

Repair Cafés as Communicative Figurations: Consumer-Critical Media Practices for Cultural Transformation

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Repair Cafés are a new format of events in which people meet to work together on repairing objects of everyday life such as electronic devices, textiles or bicycles—media technologies being among the goods which are brought along most often. While some people offer help voluntarily and without charge, others seek help in undertaking repairs. The idea is to help people to help themselves. The Dutch foundation Stichting Repair Café claims to have invented the concept in 2009 (Stichting Repair Café: no date). Whether this is the origin or not, Repair Cafés have spread all over Western European and North American countries within the past few years.¹ In Germany, the foundation Anstiftung & Ertomis builds a network of repair initiatives by inviting organizers and helpers to face-to-face meetings and offering a website on which Repair

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Cafés can register and become visible through appearing on a map and in a calendar announcing events.²

While repairing is an old practice, what is new is that the act of repairing becomes public in Repair Cafés, and the actual repairing as well as the repair events are staged as political actions which strive for cultural transformation aiming at sustainability.

In this chapter, results of a qualitative study are presented in which Repair Cafés in Germany have been analyzed from the perspective of media and communication studies. Choosing this approach, the focus of the study was on the people repairing media technologies as well as the organizers of the events. Why do people participate in Repair Cafés and repair media technologies? What do Repair Cafés and the practice of repairing mean to the participants? And what relevance do the participants see in the Repair Cafés for a (mediatized) society?

A figurational perspective (see Hepp and Hasebrink in this volume) is helpful to structure the findings, to further analyze Repair Cafés and to answer the research questions.

When analyzing Repair Cafés from a perspective of media and communication studies, the transformation of media and communicative practices becomes visible as do media practices aiming at cultural change. Therefore, on the basis of the study conducted, it can be discussed how media are and can be used for cultural transformation; here, with a view to sustainability. Defining the repairing of media technologies as media practice in this chapter, it is argued that the term media practice has to be understood in a broad sense in media and communication studies, not only taking into account what people do with media content but also what they do with media technologies.

5.2 RESEARCH ON REPAIRING AND PUBLIC SITES OF REPAIR

Repair and Repair Cafés are mainly analyzed in technology and design studies. Here, repair is defined as ‘the process of sustaining, managing, and repurposing technology in order to cope with attrition and regressive change.’ (Rosner and Turner 2015: 59) Steven J. Jackson ‘rethinks repair’ and suggests the approach of ‘broken world thinking’ in media and technology studies, shifting the approach from the new, growth and progress to erosion, breakdown and decay (2014: 221). He sees a necessity for this shift in current crisis and instabilities and perceives repairing as a way to sustain and restore infrastructures and lives (2014: 222). Reflecting on

the collaboration with artists and their work of art, Jackson and Kang argue that reuse and creative repurposing of broken technologies does not only enable technologies to *be or become* anything, but rather facilitates ‘communication with material objects’ (Jackson and Kang 2014: 10): Even though claiming that things act or have agency is too strong for the authors (which would be the argument of the Actor–Network Theory, see e.g. Latour 2007), they stress that ascribing affordances to things might be too weak and require that the human relationship to technologies must be reconsidered (Jackson and Kang 2014: 9).

When analyzing repair initiatives in Paraguay and the USA, Daniela K. Rosner and Morgan G. Ames point to the affordances that technologies imply. They introduce the notion of *negotiated endurance*, which ‘refers to the process by which different actors—including consumers, community organizers, and others—drive the ongoing use, maintenance, and repair of a given technology through the sociocultural and socio-economic infrastructures they inhabit and produce’ (Rosner and Ames 2014: 319). With this term, they stress that the lifecycle of things is negotiated by the users in the appropriation process rather than planned ahead by the people who designed such things (Rosner and Ames 2014: 329, see also Rosner and Turner 2015, 63ff.).

Rosner and Ames argue that breakdown and repair of technologies is actively produced through everyday practices, and these practices are shaped by material, infrastructural, gendered, political and socio-economic factors (Rosner and Ames 2014: 328).³ The latter might make repairing a ‘privileged practice, relying on certain kinds of materials (replacement parts, testing equipment) and forms of expertise to be carried out’ (Rosner and Ames 2014: 320).

