

FULL PAPER

Organizational Communication in a Networked Public Sphere

Strategische Organisationskommunikation in einer Netzwerköffentlichkeit

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to provide a conceptual foundation for the examination of the impact of the new public sphere on strategic organizational communication. The paper addresses the following question: how do organizations strategically communicate in the face of the changing public sphere? The argument is made, that organizations adapt to this new environment, but that they also actively shape it. Based on a broad review of literature related to the new structural transformation of the public sphere, a model of a networked public sphere is derived. This model serves as a foundation to formulate propositions for future research on strategic organizational communication under the conditions of a networked public sphere. The emphasis of the paper is on the development of a theoretical framework. However, examples will be included in order to illustrate the assertions. The value of the paper lies in addressing central themes of strategic organizational communication through the lens of the public sphere perspective.

Key words: Organizational communication; Public relations; Public sphere; Social network analysis

Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag fokussiert strategische Organisationskommunikation unter den Bedingungen einer vernetzten Öffentlichkeit. Wie wirkt sich der neue Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit auf die strategische Organisationskommunikation aus? In welcher Form trägt strategische Organisationskommunikation selbst zur Transformation der Öffentlichkeit bei? Öffentlichkeits- und netzwerktheoretische Überlegungen zusammenführend wird das Modell einer Netzwerköffentlichkeit entwickelt. Auf der Grundlage dieses Modells werden Veränderungen der strategischen Organisationskommunikation diskutiert und neue Forschungsfragen aufgeworfen. Damit leistet der Artikel einen Beitrag zur theoretischen Fundierung der strategischen Organisationskommunikation aus dem Blickwinkel der Öffentlichkeitsforschung.

Schlagwörter: Organisationskommunikation; Public Relations; Öffentlichkeit; Soziale Netzwerkanalyse

Many communication scholars will remember the Greenpeace/Brent Spar case. In April 1995, Greenpeace activists occupied the Brent Spar oil storage facility in the North Sea. This action was part of a campaign against the deep sea disposal of oil installations by Shell and other oil companies (Greenpeace, 2007). The Greenpeace campaign, the amplification of the conflict by the news media, and the threat of a consumer boycott eventually prompted Shell to call off the sinking of the Brent Spar. This example inspired many scholars to examine more closely how public opinion was formed during this case and what role the mass media had played (Berens, 2001; Berens & Hagen, 1997; Gehrau, 2009; Hansen, 2000; Johannsen & Vorfelder, 2009; Klaus, 2009; Tsoukas, 1999; Vowe, 2009). Especially the one-sided, top down communication of Shell was subject to criticism (Renn & Löfstedt, 1997). Moreover, scholars interrogated the way Greenpeace pitched the case to the news media and how the media were drawn into the campaign (Klaus, 2009).

In March 2010, fifteen years and many protests later, Greenpeace successfully campaigned again, this time against the Swiss based food corporation Nestlé. Nestlé used palm oil from an Indonesian supplier for the production of the chocolate bar *Kitkat*. In the eyes of its critics, Nestlé threatens the livelihood of orangutans, as the production of palm oil is causing deforestation. Greenpeace launched a viral campaign on video platforms and on social networks sites. The environmentalists published a provocative video on YouTube and encouraged supporters of *Kitkat* on Facebook to change their profile to anti-Nestlé slogans. The corporation's reaction made things worse: Nestlé lobbied to have the video removed from YouTube, citing a copyright complaint; when the YouTube video was launched again, it received more than 1 1/2 million hits. Also, Nestlé tried to stop Facebook "fans" using any altered versions of the brand logo. This led to even more support for the Greenpeace campaign as the corporation offended unwritten laws of the net community.

The conflict ended with another success for Greenpeace as Nestlé quit its collaboration with the Indonesian supplier and promised to produce in a sustainable way (Greenpeace, 2010; Tabacek, 2010). Like in the Brent Spar case, there was a discussion in the aftermath, this time in various blogs. The main subject was the PR disaster of Nestlé but there was also a beginning discussion among Greenpeace supporters on viral campaigning (Lange, 2010).

