decisions still need to be made (mainly regarding the number and methodological setup of my case studies). However, in the following sections I will present the (emergence of my) overarching research interest and the previous stages and activities within my project (see also table 1 for an overview).

Overarching research interest of my PhD project

When I started to work for the research project in which I am involved (since October 2011) and which explores the relationship between journalism and audience under the conditions of networked public spheres, I was generally interested in the notions of “active audiences” and audience activity. While both aspects are important for our research, the focus of the project is on journalism, so I felt that it could be a beneficial solution to combine the work we are doing within the project with my own interests and previous research (e.g. on various social web usage practices).

Broadly speaking, the notion of an “active audience” has always been an important reference within scholarly discourses, mainly in the research areas of reception studies and studies on “media effects”. The “active audience” regained attention of communication and media scholars (empirically as well as theoretically) with the advent of the so called Web 2.0 and social media, and has been used as a rhetorical stencil for a presumed “participatory turn” in contemporary media landscapes. Apparently, social media and other “interactive” features (e.g. on online news websites) promote new types and possibilities for “audience activity”, which forces scholars and practitioners alike to reconsider the role and “place” of audience members and/or users in processes of (mass) media communication. Here, previous research often focused on the (cognitive) processes of selection and interpretation of media content, by analyzing, for instance, how the audience co-constructs the journalistic content through processes of meaning making and appropriation (e.g. research in the

¹ Supervisors of the project: PD Dr. Wiebke Loosen and Prof. Dr. Uwe Hasebrink (both Hans Bredow Institute).

cultural studies tradition, see Renger 2004) or how it uses media to satisfy certain needs (e.g. uses and gratifications studies, see Ruggiero 2000). With the implementation of new interactive features, new feedback channels and various new media formats and genres, also the blurring boundaries between producer and user have been discussed under labels such as “produsage” or “prosumption” (Bruns 2010). Hence, the processes and practices of content production on the user side – as opposed to merely “passive” forms of consumption – are also the object of various empirical studies. These new options for media participation and productive practices also raise the question of the production means as a prerequisite of active media production. Here, Lüders (2008), for instance, points to the emergence of “personal media” at the intersection of techniques, technologies, media forms and genres (e.g. weblogs, podcasts), and the role of creative user agency and appropriation in that process. She argues that the main technical and social characteristics of these personal media are opposed to mass media due to “different interactional roles and network structures and users as active producers” of content (ibid., p. 698), which is why “personal media” are more symmetrical (through facilitating mediated interaction) as well as more de-institutionalized and de-professionalized than mass media. This observation also underlines the relevance of technical infrastructures and objects for processes of audience activity.²

In his AIP model, Carpentier (2011a, p. 29) stresses the relevance of being in operational reach of technologies as a precondition to produce, distribute and receive content (*Access*), to create socio-communicative relationships to (co-)produce, select and interpret content (*Interaction*), as well as to take part in co-deciding processes of media production (*Participation*). Moreover, previous research has shown that the (active) use of participatory features and active content creation as well as the appropriation of media technologies has various preconditions, such as certain motivations, self-esteem, attitudes, but that it also requires certain skills and competences (e.g. King/He 2006; Chung, 2008; Correa 2010). Moreover, practices of audience activities are also influenced by the technological basis and “affordances” of media technologies. This means that while the material structure (e.g. the software “code” of interfaces) does not fully determine the usage, it has a certain structuring effect on our actions, since it opens or restricts certain options of usage (see Zillien 2008, Schmidt, 2011), and thereby exerts a certain “pressure” on the way we communicate: “Media as such only become concrete in communicative action; however, they offer a certain ‘potentiality of action’ (...) which can be called the ‘moulding force’ of the media” (Hepp 2012: 17). This also points to a perspective of an ongoing “mutual shaping” process, i.e. the simultaneous pursuit of interdependent technological and social transformations, as well as the interplay between artifacts and those who use and develop them in various settings, for instance between media technologies

