Public relations and the new institutionalism: In search of a theoretical framework

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Abstract
The aim of this conceptual article is to study a possible dual relationship between public relations and the new institutionalism. How can neo-institutional organizational theory contribute to public relations research, including answering the question: How is public relations (corporate communication or strategic communication) institutionalized in private and public organizations? And how, vice versa, can public relations contribute to the neo-institutional study of organizations, including answering the question: How does public relations institutionalize? In the first part of the article, a short up-to-date précis of the new institutionalism is given demonstrating how this theoretical framework within organizational sociology has developed through various stages and in various directions. The focus is on the shift towards a more complex and interactive understanding of how and why organizations adopt institutionalized norms. In the second part of the article, the new interest in rhetorical, discursive and communicative aspects among neo-institutional scholars is discussed with special reference to Lammers’s theory of institutional messages. An outline of a new theory about how public relations institutionalizes is presented. Each of the two parts of the article ends with a set of research questions to be addressed by future cross-disciplinary research in public relations and neo-institutional organizational theory.

Keywords
Communication, neo-institutional theory, organization, public relations, research agenda

Introduction
For the last decade or so, public relations research has opened up to introducing new theoretical approaches, models and concepts belonging to other disciplines within the
social sciences. An excellent manifestation of this new openness is the special issue of *Public Relations Review* on ‘Public Relations and Social Theory’, published in 2007 and later turned into a book (cf. Ihlen et al., 2009). These two publications highlight a series of ‘grand theorists’ (Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, etc.) and their ‘grand theories’, demonstrating how these new theories can contribute to the study of public relations. However, one important social theory is conspicuous by its absence in both publications: the new institutionalism in organizational sociology.

The aim of this conceptual article is twofold. First, we intend to demonstrate how neo-institutional organizational theory – in its most developed form – can serve as a useful theoretical framework for public relations research. This applies in particular to the empirical studies of the institutionalization of public relations (corporate communication or strategic communication) in private and public organizations that have been conducted since the late 1990s (e.g. the Corporate Communication Practices & Trends surveys conducted by CCI, the Generally Accepted Practices surveys conducted by the Strategic Public Relations Center, and the European Communication Monitor surveys conducted by EUPRERA and partners). These mostly quantitative studies have all contributed with an important body of knowledge about how the various disciplines or fields of practice within public relations (consumer communication, internal communication, crisis communication, CSR and sustainability, etc.) have developed over time. However, many of these studies do not seem to be based on a proper theoretical framework allowing us to describe and explain what is actually going on, when public relations becomes ‘infused with value’ in specific types of organizations and organizational fields.

Second, we also intend to show how public relations itself plays a key role in the processes of institutionalization examined by neo-institutional organizational theory. Early neo-institutional theory was based on a very simple communication model conceiving communication as a linear process of diffusion where the institutional context is viewed as the ‘sender’ and the organizations as the ‘receiver’. However, in recent years, neo-institutional scholars have become more and more aware of the rhetorical, discursive and/or communicative aspects of institutionalization (cf. Green, 2004; Suddaby, 2010; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2008). We claim that public relations research can contribute to the further development of the new institutionalism by its study and approach to several of these aspects.

**From neo-institutional organizational theory to public relations**


Neo-institutional theory has historical roots reaching back to, among others, Philip Selznick and his institutional analysis of organizations (Scott, 2008: 21–23). Selznick defines institutionalization as a process that happens to an organization over time. To institutionalize is to ‘infuse with value’ beyond the technical requirements of the task at
hand’ (Selznick, 1957: 16–17). Since the mid-1980s, neo-institutional theory has developed into one of the most important organizational theories (Greenwood et al., 2008: 2). However, so far, only very few communication scholars have applied the theory in their research (cf. Frandsen and Johansen, 2009, 2011, 2012; Grandien and Johansson, 2012; Lammers, 2003, 2009, 2011; Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Sandhu, 2009, 2012; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

Neo-institutional theory can be described as a theory about the relationship between organizations and their social environment, and about how this environment in the shape of institutions penetrates, constrains and changes the organizations. Scott (2008: 48) defines institutions in the following way: ‘Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life.’

