Expanding the Bridge, Minimizing the Gaps: Public Relations, Organizational Communication, and the Idea That Communication Constitutes Organization

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Public relations (PR) and organizational communication (OC) are two related fields of research in the larger discipline of communication studies; nevertheless, they developed separately. Inspired by Christensen and Cornelissen (2011), who argue that the fields of corporate communication and organizational communication could cross-fertilize if they acknowledged their common ground, this article has a threefold aim: first, to explore the main gaps between PR and OC; second, to identify ways of bridging those gaps through a systematic comparison of the axioms underlying PR and OC, in contrast to Christensen and Cornelissen, who mainly focus on enriching corporate communication with ideas from OC; and third, to argue that the field of German-speaking communication research, which draws to a large extent on holistic social theories (e.g., Habermas, 1984, 1987; Luhmann, 1995; Schimank, 1996), offers the means of bridging PR and OC. We also argue that it is worth exploring potential bridges between PR and OC in German-speaking

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research precisely because in the respective literature these two terms are often used synonymously.

The Gaps: Topic, Epistemology, Methodology, and Virtue

As Theis-Berglmair (see her article in this forum) shows, the disciplinary roots of PR and OC are different. The latter originated in speech communication and interpersonal communication, the former in mass communication. A consequence of this difference is that there are at least four interrelated gaps between these fields, which we will discuss in the following. The first gap concerns differences in topic. Researchers usually regard PR as an organizational function, more precisely, as a managerial process that focuses on how organizations deal communicatively with different stakeholders. This perspective implies a rationalist mindset and perceives PR as a strategic planning process (Wilson, 2001). Although there are some topical overlaps between PR and OC, the latter has much stronger links to organizational theory, culture, leadership, and learning and emphasizes the importance of nonintended, emergent forms of communication (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2007).

The second gap concerns the underlying epistemology. Leading PR approaches like the “excellence theory” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) are based on a realist epistemology (Wehmeier, 2012). Furthermore, many PR works are closely associated with praxeological management studies that advocate conducting research “at the edge of leading praxis” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 258). As an academic subject, PR focuses on supporting professionals with models and tools so that they can be more efficient, effective, and ethical (e.g., Flynn, 2006). By contrast, OC research is mainly rooted in social constructionism (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), critical theory (Deetz, 2001), or synchronizations of both (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). In these traditions, the object of study is seen neither as given nor as something that can be easily modeled and prescribed. Instead, it is regarded as contested terrain that can be described from different perspectives.

The third gap is the difference in methodology. Based on its managerial focus, PR follows three main tenets. First, PR research refers primarily to the quantitative and deductive tradition of mass communication studies focusing on generalizations that are adaptable to specific managerial concerns (Besson, 2008). This focus was contested only recently (Edwards, 2012). Second, in general, the assumptions on which communication management is based are analyzed only indirectly through surveys on the biases and opinions of communication professionals (e.g., Grunig et al., 2002) rather than through the
examination of communication processes. Third, in cases of more qualitative research, PR draws on the tradition of “best practices.” For instance, the *Handbook of PR* (Heath, 2001) lists 16 articles on best practices. Some of the main streams of OC literature, on the other hand, are inductive, explorative, and influenced by interpretive methods that fit the underlying constructivist and critical epistemology. The Montreal School of organizational communication is especially associated with a distinct qualitative methodology that employs narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, and case studies to analyze “the communicative mechanisms that come into play to sustain and reconstruct the organization in and through its daily practices” (Taylor & Van Every, 2011, p. 242).

The fourth gap concerns underlying *virtues*. These refer to the three Aristotelian forms of knowledge, *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*, which Flyvbjerg (2001) used to describe distinct self-understandings in the sciences. In line with that concept, academic PR can be seen as *techne* that legitimates one’s superior standpoint by referring to *episteme*, which strives for universal truth and knowledge; in PR research this view is reflected in the search for objective generalizations. These objective generalizations are used in PR, according to the instrumental logic of *techne*, by being translated into best practices and prescriptive models. By contrast, OC follows the logic neither of *techne* nor of *episteme*. It is the virtue of *phronesis* that seems to play a central role, especially for the Montreal School and scholars promoting the “communication constitutes organizations” (CCO) view (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009). *Phronesis* represents practical, context-sensitive, and thus adaptive wisdom based on practical value-rationality and experience. Obviously, such wisdom is gained through in-depth ethnographic research on actual communication processes rather than through surveys and interviews on best PR practices. Taylor and Van Every (2011), for instance, provide many examples of such in-depth research on communication with relation to internal change and identity-building processes that enrich the researchers’ expertise.