Nevertheless, the repair initiatives that Rosner and Ames analyzed follow the idea of technical empowerment, which they define as ‘knowing more about technology and making more informed choices around technology as a result—and sustainability—advancing reuse over recycling and disposal’ (Rosner and Ames 2014: 326). But the authors also concede that empowerment rarely emerges in the repair initiatives as often the things are repaired *for* the people seeking help (Rosner and Ames 2014: 327).⁴

However, this technical empowerment has a political character, and repairing can become ‘a mode of political action’ (Rosner and Turner 2015: 64f.). Repairing can be characterized an act of unconventional political participation as it is not institutionalized but might aim at shaping and transforming society (Kannengießner 2017).⁵

Rosner and Turner call Repair Cafés ‘Theaters of alternative industry’ (2015), which are ‘meant to demonstrate the power of creative re-manufacturing to change the world’ (Rosner and Turner 2015: 65) and whose participants strive for social change (Rosner and Turner 2015: 67), whereupon the change here is seen in questions of egalitarianism and collectivity.

Charter and Keiller analyze the motivations of 158 volunteers in Repair Cafés in nine countries in a quantitative study: the top three reasons why participants engage in Repair Cafés were encouraging others to live more sustainably, providing a valuable service to the community and being part of the movement to improve product reparability and longevity (2014: 5). The authors draw the conclusion that volunteers act altruistically and that their personal gain is not important to them (Charter and Keiller 2014: 13).

The qualitative study I conducted analyzing Repair Cafés from a perspective of media and communication studies contributes to the research field dealing with public repair sites and points to the meanings people repairing media technologies as well as organizers of these events construct regarding the relevance of Repair Cafés in a mediatized society and the repairing of media devices itself. Moreover, aspects of the current transformation of media practices as well as a broader cultural change regarding media appropriation become apparent.

The results discussed below show that many people repairing media technologies act as critical consumers. Consumer criticism and critical consumer campaigns are analyzed in media content analysis within the field of political communication (e.g. Greenberg and Knight 2004; Micheletti and Stolle 2007; Baringhorst et al. 2010; Gaßner 2014). But the study of repairing media technologies in Repair Cafés also shows that critical consumers’ *media practices* have to be acknowledged in media and communication studies, as they are on the one hand a reaction of the transformation of media environments and on the other hand themselves aim at cultural change.

5.3 METHODS USED AND FIGURATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

A qualitative approach is useful when analyzing the aims that people repairing media technologies have and the meanings that participants as well as organizers of Repair Cafés construct regarding the relevance of repairing media devices as well as the relevance of Repair Cafés in a

mediatized society. The approach of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008) allows for an open perspective and reconstruction of the perspectives of people involved in Repair Cafés.⁶ Using the theory-generating approach of Grounded Theory and based on the empirical findings, the theory of *consumer-critical media practices* was developed (see also Kannengießer 2016). Consumer-critical media practices ‘are those practices which either use media to criticize (certain) consumption or which are (conscious) alternatives to the consumption of media technologies’ (Kannengießer 2016: 198), repairing media technologies being an example of the latter.

As case studies for the qualitative study, I chose three Repair Cafés in Germany which differ regarding the context in which they were organized and the background of the organizers: one is set in a university context in Oldenburg (a mid-sized city in North-Western Germany), a second is organized by an artist in the quarter of Kreuzberg in Berlin (this was the first Repair Café in Berlin and was awarded a prize for sustainability by the City of Berlin, Berlin Online 2013), and the third is in Garbsen (a small city near Hanover in the north of Germany), organized by a retired teacher in collaboration with the Agency for Volunteers of the City of Garbsen. I chose these different case studies to find out whether there are differences regarding the aims of people involved when they have different backgrounds and when the events take place in different settings.

In these Repair Cafés, I conducted observations in 2014 and 2015 as well as 38 qualitative interviews with the organizers, with people offering help in repairing media technologies and with people seeking help in repairing their devices.⁷ The observations followed the (media) practices during the repair events, and interviews took place to reconstruct the perspective of the people involved. Moreover, I conducted an observation in a network meeting of Repair Cafés in Germany which was organized by the foundation Anstiftung & Ertomis in Berlin on 10 October 2015, and interviewed the two employees of the foundation who organized the event.

I coded the interview transcriptions as well as the protocols of the observations in accordance with the coding process of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). As a key category, the concept of consumer-critical media practices was developed, under which the findings of the analysis can be subsumed.

