
Why “Public Relations”, why not “Organizational Communication”?

Some comments on the dynamic potential of a research area

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Der vorliegende Aufsatz beleuchtet die unterschiedliche Positionierung der Forschungsfelder Public Relations und Organisationskommunikation in der deutsch- und englischsprachigen Kommunikationswissenschaft. Auch wenn die Bezeichnungen im deutschen Sprachraum zunehmend synonym verwendet werden, kann sich eine wissenschaftliche Annäherung der beiden Bereiche nicht im Austausch der Begrifflichkeiten erschöpfen. Auf der Basis der Weickschen Arbeiten zum Prozess des Organisierens und neuerer systemtheoretischer Ansätze wird ein Kontingenzmodell der Organisationskommunikation entworfen, welches es erlaubt, die bisherigen Grenzen zwischen „interner“ und „externer“ Kommunikation zumindest in theoretischer Hinsicht zu überwinden. Das schließt die Brauchbarkeit einer solchen Differenzierung in der Praxis zwar nicht aus, macht sie aber nicht zum Ausgangspunkt einer kommunikationswissenschaftlichen Analyse von Organisationen.

Introduction

In German Communication Studies, the past decade has witnessed an increase in the use of the term “organizational communication”. Occasionally, it seems to replace the term “public relations” which has been well established in Germany for some decades. The tendency to drop Public Relations as a term can be observed in conferences titles (such as the following: “Organizational Communication and Communication Management” or “Personalization of Organizational Communication”) as well as in university Master programs, such as “Organizational Communication”, “Communication Management”, “Strategic Communication”, all of which indicate that the term “Public Relations” is going to be superseded gradually.

How do we interpret this conceptual change? Does it indicate a significant move towards the research area of Organizational Communication with its long

standing scientific tradition in North America? Is it a reaction to the negative connotation which the term “Public Relations” experiences in public opinion (Bentele and Seidenglanz 2004; Wehmeier 2008)? Or does this use of terminology indicate a significant change towards a more integrative concept of communicative activities of organizations which includes both, “external” and “internal” communication, “Public Relations” and “Organizational Communication”? The aim of this paper is to highlight the conditions under which it is possible to develop such an integrative understanding of Organizational Communication.

The paper begins by briefly reviewing the research field of Organizational Communication as it is established in North American academia. Section 2 then moves on to consider the relation between the research areas of Public Relations and Organizational Communication in German academia. Section 3 includes an intermediate summary of the relation between different research fields and sub-disciplines in Germany and North America. Section 4 goes on to discuss the status of organizational theory in German Communication Studies and in public relations. Section 5 takes a look at organizations and environments from the perspective of new systems theory and from Karl E. Weick’s understanding of organizing. Based on the work of both Niklas Luhmann and Karl E. Weick in section 6 a contingency model will be developed which may help to overcome the separation of the research areas of Organizational Communication and Public Relations and which might also give some new insights to an integrative vision of Organizational Communication. Finally, section 7 discusses the status of Communication Studies for organizational theory and offers possible research questions for communication scientists.

Organizational Communication and Public Relations in North American academia

In the English speaking academic sphere, “Organizational Communication” and “Public Relations” signify two different areas of research. There seems to exist a clear cut separation of themes classified as belonging to “Organizational Communication” and topics applying to the area of “Public Relations”. Whereas Organizational Communication is often said to cover communication processes “inside” organizations, Public Relations focuses on relations an organization maintains with its “environment”, and particularly with its stakeholders. The separation of the two research areas is emphasized by the fact that scientific communities, for example the “International Communication Association” (ICA) identify different divisions for the distinct areas. Moreover, in universities, both disciplines often

find themselves located in different faculties: faculty of Speech Communication versus faculty of Mass Communication/Journalism.

Attempts to structure the field of Organizational communication do not always follow such strict separations. The content analysis of relevant journals in the field conducted, for example, by Wert-Gray et al. (1991) reveals the following subjects as typical for Organizational Communication:

- Organizational climate/culture
- Superior – subordinate communication
- Power, conflict and policy
- Flow of information
- Public organizational communication

About 65% of the research published in scientific journals during the decade 1979-1989 covered these areas. Though the results of such studies always depend on which journals the researchers take into consideration, we can observe a trend towards separating the two areas of research. It seems that during its struggle for identity (see the summary in Tompkins and Wanca-Thibault 2001) Organizational Communication limited itself more and more to communication on the "inside" of organizations. Certainly this separation had been strengthened by the spin-off of Public Relations out of the Organizational Communication division of the International Communication Association (ICA). In comparison with the result of the content analysis conducted by Wert-Gray et al. (1991) the self-description of Organizational Communication as a division of ICA does not include explicitly public organizational communication (ICA Division IV Mission Statement, 2011¹):

We study a variety of multi-level phenomena including: discourse and discursive practices, communication of emotions, leader-follower communication, democratic communicative practices, negotiation and bargaining, group processes and decision making, socialization, power and influence, organizational culture, organizational language and symbolism, communication and conflict, identity and identification, adoption and appropriation of communication technologies, emergence of organizational and inter-organizational networks, and new organizational forms

The several handbooks on Organizational Communication published since the 1980s (for example Jablin et al. 1987; Jablin and Putnam 2001) almost completely omit the external relationships of an organization. Despite such efforts to self-restraint the research field of Organizational Communication is far from being well defined.