The two cases shed light on the conflicted relationship between multinational corporations and NGOs. They are examples for the "David and Goliath" effect: while large transnational corporations struggle to gain public trust NGOs in general and Greenpeace in particular are perceived as trustworthy and sympathetic. While the campaigns cannot be compared directly as they address different topics in different socio-political and economic settings, they give cause to reflect on some of our assumptions on public relations and organizational communication research. What do the stories tell about the conditions under which conflicting views were made public? What exactly has changed?

Without doubt, the proliferation of digital information and communication technologies (ICT) altered the communicative environment for all of us as individuals, but also for organizations. What are the consequences for theorizing

about PR and organizational communication? In this paper, I suggest a reconsideration of public relations and strategic organizational communication from a public sphere perspective.

The digital media are a powerful driving force for the transformation of public communication and, in turn, for the way organizations communicate in public. The idea to think about PR from a societal perspective has been raised frequently in recent years (Coombs & Holladay, 2006, 2010, 2010; Heath, 2006; Taylor, 2010; van Ruler & Vercic, 2005). But scholars disagree about the basic conceptual framework; some propose society in general (Heath, 2006), others see the civil society as foundation for a macro-theoretical perspective on PR (Taylor, 2010). This paper suggests to put the concept of the public sphere in the center as the public sphere is constituted by communication, making it a concept which is particularly pertinent to communication studies. The purpose of this paper is to *provide a theoretical framework for examining the implications of the new public sphere for public relations research*. My point of departure is the concept of the “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006; Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006) as this concept stresses the features of the public sphere which are particularly relevant for public relations: the higher visibility of organizations in a network and their strong embeddedness in a plurality of social relationships. The implications of this framework of the networked public sphere will be discussed in relation to a structural, a relational and a spatiotemporal dimension of organizational communication.

The current debate draws on the question whether the internet constitutes a new public sphere, and if so, how this public sphere is connected to the traditional public sphere. Also, opinions differ with regard to the normative potential of the internet; soaring expectations of internet enthusiasts are positioned against concerns of the skeptics. Important as it is to consider the normative consequences of the transformation of the public sphere, there is also a need to discuss the implications from an analytic perspective. From this point of view, it is less decisive to ask whether the internet is a blessing or doom for the public sphere; instead, it is important to focus on the interrelation between the “old” and the “new” public sphere. Accordingly, in this paper I outline that the networked public sphere does not simply correspond to the internet as a new form of public sphere. Instead, it is argued that the transformation of the public sphere is the result of the interplay of virtual networks, enabled by technological possibilities and various types of organizational communication practices. Organizations play a dual role with regard to the constitution and the processing of the networked public sphere: on the one hand, organizations adjust to new developments within their environment; on the other hand, they shape that environment by incorporating new technology-driven forms of communication within their organizational communication repertoires. In order to discuss the role of public relations and organizational communication in the networked public sphere, I draw on the arena model of the public sphere as developed by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991, 1994, 1997). This model will be modified and enhanced based on network theoretical considerations. Finally, the implications of this revised model of the networked public sphere for organizational communication will be discussed, referring to the two Greenpeace examples.

1. Literature review: The (networked) public sphere

The notion of the public sphere is closely connected to theories of democracy. The public sphere's function for democracy is prominently expressed in the idea of the ancient polis. The agora, the market place where citizens came together face-to-face in order to discuss matters of public interest, was at the heart of the Greek polis. This spatial notion of a public sphere provides the blueprint for the classical, representative liberal notion of public sphere (Arendt, 1958) as well as to discursive theories (Benhabib, 1992; Habermas, 1991; see for an overview on models of public sphere Ferree et al., 2002), and it was eventually assigned to the mass media as well (e.g., Curran, 1991). According to the liberal theory of mass media, media coverage is assumed to represent the pluralist voices within a society; much like public opinion was formed in the idealized Greek agora. From the point of view of discursive theory, mediated political communication may facilitate deliberative legitimization processes, but only under the condition of a self-regulating media system and feedback loops from the audience (Habermas, 2006). The discursive concept of the public sphere was also adopted by organizational communication and public relations scholars. In particular, dialogue-oriented and discursive approaches of public relations refer to Habermas' discursive theory, albeit in earlier versions (Burkart, 2007, 2009; Leeper, 1996).