The main categories developed through the coding process and thereby the findings can be structured and examined on a further level using a figurational perspective (explained in detail in Hepp/Hasebrink in this volume). In Elias's sense, figurations are networks of individuals (Elias 1978: 15). Communicative figurations are characterized by the *constellation of actors*, the *frames of relevance* (which is the thematic topic or theme of that figuration) and the *communicative and media practices* which can be found in communicative figurations (Hepp and Hasebrink in this volume). Each communicative figuration uses a specific *media ensemble* (Hepp and Hasebrink in this volume), which encompasses the entirety of media that can be found in a figuration.

Drawing attention to these key characteristics of communicative figurations allows us to point to the main characteristics of Repair Cafés, as each Repair Café is a communicative figuration. Moreover, the network of Repair Cafés in Germany becomes a communicative figuration itself. But the focus of this chapter is on the former: Repair Cafés as communicative figurations. Moreover, using a figurational perspective, it is possible to discuss the transformation of communicative and media practices which can be perceived in these events as well as the aims of the actors regarding changes in media practices and cultural transformations.

5.4 ACTOR CONSTELLATION IN REPAIR CAFÉS

Repair Cafés are in Elias's sense figurations, as here networks of individuals are formed (Elias 1978: 15), the individuals taking different roles as organizers, people offering help (the helpers), and others seeking help (the participants) in the repairing process. The *constellation of actors* participating in the communicative figurations in Repair Cafés comprises these different roles. The network comes into being in a certain location at a certain time, as Repair Cafés are usually organized as monthly events. As they are organized repeatedly, the figuration of each Repair Café becomes stable although happening intermittently. Each Repair Café, the repeatedly organized repair events at a certain location, is a communicative figuration whose organizers and helpers become constant actors, while the participants change from time to time (although many participants do visit several times or regularly).

Analyzing the actor constellation in Repair Cafés, the heterogeneity of people involved has to be stressed as well as the different patterns that can be perceived. On the one hand, organizers, helpers and participants

differ in gender and age as well as social backgrounds. In the case studies chosen, the organizers' backgrounds differ (which was one intention for the sampling, see above): The organizers of the Repair Café in Oldenburg are working for the university, the one in Garbsen is arranged by a retired woman in collaboration with the Agency for Volunteers of the city, and the events in Kreuzberg, Berlin, are organized by an artist in her studio in collaboration with the non-governmental organization *Kunststoffe e.V.* Because of this background, the age of the organizers differs: in the organizational group in Oldenburg, students between 25 and 30 years old are involved as well as a female lecturer and a male professor, who are in their early 50s. The retired teacher in Garbsen is 65 years old and the artist in Oldenburg is in her early 30s. Regarding the gender of the organizers, mainly women arrange the events of the three case studies, but the observation in the network meeting of Repair Cafés in Germany hosted by the foundation *Anstiftung & Ertomis* showed that at least half of the organizers participating in this network event have been men. Regarding gender, the most significant pattern in respect of the actor constellations in the communicative figurations of Repair Cafés can be found in the group of helpers: while nearly exclusively men offer to repair media technologies, women volunteer to repair textiles; this finding goes along with the results of the study Daniela Rosner conducted in the USA (Rosner 2013).

With regard to class and educational background, it has to be noted that the organizers of the case studies chosen all have an academic background. This is clear for the Repair Café that is organized in the university context of Oldenburg, while the artist in Berlin has a university degree and the retired woman organizing the repair events used to be a teacher. But in the network meeting, many organizers of Repair Cafés had a vocational training.

Looking at the group of participants who bring along their broken media technologies (which was the focus of the study presented in this chapter), characteristics in the social categories of gender, class, age and educational background are very heterogeneous. Men as well as women from different age groups and social backgrounds all participate. Regarding class, it has to be stressed that the organizers of the case studies chosen are sensitive to this category. The Repair Café in Oldenburg does not take place at the university but was first hosted in a café. After this, it was organized in cooperation with Oldenburg's theatre (*Oldenburgisches Staatstheater*), in a building which used to be a shop in the city centre and is rented by the theatre but is not the

theatre building itself. This choice of location indicates that the organizers intend the Repair Café to be open to everyone. In Garbsen, the repair events take place in a community centre hosted by the Agency of Volunteers of the city, which is located in a quarter where many socially deprived people, predominantly migrants, live. The intention of the organizers is to approach as many people in the neighbourhood as possible and to construct the repair event as a social event (see below).⁸

