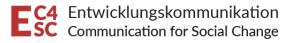*Programmatic paper*

Communication and Public Sphere in Fragile States: A Transformative Research Program Using the Example of Afghanistan

Dr Kefa Hamidi (With input from Dr Hazrat Bahar)

Abstract

The programmatic paper[1] presents an innovative programme at Leipzig University that integrates six exiled scholars from Afghanistan into research, teaching and transfer. The programme focuses on investigating the Afghan media system and public communication spaces in fragile states. The programme is based at the Centre for Development Communication (EC4SC) and pursues participatory and transformative research approaches. It combines theoretical reflections on "cosmopolitan communication studies" with practical promotion of epistemic diversity and transcultural perspectives. The aim is not only to generate knowledge about Afghanistan, but also to contribute to the internationalisation and diversification of communication studies in Germany. The programme is characterised by a close connection between research, teaching, participatory science communication and public dialogue. It represents a model case for the integration of academics from the Global South into the German academic landscape and advocates the sustainable structural promotion of global perspectives in communication research.

1   The programme

In 2023, the Centre for Development Communication - Communication for Social Change (C4SC) at the Institute of Communication and Media Studies at Leipzig University established a programme for six exiled academics that offers them the opportunity to continue their research at Leipzig University as regular academic staff. The participants are academics who have held professorships in Afghanistan in the past, most of whom have also worked as journalists and whose perspectives combine media studies, communication studies, political science, sociology and practical journalism. Their individual projects are doctoral theses or simple research projects. The programme pursues several goals:

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[1] This paper was originally written in German. The English and Persian versions were subsequently produced using AI-based translation tools and were editorially revised. The aim of this multilingual approach is to foster international exchange and make the content accessible to a broader audience.

- Pooling the expertise of researchers in order to analyse the media system and the public in Afghanistan from a communication science perspective and derive options for action.
- Develop models and formats to continue to reach the AFG public.
- To enable the researchers to integrate themselves into the German academic landscape beyond the duration of the project through targeted measures.
- Developing into a contact point for other exiled academics, journalists and activists in order to establish itself as an expert body for the public in Germany.

The programme is integrated into university life in Germany and is divided into three areas: Research, teaching and transfer. The research framework of the programme is the media system and the public sphere in fragile states, in the case of Afghanistan. The change in the media system in Afghanistan after the Taliban took power has undergone a profound transformation. It used to be characterised by liberalism and freedom of expression. But how has this landscape changed? How can the media contribute to promoting participation, dialogue and social change in such a fragile environment?

These are just some of the questions that the project is investigating. The six AFG exile researchers each have their own research focus within the project.

- Development of the media system from the Taliban's first rule to their return to power in 2021.
- Citizen media in Afghanistan with a special focus on the restriction of freedom of expression.
- Social media in Afghanistan and the AFG diaspora and its impact on society.
- Journalism culture in Afghanistan.
- Role of social media in recruiting for extremist groups.
- Gender activism in Afghanistan and role of media platforms in women's protests.

In the area of teaching at Leipzig University, courses in the KMW, Global Studies and Global Mass Communication degree programmes are offered by the exile

scholars. These courses are intended to build on each other thematically and form a three-semester seminar series in which research-oriented teaching and intensive practice transfer are combined.

At the end of the project, an anthology entitled Media and the Public Sphere in Afghanistan will be produced, based on the work on the individual topics, the stimulated academic discourse, networking with other relevant actors, etc., which will open up the topic for Afghanistan from 2001 onwards.

The programme aims to enable the participating scientists to integrate themselves into the German scientific landscape beyond the duration of the project. To this end, the programme offers various workshops and workshops that prepare participants for independent participation. These formats cover aspects of scientific work as well as scientific organisation and science funding in Germany. In addition to the targeted empowerment through these training formats, the intended permanent integration into teaching, science organisation, science communication, etc. also contributes significantly to integration into the local scientific landscape.