² My interest in technological aspects of media usage derives from a term paper I wrote during my masters studies (in 2010), in which I elaborated an integrative model by combining elements of the domestication cycle (as introduced by Silverstone/Haddon 1996) with elements of the Social Shaping as well as the Social Construction of Technology approach.

and their users (e.g. journalists and audience members). Accordingly, users also play an active role in the shaping of media technologies – by the “embedding” of concrete technological objects in everyday life practices (and thereby re-shaping their functions and practices related to them) and within discursive processes of familiarization and the negotiation of the social representations of new ICTs (see Sarrica 2010). But also by providing feedback for further developments of a specific media technology (e.g. software) as well as by varying or recombining “code components” through their usage practices (Schmidt 2011). Taken together, previous research has shown how users produce meaning through their interaction with the content of media technologies, as well as how “users are involved in shaping the materiality of media technologies, that is, the artifactual dimension that enables and constraints communication practices” (Siles/Boczkowski 2012, p. 227). This intersection of the active role of users in the material configuration of artifacts and the engagement with their content requires a perspective – coined as “texto-material” – which combines a focus on users’ content creation and interpretation practices with a consideration of how they appropriate and shape artifacts (ibid., p. 228).

This first literature review or “pre-study” of my PhD project cumulated in a paper on the role of technological objects in the relation between journalism and audience, which I am going to present at this year’s ICA conference. In the paper, I argue that technological objects can be conceptualized as relevant “intermediaries”, which provide certain intermediating functions between journalism and audience (or producer and user). This means that we should not only analyze how people create and interpret the content of specific media offerings and actively appropriate and shape technological objects (see Siles/Boczkowski 2012), but also consider their form, the design and “programming” decisions as well as the purpose, anticipated target group or “ideal user” of a technological object. The proposed conceptual framework (see figure 1) comprises various actors (producers and users, the technological “intermediary”, but also secondary actors, i.e. administrators and “engineers” of certain technological objects) as well as several interrelated stages of the implementation, appropriation and negotiation of technological objects. While the framework is more or less a “byproduct” of the pre-study for my dissertation project, it might be a helpful guidance to access and analyze the relationship between producer and sender, and the intermediating role of technological objects.

In the initial phase of my PhD project, I felt that technology-related aspects such as technical skills or competences, the “affordances” of technological objects, attitudes towards technologies or the appropriation of (new) technological objects, have been kind of a blind spot in media research with regard to “audience activity” and participatory practices. I think that technologically structured participation and/or the “manipulation” of technical structures by user practices can be understood as another dimension of audience activity. Particularly, I am interested in the extent to which the technical structure is shaped and shaping participatory media practices and formats, where users can

become active with regard to media content as well as becoming “producers” and/or producers of media content themselves.

Last summer, I realized that I had to narrow down this very broad take to a concrete object of study, which is why I decided to focus on different forms of “radio communication”. For one, I have a personal interest in (and biographical connections to) “auditive media”.³ Moreover – from the media researcher perspective – “radio communication” as a “participatory” medium is a very interesting object of study, due to the long history of audience involvement in radio broadcasting (e.g. radio talk shows) and various participation models (such as community radio; see Vogel 1991), the presumably low access barriers (in terms of production and consumption; Kleinsteuber 2012), as well as a relatively high mental involvement of the listeners (Forsslund 2011). Moreover, we are witnessing the emergence of new practices of radio production and consumption due to technological developments (e.g. simulcast, mobile apps) as well as new audio formats (e.g. podcasts, independent web radio stations), which are expanding the “traditional” mass media repertoire of radio broadcasting through forms of “personal media” (Lüders 2008). However, formats of radio communication have a relatively marginal status in academic media research, at least in the German context, where most empirical research is done in the field of audience research, and focuses on aspects such as the frequency of radio consumption, range and reach of radio stations or listener preferences. Above that it is interesting that with the advent of social media and the new possibilities for “audience activity” they afford many scholars and practitioners, re-discovered and – at least in the early years – referred to a very classical take on radio theory by Bertolt Brecht. Be it plausible or not with regard to particular types of social media: Brecht’s theoretical fragments of a “generalized media practice” and his “production-oriented” approach towards radio communication (see Schätzlein 2012, pp. 41f.) is still very interesting, because it reminds us to consider the conditions of radio production and how people interact with and participate in different forms of radio communication. All in all, I decided to focus my PhD project on the role of technical aspects, such as technological affordances, skills or access to certain devices, for participatory practices of radio communication. The overarching research question of the project is:

What role do (arrangements of) technical objects and their affordances as well as technical skills and competence play for participatory practices of radio communication?

³ For one, I am a heavy podcast listener since 2011 – a niche format, which is currently experiencing a “renaissance” in Germany due to the activities of popular Internet personalities (e.g. Tim Pritlove, Holger Klein), initiatives to enhance the usability of podcasting technologies (e.g. Podlove Player and Publisher) and technological developments (e.g. mobile apps like Instacast, the audio publishing platform Auphonic). And secondly, I hosted different community radio formats throughout my school and university years, and felt it increasingly difficult to master the technological aspects of radio production.

This comprises four dimensions: the dimension of the (*technological*) *object* or artifact, the dimension of *agency*⁴, the dimension of (*productive*) *practices* and a *medium* dimension. Here, I refer to a relatively broad understanding of “radio communication”, which includes (frequent) *practices* of the production of audio material and a broad variety of traditional and emerging *formats* (e.g. broadcast radio, web radio, Podcasts) that are distributed and received through various *channels* and *devices*. Moreover, it is characterized by “multiple layers of *radio contexts*” (Vagle 2011, p. 96), i.e. the natural order (human biology, technologies as well as physical time and place), structural agents of social nature (e.g. political/economic system, social groups and institutions) as well as cultural and situational contexts (such as an inventory of genres). Considering these dimensions, my assumption is that different types of “radio communication” enable or facilitate different participatory practices – from a call in a radio talk show, hosting a community or web radio show, producing a podcast or being a ham radio operator – which require different (arrangements of) technologies and technical agency.⁵ Carpentier (2011b, pp. 270f.), for example, points to the observation that ham radio operators and community radio are examples for low-tech media arrangements, which are additionally characterized by a certain participatory ideology, easy-to-use-technologies, limited financial resources and a community-orientation.

Outline of (planned) empirical research

After narrowing the focus of my project to forms of radio communication, I thought about the general approach of my empirical work. Considering my previous research projects and experiences with different methodological settings as well as the research design of the project I am currently working for, I decided that I would like to follow two methodological premises:

- a) The principles of *case study based research*, with its advantages of flexibility – regarding the use of methods and data material – and context sensitivity, which allows “thick” descriptions of every case under observation. However, the scope and generalizability of the results might remain limited. Additionally, the justification of the case selection is very crucial, since, the selected cases might be exceptional, extreme or “typical” (see Yin 2009).
- b) The principles of *theory generation*, i.e. the openness of the researcher and its research object, the variation of perspectives under observation, as well as the search for similarities and structural relations between them, as it is required by Heuristical social research (see Kleinig 1995, Hagemann 2003). Another important principle of my approach is the circularity of the research process (with a stepwise refinement of the theory and theoretical saturation as the end point) as postulated within the grounded theory approach (see Krotz 2005). The goal

⁴ Here, I refer to an understanding of agency as the capacity of an agent to act and engage with different structural environments “which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive responses” (Siles & Boczkowski 2012, p. 229).

