Mălina CIOCEA*
Alexandru I. CÂRLAN**
Bianca-Florentina CHEREGI***

# The Articulation of Public Problems within a Communicative Figuration Approach

## Abstract

This article proposes an analytical shift in the theorization of public problems, from the standard (institutional) constructionist view which has informed the tradition of conceptualising social problems since Spector and Kitsuse's classic work, to a communicative constructionist view, stemming from the mediatization paradigm. The rationale behind this shift is based on the conceptualization of the relation between various types of actors as claim makers and the logic of visibility governing processes of publicization in a media ecology marked by accelerated development. If, in the new communicational landscape, claim-making activities can turn any new-media user into a potential constructor of public problems, then we need to explain how developments in media technology reconfigure the practices of claim-making. In our understanding, such reconfigurations are just a particular case of the socio-cultural processes of transformation which are the focus of the mediatization paradigm.

On the other hand, in a Foucaultian tradition, a shift from problems to problematizations is required in order to account for the processual dynamic through which certain phenomena are analysed under specific circumstances and at certain times, while others are ignored. This shift leads to an understanding of communicative figurations as a meta-theoretical framework for the construction of public problems, accounting for the interdependencies between articulations of public problems and the dynamics of the public sphere.

With this aim in view, we first identity and evaluate the theoretical directions that are symptomatic for the transition from social problems to public ones and from problems to problematizations. In the second part, we present the heuristic potential of the concept of communicative figurations for our topic and articulate some methodological implications for a research agenda.

**Keywords**: public problem, communicative figurations, mediatization, communicative constructionism, problematization

* College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, malina.ciocea@comunicare.ro.
** College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, alex.carlan@comunicare.ro.
*** College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania, bianca.cheregi@comunicare.ro.

## Introduction

In Romania, the 2019 European Parliament Elections occasioned a reiteration of a well-known media spectacle in the Romanian public sphere, labelled by the media as "the diaspora's vote". Images of the Romanians queuing in London, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Rome, but also in smaller European cities such as Leicester, Stuttgart, Girona, or Padova, to vote in the elections and the referendum against corruption organized simultaneously, traced the geography of contemporary Romanian diaspora. These images, feeding from new media to public televisions and back, from live mobile phone broadcast on Facebook to professional TV broadcast, and the public discussion generated along with their circulation, equally traced a communicative geography. In this communicative dimension the rage of diasporic citizens who were running the risk of not being able to cast their ballot before the closing of the polling location was doubled by the solidarity of those remaining in the homeland. The public authorities presented various justifications for this situation. Under the pressure of the moment, claims were strongly made and fiercely contested, and political instrumentalizations and pre-occupation for democratic life mingled beyond clear distinction.

The stream of images on Facebook, accounting for the experience of diasporic citizens, afforded journalists new interpellation strategies for public authorities. At the same time, by filming and broadcasting queues, the diasporic citizens emerged as a collective actor in a play of live political contestation amplified by traditional media but also by the diasporic citizens themselves through massive sharing in new media. Nonetheless this spectacle has run several times in the last decade: the Romanian elections in 2009 and 2014 generated the same situation. A law regulating postal vote, created to address mainly those abroad, couldn't be employed in these particular elections due to various judicial reasons, and this limitation reignited older debates about criteria of belonging to the electoral body, and about citizenship. Thus, the diaspora's inability to vote is not merely a problem, but rather a recurrent problematization in electoral contexts. The spectacular element of queuing to vote is a visual container condensing long-term demographic processes in live broadcasted images, linking specific events with multiple argumentative exchanges about residence, citizenship and right to vote and finally interweaving national bodies and transnational fields in the context of massive emigration to EU.

This example serves as an illustration of how public problems are constructed in the dynamics of public communication. Visibility becomes both a resource and a constraint for various actors; through patterns of publicization diaspora's vote is granted the statute of a public problem. The new media landscape shapes both actors and their actions: citizens living abroad are assigned the diasporic statute by the media, which they reconfirm by using it strategically (Beciu & Lazăr, 2015), in a circular flow between traditional and new media, between collective actors who are the object of power relations in electoral circumstances (Beciu & al., 2018) but who also claim their own agency and heterogeneity through mediated action.