2   Background and institutional integration

Institutionally, the programme has been linked to the Centre for Development Communication (EC4SC) at the Institute of Communication and Media Studies at Leipzig University, which was established in 2019. The Centre's central concern is the question of how communication can be used to enable sustainable social change in society or in various groups[2]. The Centre is committed to participatory and transformative research approaches. Special attention is also paid to the internationalisation of research perspectives in the individual projects. When developing research projects, the Centre attaches great importance to the triad of all participatory and transformative approaches from research, teaching and

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[2] On the approaches of the Centre and the research approach of Communication for Social Change, cf:
Hamidi, K., Mielke Möglich, A. Communication for Social Change. Publizistik 66, 565-588 (2021):
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-021-00679-8. - Hamidi K, Mielke Möglich A. Entwicklungskommunikation -
communication for social change: Aufbau und Etablierung eines neuen Schwerpunktes in der deutschen
Kommunikationswissenschaft. Global Media Journal 9 (2019): https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.38717.

transfer[3]. The EC4SC offers the appropriate institutional framework through its many years of activity in participatory communicative research, through its application in numerous contexts and through its comprehensive networking[4]. Transformative science is characterised by its ability not only to observe social change, but also to actively shape it and thereby accelerate change (Schneidewind, 2016). This approach emphasises that scientific knowledge not only serves to describe but also acts as an impetus for social change. The focus is on practical solutions, sustainability and the expected social impact (Jahn et al., 2012). The main aim of this approach is to develop concrete solutions to real social problems by actively involving the people concerned in the research process (Bergmann et al., 2021). This approach encourages collaboration between scientists and non-university stakeholders and places particular emphasis on open dialogue with society and the creation of creative fields of experimentation (Nowotny et al., 2001). In short, the aim of transformative science is to transfer the findings from the laboratory to society and thereby bring about positive change. Participatory research is a unique approach that bridges the gap between scientific research and practical application (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). It is a dynamic and integrative approach that promotes a better understanding between science and practice. Collaboration and joint learning take central stage (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). In participatory research, academic researchers work closely with stakeholders to understand their experiences and knowledge. This approach integrates members of the community into the entire research process, from formulating the research questions to sharing the results (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Ultimately, participatory research aims to democratize research and give a voice to those who are often not heard (Chilisa, 2012). Creating a "safe space" is crucial. Participants must feel comfortable and able to share their thoughts and experiences without fear. Reflection also plays a central role, which includes self-reflection and deep thinking about the research situation and the research process (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Creating a communicative space with open dialogue is essential.

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[3] Cf. For information on the centre's fields of activity, see the website: https://www.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/entwicklungskommunikation/.
[4] Cf. For information on the centre's fields of activity, see the website: https://www.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/entwicklungskommunikation/.

3   Internationalisation

In German communication studies, efforts are being made to diversify and internationalise knowledge production. A central project in this context is the DFG-funded network "Cosmopolitan Communication Studies", which is committed to the comprehensive internationalisation and cosmopolitan orientation of German communication studies. This means recognising and integrating global diversity in knowledge production both in terms of content and space (Richter et al., 2023). The results of the project show that there is a considerable need for "cosmopolitan knowledge production" and a profound internationalisation of teaching and research at German universities. This includes the quantitative measurement and qualitative evaluation of internationally orientated knowledge production, particularly regarding international topics, contexts and comparisons. According to the network, communication studies should look beyond the Eurocentric framework and recognise the international diversity of theoretical perspectives, methods and research subjects. Experiences from societies outside Europe and the USA, particularly in dealing with multi-ethnic or multi-religious diversity, can provide valuable knowledge for transformative developments (Richter et al., 2023). The DFG network "Cosmopolitan Communication Studies" is actively committed to the comprehensive internationalisation and cosmopolitan orientation of German communication studies. This includes the recognition and integration of global diversity, both in terms of content and geography, in the process of knowledge production (Richter et al., 2023, p. 2). Critically, notes that although the term "internationalisation" is frequently used in German communication studies, it is often limited to the provision of English-language courses or the publication of research findings in English-language journals (ibid., p. 5). The desired comprehensive internationalisation requires not only long-term higher education policy measures, but also short- and medium-term projects and programmes that create spaces and opportunities within established structures in which academics from the Global South can conduct research who would otherwise not have the opportunity to do so (Richter et al., 2023, p. 8). In this way, the integration of intercultural and transcultural perspectives, approaches, researchers and projects could be quickly and easily prioritised in all areas of communication

studies research. This approach represents a fundamental shift in thinking, as it promotes international collaboration and adequately recognises cultural diversity in research approaches (ibid., p. 9).

