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Webcomics as mediation

## Webcomics as mediation

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## Abstract

This article focuses on Nadja Hermann's uniquely inspiring webcomic *Erzählmirnix* (sometimes translated into English as 'Emoticomix'), approaching it from a theory of mediation. In recent years, this perspective has been developed into a fine-grained model for the analytical application in comic studies. Applied alongside or complementary to narrative-focused as well as art-focused perspectives, a view on comics as mediation puts into focus the interrelations of communicative-semiotic, material-technological and conventional-institutional aspects of a comic's production, distribution and reception. *Erzählmirnix* makes an excellent, intriguingly complicated test case, as it is at the same time incredibly influential in German-speaking countries while still being entirely neglected by research. 'Mediation' focuses on the distribution of agency between all the actors involved with (digital artefacts perceived as) comics: in a semiotic-communicative respect this refers to comic-specific 'narrative instances' (like narrators, perceived as distinct from authors or artists) as well as to affordances and limitations of genre traditions; in a material-technological respect it addresses the possibilities and constraints of platforms and material formats, while cultural-institutional perspectives take agency distributed between countless personal, institutional or corporate actors into account. My article then discusses how the entangled agentic structures surrounding Herrmann's minimalistic graphics and 'emoji'-pictures constantly bridge, undermine and negotiate distinctions between comics, cartoons, memes and actual social media commentary.

**Keywords:** [mediality](#), [memes](#), [emoji](#), [platforms](#), [social media](#), [filter bubbles](#), [comic studies](#)

The present article focuses on Nadja Hermann's 'uniquely inspiring and acerbic webcomic *Erzählmirnix*' ([Packard 2020](#): n.pag., original emphasis), approaching it from a theory of mediation developed within media studies. Nick Couldry understands mediation as 'the intervening role that

the process of communication plays in the making of meaning' ([2008](#): 379). In recent years, this perspective has been developed into a fine-grained model for analytical application in comic studies ([Ossa et al. 2022](#)). Applied alongside or as a complement to narrative-focused as well as art-focused perspectives, a view on comics as mediation puts into focus the interrelations of communicative-semiotic, material-technological and conventional-institutional aspects of a comic's production, distribution and reception. *Erzählmirnix* makes an excellent, intriguingly complicated test case, as it is at the same time incredibly influential in German-speaking countries while still being entirely neglected in research (for reasons that are perhaps not accidental). The series has been published since 2012, initially on its own (now discontinued) WordPress site. From 2018 on, however, the strip has been distributed exclusively on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, with an additional Instagram channel since 2020. Hermann also has been releasing English translations under the moniker 'Emoticomix' since 2016 and there are also two printed German editions from 2016 ([Hermann 2016](#)) and 2021 ([Hermann 2021](#)). Neither these nor the English translations, however, indicate the reach her comics have in the German-speaking parts of the internet.

In 2020 *Erzählmirnix* was recognized with the prestigious thirteenth 'Golden Blogger' award (for best Twitter account 2019) alongside renowned online journalists such as Sascha Lobo or platforms such as Volksverpetzer.de ([Die Goldenen Blogger 2020](#)), acknowledging Hermann as one of the most important voices in contemporary online culture, comparable perhaps to the popular science journalist Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim or the YouTuber Rezo. Hermann's number of subscribers/followers is between 165,000 and 187,000 (25 February 2023), but these only represent a fraction of the audiences reached through retweets or shares. The short strips are thus tailored for what Tim [Glaser \(2018\)](#) has called the 'memetic reception' of comics, addressing the fact that strips are relentlessly commented upon, shared, linked and spread by their readership. There also exist

myriads of material objects, merchandise and supplementary works with Hermann's highly recognizable aesthetics, both distributed through her official webshop and created as fan art by her readers (and then often photographed and posted). In fact, it would maybe not be an overstatement that most German-speaking Facebook or Twitter-user under the age of 30 recognize her aesthetics at least.