In this article we start from a preliminary understanding of the public problem as "a process of symbolic negotiation of the definitions and interpretations of socially problematic situations and phenomena which are considered to necessitate collective action and public policies" (Beciu & al., 2018, p. 13). From this starting point, several questions emerge: how do various social issues turn into public problems? What type of power and visibility are required to cover the distance between problem claiming and problem recognition? And what is the role of the new communication technologies, with their democratic promise, in cover-

ing this distance? How can we conceptualize public problems flexibly enough to accommodate the interrelation between the accelerated rhythm of developments in new media, and emerging socio-cultural practices in society? And, ultimately, are we to understand the concept of public problem as implicitly evaluative, producing symbolic hierarchies between various social issues, or as simply descriptive? In this respect, what is the relation between public problem understood as a claim-making strategy (various actors claiming that we need to recognise and address a problem – i.e. a category of practice) and public problem as an analytical category, with a consistent theoretical history? While the last track needs a separate discussion, this article will address the first questions. To this end, three main approaches on public problems are selected and discussed in the first section, which are symptomatic for the transition from social issues to public problems and from problems to problematizations. The second section proposes the premises of an analytical framework, relying on the heuristic potential of the concept of communicative figurations and articulating some implications for a research agenda.

## 1. Theoretical approaches on public problems

### 1.1. Public problems within the paradigm of symbolic interactionism

The literature on public problems stems from the symbolic interactionist tradition, continuing the Chicago School approach, and more specifically W. Thomas and D. Thomas' s conceptualization of the *definition of situations*. Employing the concept of *social problems*, the paradigmatic work is the classic *Constructing social problems* by Spector and Kitsuse (1977/2001). It is Joseph Gusfield who substitutes *social problems* for *public problems* in his 1981/1984 work, proposing the public dimension as a key concept in his theoretical model. Relying heavily on Kenneth Burke's rhetorical criticism and on Goffman's dramaturgy, he is interested in the construction of a form of *public consciousness* through ritual, ceremonial and the dramatic qualities of public actions. Within the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, he discusses about the structure of a public problem (a cognitive and a moral dimension) and the types of responsibilities that such a problem creates: "The structure of public problems is then an arena of conflict in which a set of groups and institutions, often including governmental agencies, compete and struggle over ownership and disownership, the acceptance of causal theories, and the fixation of responsibility" (Gusfield, 1981, p. 15). The problem challenges the symbolic order and can be controlled by attributing causes, establishing responsibilities, etc. Gusfield distinguishes between ownership, causal responsibility and political responsibility. "Owners" can be groups or institutions that have symbolic power over various problems, at different moments in time. Disowning public problems refers to the avoidance of the obligation to get involved in the process of creating or solving a problem. Causal responsibility refers to facts (what causes a problem), while political responsibility relates to public policies (Gusfield, 1981, p. 14). Ownership of public problems is not a status quo external to the debate, but a position that is permanently assessed, reconfirmed or contested by various actors in the public space, thus constituting itself as a strategy of legitimization and acceptability transfer from symbolic prestige to public position and the other way around.

More recently, Miller (2018) reflects upon the constructionist approach to public problems, insisting on Spector and Kitsuse's book, *Constructing Social Problems.* In his opinion, stud-

ies of claim-making activities need to embrace interpretive frameworks that are more encompassing than those proposed by Spector and Kitsuse. An expanding vision should consider how social problems claim-making is organized and accomplished within diverse groups and activities in contemporary societies (Miller, 2018, p. 87). The study of social problems should insist on claim-making activities as culturally constructed. Secondly, following in Gusfield's footsteps, Miller considers Burke's depiction of drama as very useful in showing how social problems claims are narratively organized, based on the pentad consisting of *agents* using their *agency* in *acting* within *scenes* to pursue discernible *purposes* (Burke, 1945 [1969]). In other words, Burke's analysis is a way of seeing social problem construction as a rhetorical instrument, closely connected to ownership.

Overall, Miller suggests that one should rethink concepts such as social problems ownership, games and work, "in a world where every blogger or person with a YouTube or Facebook account is a potential constructor of social problems" (2018, p. 94), leaving open the issue of how media technologies reshape the relations between actors, agencies and scenes – in Burkean terminology – and to what consequence for the articulation of public problems.