Recently, especially in connection with the emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICT), the public sphere has been conceptualized as a network. A reason for the increasing significance of network-based concepts of the public sphere could be the growing complexity of societies. Networks are supposed to be at the core of this complexity and are regarded as a particularly suitable describing pattern for modern societies (Barney, 2004; Castells, 2001; Van Dijk, 2006). Castells (1996, 1997, 1998, 2001) developed a theory of the information society as a network society whereas the proliferation of information technologies leads to new forms of socialization which eventually transform the whole society into a network. In this networked society the public sphere is organized as a network of communication media (Castells, 2008). The internet enables new forms of collective action especially for social movement organizations. Movements are considered to operate as a "network of networks" constituting a prime example of "leaderless resistance", as they manage to co-ordinate protests and events without central command or a common program (Castells 2001, p. 142). The cyberspace constitutes a realm of interactive, horizontal networks which form an alternative mode of public communication, the so-called "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2007). This mass self-communication is regarded as overlapping and complementing the traditional public communication which is dominated by corporate media and mainstream politics. Network-based concepts of the public sphere are usually accompanied by the idea of a fundamental change of public communication. Benkler (2006) puts it like that: "The change brought about by the networked information environment is deep. It is structural. It goes to the very foundations of how liberal markets and liberal democracies have co-evolved for two centuries." (p. 1)

The literature on the networked public sphere can be roughly categorized in views stressing either the positive or the negative effects of online communication – albeit a purely optimistic point of view is hard to find any longer. For democracy theorists, the most important achievement of the internet is the potential to include all citizens (Brants, 2005; Rasmussen, 2008 for an overview), and the new opportunities online communication offers to political participation and mobilization (Norris, 2000; Sunstein, 2001). More specifically, the improved access to institutions and elite organizations is perceived as enlarging transparency and accountability (Wong & Welch, 2004; Meijer, 2007). This includes also an improved access for individuals to the mainstream media. The possibilities to contact political organizations and media via e-mail, to discuss issues in blogs and chat rooms, may lead to an increasing diversity of opinions (Dahlberg, 2001; Gripsrud, 2009). Some scholars interpret the internet as leading to the formation of a counter public sphere (Engesser & Wimmer, 2009; Milioni, 2009); and they suggest that the model of the two-step-flow of communication is no longer valid (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). Fringe or oppositional organizations are seen to benefit disproportionately from the rise of ICT (Bennett, 2003, Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Bimber, 1998; Voss, 2008). Also, with regard to the impact of ICT on organizations, the hope has been expressed that new organizational structures like flat hierarchies would be established. New types of organizations, namely purely virtual organizations that are able to operate without a physical home base are expected to emerge (Ward & Vedel, 2006).

From a more skeptical point of view, the technological change of the public sphere is seen as a threat to public communication. Especially the fragmentation of issues and publics is regarded as having a negative effect on the political integration of societies, as traditional media outlets, especially quality newspapers, lose their capacity to set the agenda for relevant political issues (Shaw & Hamm, 1997). Next to this, representatives of the so-called normalization thesis of cyberspace argue that existing power relationships are reflected in the online public sphere as well (e.g., Resnick, 1998). The theoretical assumption of a more democratic public debate in the internet is not supported by empirical research: Gerhards & Schäfer (2007) examined the public debate on human genome research in the internet and in print media and did not find significant differences. Rucht, Yang, and Zimmermann (2008) produced similar findings with regard to the discourse on genetically modified food. Schweiger and Weihermüller (2008) combined a search engine based content analysis of websites and surveys in order to compare public opinion in the internet and public opinion as measured by surveys. Their case study on the issue of a smoking ban in restaurants showed that not only corporate and elite actors but also “common people” and journalists had a say in online discourses. However, elite actors were overrepresented. If one assumes an equal distribution of opinions, then corporate views should have been minority views, yet this was not the case. Since the use of online media for campaigning requires time and resources, organizations which are powerful in the off-line world will gradually dominate cyberspace as well. In fact, as Sassen (2006) argued, networked forms of collaboration are not inherently distributive. By comparing two cases, an electronic network in finance and an electronic activ-

ist network, she showed that participation and the distribution of control depended on the types of organizations which are involved in the networks. While the electronic network in finance did not significantly alter the trends towards sharp concentration, the electronic activist network helped in producing a decentralized and transboundary public sphere.