5.4.1 *Repairing Media Technologies as Media Practice*

A second characteristic of communicative figurations is communicative practices (see Hepp and Hasebrink in this volume), which are often mediated and are therefore media practices. Analyzing the *communicative and media practices* in the communicative figurations in Repair Cafés, it first has to be described what people actually *do* at these events. In Repair Cafés, people join forces to repair their media technologies (among other things). They bring along new technologies such as laptops and smartphones, and old ones such as slide projectors and old radios. They open the devices, clean them, mend them and screw them back together. Helpers explain the defects the devices have, what could be done, what they can do and what the owners could do in future when similar problems occur. Sometimes the repair is successful—and sometimes not. Moreover, people in Repair Cafés chat together and partake of the beverages and cake which are served during the repair events.

Analyzing the *communicative and media practices* in the communicative figurations in Repair Cafés, it is important to distinguish between the practices in which people communicate (face to face or mediated) and the repair practices. Taking the latter into account—the repairing of media technologies—I will discuss here why the repairing of technologies can be characterized as *media practice*.⁹

Practice theory has a long tradition in media and communication studies (for an overview and the discussion see e.g. Couldry 2012: 33–58, Genzel 2015, Pentzold 2015). Nick Couldry defines media as ‘the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media’ (2004: 117). He stresses that we need the perspective of practice to help us address how media are ‘embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life’ (Couldry 2004: 129). A practice perspective helps us to understand how people actually appropriate media (technologies) in everyday life and which meanings they construct regarding media. The central question

of the paradigm perceiving media as practice is: ‘What, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?’ (Couldry 2004: 119) This question can be answered quite easily when looking at Repair Cafés: people repair media technologies (successfully or not). Depending on the broken media technologies which people bring, participants open the devices with the support of the helpers and the tools offered. New technologies, especially laptops and smartphones, are difficult to open, and special tools are needed, but there are often ‘experts’ among the helpers who are able to solve these problems. Helpers and participants identify the defects, participants describe the problems which occur during usage, helpers share their knowledge about the devices. Helpers bring with them spare parts, and sometimes they have to improvise or tinker with broken parts. But often simply cleaning is sufficient to get the objects working again.

Defining these processes of repairing media technologies as media practice, I want to stress that we have to understand the term in a broad sense, not only asking what people do with media content but what people in general do in relation to media; that is, with regard to media content *and/or* media technologies. Following such a broad understanding of media practice, the repairing of media technologies is an example of the latter. Defining the repairing of media technologies as media practice, we are able not only to understand what people are actually doing with media technologies when repairing them but we can also acknowledge why they are repairing media technologies, and what kind of sense they ascribe to media technologies. This brings me to the *frame of relevance* of the communicative figuration in Repair Cafés. Regarding this characteristic of communicative figurations, the media practice of repairing can be described as *consumer-critical*, which I will explain here.

5.5 CONSUMER-CRITICAL MEDIA PRACTICE AND SMALL MEDIA REPERTOIRES

The *frame of relevance* of the communicative figurations in Repair Cafés can be reconstructed by analyzing the aims of the people involved. Why do people come to Repair Cafés and why do they repair their broken media technologies? The meanings people involved in repair events construct regarding the repairing process as well as the Repair Cafés allow us to reason the frame of relevance, or the theme, of communicative figurations in Repair Cafés.

Eight main aims were identified concerning the question why people participate in Repair Cafés and why they repair media technologies and why they organize the repair events: conservation of resources, waste prevention, appreciation for the device, the fun of repairing, meeting and talking to people, sharing knowledge, learning repair skills and economic considerations.

People involved in Repair Cafés are aware of the harmful production processes of media technologies: ‘I think especially the repairing of computers is important as they contain resources, because of which people in other countries die. And we should not throw these [technologies] away and buy a new iPhone,’ says Simon Meyer,¹⁰ a Repair Café organizer.¹¹ One participant even calls the people producing media technologies ‘slaves’. Many organizers and participants point to the harmful pollution and situations of war under which the resources needed for digital media technologies (such as coltan) are extracted. They try to conserve resources by not buying new technologies but prolonging the lifespan of existing ones.