1 <http://www.icaheadq.org/sections/secdetinfo.asp?SecCode=DIV04> (august 5th , 2011)

The relation between Public Relations and Organizational Communication in German Communication Research

German Communication Studies is being rooted in *public* communication as the central area of research. Since the 1980s and especially during the 1990s, the discipline grew broader and split into different divisions. Yet, this development did not destroy the unity of the discipline as the divisions were tied together by a common subject: public communication.

One of the divisions calls itself “Public Relations and Organizational Communication”. In spite of the description, the dominant interest of the scientists who constitute this division is *Public Relations* as an area of research. And it is not without reason that this topic developed as the central subject in this division: From an organizational point of view, mass media had already been recognized as a relevant environment for organizations and, additionally, scholars of Communication Studies (Baerns 1985) had drawn the attention of their colleagues to the fact that public relations activities of organizations are a relevant factor in the process of constituting the public. These findings helped Public Relations to develop as a sub-discipline of Communication Studies without changing the main research focus of the discipline. It is not surprising then that the connection between public relation workers and journalists dominated research in public relations for years and produced different models of explanation (Bentele 2005; Theis 1992).

Since Organizational Communication, with its long-standing tradition in North American Communication Research, did not fit in with the discipline in Germany with its exclusive focus on public communication, a clear cut separation between the two areas, Public Relations and Organizational Communication, is hard to find. Organizational communication as a field of research comparable to the situation in US academia had been regarded as irrelevant for Communication Studies in the German speaking part of Europe for a long time.

Notwithstanding this, the situation has been undergoing a change since the 1990s. Over the last 20 years we could observe several commitments by social scientists and linguists to bring the research field of Organizational Communication to the attention of their colleagues (Signitzer 1988; 1995; Theis 1994; Herger 2004; Theis-Berglmair 2003; Hahne 1998; Menz 2000; Menz and Müller 2008). Furthermore, handbooks on Communication Studies published during the 1990s in German speaking Europe increasingly considered Organizational Communication as an evolving field for Communication Research (Bentele et al. 2003), while handbooks on Public Relations nowadays try to incorporate articles on Organizational Communication as well and call for a more integrative view of the field (Zerfass et al. 2008).

Organizational Communication and Public Relations: intermediate results

If we compare the relation between Organizational Communication and public relations in Germany and in the US, we find common features, but also differences. As a common ground we identify a separation of the different research areas in both scientific communities. Due to the fact that the terms public relations and organizational communication sometimes are used synonymously in Germany in recent years, the differences between the two branches of research tend to diminish but in fact still exist. Whereas the public relations division developed out of the organizational communication division in the ICA the respective division of the German communication association includes organizational communication as a term but until now has placed its main emphasis on public relations, that's to say, on "external" communication activities of organizations. "Internal" processes do not come to the attention of the researchers unless the target group can be treated as "internal public".

We find differences between the scientific communities in the way organizational communication and public relations are connected to communications as an academic discipline on the one hand and to organizational theory and research on the other hand. Communication science in the US has a rather broad orientation towards these different forms of communication, something that is apparent from the self-description of the sections of the ICA²:

Despite special interests, we view our field as a coherent discipline in which all different aspects of communication are linked by common processes, structures, theories, and methods.

In this group organizational communication has played an important role since the 1950s. In comparison, German communications is characterized by its interest in public communication. Due to technical innovations in the media of communication, interpersonal communication has received increased attention over the last years. The self-description of the German Association of communication (DGPK³) thus differs slightly from the one mentioned above:

2 http://www.icahdq.org/about_ica/welcome.asp (august 5th 2011)

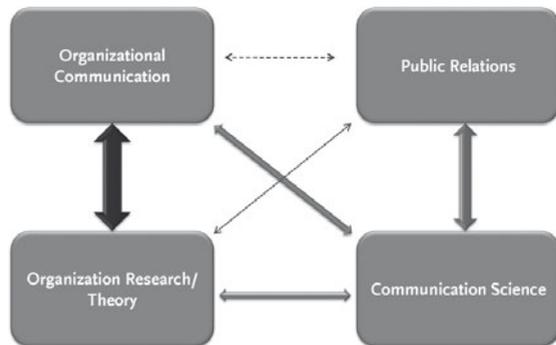
3 DGPK stands for: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft

Communication Science dedicates itself to the social processes, consequences, and significance of the media, public communication, and interpersonal communication.⁴

This self-description still offers more connections to public relations than to organizational communication. Whereas in the US we find a rather strong connection between communications and organizational communication these ties are rather weak in Germany. With respect to organizational communication, public relations, organization research/theory and communications we find different networks of relations in the US and in German speaking Europe (compare fig. 1 and fig. 2).

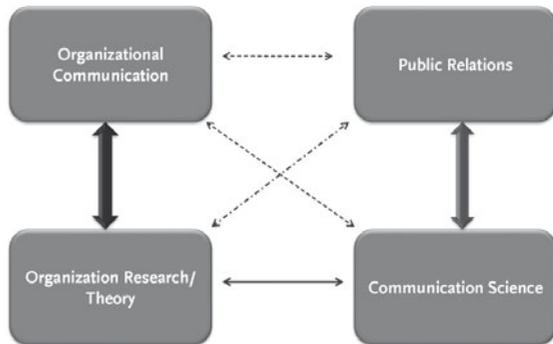
We also recognize a rather strong relationship between organizational research/theory and organizational communication, and a very strong relationship between public relations and communications science (both in Germany and in the US). However, rather weak ties exist between public relations and organizational communication. Because of the loose coupling between German communications and organizational communication we find but a few connections to organizational theory and research. But this is not to say that there are no connections at all.

Fig. 1 Network of relations in US communications



⁴ www.dgpuk.de/index.cfm?id=3376 (august 5th 2011) Translated by ATB. Original: "Die Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft beschäftigt sich mit den sozialen Bedingungen, Folgen und Bedeutungen von medialer, öffentlicher und interpersonalen Kommunikation."

Fig. 2 Network of relations in German communications



The status of organizational theory in German communications and public relations

Scholars of communications focus their attention on the outside of organizations or at best on its borders. Since public communication marks the core interest of the researchers, there seems to be no necessity to look into organizations or to take into account organizational theories – with few exceptions: editorial departments and – more recently – departments of public relations and communication management. Editorial departments play a central role for the construction of the public, therefore, this kind of organization gained some relevance within the discipline in the past. In his famous study of an editorial department Manfred Rühl (1969) shows that decision processes in editorial departments can be characterized as programs for managing environmental complexity. He refers especially to March's and Simon's (1958) work on decision-making and to the early publications of Niklas Luhmann (1970/1976; 1971) on organizations. Besides the fundamental work of Manfred Rühl, which has been continued by scholars like Saxer (1986), Altmepfen (1999) or Blöbaum (2000), little effort has been devoted to integrating organizational theory with the study of communication⁵. Additionally, not every author mentioned above would assign his study to the area of organizational communication.⁶ Instead, most scholars in communications would in-

5 There are certainly other studies in editorial departments as well, but in most cases the research is not based on organization but on action theory (see for example Quandt (2005).

6 Though Manfred Rühl certainly would agree to such an assignment as well as Klaus Dieter Altmepfen probably would do.

interpret their work as a contribution to communicator studies, that is to say studies on journalists or public relations actors and their working conditions.⁷ This holds true also for Howard Nothhaft's (2011) effort to differentiate public relations from communication management with the help of Mintzberg's typology.

In so far as public relations are concerned the majority of research adheres to organizations but not necessarily to organizational theory. Scientists who refer to *the* "organizational perspective" of public relations (in comparison to the social perspective) often have the managerial view in mind (Faulstich 2000). Probably the most frequently cited definition of public relations is the one by Grunig and Hunt. This definition draws the attention of the researcher to the "outside" of the organization: "Public Relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig and Hunt 1984, p. 6). The inside of an organization comes into play only in those cases where an *internal public* is brought up by the researcher.

The strict subdivision between "external" versus "internal" oriented communication processes was supported by early systems theory. Early, that's to say pre-autopoietic, systems theory stresses the idea of organizations "having" an environment. This kind of systems theory so to speak paved the way for a clear cut separation of system and environment, of inside and outside, of organizational communication (= inside) and public relations (= outside) – without reflecting much on the process of *boundary construction*. But modern systems theory today can help us to fulfill this desideratum.