**Identifying Bridges and Closing the Gaps**

We argue that identifying bridges between the two partly isolated fields can open up paths for joint research aiming to meet the current overarching challenges of communication studies. Regarding the research *topic*, recent shifts from a mass-mediated modernity to a computer-based, “next society” (Baeccker, 2007) and their implications for the relations between organizations and stakeholders underline the necessity for greater interdisciplinary exchange between PR and OC. On one hand, PR can benefit from broadening its scope, which traditionally focused on mass-mediated communication,
to encompass OC topics, such as interactive, computer-mediated communication processes (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2004). On the other hand, OC may benefit from expanding its focus to organizations as open systems that are constituted not only by intraorganizational communication but also by a network of relations between organizations and their public sphere, a topic primarily associated with PR (Raupp, 2011).

With respect to epistemology, understanding communication processes both in their strategic as well as their evolutionary dimension could help bridge the differences between the two areas. The CCO perspective’s conceptualization of organization as a communicative site and surface (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) can offer a promising starting point: The prescriptive management epistemology underlying most PR research can help OC scholars to understand better the strategic mindsets that are associated with communication rules, images, and concepts, on which communication management primarily concentrates. On the other hand, the OC perspective could introduce to PR research the idea that organizations as communicative surfaces are not only constantly contested in ongoing communication processes but ought to be fundamentally regarded as the evolutionary result of intertwined internal and external communication processes that constitute the factual site of organizations.

Turning to method, an abductive approach could prove a bridge between OC and PR. Abduction means to observe consequences and to form explanatory hypotheses (to abduce) about the preconditions that led to the consequences (Peirce, 1976) or, to paraphrase Locke, Golden-Biddle, and Feldman (2008), abduction is theorizing through disciplined guessing. Abductive theories tend to be local rather than universal, compared to the general theories or middle-range theories that prevail in PR research. For that reason, they may help scholars understand better specific phenomena in an increasingly fragmented organizational landscape. Furthermore, abductive theories are problem driven, which may help scholars overcome the problems associated with the rather descriptive research tradition in the OC domain.

Abduction could also help bridge the last gap, which concerns virtue. On the basis of the above arguments, a more phronetic approach would benefit both disciplines. Phronetic PR research is likely to concentrate more on gaining knowledge through experience and deep understanding. Rather than limit its scope to the organizational focus, it could investigate systematically the communicative interrelations that are desirable to an organization’s broader relational network. Conversely, a phronetic perspective can help OC research to overcome its disciplinary struggle between claims of neutral description and more critical approaches (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 14ff.), as phronesis is not limited to describing or criticizing specific communication processes of
organizational sensemaking and authority but also gives researchers the opportunity to declare their own ideological standpoint and agenda in the process of interpretation.

**Implicit Attempts in the German-Speaking Community to Bridge Gaps Between OC and PR**

In this last section, we introduce a few examples from German-language research on communication that could help bridge the gaps identified here between PR and OC. As already mentioned, in German-speaking academia there is no distinct field of OC. For that reason, this section offers a selective, rather than a comprehensive overview.

**Topic**

Over the last few years, the label OC has gradually entered PR research in German-speaking academia while its underlying concept has been gaining cautious recognition. For example, the German *Handbook of PR* (Bentele, Romy, & Szyszka, 2005) includes one article on OC (Theis-Berglmair, 2005) and, not long ago, a textbook was published explicitly on the interrelations between (the North American tradition of) OC and PR (Weder, 2009). Besides such explicit indications, there are also implicit signs that PR and OC could be brought together.

One such sign is the “Consensus-Oriented Public Relations” (COPR) approach to planning and evaluating PR communication (Burkart, 2009), which places communication at the heart of PR theory. The COPR approach is based on the theory of communicative action developed by Habermas (1984, 1987), which analyzes the conditions of communicative rationality by examining speech acts guided by the rational conditions for mutual understanding (intelligibility, truth trustworthiness, and legitimacy). The COPR model involves four steps for starting a rational discourse between organizations and stakeholders: (a) giving information about facts, the legitimacy of a specific project, and the organizations involved; (b) engaging in open discussion; (c) employing discourse about the truth of statements, the truthfulness of communicators, and the legitimacy of the project; and (d) producing a situational definition that clarifies the result of the discourse. Burkart points out that full agreement of organizations and stakeholders on all levels will rarely be achieved. Instead, he argues, a common goal would be to detect “rational dissent”, presented as a means of coping with social conflict. Although this
Wehmeier and Winkler

285

theory is normative rather than social constructionist, it provides a bridge between PR and OC through the idea that communication organizes relations between different publics. Furthermore, the theory points at processually constructed zones of shared meaning. Thereby it becomes obvious that communication constitutes continually these two groups as organizational entities as well as the relation between them.