## 1. Quaternary media and the allusion to immediate communication

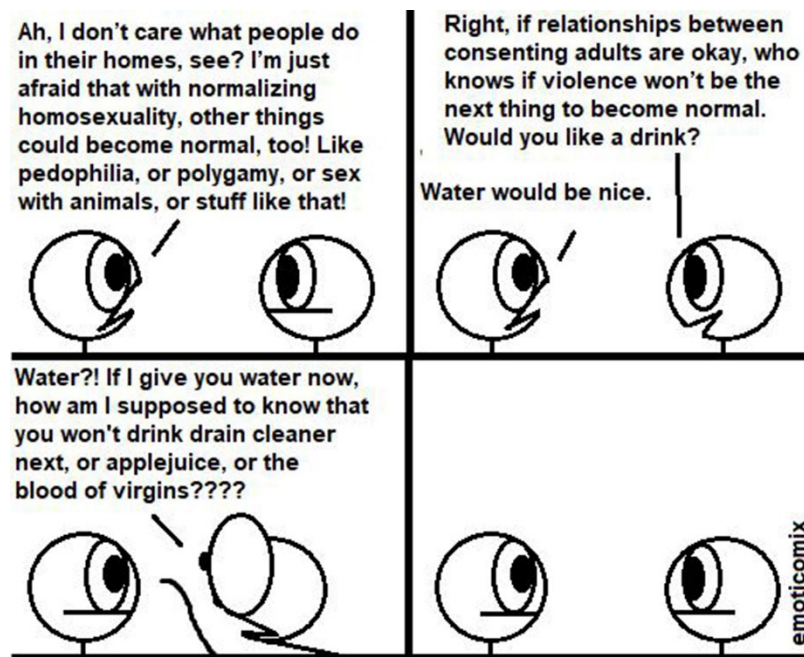


Figure 1: Rebutting a common discourse pattern by mirroring the core argument in a *reductio ad absurdum*, @emoticomix (2021a).

A four-panel, black-and-white comic strip created in Microsoft Paint. It shows two smiley faces (leftie and rightie) in conversation. P1: Leftie: 'Ah, I don't care what people do in their homes, see? I'm just afraid that with normalizing homosexuality, other things could become normal, too! Like pedophilia, or polygamy, or sex with animals, or stuff like that!' P2: Rightie: 'Right, if relationships between consenting adults are okay, who knows if violence won't be the next thing

to become normal. Would you like a drink?’ Leftie: ‘Water would be nice’. P3: Rightie: ‘Water?! If I give you water now, how am I supposed to know that you won’t drink drain cleaner next or applejuice or the blood of virgins????’ P4 shows merely awkward silence.

Scott [McCloud \(2000\)](#) described in enthusiastic detail more than twenty years ago wide ranges of novel design choices offered to comics artists by digital environments. The research literature ever since focused on an opposition that is mostly outdated, however, at least for the vast majority of digital comics artists. In lieu of artists’ established options of either being subject to publishers as ‘gatekeepers’ (and to the printed book and its restrictive materiality) *or* of gaining such agency themselves through digital self-publishing (and the respective freedom of a home-grown homepage), since around 2010 platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram have emerged as an entirely new sort of mediating actor ([Rizzi 2023](#)). In these media contexts where strips seem to respond more immediately to other people and a rapid back-and-forth between creators and readers is quite common, webcomics have developed new forms and functions unforeseen by McCloud. Formally, Hermann relinquishes almost everything that is often seen as typical for (narrative) comics: there are no recurring characters or any individualizing character traits, no drawn backgrounds and no overarching narratives. One might even dispute whether her repeatedly copped Microsoft Paint smileys should be considered ‘drawings’ or ‘pictures’ at all, bordering on emojis, ‘rage face’ memes ([Connor 2012](#)) or other digital pictograms (and they are often used in such a function as decontextualized reaction images, as I will discuss below).

What happens in *Erzählmirkix* strips? Hermann employs one strategy over and over again, exhibiting communicative patterns from everyday social media discourses and news media by revealing hypocrisy, biases and contradictions. Two recurring sub-forms are the exposure of (1) communicative implicatures by mirroring arguments in a poignant *reductio ad absurdum* ([Figure](#)

1) and of (2) performative self-contradictions right-wing online trolls *should* entangle themselves in – if it didn't take Hermann's analytical talent to carve it out (Figure 2). The two nameless Microsoft Paint smileys (sometimes addressed as 'leftie' and 'rightie' by readers for their spatial positioning in the panels) act as collective protagonists in a microscopic communication laboratory. Topics include polarizing social and political issues (veganism, science denial and gender politics) or overlooked and taboo concerns like depression – approached always from a decidedly (self-identifying) 'left-green' perspective. Judging from the comments and reactions that many episodes incite, it is clear that her strips *do* traverse clashing 'filter bubbles' (Pörksen 2018) by provoking angry posts from right-wing accounts more often than not. Predominantly, of course, the strips are favourably received in the comments by an enthusiastic community sharing her values and celebrating her acerbic ingenuity.