### 1.2. The public problem in the perspective of French pragmatic sociology

The constructionist premises of the American tradition are nuanced in the model articulated by representatives of the French pragmatic sociology. In their theories on the public sphere they introduce the concepts of social theory on the public sphere (H. Arendt, J. Habermas). Pragmatic sociology looks to understand the factors that lead to the constitution of categories of public action.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) discuss the normative principles that underlie the competence that actors employ in critical moments (*moments critiques*) on a public scene. When actors have disputes on the public scene, they can reach consensus by establishing equivalence (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 361), by which the authors mean a form of generality external to actors, which involves giving up singularity and converging towards a form of generality. This search for generality supposes a critical competence in actors involved in dispute. The collective conventions of equivalence build a regime of justification, which can be analysed as a grammar of orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 359), such as the civic order, whose mode of evaluation is collective interest (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 368).

Boltanski recognizes, with pragmatic sociologists, that uncertainty can threaten reality. But, unlike them, he does not believe that uncertainty can be reduced by actors, on the basis of a common sense that is derived from shared knowledge or meaning. In Boltanski's view, people cannot reach agreement even when they share the same context, because they are not in the same situation (Boltanski, 2011, pp. 59-60). On the contrary, in social life there is "radical uncertainty about the whattness of what is [ce qu'il en est de ce qui est]" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 55), which creates unease. This stance

> "involves abandoning the idea of an implicit agreement, which would somehow be immanent in the functioning of social life, to put *dispute*, and, with it, the divergence of points of view, interpretations and usages at the heart of social bonds, so as to return from this position to the issue of agreement, to examine its problematic, fragile and possibly exceptional character." (Boltanski, 2011, p. 61)

By putting dispute and divergence at the basis of social life, Boltanski places himself against standard social constructionism. However, he does acknowledge the agency of peo-

ple and institutions they create in the construction of social reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 25).

It is in this line of pragmatic sociology that Cefaï et al. later develop a broader project of a sociology of valuation and evaluation, which aims to investigate how people assign meaning to their actions and how they evaluate situations (Cefaï et al., 2015, p. 2). The moral operation of valuation is understood as an objective act arising from the agents' habitus and ethos. The idea stems from Jon Dewey's definition of what constitutes a problematic situation and how public problems arise, as well as the experience of public problems through the moral operation of valuation. By attempting to build an explanatory framework of how people define and evaluate situations and experience values, the sociology of valuation and evaluation is essentially interested in norms that guide interaction between actors, actors' agency and the values that direct their actions.

How are public problems different from social problems? Not all social problems become public problems. They may require action from the state or other institutions that address the public good, but they do not become public unless they are configured dramatically, rhetorically and narratively, as Gusfield (1984) describes. So the problem becomes public when it generates discourses and when it generates practices. "The public problem is constructed and stabilized, thematized and interpreted in the frameworks or the frames of relevance that are taking place in a horizon of interactions and interlocutions" (Cefaï, 1996, p. 47, our translation). For instance, the problem of migration in Romania is a society theme that populates the imaginary of Romanians, a theme on the media and political agenda, but also a public problem that has generated engagement and public policies (Beciu et al., 2018, p. 11; see also Beciu et. al., 2017, for a discussion on forms of agency, sources of power and (re)positionings of the media in a transnational field of social relations, in the context of circular migration).

However, "the public problem is not just a projection of social representations, accessible as discursive contents" (Cefaï, 2013a, our translation). In fact, the public problem requires validation by actors. This activates various criteria (moral, political, etc.), which are themselves debated and which, eventually, lead to a self-reflection of society. The problem becomes public when it constitutes a public. Since the public itself does not exist outside publicization ("The idea of 'publicization' implies that 'the public' is not a given in itself, existing before or outside the performances that concern it" – Cefaï & Pasquier, 2003, p. 14, our translation), publicization is a collective action (Cefaï & Pasquier, 2003, p. 16), by various actors who claim what is relevant for a certain community in terms of public action towards the common good.

Public problems are constituted through discourse and practical procedures/performance, on a public arena. Just like the public problem, the public arena does not exist beforehand. It is built by means of the tensions and conflicts that accompany the constitution of the public problem (Cefaï, 2013a). Gusfield (1981) sees it as a place of debate, controversy, expertise, and deliberation. In the public arena a series of practical acts take place: mobilization of actors, participation, interpretations, disputes, negotiation, deliberation, decision, etc. (Cefaï, 1996, p. 57). But not all conflictual situations become public problems, because public attention is limited. Public problems gain prominence through operations of selection and argumentation that make a specific conflictual situation general and legitimate. The publicization of the public problem on a public arena involves a valuation of potential problematic situations (Cefaï, 2013b, p. 3). In this respect, collective action can be understood as this process of finding the general aspect and the legitimacy of public problems.