Behind this definition lies a theory of the three pillars of institutions: (1) the regulative pillar where focus is on how institutions constrain and regularize the behavior of organizations by setting up laws and rules, and by introducing monitoring and sanctioning activities; (2) the normative pillar where emphasis is placed on normative rules introducing a prescriptive, evaluative or obligatory dimension into the life of organizations; and (3) the cultural-cognitive pillar focusing on shared conceptions of reality and the frames through which meaning is made (for an overview, see Scott, 2008).

Neo-institutional theory rejects the idea of formal organizations as rational and effective instruments for achieving specific goals (decisions, structural design, innovation, products, profit, etc.). From such an instrumentalist perspective, the planned change of an organization is viewed as a rational and effective solution to be implemented, as a response, after the organization (top management) has identified an objective problem with a solution already in existence.

Neo-institutional theory, on the contrary, views organizations as actors who are not only searching for effectiveness, but who are also, to an equally high extent, driven by a need for legitimacy (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). Organizations operate in institutional contexts where they are confronted with ‘organizational recipes’, that is, socially constructed norms for how an organization at all times must be led and/or structured. Each of the three pillars of institutions presented above provides a basis for legitimacy. From this symbolic perspective, the relationship between problem and solution is turned upside down if we compare with the instrumentalist perspective: First the organization becomes aware of a popular ‘solution’ that is becoming more and more dominant within a specific organizational field, and then the organization experiences that it suffers from a problem that has to be solved (Røvik, 1998: 39).

Neo-institutional theory has developed through various stages and in various directions. Early neo-institutional research is characterized by the fact that organizations to a large extent are seen as the passive receivers of institutionalized norms, which are adopted ceremonially and in a decoupled form (cf. the concepts of myth, ceremony and decoupling in Meyer and Rowan, 1977), and which are diffused to all the organizations within one or more organizational fields (cf. the theory of institutional isomorphism and homogeneity in DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Early neo-institutional research is first of all interested in the study of the formally decided adoption of institutionally prescribed structures and practices in organizations; this adoption of ‘organizational recipes’
(representations of practices) is examined by applying quantitative surveys in large populations of organizations. Early neo-institutional scholars also pay lesser attention to the processual aspects of institutionalization, that is, what happens before and/or after an organization has formally adopted a ‘recipe’.

More recent neo-institutional research is characterized by the fact that organizations are ascribed a far more active role (cf. the concept of institutional entrepreneurship in DiMaggio, 1988) (re)acting strategically in various ways (cf. the concept of strategic response in Oliver, 1991). The so-called Scandinavian tradition (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009) has contributed substantially to this new agentic understanding of institutions and organizations. It applies a social constructivist approach that doesn’t treat institutionalized norms as ‘out there’, but as interpreted and reformulated during the process of adoption in accordance with local organizational contexts. Thus, the Scandinavian tradition emphasizes heterogeneity focusing on the processual aspects of institutionalization; especially inside organizations, that is, what happens to an ‘institutional recipe’ after it has been adopted? How is it contextualized? Is it just reproduced as such? Or is it modified by the organization (Røvik, 2007: 293–318)? These aspects are examined using qualitative case studies rather than large quantitative surveys (Røvik, 2007: 37-40).

Schneiberg and Clemens (2006: 212) summarize the development of neo-institutional theory in the following way: ‘Acknowledging heterogeneity challenges conventional images of causality and pushes institutional analysis away from strong forms of structural determinism to a much greater emphasis on agency, conflict, contingency and process.’

The most recent developments within neo-institutional theory seem to confirm this new understanding. Thomas Lawrence and Roy Suddaby have introduced the concept of institutional work defined as ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 215; see also Lawrence et al., 2009). Other scholars such as Patricia Thornton, William Ocasio and Michael Lounsbury (Thornton et al., 2009) have tried to re-promote the concept of institutional logics originally coined by Friedland and Alford (1991). In an attempt to bring the influences of society back into institutional analysis, they define institutional logic as ‘the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality’ (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999: 804; see also Thornton and Ocasio, 2008).