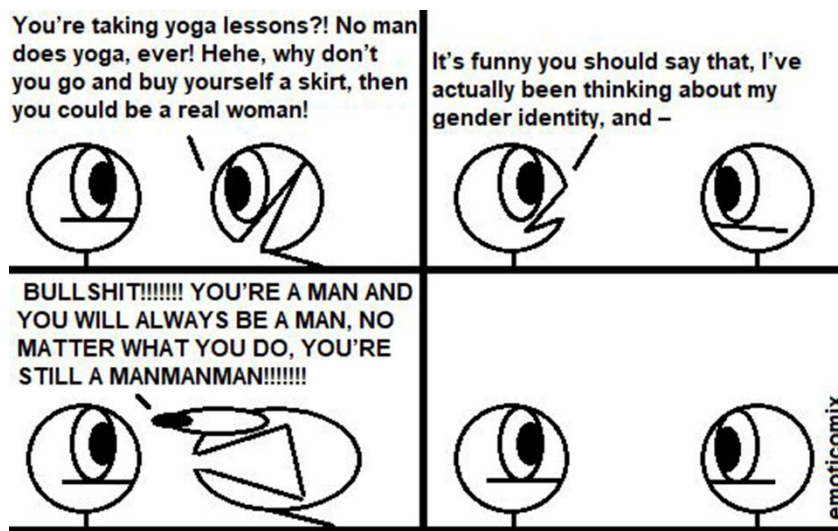


Figure 2: Rebutting a common discourse pattern by revealing performative self-contradictions, @emoticomix (2021b).

A four-panel, black-and-white comic strip created in Microsoft Paint. It shows two smiley faces (leftie and rightie) in conversation. P1: Rightie: 'You're taking yoga lessons?! No man does yoga,

ever! Hehe, why don't you go and buy yourself a skirt, then you could be a real woman!' P2: Leftie: 'It's funny you should say that, I've actually been thinking about my gender identity, and –' P3: Rightie: 'BULLSHIT!!!!!!! YOU'RE A MAN AND YOU WILL ALWAYS BE A MAN, NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, YOU'RE STILL A MANMANMAN!!!!!!!' P4 shows merely awkward silence.

What is special about the mediation of this particular strip? Put simply, it undermines or shortcuts the established media theoretical base distinction of primary, secondary and tertiary media introduced by [Beth Hanno and Harry Pross \(1990\)](#). A printed comic would accordingly be a secondary media form (devices needed for their production, but not for their reception), a webcomic like *Erzählmirnix* a tertiary one. Hanno and Pross's idea was that the communicative 'distance' gets larger and larger alongside the number of mediating devices between them – which can be conveniently 'counted'. As Stephan [Packard \(2021\)](#) observed recently, however, these distinctions have been developed within a model of mass communication (one-to-many, pull media) that does not seem to capture new forms of networked, interpersonal communication (many-to-many, push media) anymore. Webcomics on social media platforms could then be better addressed as one of Manfred [Faßler's \(1997\)](#) 'quaternary media' that *appear* as immediate, direct, personal forms of communication and interaction again – not *despite* but *through* their digital mediality. This is certainly a gradual (but often all the more potent) *insinuation* into communicative presence, proximity and immediacy, Packard found:

By addressing digital media as quaternary media, [...] Faßler and others take into account that most communication today seems like a direct, primary-media experience of presence, when in fact it is a tertiary communication coupled to sending and receiving devices.

([Packard 2022](#): 27, translation added)



As quaternary media, webcomics thus position themselves no longer as ‘published works’ (pull-media) but as individually situated acts of communication (push-media). If we no longer *abstract* individual comic strips into decontextualized ‘works’, it becomes all the more clear how their rhetoric, aesthetics and even their humour are tailored according to individually situated acts of communication. T. Campbell found in already: ‘[t]he best webcomics seem to have developed in a sort of conversation, a day-by-day process of stimulus-response between reader and creator’ (2006: 17). The following perspectives derived from the frameworks of mediation theory are then perhaps better suited – or at least complementary to – narrative-focused or art-focused accounts to analyse the interconnection of communicative-semiotic, material- technological and conventional-institutional aspects of webcomic mediation.