### 1.3. Public problems: a discursive perspective

Various constructionist paradigms that shaped theoretical debates on public problems gained a new life with the new developments in discourse analysis. If, in the American tradition, Gusfield looked for analytical tools in Kenneth Burke's rhetoric, in the European space the relevant approach is that of Michel Foucault.

The concept of public problem cannot be understood in the absence of a discussion on problematization, that aims to explain why certain phenomena tend to be analysed under specific circumstances and at certain times, while others are ignored. For Foucault, it is important to understand how and why certain behaviours, phenomena and processes become problems, and how these problems become objects for thought (Deacon, 2000).

This process of selection naturally introduces the idea of people as subjects, because it is people, through their discursive and non-discursive practices, that produce problematization (Foucault, 2013). Problematization is the totality of these discursive and non-discursive practices that create new fields of experience through an apparatus comprised of both discourses and non-discourses: institutions, social relations, economic and political decisions, laws, and administrative measures. (Foucault, 1980)

How does this analytical approach to problematizations change the way we look at public policies and politics? Once people have been recognized as subjects with a critical consciousness, through their practices, analysts need to account for their role in the public arena. Another implication is that the relationship between problematizations and practices needs to be systematically investigated. This has an impact on governmentality studies, for instance (see Bacchi, 2012, for an approach to policy analysis that focuses on problematizations behind policy proposals).

One of the most recent developments in this tradition is *Social Knowledge Approach to Discourse* – SKAD (Keller, 2011). Correlating the constructionist paradigm of symbolic interactionism with classical works on the social construction of reality by German social scientists and with the post-structuralist approaches of Michel Foucault, Keller proposes a *discourse-focused approach* in which public problems are analysed, in a logic of discourse *production*, in a three-fold model (speaker positions, subject positions/identity offerings and social actors). From Foucault, SKAD retains the idea that discourses are socio-historically situated real practices (whether speech, text, discussion, visual image, or use of symbols) that constitute objects (Keller, 2011, p. 48). SKAD is interested in how knowledge is produced and transformed in social arenas. It is concerned with the relationship between discourses taken as performative practices which constitute reality orders (Keller, 2011, p. 48) and the transformation of the social orders of knowledge through these practices (social constructions, social conventions, structuration of symbolic ordering, and their social effects). SKAD differentiates between dispositifs of discourse production and infrastructures emerging out of discourse that tackle events, practices, and institutional arrangements. It investigates the interpretative repertoire of a discourse, which includes: interpretative schemes or frames, classifications, phenomenal structures and narrative structures, as well as legitimating elements (patterns of legitimization), subject positions, and discourse generated model practices (Keller, 2011, p. 57). Regarding the content-related structuring of discourse in a phenomenal structure, it develops categories echoing Gusfield's model: causes, responsibilities, need for action/problem solving, self- and other-positionings, wealth model and values (Keller, 2011, p. 59).

## 2. Beyond the terminological trouble: starting points for an analytical framework

### 2.1. Shaping the premises of an analytical and methodological framework

In terms of methodological approach, the sociology of public problems draws on two different research paradigms: the *symbolic* analysis of public problems (Cefaï, 2001; Gusfield, 1981) – focusing on the evolution of the public problem in time, and the *pragmatic* analysis of public problems (Boltansky & Chiapello, 2005; Boltansky & Thévenot, 1991, 1999; Cefaï, 2007; Lemieux, 2000) – insisting on the discursive strategies used by the claim makers to construct public problems (Beciu, 2011, p. 107). Researchers coming from the symbolic analysis paradigm generally use complementary methods such as framing analysis, discourse analysis and ethnography.

The prevalent methodological point of departure in the sociology of public problems is the case study. The comparative case study is used to analyse claim-making activities and their contexts (Best, 2006; Loseke, 2003). Best (2006) draws on Spector and Kitsuse's (2001) analysis of the social problem construction, investigating the micro-political relations between claim-making groups involved in each stage of the process.

For Loseke, social problems frames organize different aspects of problem construction. Diagnostic, motivational and prognostic frames define the claim-makers' response in different situations and the use of formula stories in advancing their causes (Loseke, 2001).