The development of neo-institutional theory towards a new understanding of agency, organizations, and society is also reflected in the way neo-institutional scholars view communication today. Early neo-institutional theory was not very explicit about its understanding of communication, but perceived the process of institutionalization as a process of diffusion, that is, a linear and sequential process where the institutional context is viewed as the ‘sender’ and the organizations as the ‘receiver’; and where the carriers of the ‘messages’ have no impact on the reception of the content (a transmission model).

More recent neo-institutional research, especially in the Scandinavian tradition, has a much more sophisticated understanding of communication. Many of the Scandinavian scholars are in particular inspired by the sociology of translation and the actor–network
theory invented by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (Greenwood et al., 2008: 17). Where diffusion is based on a transmission view of communication, translation is based on a view of communication as a complex and dynamic process where organizations are no longer the passive receivers of new regulations, norms, values, and cultural-cognitive beliefs; an approach that is implicit in the idea of institutional isomorphism (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). On the contrary, organizations are viewed as active contributors to the process of institutionalization. They interpret and reformulate the institutions they ‘receive’ making interventions in accordance with their own local organizational context; an approach that is related to the theory of institutional work and its focus on action (cf. above).

Scott summarizes the shift in neo-institutional communication theory in the following way:

Early research tended to view diffusion as a rather mechanical process: the movement of technologies, models and ideas from one place to another. Attention to the intermediary role of carriers, with the recognition that the mode of transmission affects the message transmitted, has helped to correct this problem. … Even more important, there is increasing recognition that the end-user also alters the innovation, sometimes in small and other times in major ways. Institutional effects are not one-sided and determinant, but multifaceted and related to a nonergodic world. (Scott, 2008: 133)

The discipline of public relations has experienced a similar development in its understanding of communication: a movement from a simple functionalist perspective towards a co-creational perspective (Botan and Taylor, 2004) with all due respect to differences in theory and methodology.

What would a study informed by neo-institutional theory look like?

How can neo-institutional organizational theory contribute to public relations research? The answer is: in many aspects. As mentioned in the introduction, the new institutionalism can, for example, serve as a useful theoretical framework for many of the empirical studies of the institutionalization of public relations in private and public organizations that have been conducted recently. We will briefly present three of the most important of these studies; following this, we will show what a study of public relations, informed by neo-institutional theory, might look like and how it can add a new perspective to previous research.

Corporate Communication Practices and Trends

The first of the three empirical studies is conducted by Corporate Communication International (CCI), Baruch College, City University of New York (CUNY). The surveys are carried out among Fortune 1000 companies in the USA. The first survey was conducted in 1999, and since then the survey has been repeated on a regular basis (most recently in 2011). The American study has been supplemented by a series of benchmarks studies in China, Denmark, Norway and South Africa. In 1999, the goals of the CCI studies were
presented in the following way: ‘Goals of the study: Describe the current state of the art in Fortune 1000 companies; find out the responsibilities of corporate communication professionals; determine what they do; determine how the corporate communication is structured; create a benchmark for further study’ (www.corporatecomm.org).

### The Generally Accepted Practices Surveys

The second empirical study is conducted by Strategic Public Relations Center (SPRC), USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. The surveys are carried out among almost 5000 public relations professionals working in private and public organizations in the USA. The first survey was conducted in 2002, and since then the survey has been repeated several times. In 2002, the goals of the Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices (PR GAPs) studies were presented in the following way: ‘The goals of the study were to: Ascertain current Generally Accepted Practices, or GAPs, for PR; explore “Best Practices”, for instance, which types of organizational structures, staffing levels, budgets, work environments and functions are common to the most successful PR organizations; determine how organizations organize, staff, fund, utilize and perceive the value of their in-house PR departments …’ (annenberg.usc.edu/CentersandPrograms/ResearchCenters/SPRC/PrevGAP.aspx).

### The European Communication Monitor

The third and most recent of the three empirical studies is conducted by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) in collaboration with the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and the Communication Director magazine. The surveys are carried out among private companies, public organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and public relations agencies in more than 40 European countries. The first survey was conducted in 2007, and since then the survey has been repeated every year (most recently in 2012). In 2007, the aim of the European Communication Monitor (ECM) was formulated in the following way: ‘Aim of the research: monitoring trends in communication management regarding strategic issues, fields of practice, instruments and resources; to analyze the changing framework for public relations driven by the European integration; to evaluate topics like addressing young people, innovation, trust and evaluation’ (www.communicationmonitor.eu).