⁵ These media arrangements are not merely mechanical but also have organizational (for example large-scale, vertically structured mainstream media arrangements vs. small-scale, horizontally structured alternative or community media arrangements) as well as cultural (for example regarding the “production culture” related with certain technologies) dimensions (see Carpentier 2011b, pp. 270f.).

would be to uncover and reconstruct the structural relations between different dimensions (here: between media technology, participatory practices, and agency) and an empirically grounded description of the research object.

So, the overarching goal of my empirical research is a conceptual mapping and description of different cases of “radio communication”, the participatory practices they afford as well as the role of technology-related aspects for these practices. Hereby, I hope to contribute to our general understanding of a) the role of technological aspects for processes of media production and reception, especially for participatory practices; and b) to identify dimensions of media related technical agency as well as technology-related constraints of participation (e.g. due to certain inequalities). With regard to my methodological premises, as well as the previous knowledge and assumptions outlined above, I identified five (potential) cases of “radio communication”, which might be relevant for my empirical research, because they use broadcast or radio technology, respectively they utilize the auditive channel:

- “classic” radio stations
- Web radio stations
- Community radio
- Podcasting
- Ham or Amateur Radio Operators

Considering the overarching research question, I assume that these different types of “radio communication” require and afford different degrees of participation as well as forms of interaction between sender/producer or recipient/user. At the same time, it is assumed that these cases also differ with regard to the necessity of access to certain technologies (e.g. studio equipment) or specific technical skills and training, but also their general technological infrastructure (such as terrestrial vs. online distribution) and media arrangement. While these technological dimensions would provide the starting point and focus of my empirical research in every case study, it might be an outcome of my project that other dimensions also play an important role to a certain degree: the organizational level and constellation of actors (media organizations, communities, individuals) and the degree of professionalization (amateurs, Pro-Ams, professional journalists), the level of institutionalization (independence vs. “embeddedness” in the mainstream media system), aspects regarding the content (e.g. topicality, target group etc.), but also other aspects (such as the economic structure; reach, publicity and frequency of the offering; “sense of mission” of the involved actors). In this view and with regard to the general research approach, it is crucial to be sensitive and open towards these dimensions, because they might be important elements of the relation between the participatory practices, the (affordances of) technological objects and required skills in every single case study. At the same time, there is a certain risk to get lost in the different aspects that come into

play, which is for sure one major challenge of the project and also relevant when it comes to methodological questions.

[Table with an outline of the case studies; will be added until June 15, 2013]

Methodological Issues

Since my PhD project is in a rather early phase with many open aspects to consider and rethink before entering the phase of empirical research, all question related to methods and data generation are more or less prospective.

From the methodological perspective, the biggest issues of my project derive from the case study based approach, because this might make it necessary to apply different methodological tools in every case study. For instance, the case “classical” radio station would suggest a standardized survey among the listeners and journalists, in-depth-interviews with certain actors (e.g. the head of the technical department, webmasters), as well as analyses of the participatory features provided by the media organization. Whereas the case study on ham radio operators suggests a more qualitative approach with a combination of in-depth-interviews, participatory observation of group meetings and “home visits” with a focus on the technical objects in use. Here, I can refer to previous research and established methodological tools, for example on the motivations of podcasters and podcast users (see Markham 2011, McClung/Johnson 2010) or listener involvement in broadcast radio shows (e.g. Orians 1991). Therefore, the concrete methodology of each case study derives from a combination of previous knowledge and research about the role of technological aspects with regard to the participatory practices, but also the boundaries (and limitations) of field access and the group of actors under observation. Hence, the main methodological issues regard the decision, which methods should be applied in each case study and, related to that, the comparability of the findings of the case studies.