Empirical areas can themselves be very diverse: while standard approaches revolve around the narrative organization of public problems, drawing on Burke's dramatistic method (Canel & Gurrionero, 2016; Gusfield, 1975; Järvinen & Miller 2014, 2015; Kenney, 2001; Rutten, Mottart & Soetaert, 2010), some researchers depart to a certain extent from this tradition, focusing on discursive practices of stakeholders (Zittoun, 2015), movies and public response to them (Schlosser, 2003), and even jokes as claim-making activities with consequences on the definition of social issues (Lowney & Best, 1996).

The field of theoretical reflexion around public problems is marred with terminological traps: depending on the theoretical tradition, one can encounter any combination of the nouns: *problems* vs. *issues* and the qualifiers: *social* vs. *public.* And finally, the *social constructionism* which, as a paradigm, dominated the approaches on the topic has been refined to *communicative constructionism* (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). This is not the place to elaborate on the causes of these situations, hence, in this article we are taking the view that in relation to various understandings of "social problems" (situations understood by various actors as having undesirable social consequences and requiring a solution – cf. *supra*, Gusfield), the peculiarity of public problems is understood as the manner in which bringing the problem to public scrutiny and the evolution of situations as a consequence of this step is a constitutive stage in the resolution of the problem. In brief, and following Couldry & Hepp's proposal for the communicative construction of social life, we posit that the manner in which a situation is claimed as a public problem by an actor depends ultimately on processes of *publicization* (of *making public* – *cf supra* Cefaï & Pasquier, 2003); furthermore, claiming the public attention is both a constitutive dimension in the articulation of the problem and an instrumental step in the attempt to solve it. Going back to our initial directions of inquiry (cf supra, *Introduction*), our understanding of public problems needs to take into account the processes of publicization in a media ecology marked by accelerated development: a theoretical model of

understanding media transformations and their impact on the articulation of public problems is required. In this regard, the public sphere is to be treated as a particular type of unit of analysis in a dynamic view of mediatization understood as a meta-process of modernity (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014), focusing on mechanisms through which visibility and publicity become resources or constraints for various actors (Adut, 2012, 2018). The methodological consequence requires a shift in focus from actors and institutions to processes and mechanisms and, as a counterpart, from problems to problematizations (Foucault, 1984; Deacon, 2000). Such a shift requires the analyst to account for the opposite process as well: how do situations fail to become public problems, through what types of contestations, dismissals, trivializations, silencing, erasures, absences, or other manners of rendering them irrelevant? Contesting or ignoring claims with regard to what might constitute a public problem at a certain point, or even challenging the consensus on an accepted definition of a public problem (if this consensus represents the *status quo*), entail a comprehensive overview of mechanisms of visibility. In this respect, publicization must also account for mechanisms of elision, silencing and instrumental dismissal of various attempts to articulate a public problem.

Methodologically, placing the theoretical framework of public problems in the broader context of the paradigm of mediatization and relying on an inductive and heuristic method calls for multiple case-studies, typical for a theory-building approach to qualitative research (Thomas, 2011). It relies on the heterogeneity of case studies, selected for their critical and paradigmatic value (consequently, with a certain potential for generalization – see Flyvbjerg, 2006). Adopting, methodologically, the approaches that follow in the footsteps of Foucault's works on governmentality and problematization, a methodological fluidity is assumed to characterise such an endeavour, with a back and forth between analytical frameworks and corpora that define case-studies (see, for instance, Ragazzi 2017, p.13). The case-study is employed rather as a strategy of research, not as a method (Thomas, 2011), and each case study will require its own methodological elaboration, depending on topic, corpus, discipline and type of perspective employed: synchronic vs. diachronic perspectives; local/national vs transnational perspectives and event-centred vs. argumentative pattern-centred perspectives. Achieving the heterogeneity of case-studies, according to these three-fold criteria, is crucial in the layout of this project since these criteria describe analytical axes in the mediatization paradigm: the temporal axis, the scale axis, and the thematic-attention axis. Since a discussion of the reasons for these opposing perspectives requires a clarification of the paradigm of mediatization, we will turn to it in the following section.

## 2.2. The structure of communicative figurations and the logic of mediatization in the articulation of the public problems

Inasmuch as the articulation of the public problems is relying on mechanism and processes of publicization and visibility, which are further shaped by technologies and media of communication, it follows that an understanding of the public problems cannot ignore the historical dynamics of the communication technologies and media. Such a perspective is the mediatization paradigm, more specifically in the version proposed by Andreas Hepp et al. (for a standard extensive treatment see Hepp, 2013).