Against this background, a programme was launched at the University of Leipzig to support the integration of people from the Global South into communication studies, open new research perspectives and thus close an existing gap in the discipline. Our project objective also goes beyond the integration of AFG academics into the German academic system. The structural promotion of diversity is of central importance. This is reflected in the fact that the programme is based at Leipzig University and the researchers are employed as academic staff, a unique constellation in communication science. In this role, they will not only conduct research but also develop transfer formats and organise their own courses. They will not only contribute their experience to German communication studies but also enrich it with their own perspectives and topics. This helps to interest and sensitise students to topics that have previously received less attention in communication studies. Bringing different perspectives and life experiences into research enables deeper insights into communication phenomena. The integration of researchers from the Global South broadens the horizons of communication science and promotes a global perspective. Overall, the promotion of diversity and inclusion contributes to a stronger, more relevant and more socially just communication science that is better able to tackle the complex challenges of our time and find solutions.

In terms of content, the programme also deals with a topic and environment that is still completely unexplored in German communication studies: media and public spheres in fragile states[5] using the example of Afghanistan. The thesis guiding the research is that the system change in Afghanistan was also a consequence of the country's fragile media and public sphere structure. The case study of Afghanistan offers the opportunity to gain insights that can be transferred to other, comparable contexts in the future. The aim of the project is to make a visible and significant contribution to the discourse on 20 years of engagement in Afghanistan and, in the best-case scenario, to initiate a development towards the urgently needed paradigm shift in development cooperation. Although

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[5] Cf. the Fragile States Index published annually by the Fund for Peace: https://fragilestatesindex.org/.

Afghanistan has been more of a political than an academic buzzword over the past two decades, it has played only a very limited role, if any, in contextualised knowledge production, let alone communication. This lack of academic contributions was not only limited to citizens; international educational and research institutions also paid too little attention to the country, so that it remained underexposed in communication studies, among other fields. As the research project is being carried out by female researchers from Afghanistan, it also offers them the opportunity to view and analyse the issues from a local perspective. This, in turn, can contribute to the sparse media and communication studies literature on Afghanistan.

Although Afghanistan has attracted a lot of attention, especially in the last two decades (2001-2021), the media system, journalism and communication system have not yet been sufficiently researched. There are sporadic attempts, but they face methodological and conceptual challenges, among others; for example, the study of the Afghan media system requires a novel approach. Given the geographical and political situation of the country, the existing Western-oriented analytical framework of media system analysis may not be suitable for analysing and understanding media and communication in Afghanistan. Moreover, the public sphere in a fragile state has not yet been systematically analysed. To fill this gap, the Centre for Communication for Social Change (EC4SC) at the University of Leipzig has launched a research programme in which local researchers are investigating various aspects of media and communication in fragile states (case study Afghanistan). The topics are a) the media system in a fragile state, b) the use of social media by female activists, c) journalism in Afghanistan, d) new media and YouTube in the post-Taliban era, e) the use of new media by the Taliban before their takeover and f) the spread of extremist organisations (ISIS). Following the intervention of the international community in Afghanistan in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA, there has been a drastic paradigm shift in the media sector, as in many other areas. A relatively free legal basis was created, and the media industry was "generously" supported. This in turn led to an explosion of media and created a relatively favorable environment and public space, but the country remained fragile (FSI, 2023). To explain the research projects in more detail, it should be noted that the analytical framework developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in relation to topic