Moreover, this poses the question if I will be able to conduct empirical field work on every case study or if I have to narrow the project down to two or three cases (e.g. podcasting, “classical” radio and ham radio operators as cases with a maximum variation of perspectives). Since my general research idea follows the principles of theory generation, it is necessary to concentrate on each case study for at least a couple of months. This requires getting and keeping in contact with research participants (individuals but also groups), as well as to visit meetings, to make “home visits”, to analyze the gathered material and so forth. Therefore, I decided to concentrate on actors and projects in Hamburg, because the city provides a research object for every case study. This might, at the one hand, limit the generalizability of my findings (which is, in my view, not very problematic). On

the other hand, I can benefit from the projects and network connections of my institute.⁶

Furthermore, I was able to get in contact with a group of podcasters at a workshop in Berlin (in May 2013), which I attended due to its focus on technical aspects of podcasting – the workshop was organized by the Podlove initiative, which is currently working on the development and promotion of new standards and software solutions for the production and publication of podcasts. Here, I gained first insights into the different technological setups and workflows of the participants, their motivations and interests, and other aspects, which are not directly related to technology (e.g. the importance of the podcasting community, the various forms of exchange between listeners and producers). Currently, I am working on a documentation and systematization of this participatory observational analysis to prepare the empirical instruments of my first case study on the “Hamburg Podcast Cluster” (a loose group of Hamburg-based podcasters).

Stage	Activities
Oct 2011 – July 2012 [Orientation]	Search for a potential topic and thematic focus of the PhD project, first phases of literature research (audience activity, media technology, ...)
Aug – Oct 2012 [Predefinition]	Agreement with my PhD supervisors at the institute, predefinition of the new working title and focus of the project (“radio activity”), first elements of an exposé Presentation of the pre-study at the conference “Internet research 13.0” (October)
Nov 2012 – May 2013 [Fixation/elaboration]	Second phase of literature research (focus on media affordances; intersection of content and materiality) Presentation of the pre-study at the German conference “Journalismus & Technik” (February) First presentation of the project at my Grad School (April) Paper about my pre-study on the role of technological objects in the journalism-audience relationship (May) First “contact” with the podcaster community at a German Podcasting Workshop (May) First report on the PhD project for ECREA Summer School (May)
Outlook [Examination]	Presentations of the pre-study paper (ICA13, June) and of a first theoretical conceptualization of “radio activity” (“Radio 2013”, July) Participation at ECREA Summer School (August) Selection of case studies and preparation of first empirical steps (September/October) Third phase of literature research (focus on research related to the selected case studies)

Table 1: Overview over the project

⁶ For instance, my supervisor is preparing a cooperation with a Hamburg-based public service radio station, i.e. I could benefit from the findings of the project, but also take part in the inquiry (journalists and listeners).

Practical Issues

At the moment, I mainly face temporal constraints due to my obligations within the research project I am working for (a 2.5 year project, funded by the German Research Association). This means, while I have a lot of opportunities, freedoms (e.g. no teaching duties) and great work conditions at my institute, only few time remains for my doctoral research. My methodological approach requires an intense field phase, which might mean that I won't be able to start the empirical phase until the end of the project in March 2014. Thus, another challenge – besides the lack of clearance with regard to the theoretical and empirical dimensions of my project – is to apply for and receive a scholarship that allows me to focus on my doctoral research for at least one year without other obligations.