## **2. Analytical framework provided by a theory of mediation**

If we leave aside a description of individual media texts and media artefacts and instead consider ‘media as environments’ ([Lindgren 2017](#): 18), we turn our attention to processes or events of communication and interaction within these (technological, semiotic and social) environments. We shift our focus from mediality (of devices, forms or texts) to mediation ([Kemper and Zylinska 2012](#); Jung et al. 2021). In this perspective the focus is no longer on the comprehensive and sufficient characterization of comics, but on the situated events and occurrences in which actors are interrelated to each other – for instance, *through comics*. A mediation-focused approach to comics thus raises the question of how mediation takes place between the (human and non-human) actors involved in their production, distribution and reception; which power structures, interaction patterns and interpretative affordances come into play when drawn (often sequential, narrative or multimodal forms of) imagery constitutes the ‘in-between’ of social actors. Such a concept of mediation is strongly connected to a deepened reflection of distributed

mediated and mediating agency ([Jung et al. 2021](#), for comic specifically [Ossa et al. 2022](#)).

Michael Cuntz described such ‘agency’ in his comprehensive survey as the ‘allotment of actions, procedures, developments or modes of operation that make a demonstrable, recognizable plausibly describable difference within any process’ ([2012](#): 28, translation added).

Configurations in which such agency is distributed include not only ‘natural’ persons, but likewise materialities, devices, inscriptions, programmes or institutions. In media studies, terms like ‘assemblages’, ‘networks’ or ‘dispositifs’ have been proposed for these interconnected configurations ([Bartosch 2016](#)), ‘heterogeneous totalit[ies] that potentially include[...] everything imaginable, whether linguistic or non-linguistic: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, policing measures, philosophical tenets, etc. The dispositif itself is the network that can be created between these elements’ ([Agamben 2008](#): 9, translation added). Media-specific roles – such as those of the ‘artist’, the ‘editor’ or the ‘fan’ – are then only generated within and derived from such dispositifs. The complex distribution of comic-specific roles (and respective notions of agency), for instance, entails likewise reviewers, distributors or comic scholars. Mediation thus precedes stable subject positions, as Richard Grusin clarifies,

mediation should be understood not as standing between preformed subjects, objects, actants, or entities but as the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions for the emergence of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world.

([Grusin 2015](#): 129)

Heuristically, one could then draw on an established sub-classification of three dimensions of mediation – and respective forms of mediating and mediated agency. I have proposed this together with [Vanessa Ossa and Jan-Noël Thon \(2022\)](#) alongside a ‘basic model of comic book medialities’ ([Wilde 2021](#)) as: (1) communicative-semiotic, (2) material-technological and (3) conventional-institutional mediation. Such a framework ([Figure 3](#)) could best be understood as a ‘methodological artefact’ in the sense used by Celia [Lury \(2020](#): 28), aiming ‘to transform an

indeterminate situation into a determinate situation’ (Lury 2020: 26): into an epistemological topography comprised of actors and interrelated degrees of agency. I would now like to apply it to Erzähmirkix as a specific ‘site’, to analyse their appearance as quaternary media, their allusions to immediate, situated acts of communicative interventions, to trace how Hermann positions herself quite differently from other authors (and their ‘works’) in a communicative-semiotic, material-technological as well as (conventional-institutional, or here especially) social-cultural sense.