(a) is mostly applied to analysing media systems. More recently, the Arab Media System (2021) can also be helpful in analysing media systems in the MENA region. However, a combination of the dimensions with a particular focus on fragile statehood could be a possible analytical and postcolonial conceptual approach. This research will address the question of how the media system has evolved. Topic (b) deals with social media and female activism after the collapse of the government. The Taliban have suppressed the media and freedom of expression, and women are their main target group with little voice in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, they continue to advocate for their causes, relying solely on social media. Topic number (c) deals with how Afghan journalists perceive their attitude and performance in the newsroom and how they differ from the world. These are compared with a global Worlds of Journalism (WJS) database. The differences identified will be contextualised. Topic (d) looks at the dramatic rise of YouTubers and the reasons for this; topic (e) examines the Taliban's use of social media before they came to power. At that time, those in power respected people's freedom of expression and media rights. The Taliban were able to use the public space for their own purposes. The final topic examines the structure and patterns of the media used by ISIS to spread its activities and messages.

The programme attempts to initiate a discussion on the topic of "structural change in the mass media public sphere"[6], because, according to the thesis of this contribution, the media in Afghanistan and the way in which they created the public sphere in this country played a significant role in turning the dream of a liberal and democratic media market into a fragmented ethnic group public sphere, which in turn reinforced the fragility of the state structures. This project explains how the promotion of the mass media has contributed to the emergence of parallel public spheres in Afghanistan. It analyses the extent to which different ethnic, religious or cultural groups use(d) different media channels and platforms to disseminate their specific discourses and opinions in a participatory manner, while at the same time these media public spheres have reinforced the fragility of the state.

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[6] Cf. Hamidi K. Transformation of media systems in fragile states using the case of Afghanistan. Global Media Journal 5 (2015): https://www.db-thueringen.de/receive/dbt_mods_00027040.

4   Participatory science communication

The programme is guided by the principles of participation and emphasises participatory science communication as a central component of responsible scientific practice. This is based on the conviction that an understanding of scientific methods and an awareness of the issues and needs of society are crucial to fostering democratic dialogue. The main objective is to promote direct dialogue between the AFG diaspora and the scientific community. Our aim is to explore, understand and change social realities together (Bergold/Thomas, 2012, p. 198). By engaging AFG academics, journalists, politicians and activists, we aim to bring to light important issues and perspectives that have previously been overlooked (Chilisa, 2012, p. 33; Haraway, 1988, p. 583). The discussion about quality criteria for science communication centers on the question of what goals science communication should pursue. A first perspective emphasises that the primary goal is to promote the "public understanding of science". This means closing existing knowledge gaps and presenting science in a positive light. In this context, "good science communication" is understood as communication that conveys comprehensive scientific knowledge to society (Weingart/Voss, 2006, p. 7). In Germany, this understanding was significantly shaped by the so-called PUSH memorandum of 1999, which led to the founding of the "Science in Dialogue" initiative. The underlying idea was that science must communicate proactively in order to be accepted by society (Weingart/Voss, 2006, pp. 5-8). Since the turn of the millennium, however, a different understanding has spread. It sees the task of science communication not only in the transfer of knowledge, but also in the promotion of participation and dialogue between science and society. The aim is to promote "public engagement with science and technology" - in other words, to actively involve citizens in scientific processes and initiate mutual learning processes (Rödder et al., 2012, p. 18). Formats such as citizens' forums, science cafés or participatory research are seen as an expression of this understanding (Weitze/Heckl, 2016, p. 43). A third perspective, which has recently become increasingly important, draws on findings from women's and gender studies and postcolonial theory. It questions the prevailing understanding of science and its epistemological foundations. The relationship between