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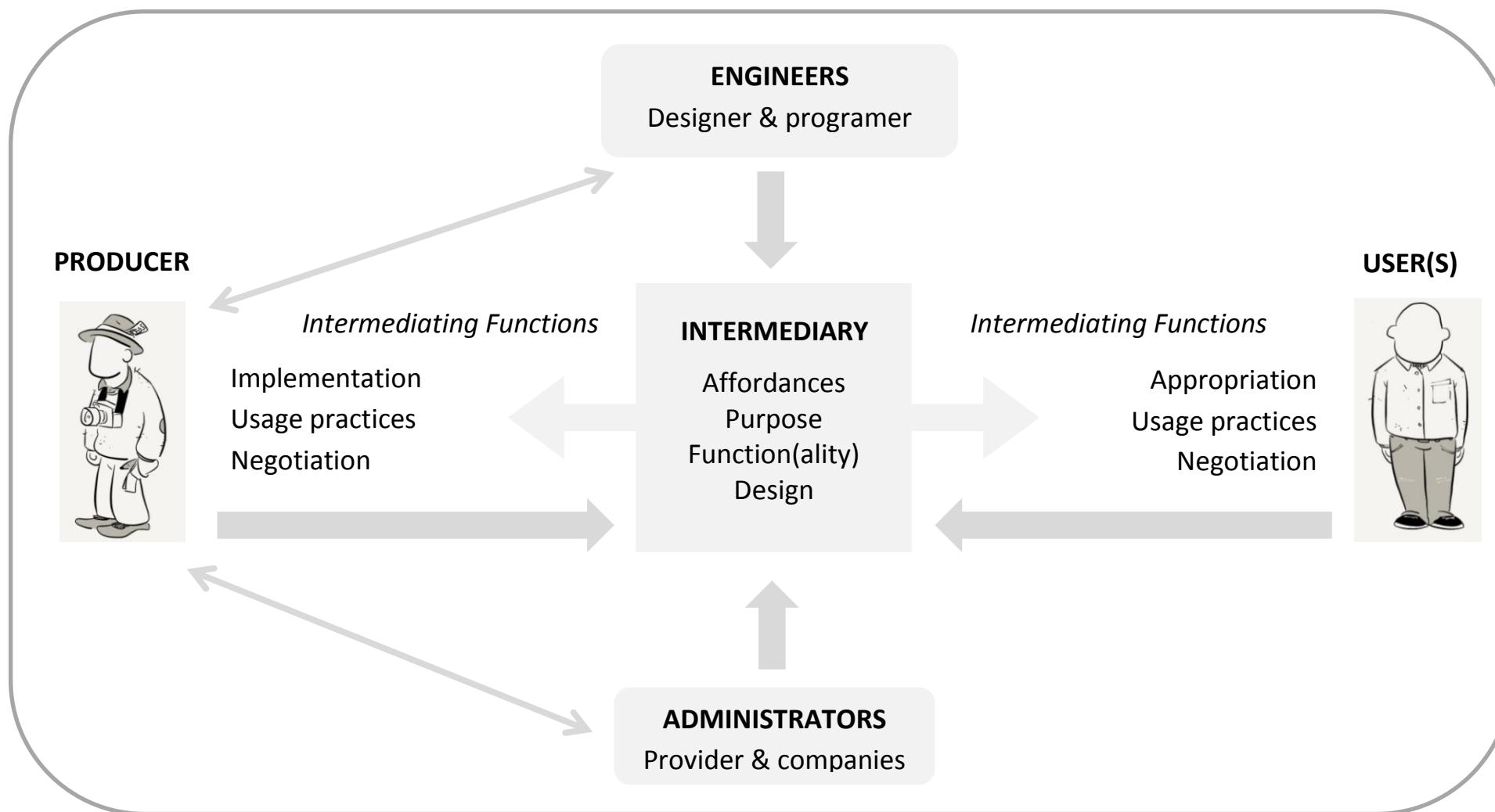


Figure 1: Conceptual framework on the relation between journalism, audience and technological objects (in: Heise 2013)

Questions & problems to discuss:

- I am aware of the fact that, at the moment, it seems to be very ambitious (if not impossible) to conduct my project within the next two or one-and-a-half years. So one important question is: How can I narrow down the focus of my project (for example by focusing on fewer case studies or only one method)?
- Do I need an overarching theoretical framework *before* I start my empirical research or is it okay to gain theoretical insight throughout the field phases (which is on line with my theory generating approach)?
- How can I make use of the conceptual framework elaborated in my pre-study and how does it relate to the focus on practices of radio communication? How do the different elements and dimensions relate to each other? [And: do I need to answer these questions now or will it be a result of my empirical research?]
- How can I tackle the tensions between my previous knowledge, the requirement of “openness” (of the research object and the researcher) and the necessity of a research focus?