As it appears from the presentation made above, the CCI studies, the PR GAP studies and the ECM differ from each other in many aspects. There are important differences concerning the aim of the surveys, their target groups, terminology, number of respondents, type of organizations, participating countries and the possibility of conducting comparative studies across different countries. However, there are also certain similarities. So far, for example, the three studies have all been conducted as quantitative surveys.

Concerning the theoretical framework of the studies, neither the CCI studies, nor the PR GAP studies have made an explicit account of such a framework (cf. Goodman, 2006). The European Communication Monitor is in fact the only study that has defined
a theoretical framework. In the reports published in 2009–11 (but not in the reports from 2007–08), a ‘research framework’ is presented consisting of five (sets of) variables: (a) Person (Communication Professional) (demographics, job status, education, professional perception), (b) Organization (structure, culture, country), (c) Situation (present), (d) Perception (future), and (e) Position (cf. Zerfass et al., 2011). In the journal articles published in 2009 and 2010 by the ECM researchers, a theoretical framework, clearly inspired by neo-institutional organizational theory, is presented more in detail (cf. among others Moreno et al., 2010 and Tench et al., 2009).

There is no doubt that the ongoing empirical studies presented above have contributed with important insights concerning the institutionalization of public relations, enabling us to follow trends over time and to conduct comparative analyses across types of organizations and across countries. However, the theoretical framework of these studies can still be improved: either by formulating the theoretical framework in a more explicit way (the CCI studies and the PR GAP studies), or by improving an already existing theoretical framework (the ECM studies).

Let us now illustrate what a study of public relations, informed by neo-institutional organizational theory, might look like. First of all, neo-institutional theory can help us to shed new light on some of the concepts often used by public relations scholars when conducting a survey. This applies in particular to concepts such as the ‘current state of the art’ and ‘benchmark’ (CCI), ‘Generally Accepted Practices’ and ‘best practice’ (PR GAP) and ‘trends’ (ECM). Two of these concepts (‘benchmark’ and ‘best practice’) are themselves the result of a process of institutionalization (cf. Champ, 1989; Røvik, 1998). All these concepts are based on the assumption that it is possible to identify short- or long-term developments (‘state of the art’ and ‘trend’); that there is consensus about certain public relations practices (‘Generally Accepted Practices’); and that some organizations are more advanced in their practice of public relations than others (‘best practice’) and therefore deserve to be imitated (‘benchmark’). In general, neo-institutional scholars would analyze this as a symbolic process of institutionalization driven by isomorphism and a search for legitimacy, and not as a set of new instruments that are considered more rational and effective than the ones used before.

Second, neo-institutional theory can help us to formulate other types of questions in our study of public relations. In order to demonstrate this we will use the organization of public relations as a function in private and public organizations (the choice of a specific organizational design) as an example.

The traditional approach would prefer to conduct a quantitative survey in a large population of organizations. The questionnaire would contain the question: How is public relations organized as a function in your organization? Followed by a series of possible answers: (1) A centralized design: an autonomous communication department (vertical design); (2) Together with other organizational functions in the organization, e.g. marketing or HR (horizontal design); (3) Individual communication professionals or smaller teams of professionals who do not belong to a specific department in the organization; and (4) Other type of organization.

The neo-institutional approach would conduct a case study. A group of organizational members (e.g. the CEO, the chief communication officer, the marketing director, the HR director) would be interviewed and asked to answer questions such as:
From where did you get the organizational idea about a specific organization (in this case: a centralized communication department) of the public relations function? Did you invent the idea yourself? Have you used a specific conceptual literature (Røvik, 1998)? Have you participated in specific development arenas (conferences, seminars, or courses organized by consultants, etc.) (Røvik, 1998)? And who brought the idea home from these arenas?

How has this organizational idea been interpreted inside the organization (cf. the concept of institutional work)? How has it been contextualized or translated to the new local organizational context (private and public organizations)?

Which kind of history has this organizational idea experienced after it was adopted by the organization? Has the idea been adopted, but without any practical implementation? Has it gone through any changes (e.g. mergers with other functions)? If yes, why? And do you see any sign of a process of de-institutionalization?