Through this paradigm we aim at a reconceptualization of the public problems so that a theoretical model of public problems would be sensible to the logic of mediatization. In its latest developments, and as a consequence of various critical assessments (see Deacon & Stanier,

2014, 2015), the paradigm assumes a definite constructionist approach, social constructionism being analysed as communicatively constituted, and structuring the social world (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In this paradigm, mediatization is understood as a conceptual frame, more specifically as metaprocess of modernity, along with commodification, individualisation and globalization (Krotz, 2007). In this understanding, "mediatization seeks to capture the nature of the interrelationship between historical changes in media communication and other transformational processes" (Hepp, 2013, p. 34) – i.e. other transformational processes of social and cultural life. But thus defined, the concept of mediatization gathers such a level of generality, that it risks becoming void of any empirical content (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014).

Borrowing from Giovanni Sartori, Deacon & Stanyer (2014) point out that a medium-level concept is required to bridge the gap between the abstract conceptual framework and the empirical realities. The communicative figuration is such a concept, proposed by Norbert Elias and operationalised by Hepp & Hasebrink for the mediatization paradigm (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014). In this understanding, communicative figurations are "patterns of processes of communicative interweaving that exist across various media and have a thematic framing that guides communicative action" (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014, p. 260). Communicative figurations consist of: 1. *forms of communication* – the different convention-based ways of communicative action, developing into more complex patterns of practice; 2. *media ensembles* – the entire media and their typical usages through which the forms of communication take place; 3. typical *constellation of actors* that can be determined for each communicative figuration; 4. a *thematic framing* – a guiding topic which must be specified (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014, pp. 260-261).

Starting from small life-worlds, the concept can be extended from typical examples in the literature (such as family life, or school life, understood as communicative figurations) to public sphere, which is analysed also as a communicative figuration by Hepp & Hasebrink. A focus on life-worlds as empirical realities, understood as communicative figurations, allows both synchronic and diachronic perspectives in elaborating case studies meant to generate heuristically models for understanding life-worlds (the temporal axis). The general model of communicative figurations proposed (see Figure 1) emphasises broad social contexts (with power relations and social rules) in which the articulation of public problems occur, but also allegiances and belongings which can work as resources (*discursive offers*, in SKAD terminology) mobilised in defining and legitimating actors. Depending on the scale of these life-worlds, their context can be a local one, a national one or even a transnational one (the scale axis). And public problems are not to be understood only as generated by events (such as the understanding of a situation as a result of an event of certain visibility or public impact), but also as reinforced by specific argumentative patters (Van Eemeren, 2017) which occur in various types of discourse (for instance employed as taken-for-granted premises in the discussion of other situations or events) and which, despite being often used strategically in particular situations and events, circulate in fact across events and contexts, requiring thus from the researcher a flexibility of attention from events to argumentative patterns and back.

Figure 1. Heuristics to analyse communicative figurations.
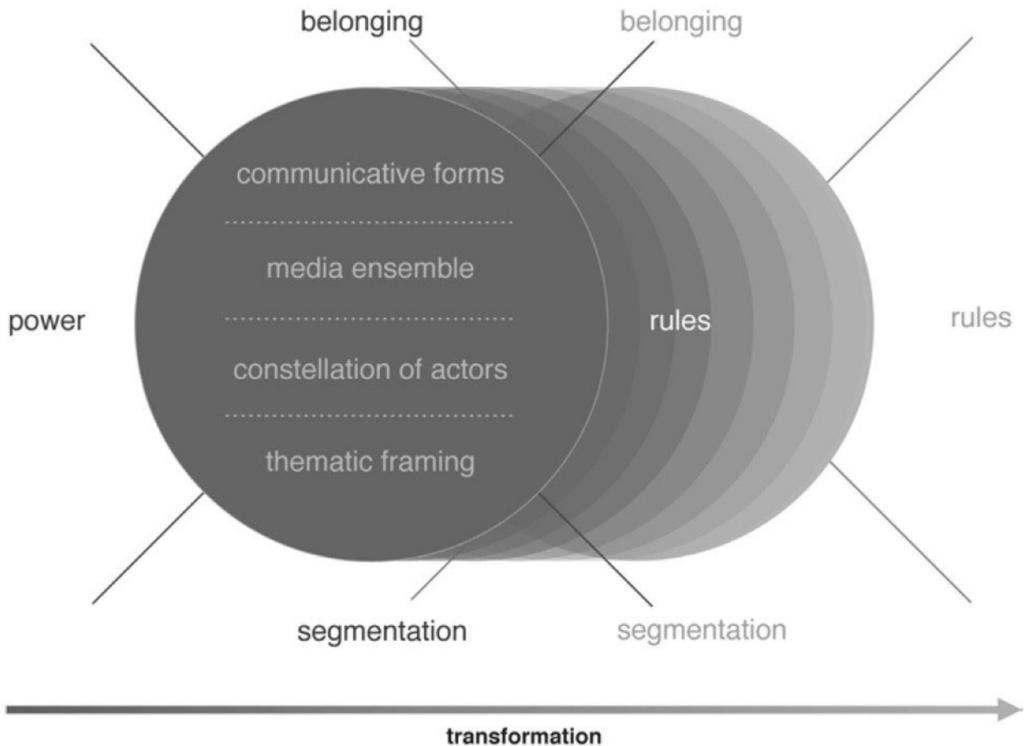