Summing up the literature on networks and the public sphere, we get a mixed picture. On the one hand, the enthusiasts stress the opportunities which a networked public sphere offers to individual citizens as well as to social movement organizations. On the other hand, skeptics point to the fact that existing structures in society will not change profoundly by the proliferation of ICT.

With regard to the question of the impact of a networked public sphere for organizations, the discussion has been confined to only a few aspects. While the normative dimension of online communication has been debated widely, in particular its influence on individual citizens, the impact of a networked public sphere on the organizational level has been considered only marginally, except for social movement organizations. Scholars of public relations and organizational communication focus primarily on the benefits of digital media for organizations (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wright, 2001). An organization-centered view prevails, and the relationships of an organization with its constituencies have been mainly examined using the categories of the situational theory of publics approach (Grunig, 1997) or the stakeholder management literature (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al. 2010). Only rarely, the notions of publics or stakeholders have been connected to the broader concept of the public sphere (Ihlen, 2006; Raupp, 2004). Thus, the literature on public relations and especially on communication management has only recently begun to consider the concept of a *networked* public sphere (as an exception cf. Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010; Coombs, 2010; Pleil, 2010). Most importantly, much of the literature leaves open the question of what exactly constitutes the network: Is the networked public sphere made up of communication channels and media? Or should the public sphere still be seen as a set of relations between social actors? Or between issues? In order to address these gaps, a conception of a networked public sphere will be developed which takes into account the interplay between actors and their communicative links. The arena model of the public sphere (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991) provides the foundation, and this model will be confronted with of social network analysis.

2. The networked public sphere

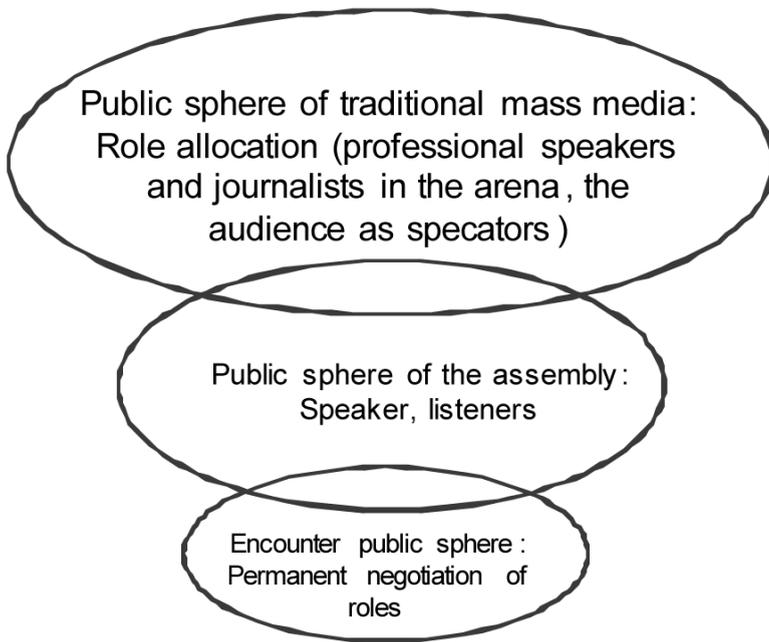
2.1 Starting point: The arena model of the public sphere

The so-called arena model of the public sphere has been developed by the German sociologists Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991; see also Gerhards, 1994, 1997; Gerhards & Rucht, 2000) and discussed widely especially among German speaking communication scholars (e.g., Bentele & Haller, 1997; Donges & Jarren, 1998; Eilders, 2008; Pfetsch, 1998; Raupp, 1999, 2004, 2010; Weißler, 1999). Drawing on Habermas' discourse-model and partly on Luhmann's mirror-model, Gerhards and Neidhardt combine action theory and systems theory, and by doing

so attempt to close the gap between normative and analytical-descriptive perspectives on the public spheres.