### Dimensions of Mediation

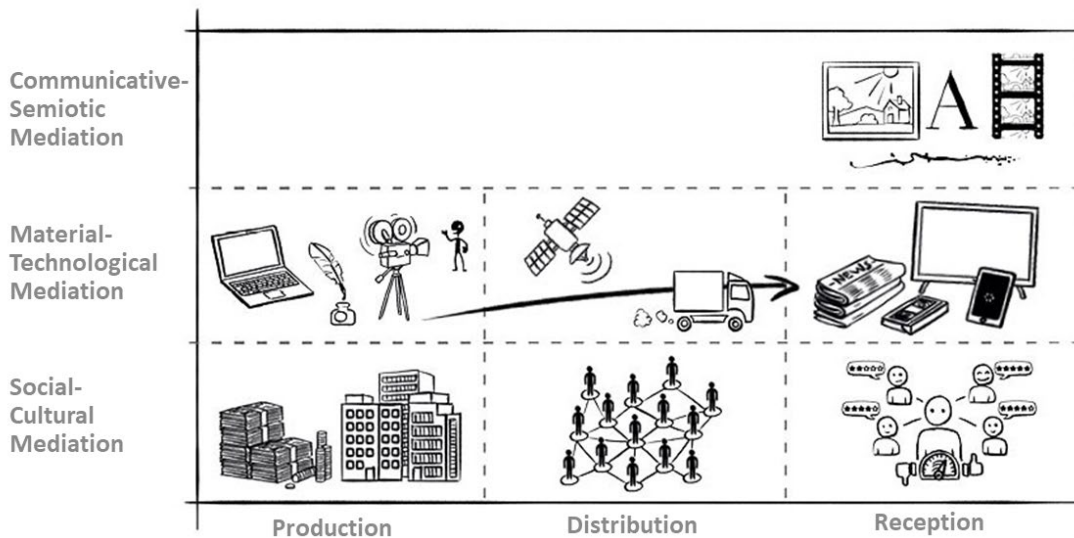


Figure 3: *Analytical Framework Provided by a Theory of Mediation*, diagram by Lukas Wilde and Kilian Wilde, [www.wilde-grafik.com](http://www.wilde-grafik.com).

Hand-drawn diagram grid captioned ‘Dimensions of Mediation’. The first horizontal row is titled ‘Communicative-Semiotic Mediation’, the second ‘Material-Technological Mediation’, the third ‘Social-Cultural Mediation’. The vertical columns are titled ‘Production’, ‘Distribution’ and ‘Reception’. All intersections feature comic book drawings illustrating the respective aspect.

### 3. Material-technological mediation: Interacting through platforms

The digital distribution of webcomics is certainly the feature distinguishing them most saliently from earlier ‘published’ works. Looking at mediation and mediated/mediating agency, there is much more at stake here than merely another delivery channel of an otherwise identical ‘text’. Arguing from a neomaterialist point of view, many scholars speak of an ‘agency of materials’ ([Coole and Frost 2010](#)). This can be linked to discussion of medial ‘affordances’, a term that dates back to psychologist James J. [Gibson \(1979\)](#) but is part of the basic vocabulary of media studies by now: it asks what scopes of action and interaction are opened up (or denied), made likely or unlikely by specific materials, forms and structures over others. Comics books, for instance, were for a long time ephemeral objects, cheaply produced; they thus *afforded* to be cheaply acquired and to be easily produced by individuals (in contrast to films or video games) while still reaching an audience of millions (as some popular webcomics do even nowadays). The affordances of the physical–haptic interaction with a printed book also became an important aspect of comic mediation ([Kasthan 2018](#)). The perhaps most salient transformation of digital comic is hence the shift from ‘analogue’ carrier media to datasets in digital environments. Research on mediation through online platforms and digital interfaces is still a comparatively young but extremely productive field of comic scholarship ([Goodbrey 2017](#)).

The agency of digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram is still insufficiently reflected but can be felt in all areas of comic production, distribution and reception: ‘[p]latforms are best understood as socio-technical assemblages that facilitate different communities, and act as mediators and gatekeepers of content’ ([Lamerichs 2020](#): 213; see also [Gillespie 2018](#)). This has countless consequences even on the formal (communicative-semiotic) dimension of comics. As Anastasia Salter noted in a well-received article, ‘[f]ormal transformation is also a consequence of changing platforms: Instagram lends itself to square comics; Tumblr to narrow, long-form work;

and many platforms support GIF animations and other born-digital approaches to comics art' ([2020](#): n.pag.). Such an influence can be felt even stronger in specialized platforms such as Webtoon or Tapas. More general social networks, too, affect comics on numerous levels through their specific affordances when they become the primary (or even only) outlet for artists. [Charlotte Fabricius \(2022\)](#) has examined this in more detail for the Insta-comics of Lucy Knisley, for example. Something similar could also be observed for Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr, each with its own 'interface regime' ([Seemann 2021](#): 136–38). The interrelation of these channels is also interesting when artists such as Hermann publish on many of them at the same time but addressed at partly different audiences – and not always the same strips across platforms, with quite heterogeneous follow-up communications in the comments. Individual episodes (files) nevertheless often adopt the logic of participatory 'spreadability' ([Jenkins et al. 2013](#)), moving between distinct platforms through reposts of fans.