(Source: Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014, p. 262).

The concept of communicative figuration (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014) is very helpful in understanding patterns of communication that contribute to the claim-making strategies. Since these claim-making strategies will typically find their materialisation in various media products, a semiotic lens is also necessary, based on the concept of "medial/intermedial configuration" (Ellestrom, 2018; Rajewsky, 2010). It is in this logic that we understand media products as cultural entities that are very much dependent on social praxis. Iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity are the main semiotic traits of a media product, that include both the visual and the auditory mode, both the iconic and the symbolic mode, and both the spatial and the temporal mode (Ellestrom, 2018, p. 21). In fact, all media are multimodal because media may represent other media types, transforming and adapting different types of discourses. Understanding public problems within a communicative figuration paradigm requires, in this regard, the analysis of the intermedial configurations that conjoint media ensembles and communicative forms in a particular social praxis structured by power relations, constellations of actors and thematic frames.

## 3. Conclusions

Our proposal is meant to shape the premises of an analytical framework of public problems rooted in communicative constructionism (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). It has the potential to add a certain degree of dynamism to analytical perspectives on public problems, by acknowl-

edging the interdependency between how public problems are articulated and how this process reconfigures the public sphere in a context of an accelerated development of the media. It takes into account the new media ecology by adopting as a metatheoretical framework the concept of communicative figurations and employing its main elements – forms of communication, media ensembles, constellation of actors and thematic framing – as heuristic categories in the analysis of public problems (Hepp & Hasebrick, 2014). On the other hand, in order to account for the processual dynamic through which certain phenomena are analysed under specific circumstances and at certain times, while others are ignored, following Foucault, a shift from problems to problematizations is required.

Starting from Spector and Kitsuse, we systematised three main approaches to public problems, shaping this transition from problems to problematization: the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, the French pragmatic sociology perspective and the *Social Knowledge Approach to Discourse* (SKAD) approach. We insisted on the articulation of the public problems, showing that not all social problems become public problems. In fact, the problem becomes public when it generates discourse and practices, requiring the recognition of the problem by the actors themselves.

Placing the theoretical framework of public problems in the broader context of the paradigm of mediatization has as a methodological consequence an option for the case study as a strategy of research. A further consequence is the heterogeneity of case studies strategically selected for their critical and paradigmatic value as well as their potential for theory building. With a rationale grounded in the mediatization paradigm, we propose as a systematic criterion for the selection of case studies a three-fold perspective – synchronic vs. diachronic, local/national vs transnational and event-centred vs. argumentative pattern-centred. These case studies will be the natural continuation of the project and the next step in the elaboration of a theoretical model of the public problems. Since the logic of visibility governing processes of publicization on a media ecology marked by accelerated development is changing, special attention should be paid to the reconfiguration of claim-making activities in the new communicational landscape. Any Internet user is a potential constructor of public problems, so a thorough analysis of the intermedial configurations in a particular social praxis structured by power relations is needed.

### Note

In this paper we use systematically "constructionist/constructionism", following Berger & Luckmann and Spector & Kitsuse, but in the academic literature of the field these terms are used interchangeably with "constructivist/constructivism" – and that is the case also for Couldry & Hepp. In other fields (for instance, sociology of education), differences between the two are stipulated for theoretical reasons pertaining to the field itself, but in the mediatisation paradigm and in the field of social problems we are not aware of a need for such a distinction.

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