Building on the assumption of a functional differentiation within societies, they point to the central position of the political system with respect to all other societal systems. Societal problems and their solutions are attributed to the political system; and the political public sphere – which is described by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991) in socio-cybernetic terms – functions as an intermediary system located between the political system and the citizens. For our discussion, the differentiation between three levels – or arenas – of the public sphere is important. According to the number of participants, the scope, and the degree of differentiation of communication roles, Gerhards and Neidhardt differentiate between the encounter public sphere, the public sphere of assemblies, and the media public sphere:

Figure 1: The arena model: three levels of the public sphere



The level of the public sphere of the mass media is seen to be most influential for modern societies. On this level, the public is numerically the largest, but its options to act are constrained. At the same time, mass communication leads to a professionalization of functional roles. The metaphor “arena” refers to various loci and roles of communication. There are three basic communication roles: the role of the speaker, the intermediaries, and the audience. The speakers (representatives of political and corporate actors) and the professional intermediaries (agencies, editors, journalists) act in the arena. The audience takes place in the

gallery, and its role is confined to listen or not to listen, to buy or not to buy, to turn the receiver on or off (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1991, p. 65).

With the analytic differentiation between different levels and different communication roles, Gerhards and Neidhardt offer a framework for the theoretical *and* empirical examination of phenomena related to the public sphere. But the emergence of online communication asks for this model to be revisited. The levels and the arenas have become more permeable and the roles are now more diverse. To re-conceptualize the arena model, central assumptions of social network theory will be summarized briefly.

2.2 Basic assumptions of social network theory

Social network analysis focuses on the emergence of social structures and the implications those structures have on social actions. The actions of the actors are embedded in a net of social relationships (Granovetter, 1985). Thus, network analysis is interested in relationships and relational data in the first place, and not in attributes of single actors (Knoke & Yang, 2008; Scott, 2007).

Social network analysis sees networks quite different from the way we think of networks in our daily life (Van Dijk, 2006). Normally we associate with a network a non-hierarchical, open, and efficient form of organization. Corporations try to look modern and describe themselves as networks, social movements speak of themselves as networks, thereby stressing the cooperative form of organizing, and the internet has been regarded as the technological infrastructure which enables those networked forms of organization. In contrast, in network research literature a social network first of all is described simply as a structural condition whereby distinct points (nodes) are related to one another by relations (ties). In network based organizational communication research, the nodes are normally individual or corporate actors (Monge & Contractor, 2003). The ties can be differentiated according to their directedness: directed relationships are asymmetrical, like the one-sided transmission of goods or one-sided influence. Non-directed relationships, for example, are the exchange of resources or information. Another network characteristic is the intensity and strength of the ties. Relationships can be fluid and weak, such as single transactions or a short meeting on a conference, or strong, like kinship relations. Also within social network theory, the concept of communication roles has been applied (Friemel, 2008). The assumption is that a role can be inferred by the position of an actor and by the relationships in which the actor is embedded. The role of an opinion leader for example is derived by the existence of many directed ties with many other actors within a network (e.g., Ebermann et al. 2010).

It is important to distinguish social networks from networked forms of communication or information transfer (Friedland et al., 2006). The internet provided a new boost to network analysis in communication studies. Whereas in the past, networks have been examined mainly by means of surveys (Schenk, 1995), more recently also networks of claims or issue networks are studied by means of online-based content-analysis or link analysis (Hepp et al., 2006; Schweiger & Weiermüller, 2008). Because of this work, the general notion of networks is possibly

mistaken to characterize the public sphere in general as a network. When Trenz (2009) rightly argues that the public sphere consists of the participation of individuals and is more than a network, his criticism points to this false understanding of networks as equivalent to the public sphere. Online communication itself does not generate a network public sphere (Beck, 2010); or as Bohmann (2004) puts it: “[T]he internet becomes a public sphere only through agents who engage in reflexive and democratic activity” (p. 140). While there is a growing isomorphism between social networks and computer networks or other technological networks, it is important to maintain the principle distinction between technological and social networks, and based on that distinction, to explore the differences and commonalities as well as the interrelatedness, of online and offline forms of public opinions. Schweiger and Weihermüller (2008), accordingly refer to the internet public sphere as a public forum which comprehends different spheres.