A second dominant aim for people who are repairing their devices is waste prevention: ‘We would have a better world if more people repaired their things [...] because our planet would be less polluted,’ says 60-year-old Maria Frey, repairing her broken mobile phone. Participants point to waste dumps, in Ghana for example, where people burn broken media technologies to extract reusable resources while damaging their health and the environment in the process, including through the pollution caused by toxic substances that end up in soil and groundwater.¹²

Therefore, participants try to avoid the production of new media technologies and disposal of existing ones by prolonging the lifespan of their possessions. They stress the value of their existing devices and their personal relationship with the technologies they possess: ‘I’m befriended with my smartphone,’ says Peter Stephen, who is trying to repair his mobile phone. The 58-year-old participant Manuel Maier underlines the amount of work which goes into each device. The people inventing, developing and designing the products, and those constructing them, are a reason for him to value his goods and try to maintain them.

Another aim for people offering help in the repair process (who were in the case studies chosen only men) is that they enjoy repairing things: Paul Winter, a 55-year-old organizer, describes the volunteers as technophiles. But the pleasure of participants who successfully repair their devices is a reason to arrange these events: ‘When the repair was

successful, people leave with a smile on their face [...]. It's great to see that people are delighted,' says Paula Klee, a 20-year-old volunteer helping to organize the Repair Café in Berlin.

Actors involved in all three groups interviewed stress the social character of Repair Cafés. They come to these events not only to get things repaired but also to meet people and have a chat. These communicative practices in the figuration in Repair Cafés are analyzed in detail below.

Several people seeking help in the repair events (mainly those receiving welfare, working in jobs in which they earn low wages or students) also seek help in repairing their media technologies as they do not have the financial resources to buy new devices or cannot pay for the repair services of commercial providers.

The repairing of media technologies can be characterized as a consumer-critical media practice, as many actors involved criticize the consumption of media technologies and try to avoid buying new devices by repairing their existing ones. Some participants face financial pressure to repair but many are also critical consumers.

These different aims might be but are not necessarily contradictions. The organizers do not perceive any discrepancy between consumer-critical practices and financial reasons or seeking pleasure. They noticed that many people come to Repair Cafés because they do not know where else to go with their very old radios or mobile phones, as the bigger stores do not repair old devices and just advise people to buy new technologies or offer a rather expensive service.

Therefore, some organizers also advertise smaller service centres and distribute lists with these service centres' addresses, because they support the idea of repairing things and the establishment of a 'culture of repair' is very important to them.¹³ *Why* people actually repair—because of consumer-critical aims, pleasure or financial necessity—is of no consequence to them.

The Repair Café in Berlin Kreuzberg also cooperates with a service centre called iDoc. This offers commercial repair services for iPhones but wants to support the idea of repair and to give something back to society, as one employee explains, and therefore sends along a volunteer to help repair mobile phones without charge.

Regarding media repertoires (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012),¹⁴ attitudes and practices differ among the participants. While some 'consumption-critical people' reduce the number of media technologies they own to only a few devices and/or buy media technologies second hand,

technophile people, including many of the volunteers, own many devices and buy innovative technologies regularly.

Some participants explain that they still use quite old devices, such as 12- or even 20-year-old computers. Others have only one device of each type, as 58-year-old Manuel Maier, who is currently unemployed, explains. He could not listen to the radio for three weeks as his only radio was broken and he had to wait until the Repair Café to fix it. Some participants also explain that they buy or acquire used media technologies from people who have bought new devices. Several participants ‘resist’ technological innovation, for example by not having a smartphone but still using ‘old’ mobile phones. Others abstain from technologies, with some participants saying they do not own a television or mobile phone, for example. But many volunteers own complex media repertoires, an example being 30-year-old Jan Schmitz, a trained IT technician, who helps to repair smartphones, explains: ‘I like technology a lot. I don’t need a new mobile phone every year but I want to see what’s new and what makes sense. [...] I test [devices] [...], either I like it, or if I don’t, I sell it again.’

To sum up, not only do the aims of people participating in Repair Cafés differ (even though the consumer-critical aims were dominant) but also they have a range of media technologies. What unites all of them is the wish to repair their media technologies.