A research agenda

We will end the first part of this article by presenting a research agenda for future cross-disciplinary research in public relations and neo-institutional theory. We assume that public relations can be defined as an ‘organizational recipe’ consisting of a complex set of institutionalized norms for how organizations should be led and structured concerning public relations as an organizational practice. We also assume that this complex set of institutionalized norms include the following aspects: (1) type of management and leadership (e.g. various types of communication management); (2) the structural design of the organization (e.g. various types of communication departments, autonomous or merged with other organizational practices such as marketing or human resources); (3) information and communication technology (e.g. the new social media); and (4) various disciplines or fields of practice.

Based on these two assumptions, we claim that neo-institutional organizational theory – in its most developed form (cf. above) – can serve as a useful theoretical framework for the empirical study of how public relations has been institutionalized over time in private and public organizations, and that it can be instrumental in helping us to answer the following set of research questions:

- How does a process of institutionalization typically unfold when it comes to public relations? Is it possible to identify specific stages (including the stage of de-institutionalization)?
- From where do organizations get the initial inspiration for institutionalizing public relations? Where are the ‘development arenas’ or the ‘conceptual literature’ where they are confronted with the institutionalized norms?
- How homogeneous or heterogeneous is the process – and the result of the process – within the individual (private or public) organizational field and across organizational fields?
- To what extent does the individual organization interpret, adapt or even invent the institutionalized norms in accordance with its local organizational context?
• Which kind of legitimacy does an organization obtain when institutionalizing public relations, and which kind of stakeholders confers this legitimacy?

Finally, concerning methodology, we claim that the research agenda presented above cannot be accomplished without applying a multi-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative research designs and techniques (surveys, case studies, organizational ethnography, etc.). The CCI studies, the PR GAP studies as well as the ECM are all based on a quantitative research design.

From public relations to neo-institutional organizational theory

In the first part of this article, we raised the question: How can neo-institutional organizational theory contribute to public relations research? We demonstrated that neo-institutional theory can serve as a useful theoretical framework for many of the empirical studies of the institutionalization of public relations in private and public organizations that have been conducted recently. In the second part of the article, the perspective will be reversed when we bring up the question: How can public relations (corporate communication or strategic communication) contribute to neo-institutional research?

Before we continue, let us try to make clear what we are talking about. We propose a simple distinction between three different perspectives (Frandsen and Johansen, 2012). In the first perspective, we are interested in studying how communication is institutionalized (cf. the first part of this article). In the second perspective, we are interested in examining the creation of institutions in communication, that is, how communicative interactions turn into communicative genres (the ‘communicative institutions’ of society) (cf. Meyer, 2008 on language, discourse and institutions). Finally, in the third perspective, we are interested in studying how communication institutionalizes. It is the latter perspective that this section is focused on.

As mentioned in the previous section, early neo-institutional theory was rather implicit or unaware of the crucial role played by communication in processes of institutionalization. The rhetorical, discursive and/or communicative aspects of institutions were either neglected, or the research was based on a simple transmission model. Today, however, a growing number of neo-institutional scholars emphasize, directly or indirectly, how important communication is and have started studying how institutions communicate.

Hoffman (2001), for example, has examined how corporate environmentalism has been institutionalized in the United States from the beginning of the 1960s until the beginning of the 1990s. According to Hoffman, the history of corporate environmentalism unfolds in such a way that it follows the three pillars of institutionalization (cf. Scott, 2008): ‘a direct reflection of the coercive rules, normative standards, and cognitive values of the organizational field’ (Hoffman, 2001: 8). From 1970 until 1982, the dominant model of institutions was ‘regulative’. From 1982 until 1988, the dominant model was ‘normative’ (environmentalism as social responsibility). Finally, beginning at the end of the 1980s, the ‘cultural-cognitive’ model started to dominate (the stage of strategic environmentalism). This does not mean that there are no environmental
management institutions at the regulative or the normative level, but at the end of the 1980s, many aspects of environmental management have become taken-for-granted aspects of corporate behavior. Hoffman (2001) claims that public relations plays an important role when the cultural-cognitive model starts to dominate:

As environmental management institutions reach the cognitive level, it becomes imperative that firms project an image of environmental responsibility. They become trapped into incorporating a public relations component into their environmental strategies. For some this reflects actual internal change. For others it amounts to greenwashing, the merely symbolic adoption of standard practices and procedures. (Hoffman, 2001: 14)

Yet, Hoffman (2001) neither describes nor explains, to any considerable extent, how institutions and public relations interact inside and outside organizations. The only hint is that it has something to do with corporate branding (and the projection of an ‘image of environmental responsibility’).