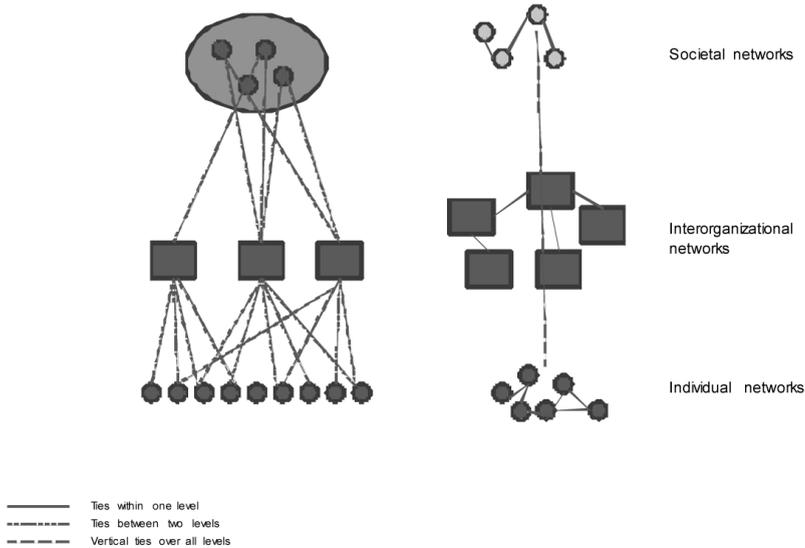
In this paper, social networks as networks of actors are at the center of the argument. These actors are related to each other by social relationships which are constituted by direct or indirect, personal or virtual communication, and the connections can be represented by issues and links. The relationships between actors via a common reference to an issue or via web links demonstrates the different grades of directness of communication relationships. Online communication offers new possibilities for networking, and for empirical communication researchers online communication offers new forms of examining communication relationships.

As a next step, the assumptions of network theory will be applied on the arena model of the public sphere. By doing so neither the internet itself nor society as a whole will be considered as the focal network. Instead, the public sphere will be conceptualized as a social network: social actors are perceived as nodes; the communicative relationships between them are regarded as ties. That means that the emergence and the dynamics of the public sphere are considered as being grounded in communicative actions and relationships between actors.

2.3 A model of the networked public sphere

The network theory-based re-conceptualization of the arena model can be visualized by the following figure (referring to Van Dijk 2006, p. 26):

Figure 2: A networked public sphere



Networks can be identified on each of the three levels of the public sphere:

- (1) On the *individual level* of the encounter public sphere, individual networks emerge from face-to-face interactions, and by the use of analog and digital media. Those interactions can be attributed to the public sphere to the extent that they are public in the sense of generally accessible. This may apply to an encounter in a café, but particularly to a chat or to postings on social network platforms like Facebook. Especially in communications in the so-called Web 2.0 challenge our familiar notions of what is public and what is private.
- (2) The mid-level or *meso-level* is most interesting for our argument. In contrast to individual networks, inter-organizational networks have been examined only rarely in communications research (Taylor et al., 2001). Public relations research focuses on the relationships between organizations and stakeholder groups, but often neglects the fact that stakeholders are organizations, which are in turn embedded in stakeholder relationships. Only recently, stakeholders have become to be seen as interrelated to each other (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heath, 2006; Rowley, 1999; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Instead, the prevailing perspective is organization-centered: one organization is singled out as an object of inquiry, and the relationships of that organization with other seemingly isolated stakeholder groups is examined. In a way, this perspective equals analysis of ego-networks, taking one actor as a point of departure. The next step, i.e., evaluating organizations as embedded in a network of actors, and characterized by network structures themselves, is often missing.
- (3) Finally, on the *societal level*, ties exist between the various social systems. The mutual relations of the different societal subsystems (the political system, the

economic system, the cultural system and so on) are dynamic and can change. In contrast to the original arena model, the political system is no longer seen as automatically placed in an extraordinary position. Instead, it depends on the specific power constellations of the systems (which can be measured as network effects), whether the political system or any other societal system is in the position to influence the other systems. The economization of society indicates a power shift from the political to the economic system in terms of market thinking. The increasing impact of mediatization points to an especially influential role of the media in terms of public attention. First, the network perspective understands the mass media as embedded in wider political, economic and social relationships (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 39). The functions of news media change. The network perspective, as they cannot be regarded as isolated or remote from society any longer. Second, print media are interrelated with digital and audiovisual media and their content eventually converges (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001). Also, the function of the traditional media gradually shifts from gatekeeping to gatewatching (Bruns, 2005; Neuberger & Quandt, 2010). These developments refer to the increased permeability between the different levels of the public sphere.