As far as the distribution of such comics is concerned, the influence of algorithmic variables on visibility and dissemination is particularly difficult to retrace. In general, comics can be seen as pure data sets, which in this respect hardly differ from music files on Spotify or video files on Netflix. 'Personalized advertisements, selling specific data to third-parties, and tracking users are common ways to make a profit from platforms' ([Lamerichs 2020](#): 213). The previously described role distribution between artists and readers is thus completely subordinate from a platform perspective because both have become mere 'resources' for interactions through clicks, likes or other site engagements according to principles of 'two-sided markets' ([Seemann 2021](#): 49–86). This does not make a consideration of the comics circulating there as works or texts superfluous, but it should always be kept in mind when we look at the communicative-semiotic level of mediation: for Facebook, Twitter or Instagram there are, in a very literal technical sense, no artists or readers, there are only users on their sites.

#### 4. Communicative-semiotic mediation: Circumventing text/paratext

Looking then at the communicative-semiotic dimension of mediated or mediating agency, what could be our interest in this regard? Mediation through comics was first examined through a narratological lens. In literary narratology, narrative mediation was indeed long considered one of the basic defining characteristics of narrative texts, identified through the presence of a narrator or a narratorial instance ([Prince 2003](#): 58). The term has also been widely discussed for films, dramas or theatre performances (see [Alber and Fludernik 2011](#) for an overview). Alongside the controversial question ([Thon 2015](#)) of whether one can also speak of ‘pictorial narrators’ in comics where the drawings are concerned, the concept of narrative mediation was here primarily discussed with regard to the trace of the artist’s hand which could, perhaps, perform an own, media-specific form of mediation (see, e.g. [Baetens 2001](#)). The limits of such perspectives for *Erzählmirnix* seem clear, although in quite interesting ways. Not only does an analysis of Hermann’s work focusing on characters, stories or narrators miss the point somehow, *Erzählmirnix* also irritates many other basic conceptualizations of a comics studies derived from film or literature – such as a distinction between ‘text’ and ‘paratext’ or what constitutes her ‘work’ in the first place. Nevertheless, Hermann’s expressions are certainly mediated through cartoonish drawings, a specific rhetorical grammar of panels and beats, scenic affects and emotions – and very ‘comicitious’ ([Beinike 2017](#)) silent panels of reverberating emphasis.

Nevertheless, many of her relentlessly cypasted smileys function more like emojis, reaction images (jpgs or animated gifs that are meant to portray a specific emotion in response to something that has been poszted before), or avatars of the author, extensions of her digital persona that engages in daily conversations with Twitter handles of other webcomic artists (like *Krieg und Freitag*) or people of public interest (such as Rezo or Fridays for Future’s German spokesperson

Luisa Neubauer, etc.). In other words, the smiley faces are not only used within represented dialogues in a diegetic domain (a represented situation) but also across such ‘diegetic boundaries’. They are employed to comment upon tweets of actual people or institutions. One example illustrating this nicely is Hermann’s reaction to a tweet of the Frankfurt Book Fair in which the organizer tried to justify the invitation of publishers from Germany’s far-right, alienating and isolating People of Colour like Jasmina Kuhnke who were repeatedly threatened by audiences of these publishers. Hermann’s reaction ([Figure 4](#)), ‘ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS, I’M ASKING?!’ (‘OB DU MICH VERASCHEN WILLST, FRAGE ICH?????!!!!!!!’ ([@erzählmirnix 2021](#): n.pag.) is attributed to an affect emoji repeatedly employed with the same verbal expression (‘...I’m asking?!’) like a meme. It is clearly the actual author Hermann to whom this outcry can be attributed, not any fictional entity ([Kunz and Wilde 2023](#): 190–92) – no different from the ironic ‘Ah, thank you for clearing that up’ in the text-section of her tweet. This can hardly be described as a metaleptic ‘breach of the fourth wall’ because no ‘barrier of fiction’ is established in the first place. Hermann’s graphic expressions, her ‘comics’, often cannot be distinguished from other communicative statements, blurring the lines between ‘text’ and ‘paratext’, between representation and interaction fundamentally or perhaps the other way round: these tweets highlight the fact that these distinctions are merely effects of certain media forms and their conventionalized semiotics which are not established here.



Figure 4: Employing comic drawings for direct comments on Twitter, @erzaehlmirnix (2021a).

Screenshot of a Twitter Tweet by @erzaehlmirnix, replying to @Book\_Fair, stating ‘A, danke für das Statement’. The tweet then includes a graphic of an exaggerated smiley exclaiming ‘OB DU MICH VERARSCHEN WILLST, FRAGE ICH?????!!!!!!’.