5.6 COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES IN REPAIR CAFÉS AND THE FORMATION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMMUNITIES

While in the last two sections the repairing of media technologies has been discussed as a consumer-critical media practice, there are other *media and communicative practices* taking place in the communicative figurations in Repair Cafés. These will be analyzed here. The communicative practices in Repair Cafés are intertwined with the process of repairing, as the repairing of media technologies is not only a media practice—as explained above—but also a communicative one: people repair their things *together*. Participants seeking help ask about the defects of their devices or problems in the repairing process. Many are keen to learn how to do repairs on their own in future. Many volunteers offering help like to explain this process and try to teach others how to repair. But people also start talking about their reasons for coming

to such events and discuss the consumer-critical aims explained above. Enabling these communicative exchanges is one of the intentions of the organizers of the Repair Cafés, who try to build a network among like-minded people through these events. This network shares a specific practice, repairing things, and many participants also share a common aim and frame of relevance: consumer criticism.

The Repair Cafés are *communicative* figurations in that within the events face-to-face communication takes place and is intentionally wanted. Participants stress the social dimension of Repair Cafés, the event giving people the possibility to get into contact with others, to have a chat and also to discuss the political dimensions of repairing their possessions. Spreading the idea of sustainability and consumer criticism is one of the aims of the actors who organize the Repair Cafés. Paul Winter, one of the organizers of the Repair Café in Oldenburg, for instance, perceives these events as ‘subversive communication instruments’ to lobby for sustainability and put pressure on the economy and politics.

In Repair Cafés communities—*Vergemeinschaftungen*—are built in Max Weber’s sense: people meet because of a shared aim and many develop a feeling of belonging (1972: 21). As 68-year-old Karl Klaus helping to repair computers explains:

People who are participating in something of this kind [Repair Cafés] have a different social and political attitude. [...] For me, it is much nicer to get involved in something cooperative than in business life, because there is a sense of belonging. I do not belong to Saturn,¹⁵ I purchase from Saturn, but actually I don’t give a shit about Saturn.

These communities are communicative (Knoblauch 2008: 74)¹⁶ as they are constructed by face-to-face communication during the event and through mediated communication between the different events. Besides the face-to-face interaction, which is bound to the place and time of the event, mediated communication among the organizers and helpers also takes place between events: The organizers of the Repair Cafés keep in touch with each other and with the helpers via telephone, email and emailing lists. These media as well as flyers or posters, which are used for public relations, form the media ensemble of each Repair Café.¹⁷ Because of the mediated communication between the repair events, their communicative figuration is not only bound to the place and time of the

event but also exists in between the occasions, although then the figuration becomes smaller as most of the people only participate during the face-to-face meetings and not in the mediated communication processes between the events.

Those repair initiatives which have registered with the German network of repair initiatives that is coordinated by the German foundation *Anstiftung & Ertomis* become visible on the online platform for repair initiatives (www.reparatur-initiativen.de). Here, repair initiatives can be found via a map showing all locations in Germany where repair events are organized, as well as a calendar which structures the events according to the dates on which they take place. When registering on the platform, the repair initiatives create a profile in which they also point to their websites, if these exist. The aim of the employees of *Anstiftung & Ertomis* in establishing this online platform is to create visibility for the repair initiatives: ‘repairing does not only happen piecemeal, but nearly every day in many different places in Germany’, explains Lisa Wilde, an employee of *Anstiftung & Ertomis*. She stresses that the foundation strives to build a network among the German repair initiatives, to support them and the establishment of new Repair Cafés, and to lobby for the idea of repairing. Next to the online platform, which creates visibility, *Anstiftung & Ertomis* uses an email newsletter to inform members about new events or developments. Moreover, the employees are in personal contact via email or telephone with organizers of repair events, helpers or simply interested people. In addition, the foundation organizes annual face-to-face meetings to which all organizers and helpers of repair initiatives in Germany are invited as well as regional meetings, which happen more regularly. While the former function as forums to exchange ideas and experiences, the latter serve as possibilities to develop regional cooperation projects, as several helpers participate in more than one Repair Café.

The online platform as well as the face-to-face meetings facilitate the creation of a ‘repair movement’ that strives for cultural transformation.

5.7 REPAIR MOVEMENT STRIVING FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The overall aim of the organizers interviewed and many participants in the Repair Cafés is a sustainable society, to which they want to contribute by the practice of repairing. For example, 29-year-old Anna Platt, organizing the Repair Café in Oldenburg, says: ‘We make a small contribution

to improve the world, to conserve resources. (...) The Repair Café is very important for our culture—(...) from a “throwaway society” to a “culture of repair”.’ The organizers of the Repair Cafés strive for cultural transformation aimed at sustainability.