The concept of the networked public sphere takes into account not only horizontal relationships on the various levels, but also vertical networks between all the three levels. There are ties between two levels, when individuals communicate with organizations, and there are ties stretching all three analytic levels, for example, when a specific relationship between an individual and an organization is covered in a traditional news outlet.

3. Implications for organizational communication research

One might ask whether the conflicts between Greenpeace and the multinationals are a subject of the public sphere at all. After all, we usually limit the public sphere to the social space between the state and the civil society (Brants, 2005). Greenpeace speaks on behalf of the civil society but its addressees are not necessarily governments but corporations. Yet this very fact points to the change of the public sphere: to the extent that the consequences of economic production are no longer limited to the economic system but to society at large, organizations are expected to be socially responsible. This shift indicates a de-differentiation of societal subsystems in the new public sphere (Raupp, 2010).

What follows from the concept of the networked public sphere for research on public relations and strategic organizational communication? In the last part of this paper, the implications will be discussed along three analytical dimensions: a structural dimension (see also Dahlgren, 2005) which relates to the institutional features and the actors' constellations; an interactional dimension which refers to representations and interactions between actors; and a spatiotemporal dimension which points to the relevance of time and space in organizational communication. The two Greenpeace examples illustrate the discussion.

3.1 Implications in the structural dimension, positions and power

The structural dimension focuses on the formal features and scope of action as well as the constellation of actors and their communication roles. Depending on the type of organization, different rules apply with regard to publicity and public accountability. While state actors are subject to specific information and transparency requirements, corporations formally have to publish internal matters mainly for their investors. Publicity requirements are even less rigid for NGOs. At the same time, all organizations are interested in attracting public attention for their concerns, but their possibilities to gain that attention differ. Research so far has concentrated mainly on attributes of organizations to examine and compare their modes of communication.

Considering the two conflicts at the beginning of this article, the visibility of the organizations has changed significantly. With the dissemination of online communication, even purely net-based communication activities may attract such a high awareness that organizations feel compelled to react or even change their behavior. The dependency on the traditional news media decreases, but it disappears not completely, as the Nestlé-case demonstrated, when at a certain point the case was covered by traditional media. The visibility of an organization is not an attribute that the organization possesses but a result of social relations: one becomes visible when others perceive you as such. Public visibility is related to an organization's resources, and is itself a resource.

Drawing on Rethemeyer's (2006) distinction between material-institutional and social-structural resources, the multinational corporations Shell and Nestlé are formally organized, hierarchical organizations which possess many material-institutional resources like employees, plants, technical infrastructure, and financial resources. Greenpeace on the other hand is a more loosely structured organization with a comparatively small number of employed staff members but many volunteers and supporters to whom less formalized ties exist. Yet, Greenpeace has at its disposal many social-structural resources such as symbolic capital (Lin, 2008) in the form of a special positive public image. Greenpeace benefits from the improved capacities for individuals to engage in public conversations and activism in the networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006).

But does this really change the power relationships between the organizations in a structural way? In the contest for public support in the public sphere, Greenpeace may be a powerful player. The campaign of the NGO activated the weak ties of the organization, but it did so only temporarily, resulting in a short term mobilization. So it is an open question to what extent the power constellation between multinational corporations and NGOs change in the long run. Corporations are embedded in a stable network with other corporations, politics, and employees; and many ties of the network are constituted by the exchange of material resources. Media change affects the mode of communication in the public sphere and facilitates the transformation of communication roles. But that change does not imply a structural change in power relations.