In particular, the theory of social systems, as developed by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1984; 2000), opens up new ways of dealing with boundaries between system and environment. Modern systems theory no longer conceives *environments* as pre-existent or as taken for granted but as a *product of the social system*. Therefore environments have to be regarded as a *construction of the organization*. This is also the reason why we cannot speak of information flowing from the outside to the inside of an organization (and vice versa). Due to their special operation mode, social systems cannot but *inform themselves* instead of being informed by anyone else outside of the organization.

One scholar who stresses this idea very early in his work is Karl E. Weick. Although his work is not recognized as a systems theory, his approach is compatible with modern systems theory.

7 See the summary on communicator studies in Weischenberg (1999) and the discussion of the relevance of organizational theory for communication research in Theis-Berglmair (1999).

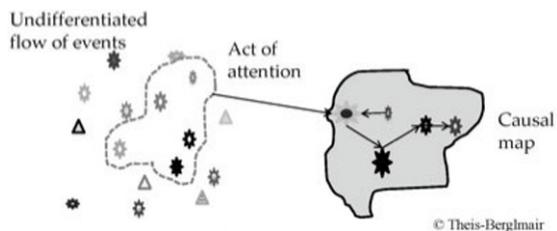
The construction of environments through the process of organizing or what kind of theory we need

What we conceive to be the organization and the environment depends on the theory we use to describe organizations. Weick considers environments to be a result of the process of organizing, not just a fact given, by whatever means. This is not to say that practitioners might regard the difference between inside and outside as a practical way of organizing their communication activities. The practitioner might also work on the assumption of “given” boundaries. Weick writes: “If organizational members discover that inside/outside is a useful punctuation, and impose it, and retain it because it allows them to take reasonable actions, fine” (Weick 1977, p. 274). *But should scholars of organizational communication follow these practical distinctions? Or should we build our arguments on theories which are able to reflect these distinctions?*⁸

Weick’s model of “enactment” emphasizes that organizations “are more active in constructing the environment that impinges on them than is commonly recognized” (ibidem). His concept of sense-making is in line with Luhmann’s (2000) and Baecker’s (1999) notion that organizations are “instruments” that serve to reduce ambiguity, and subsequently to transform ambiguity into some kind of certainty or reliability. Weick offers a possible way of showing how this clarification takes place, in other words: “[...] about how the organization knows what it faces” (Weick 1977, p. 272).

Through the *act of attention* the organization selects an undifferentiated flow of events, a stream of experience for further work and transforms it into a *simple collection of events*. This collection is *punctuated* and brought into “a network of causal consequences”, labeled and retained in a *causal map*.

Fig. 3 Process of enactment



This process of enactment takes place on the *inside* of an organization, though it may remind us of public relations devices such as “monitoring” or “issues manage-

8 This argument holds true also for public relations (see Theis-Berglmair 2005, p. 48).

ment”, devices which it is assumed that they deal with events and trends on the “outside” of an organization. However, to find out what is happening on the outside has, first and foremost, to do with the inside of an organization, especially with the communication processes therein (Weick 1977, p. 278, emphasis added by ATB):

Members act as if they have environments, create the appearance of environments or simulate environments for the sake of getting on with their business. These organizing acts are *acts of invention* rather than acts of discovery, they involve a super-imposed order rather than underlying order, and they are based on the assumption that cognition follows the trail of action.

In other words, “[...] an organization can never know what it thinks or wants until it sees what it does.” (ibid: 279).

Retained enactment means that a *fixed causal map* is imposed on observations. Organizational procedures and working programs are built on enacted environments. Once the decision for a causal map has been taken, *organizations tend to preserve their interpretation of reality*. This world view also has to be presented to organizational members – in many cases via organizational newspapers or other publications. These publications serve as a tool for sense-making: What are we doing and why? Scholars who study organizational newspapers for employees often bemoan the “undemocratic” character of such publications (Bischl 2000). But organizations are not democracies. The function of such organizational media is to present and to reassure the results of retained enactment processes, which are binding for members. Any change, any attempt to alter an organization’s environment, is conceived as a provocation.

A contingency model of organizational communication

The developments in systems theory and the process of organizing as it is described by Karl E. Weick have far reaching consequences for a reconciliation of the differences between Organizational Communication and Public Relations. The adherence to environments and causal maps once experienced as useful leads to concepts of communication which foster the consistency of successful interpretations. It is then no surprise that we find a large body of literature (especially in Public Relations) dealing with corporate identity, integrated communication management or impression management (reputation/image). It seems that the majority of communication activities of organizations are designed to reproduce organizational realities.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-531-18098-4>

Organisationskommunikation und Public Relations
Forschungsparadigmen und neue Perspektiven
Zerfaß, A.; Rademacher, L.; Wehmeier, S. (Hrsg.)
2013, VI, 328 S. 13 Abb., Softcover
ISBN: 978-3-531-18098-4