‘We cannot talk about sustainability without a culture of repairing, and a fundamental extension of the lifespan of technologies.’ In this quote 55-year-old organizer Paul Winter stresses that a ‘culture of repair’ is needed to establish a sustainable society and perceives a need for change regarding identification with technologies. ‘We need to have a cultural change, through which it becomes cool again and socially acceptable to walk around with technologies which have signs of use and patina, where the display has scratches or fractures and one says: “This is my good old device, I stand by this, this is my trademark.”’

Such a cultural transformation could only happen when there are people who identify with and support these ideas. Currently dominating is a consumer society in which the ownership of goods is important to people, as is the act of purchase itself (Oetzel 2012). This is what many people involved in Repair Cafés want to change, as Manuel Maier, a participant in the Repair Café in Berlin, claims: ‘We need to get rid of the consumption mentality.’

The number of Repair Cafés gives us cause to think about a repair movement. In total, 491 repair initiatives are registered on the website supported by Anstiftung & Ertomis (www.reparatur-initiativen.de, 10 February 2017), and on the website supported by Stichting Repair Café, 1211 Repair Cafés are registered worldwide (<http://repaircafe.org/en/visit/>, 10 February 2017).¹⁸

Four characteristics of social movements also match a repair movement: shared aims and a shared identity, protest and network character (Ullrich 2015: 9ff.): As the results of the study show, Repair Café stakeholders share the aim of sustainability and a consumer-critical identity, their forms of protest are the repair events and the practice of repairing, and they network not only locally in these events but also translocally on a national level (organized in Germany by Anstiftung & Ertomis). The aim of the repair movement is to transform society into a culture of repair, thereby striving for a sustainable society.

In mediatized societies, where the media environment of the people becomes more and more complex and where media gain in importance in all societal areas (Krotz 2009), the number of media technologies is increasing. By repairing a device and prolonging its lifespan, people avoid

the acquisition process of media technologies. They take enjoyment from repairing their media technologies rather than from the act of buying. These are people who say about themselves ‘I am not a consumer person’, as Nils Werner, a 27-year-old bicycle courier trying to repair his laptop, describes himself. Therefore, the actors involved try to contribute to an alternative to the consumer society. They criticize today’s ‘deep meditation’ (Couldry and Hepp 2016). But people repairing media technologies do not reject media technologies. Many are ‘technophiles’, who offer to help to repair media technologies, and many of them use media to communicate with each other or to advertize their events. When asked about the need to repair media technologies, helpers and participants alike stress that the lifespan of media devices should be prolonged by doing repairs and thus promoting sustainability.

5.8 REPAIR CAFÉS AS COMMUNICATIVE FIGURATIONS: ANALYZING THE TRANSFORMATION OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA PRACTICE, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CHANGE

A figurational perspective was used in this chapter for analyzing Repair Cafés from a media and communication perspective. Repair Cafés are in Elias’s sense a figuration, as here networks of individuals are formed, the individuals taking different roles as organizers, people offering help (the helpers) and others seeking help (the participants) in the repair process. The *actor constellation* of the communicative figurations in Repair Cafés is composed by these different roles. The network comes into being at a certain location at a certain time. Repair Cafés are usually organized as monthly events. As these events are organized repeatedly, the figuration of each Repair Café becomes stable, although happening intermittently.

Although the motivations of the participants are not homogeneous, the overall *frame of relevance* of the communicative figuration in Repair Cafés can be identified as consumer criticism. This is because many of the participants and all of the organizers interviewed value their existing devices, are trying to avoid the consumption of new media technologies and to avoid polluting production and waste.

The *communicative practices* in Repair Café happen mainly face to face within the events, but organizers and volunteers offering help also connect via email, emailing lists or telephone calls between events. But media are not only relevant for the communication process among the

participants but also as objects of repair. Therefore, media practices in Repair Cafés are on the one hand mediated communication practices of the people involved, while on the other hand the repairing of media technologies can be defined as a media practice itself, a practice which is related to media. Conceptualizing the repair of media technologies as media practice shows that in media and communication studies, the concept of media practices has to be understood in a broad sense, not only taking into account what people do with media content but also analyzing what they do with media technologies.