Another bridge might be built by applying Luhmann’s systems theory to PR research. Drawing on the concept of autopoiesis, Szyszka (2004, 2008) sketches an organizational view of PR, depicting organizations as systems that develop and differentiate themselves from other systems mainly through communication. Organizations, as Szyszka argues, not only constitute themselves through communication but also permanently have to differentiate themselves from other organizations through communication. Using techniques such as issues management for sensemaking purposes, communication is seen here as a stabilizer of organizational boundaries and identities. Although this approach does not apply consistently the idea of organizations as communicative entities, its concept of communication is largely compatible with the CCO perspective, where communication plays a fundamental role in constituting shared meaning and thus the organization itself.

Also drawing on systems theory, Preusse, Röttger, and Schmitt (in press) characterize PR as a second-order observation; that is, an observation of (a) how the organization observes its environment and itself and (b) how the organization is observed by the environment. Communication is central to this approach, which assumes that only through communication does the organization see what it does. Without explicitly using the terms site and surface (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), the authors claim that through organizational discourse observations can materialize in the form of organizational self-descriptions like strategy papers or mission statements. In line with this view, but using sociocybernetics as a metatheory, Nothhaft and Wehmeier (2007) argue that, to describe relationships between organizations and stakeholders more adequately, PR research should focus on how communication inevitably shapes relationships rather than employ communication strategically for relationship management.

In a recent article, Löffelholz, Auer, and Schleicher (in press) use Schimank’s social-integrative approach (1996) to theorize the relationship of organization and communication on all three levels of social structure (micro, meso, and macro). Without applying the CCO perspective explicitly, they look at the interplay between written organizational texts as parts of the organizational structure (e.g., rules on how to communicate in a crisis situation)
and the resistance of organizational members to, or their ignorance of, these rules. Organizational change, they further argue, is often initiated by personal communication on the local level.

**Epistemology and Method**

In line with phenomenological sociology (Schütz, 1993), we assume that social structures emerge only from the interaction of interpretive processes and that, therefore, the symbolic dimensions underlying shared processes of sensemaking are central to academic research. In this stream of literature, a number of works in linguistics and communication focus on specific organizational topics. For instance, from a social constructionist standpoint, Menz and Müller (2008) analyze the impact of complex societies on organizations and their members. More specifically, they are interested in how the organization copes with integrating personalities and identities and simultaneously changing itself against the background of a complex and evolving society. Also inspired by social constructionism and phenomenology, Wehmeier and Schultz (2011) develop a sensemaking, institutional, and narrative view of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. Using as a starting point the idea that communication is more than a means of creating ends like legitimacy, reputation, trust, credibility, and competitive advantages, they theorize on how the phenomenon of CSR is communicatively constructed as the organizational surface and how it is translated by different actors in the process of turning into the site. Thus, implicitly, this approach has the potential to build a bridge between functionalist PR research on CSR on one hand and the symbolic dimensions of meaning production in OC on the other hand.

**Virtue**

By gaining deep understanding and experience, researchers are able to emancipate themselves from organizational goals and pose questions that Flyvbjerg (2001) relates to phronetic research: “Where are we going? Is this development desirable? Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? What, if anything, should we do about it?” (p. 60). We argue that these questions are important for both PR and OC, as they have normative potential and are not limited to mere analytic constructionism. The normative lens of phronetic science may be unusual in the CCO perspective. However, it is not unusual in the German-speaking academic communication community and in the critical tradition of OC (Deetz, 2001). We argue that, because of its in-depth methodology and the expertise it allows the researcher to gain
through its application, the CCO perspective has far more phronetic potential than most traditional PR approaches. By connecting PR to holistic social theories and to questions of communication and society, some of the approaches developed in German-speaking academia have the potential to build a bridge between PR, OC, and phronetic science. Burkart’s (2009) COPR model, for example, can easily be connected to phronetic questions, as it fosters both a deep, situational understanding of communication processes that not only generate organizational dissent or consent but also gives guidance on how to decide and proceed for the collective good. To some extent, systems-theoretical and institutional approaches to PR theory also have the potential to answer these questions in our view. Ronneberger and Rühl (1992), for instance, argue (however debatably) that the function of PR as a social system is to foster public interests (in German: *Gemeinwohl*). Finally, Kussin (2006) assumes that the main function of PR is to build an organizational identity through the interplay of organizational self-description and the public deconstruction of that self-description. Both approaches can be applied to questions of power and norms in specific communication situations. Connecting OC and PR to the virtue of phronesis, however, does not mean that PR should be detached from *techne*. As an applied field of research, PR will always have its stakes also in building models for organizational praxis. However, only the virtue of *phronesis* is able to go beyond this limited approach and to connect PR to OC and to questions of values and norms.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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