Where Hermann does create represented situations of interacting characters (leftie and rightie in dialogues) as in [Figures 1 and 2](#), most interesting is that *Erzählmirnix* seems to reflect polarized online communication not only through the content of the conversations but also in a formal sense: there are no individualized characters because, ‘in our digital public spheres, the integrity and identity of communicative instances – central anchor points for assessing credibility and truthfulness – have become fundamentally sketchy’ ([Pörksen 2018](#): 35, translation added) where troll accounts or bots are involved more and more frequently. At the same time, however, one always recognizes Hermann’s reduced style. Taken by themselves, her smiley faces are incredibly generic, but combined with some basic ‘comic grammar’ (a sequential panel structure



and attributed verbal texts), they have developed into a highly iconic and recognizable aesthetics. Crucially, it is less connected to any authorial ‘aura’ as a ‘trace of the artist’s hand’. Regardless of the person who shares or reappropriates the strips as well as the context in which they do so, the style instead seems to mark a consistent discourse positioning as left-leaning and progressive. This leads to the third dimension of mediation for the final part of this reflection.

## 5. Social-cultural mediation: Connectives and filter clashes

The social-cultural dimension of mediated or mediating agency is constituted by the institutions, conventionalized practices, political interest groups and (sub)cultures surrounding the production, distribution and reception of comics. Just as cinema is not only a space for the reception of film texts but can be seen as a ‘dispositif’ that produces certain subject positions ([Agamben 2008](#)), so, too, can comics be examined in terms of social structures that are in a sense ‘attached’ to their media aesthetics. In the broadest sense, then, comics can be studied as sites of mediation between members of different cultural spaces ([Peterle 2017](#)), ‘imagined communities’ ([Anderson 1991](#)) sharing or rejecting certain subject and discourse positions. Returning to *Erzählmirnix* one more time, we have already noted that Hermann’s aesthetics serve as easily recognizable markers for specific values. She clearly positions herself against the ‘wordless online ideology of the doctrine that all information were equivalent’ ([Pörksen 2018](#): 35, translation added): the increasing polarizations of digital discourse cannot be overcome through ‘reconciliation’ or by ‘being neutral’. *Erzählmirnix* continuously takes a stance by positioning itself critically, emphatically, perhaps even sometimes polemically. It is no surprise then that its drawings are also often recontextualized by fans sharing similar values – which is easily possible through the semiotic affordances of the Microsoft Paint smileys utterly unattached to a specific ‘trace of the hand’.

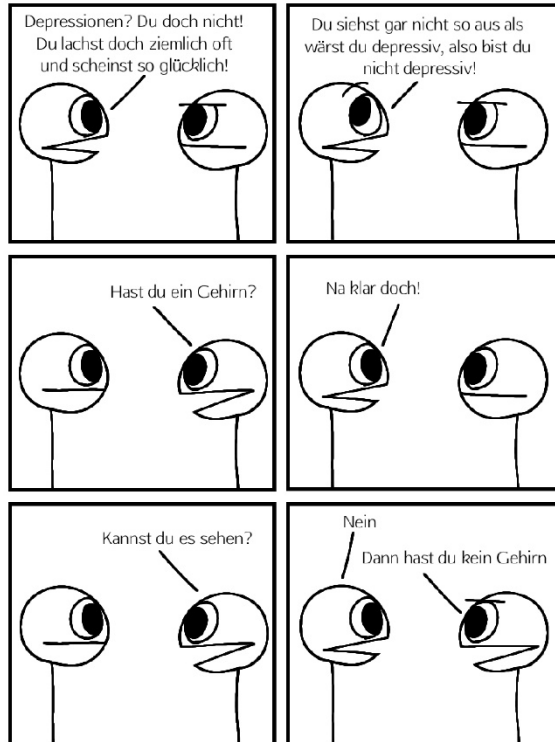


Figure 5: Fanart mimicking Hermann's (graphic as well as rhetorical) style, @dreemurr\_hacki (2021).

A six-panel, black-and-white comic strip, apparently hand-drawn. It shows two smiley faces (leftie and rightie) in conversation. P1: Leftie: 'Depressionen? Du doch nicht! Du lachst doch ziemlich oft und scheinst so glücklich!'; P2: Leftie: 'Du siehst gar nicht so aus als wärst du depressiv, also bist du nicht depressiv!'; P3: Rightie: 'Hast du ein Gehirn?'; P4: Leftie: 'Na klar doch!'; P5: Rightie: "Kannst du es sehen?"; P6: Leftie: „Nein“ Rightie: „Dann hast du kein Gehirn“.