researchers and their subjects, the epistemic violence of Eurocentric knowledge systems and the implicit assumption of universal knowledge are critically examined (Haraway, 1988, p. 581; Spivak, 1990, p. 121). This perspective advocates a reflexive, power-critical science communication that recognises diverse forms of knowledge and creates new spaces for dialogue-based negotiations (Wissenschaftsrat, 2022, p. 17; Kessler/Scharloth, 2020, p. 122). The realisation that the production of knowledge and research findings is anchored in a specific cultural and social context inevitably leads to a critical examination of power relations and epistemic violence. In this context, Donna Haraway speaks of "situated knowledges", i.e. the idea that knowledge is never objective, but always situated and dependent on the position of the knowledge producer (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). In her work, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also criticizes the colonial and Eurocentric structures that persist in Western knowledge production and warns against the epistemic erasure of subaltern voices (Spivak, 1990, p. 121). The programme therefore places particular emphasis on the need to critically question the process of knowledge production in research and teaching, taking power structures into account. This ties in with decolonial and feminist critique of science, which demands that scientific knowledge should not be understood as universal and objective, but that its conditions of origin, implicit hierarchies and mechanisms of exclusion should be revealed (Mignolo, 2009, p. 162; Harding, 1991, p. 124). The interaction between the concrete realities of people's lives and academic discourses is of particular importance here. The idea of a shared construction of knowledge that integrates both empirical and contextual knowledge is central to participatory and transformative research (Bergold/Thomas, 2012, p. 197). Such an approach endeavors not only to take local knowledge into account, but also to actively integrate it into the research process. The prerequisite for this is supplementing the purely external scientific perspective with the involvement of those directly involved - a principle that is often referred to as the "co-production of knowledge" in the context of participatory research (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 40)

The involvement of AFG exile researchers, exile journalists, activists, etc., who are seen as co-researchers, is a central prerequisite for the participatory research approach, which takes up impulses from practice and at the same time transfers results into practice. The active participation of these stakeholders in the

construction of knowledge should contribute to self-determination and self-efficacy and promote a more inclusive understanding of knowledge that takes different perspectives and experiences into account. In this respect, the programme is not limited to the sum of the participants' academic work but positions itself as a point of contact at the interface between the communication spaces of the public in Germany, the AFG exile community and the public in Afghanistan. In this way, tools for actively stimulating and influencing social change processes are created in addition to pure analyses. The research of the subject matter is not conducted exclusively from an "objectifying" external perspective, but the actors involved in the respective communication spaces are constitutively included in the analysis. As a result, communicative spaces are experienced as dynamic, and the involvement of the participants not only makes it possible to analyse the current state, but also to outline a target state that is advantageous for all participants. In addition, by collecting and mediating the various concerns, ways of changing the communication structures accordingly can be identified. The programme also emphasises the principle of transformation research: we do not limit ourselves to analyzing or describing but work together with the experts on the ground to create both "target knowledge" and "transformation knowledge" (Schneidewind, 2016, p. 85). Our focus is on providing tools that enable sustainable and real change in Afghanistan's media system. The starting point for this is the view that a research structure that is as participatory as possible, i.e. the involvement of all participants in a communicative space, is a primary prerequisite for resolving possible lines of conflict (Bergmann et al., 2021, p. 19) and opens up the prospect of achieving participatory social goals (Nowotny et al., 2001, p. 117). Based on these parameters, the project can also make a significant contribution to broadening the scope of communication studies and related disciplines in Germany and complementing them both thematically (communication for social change) and geographically (Afghanistan, Middle East) and geopolitically (fragile states, global South). Through comprehensive analyses and empirical research, we will gain insights into the ways in which people raise their voices, exchange information and participate in public discourse in such an environment.

5   Networking and community

The programme has developed various forms of networking and the creation of high-profile and participatory formats that go beyond the mere support of research projects and the integration of the scientists involved. After the start of the project, a science communication strategy was developed to reach different target groups within and outside the scientific community. Firstly, we opened various accounts such as LinkedIn, ResearchGate or Academia for our programme and regularly filled them with content by publishing our own publications on the one hand and linking to new publications on the topic on the other. Secondly, for the AFG Diaspora, we decided in favor of the platform X and opened an account there, as this is the best way for us to reach the academic target group from Afghanistan, as well as journalists. Our account now has 700 followers and is growing rapidly. Xspace events are organized there, where participants can take part in live discussions about key aspects of the research project. Every two months, we organise an Xspace discussion round as part of our research project, in which our researchers and guests from the AFG media system take part. These events, with their debates and discussions, attract hundreds of participants, including journalists, activists, politicians, students and other interested parties. In these discussions, the research questions of our project in particular are put up for debate and then discussed and reflected upon by various groups. From the beginning, we have tried to include these reflections in the research process. So far, we have organized several Xspaces in which up to 300 people have taken part live and 3,000 people have listened to the content. The X-Account is also used to educate the general public about research terms in the context of science communication and to explain them in a generally understandable way, e.g. media system, public sphere, transformative research, participatory research, transfer, etc. Thirdly, we have designed a podcast "Mediascape Afghanistan"[7] for the English and German-speaking target groups. So far, eight episodes have been published that address key topics in media and communication research. The first series is based on the empirical results of the