3.2 Implications in the relational dimension, dialogue and transparency

In the interactional dimension, modes of representation and the way how actors interact with each other come to the fore. The internet and particularly social media applications are expected to facilitate two-way communication (Grunig, 2009; Hiebert, 2005; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Worley, 2007). Even if organizational communication has not changed fundamentally in spite of new possibilities for dialogue (for empirical evidence see summarizing Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010), the expectations towards more transparency and legitimacy have increased. Christensen and Langer (2009) rightly argue that our common notion of organizational transparency presumes not only a disclosure of all organizational information but also a high degree of self-transparency on the part of the organization – “epistemologically and practically speaking an unattainable goal” (p. 138). From a network perspective legitimacy, like visibility, is not an attribute of an organization but the result of attributions of legitimacy (Hellmann, 2006; Suchman, 1995). The more organizations are embedded in a network of mutual observances, the more transparency and thus legitimacy depend on the perceptions of the other participants in the network. Transparency is no longer an issue which can be provided and managed by a single organization. Instead, transparency becomes a matter of collective sense-making and can be regarded and measured as a network effect.

The example of the two campaigns illustrates how global corporations are critically observed by NGOs who aim at changing corporate behavior towards more sustainability. Both Shell and Nestlé had run sustainability campaigns before they were accused of unethical and harmful behavior. But during and after the Brent Spar case, Royal Dutch Shell chose an approach of responsiveness rather than responsibility (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Nevertheless, corporations manage their relationships strategically by differentiating between stakeholders, and they differentiate between vital and less relevant stakeholder groups. By demonstrating their social responsibility, corporations indicate that they see themselves as accountable to the public in general, and they will be evaluated with respect to this self-claimed responsibility. Information which is tailored for the needs of one stakeholder group becomes more readily accessible by people who are not belonging to that target group. Discrepancies in addressing different target audiences represent a risk; and discrepancies between doing and talking will be much more easily detected. In the relational dimension, higher visibility implies also an increased risk to be scrutinized publicly, and dialogue will be expected more than ever before.

3.3 Implications in the spatiotemporal dimension from routine to crisis communication

The Greenpeace vs. Nestlé story can be read as a textbook example for the assumption that crises nowadays are transboundary in nature (Boin, 2009). A transboundary crisis is characterized by its capacity to cross regional, temporal and systemic boundaries. Especially organizations which act on a global level are

prone to transboundary crises – and likewise are able to campaign on a global level. Greenpeace press officer Daniel Kessler explains why the organization chose Facebook: “Facebook’s become a hotbed for activism. We have offices in 40 countries and many of our offices are participating in this campaign. Each has their own Facebook page. People naturally go to Nestle’s Facebook profile” (cited in Ciarollo, 2010). This quote illustrates not only the transnational outreach of the NGO, but also the fact that in a transnational public sphere political actions still require a local backing. The model of the networked public sphere takes into account the local and temporal interconnections of actors and actions.

For organizational communication these interrelations imply a growing uncertainty of results of actions. Within communication studies, communication under the conditions of uncertainty is a domain of crisis communication research. Crisis situations involve a high degree of uncertainty for organizations which are affected by or cause a crisis, and communication is regarded as a precarious task. By contrast, the literature of routine communication (which is not labeled as such) is dominated by the notion that communication processes are predictable and controllable.

That idea of control is challenged by crisis communication research and also by network theory. Network actors are in a state of permanent communicative uncertainty. The communication of a network actor will affect not only his direct environment but possibly also other remote actors. Crisis communication research emphasizes the problems of decision making in the face of insufficient information, and the problems of internal cooperation and coordination (Coombs, 2007; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). These problems increase significantly in the networked public sphere; communication research should pay more attention to them. “Routine” communication and crisis communication become more and more interlocked. In a networked public sphere, the *routine* mode of communication and the *crisis* mode are just two points on a continuum.

The purpose of this paper was to reflect recent developments in strategic organizational communication from a public sphere perspective. The ongoing transformation of the public sphere by new communication technologies influences and changes strategic organizational communication in different ways. In order to grasp these changes a conceptual model of a networked public sphere has been suggested. This model serves as a heuristic to describe and interpret communication relationships between organizations. It was suggested that a public sphere perspective is helpful in overcoming the organization-centered view, which dominates much of the public relations and organizational communication literature. The linking of network analysis and public sphere theory offers a fruitful framework for further conceptual and empirical research on organizational communication in a changing communication environment.

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