The repairing of media technologies in Repair Cafés can be perceived as a change in media practices in consumer society (which is dominantly characterized by an increasing number of media technologies and regular purchases), which again strives for a cultural transformation aiming at sustainability. Many stakeholders question the present trends of changing media environments, in which the media environments become more and more complex, with the lifespan of media technologies becoming shorter and therefore an increase in production and disposal of media devices. Instead, they aim at maintaining existing media technologies and prolonging the lifespan of devices to avoid the production of new media technologies and the disposal of existing ones.

The participants acknowledge the materiality of media technologies, as they are aware of the problematic effects on the environment regarding the production and disposal of these goods. They draw attention to the negative social and environmental effects of media technologies, which are often not acknowledged in media and communication studies.

With the establishment of more and more Repair Cafés, not only do such communicative figurations emerge, but taken together they become a movement which strives for cultural change as well as the transformation of media practices. As many participants feel a sense of belonging to this repair movement, the Repair Cafés can be described as communities.

Repair Cafés are not the only (rather new) phenomenon criticizing consumer society and striving for cultural transformation. Other projects such as Transition Towns, Urban Gardening projects or exchange circles, share similar goals. In these projects, media also become relevant, for example social networking sites, blogs or online forums which are used to connect and mobilize people, and websites, posters and flyers which are used for public relations. But media are not only relevant for connection and mobilization within consumer-critical action, but in Repair Cafés media technologies themselves move into central focus

and become objects of critique and transformation. People try to not only change (their) media practices but also to contribute to a cultural change, towards a ‘culture of repair’. As the number of Repair Cafés increases, these events might contribute to cultural transformation and to a more sustainable society, although their influence might not be revolutionary in the context of current consumer cultures.

NOTES

1. See a map for locations of registered Repair Cafés at www.repaircafe.org.
2. Visit www.reparatur-initiativen.de for the map and calendar.
3. In public repair events, the repairing of technologies is highly gendered as female participants pass repair work to male volunteers and mainly women do repairs to textiles (Rosner and Ames 2014: 326). I share this finding in the study I conducted, see below. For a detailed analysis of gender roles in public sites of repair (see Rosner 2013).
4. I share this statement in the results of the empirical study I conducted; see below.
5. Unconventional forms of participation are those which are not institutionalized (Nève and Olteanu 2013, Barret and Brunton-Smith 2014, 7).
6. I followed Strauss and Corbin’s approach of the Grounded Theory and not Glaser’s. For a comparison of the two see, for example Walker and Myrick (2006).
7. Although the interviewees agreed that I use the interviews for my research and publications, all interviews have been made anonymous and pseudonyms are used. All quotes by interview partners have been translated into English by the author.
8. For a detailed analysis of the relevance of the locations of Repair Cafés, see Kannengiesser (2018).
9. The communicative practices and media practices through which people communicate in Repair Cafés are analyzed below.
10. Pseudonyms are used for all interview partners.
11. For an analysis of the harmful production processes of technologies see for example, Chan and Ho (2008), Bleischwitz et al. (2012).
12. See for analysis of the effects of e-waste, e.g. Bily (2009), Robinson (2009), Gabrys (2011), Kaitatzi-Whitlock (2015).
13. The popularity of the term ‘culture of repair’, which many organizers use in the interviews, increased in Germany after the release of the book *Die Kultur der Reparatur* (The culture of repair) by Wolfgang Heckl (2013), who is director of the German Museum in Munich.

14. ‘The media repertoire of a person consists of the entirety of media he or she regularly uses’ (Hasebrink and Domeyer 2012, 758). In this context, a distinction is made between the media repertoires of individual people and the media ensemble of a communicative figuration, which encompasses the entirety of media that can be found in a figuration (see Hepp and Hasebrink in this volume).
15. Saturn is one of the biggest stores selling electronic goods in Germany.
16. Although Hubert Knoblauch stresses the relevance of mediated communication in today’s communities, I argue in respect of Repair Cafés that face-to-face and mediated communication are both relevant for the communities constructed here.
17. The media ensemble of each communicative figuration has to be distinguished from the media repertoires of the individual people (see footnote 14).
18. First Anstiftung & Ertomis cooperated with Stichting Repair Café. But Max Georg, an employee of Anstiftung & Ertomis, explains that they then started working independently, criticizing Stichting Repair Café for using the concept as a commercial idea. For instance, people have to pay to get a ‘starter kit’, which includes information on how to organize a Repair Café and the right to use the logos (<http://repaircafe.org/en/faq/#faq-webwinkel>).

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