Figure 5 shows a 'Fancomic/Fanart for @erzählmirnix' from the handle @dreemurr\_hacki (identifying as Hacki Dreemurr), mimicking not only Hermann's graphic and rhetorical style but also her recurring stance on the topic of depression. Like in many *Erzählmirnix* strips, 'leftie' belittles the problem while 'rightie' uses the trademark rhetoric of

*reductio ad absurdum* once more. In the tweet text, ‘Hacki’ attributes the ‘art style’ to Hermann’s handle, and the latter immediately commented back with a simple ‘nice!’ (inviting another ‘Thanks!;) I’m so happy that you like it!’). *Erzählmirnix*-comics have also long travelled back into the ‘analogue’ world. Fan-produced stickers with her works can be found on streetlamps and other public places in the German-speaking countries (often documented in photographs posted online again) or on rally signs at Fridays for Future protests where Hermann’s aesthetics also serve as an immediate position marker, even before any words are attributed to them. [Figure 6](#), for instance, shows one of her strips on posters for a counter rally against ‘Schwurbler’ (‘Corona-denier’ demanding the immediate termination of all safety precautions against COVID-19). The strip exposes once again some inherent contradictions blazoned out by a group of ‘critical thinkers’, claiming to be ‘sceptical’ towards all media information while the resolving call-response closes with ‘And what do we believe instead?’ ‘The biggest bullshit, just like that!’

Figure 6: Hermann reposting a tweet showcasing one of her strips on a rally, @erzaehlmirnix (2021b).

Screenshot of a Twitter Tweet by @erzaehlmirnix, stating ‘Mein Comic wurde auf einer Anti-Schubel-Demo eingesetzt (yay) und ich habe nun erfahren, dass von den 150 angemeldeten Autos gerade mal 8 aufgetaucht sind

Nein danke!' poster showcasing a four panel, black-and-white comic strip by Hermann mocking anti-vaxxers.

As a superordinate actor 'comprising' all these recontextualizations we could perhaps name a 'connective' as understood by Bernhard Pörksen, a 'unstable formation of the swarm' ([Pörksen 2018](#): 89, translation added; see also [Bennett and Segerberg 2012](#)). While more durable social groups (or 'collectives') are defined by shared aims, needs or intentions that consolidated their common identity (even if still only imagined as theorized by Anderson), more loosely assembled *connectives* are only temporarily aligned to each other (and quickly dissolved again) through congruent media use – for instance by disseminating a certain meme or circulating a specific webcomic strip ([Wilde 2022](#)). The fact that Hermann's readership *can* be distinguished from opposing connectives rejecting their values and world-views can easily be observed under many of her postings (especially on Facebook) when dozens of right-wing accounts (anti-vaxxers in the years of the pandemic, for instance) likewise unite to leave angry comments. This also shows that her strips *are* managing to leave their own 'left-wing' filter bubbles to become nodal points or catalysts in what [Pörksen \(2018](#): 119) called 'filter clashes', a visible confrontation or even interpenetration between mutually exclusive discourse spheres.

## 6. Summary and conclusions

Just like political cartoons before them, humorous webcomic strips like *Erzählmirnix/Emoticomix* serve as powerful mediators for 'filter clashes' between mutually closed discourse spheres.

Propelled by their high spreadability, they travel even more easily through and across social media platforms (material-technological mediation). Hermann's strips lend themselves especially well to such a 'life of their own' as the simplified aesthetics of Microsoft Paint smileys can be

easily recontextualized and appropriated without much loss of any ‘authorial or artistic aura’ (communicative-semiotic mediation). Their sociocultural and political stance, in contrast, representing a left-leaning, progressive world-view and respective values shared by Hermann’s ‘connective’ communities, remains remarkably stable (social-cultural mediation). In and by these three dimensions of mediation, the strips position themselves not as published digital works (tertiary media or push media), but as more immediate, individually situated acts of communication and interaction (quarternary media or pull media). This is an interesting novel aspect of webcomics far transcending McCloud’s thoughts on their digitalization because he could not anticipate digital platforms and their mediating affordances. While none of the three perspectives on *Erzählmirnix* (nor on its allusion to immediacy) offered here necessarily require the concept of mediation, it allows to discuss especially the interrelation of the communicative-semiotic, the material-technological and the social-cultural dimension of mediating and mediated agency ‘between’ Hermann and her readers within a shared framework.

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