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[7] https://open.spotify.com/show/23tYdUdOQU23d8CNyQ9h2F

participating organization's own research work. The episodes are conceived and realized by the research team and offer insights into key findings and their scientific and social implications. The second series documents discussions held in the context of Twitter Spaces and makes them accessible to in audio format. Both series aim to contribute to the greater internationalisation of media and communication studies in Germany. Further episodes are planned for the course of the year. The podcasts are available via the Spotify platform. Fourthly, a separate digital publication series entitled "Insights into Media and Communication in Afghanistan"[8] has been realized. The online journal is already published on the project website and serves to systematically process and publish research findings from smaller studies conducted by the fellows. Around ten articles have been published in the current year. The series contributes to the visualization of media and communication science perspectives on Afghanistan and at the same time promotes young academics. Fifthly, a three- to four-day summer school entitled "Decolonizing Afghanistan" will be held in Leipzig, to which up to twenty guests from the Afghan diaspora and other relevant actors and organisations will be invited. The focus is on the joint development of a publication with ten literary or essayistic contributions in German or English, which will subsequently appear in book form. The aim is to create a transcultural space for reflection in which different voices from the diaspora can come together and formulate new, decolonial perspectives on Afghanistan. Finally, the "Diaspora Communication Network"[9] was founded. The aim of this network is to create a structured framework for the academic analysis of diaspora communication - with a particular focus on diasporic public spheres in Germany. The aim is not only to analyse the Afghanistan diaspora, but also to reflect on this topic in connection with other diasporic contexts and discourses on a meta-level. The establishment of the network is intended to create a space in which overarching questions can be developed and comparative perspectives opened up. The network promotes interdisciplinary exchange, supports the identification of relevant research topics and enables coordinated collaboration. It serves to pool academic contributions and further establish diaspora communication as an independent and networked field of research. Regular virtual and physical

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[8] https://mps-afg.com/publications/
[9] https://mps-afg.com/transfer/diaspora-network/

meetings are intended to help consolidate existing knowledge, identify gaps in research and initiate joint projects.

6   Conclusion

This established programme focuses on transformative and participatory approaches and integrates international perspectives into the research process. An important transfer of practice manifests itself in a participatory format of science communication. With this step, an important measure for the realisation of the far-reaching internationalisation aimed for by the DFG (German Research Foundation) is being implemented. This internationalisation not only contributes to the enrichment of research but also has a positive impact on teaching. However, it should be noted that such projects are generally dependent on selective third-party funding and the individual commitment of individuals and have not been firmly anchored in structures, at least until now. In order to achieve a sustainable and far-reaching internationalisation and diversification of communication science, it will be crucial that such programmes are not only supported by the universities, but also by science policy. This requires a strong commitment to promoting internationalisation in order to facilitate long-term change in communication studies.

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About Us

The Centre for Communication for Social Change is a research institute affiliated to the Institute for Communication and Media Studies at the University of Leipzig, Germany. The Centre is active in three main areas: research, education and knowledge transfer.

As part of its research programme, the Centre focuses on "Media and Public Sphere in Afghanistan", exploring the dynamics of communication, structures and transformations in the Afghanistan media landscape and its diaspora. In the area of education, the Centre offers seminars and lectures in communication and media studies with a focus on Afghanistan. For knowledge transfer, the Centre organises a variety of programmes including conferences, workshops and interactive spaces for dialogue and exchange of ideas.

Afghanistan Media and Communication Insights

The Afghanistan Media and Communication Insights series is an important part of the research programme. It presents key findings from the Centre's research as well as other prominent studies on media, communication and the public sphere in Afghanistan and its global diaspora.

Link: https://www.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/entwicklungskommunikation

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