Green (2004) has established a rhetorical theory of diffusion conceptualizing it as a process where ‘managers play an active role in the diffusion process, because what managers say and how they say it matter a great deal’. One of the key findings of his research concerns the relationship between the diffusion of a managerial practice, the number of justifications (persuasion) and the level of taken-for-grantedness (or level of institutionalization). ‘[W]e can expect an increase in supportive justifications to occur at the beginning of a managerial practice’s diffusion and prior to that practice’s achieving taken-for-granted status. As the practice becomes more widely diffused and accepted, the frequency and amount of justification should decrease’ (Green, 2004: 656).

Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) have examined the role of rhetoric in legitimating institutional change or shifts in institutional logics. Based on a study of an accounting firm’s purchase of a law firm, triggering a struggle over a new organizational form, the two researchers conclude that rhetorical strategies contain two elements: (1) institutional vocabularies, that is, ‘the use of identifying words and referential texts to expose contradictory institutional logics’; and (2) theorizations of change, that is, teleological, historical, cosmological, ontological and value-based ‘theories’ by which ‘actors contest a proposed innovation against broad templates or scenarios of change’ (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005: 35).

Recently, Suddaby (2010) has tried to define some important ‘challenges’ and a ‘future research agenda’ for neo-institutional organizational theory. According to him, the central point of neo-institutional theory is to understand ‘why and how organizations adopt processes and structures for their meaning rather than their productive value’ (Suddaby, 2010: 15). He lists four promising areas for future research. Language is one of them: ‘Perhaps the most promising development in recent institutional theory is in contemporary efforts to analyze the role of language in institutional processes and effects’ (Suddaby, 2010: 17). This area also includes public relations: ‘Organizational theorists pay too little attention to the critical role and function of corporate public relations professionals in contemporary business organizations’ (Suddaby, 2010: 17).

So far, Lammers (2011) has made the most important contribution to the study of how institutions communicate. Inspired by Douglas (1986), he has developed a theory
focusing on institutional messages and the role of communication in replicating and diffusing institutional logics. His goal is to bridge between the micro-level (the world of organizational communication and sensemaking) and the macro-level (the structures named institutions).

He focuses on the concept of message, although he recognizes that from a communication theory point of view this concept may be said to belong to a transmission approach to communication (cf. the conduit metaphor of organizational communication). He defines an institutional message as ‘a collation of thoughts that takes on a life independent of senders and recipients. It may have the force of rules and is spread intentionally or unintentionally via multiple channels to narrow or wider audiences’ (Lammers, 2011b: 171). According to Lammers, institutional messages play a central role because they become carriers of institutional logics. They ‘have the power, through their endurance, reach, and encumbency, to influence and regularize human conduct’. Individuals make sense of institutions and ‘derive logics for their action that in turn reinforce those institutions’ (Lammers, 2011a: 152).

Lammers makes a distinction within academic research between the uses of the concept of institutional message at (1) an interactional level (e.g. the management of conversation, the talk at work, where the institutional message is implicated by the setting (context) and from the roles of the inter-actants); (2) an organizational level (e.g. the efforts of aligning organizational messages and activities); and (3) an institutional level (e.g. used as an artifact, a message created in an inter-organizational environment that transcends settings, inter-actants and organizations) (Lammers and Barbour, 2006).

From these studies, it appears that institutional messages have four characteristics: (1) they are independent and have some life of their own beyond particular individuals and organizations; (2) they reflect some measure of power; (3) they are exchanged with varying degrees of intentionality; and (4) they vary in reach. This diffusion is a form of communication, and in this way Lammers shows how communication contributes to a neo-institutional view of organizations.

However, according to Suddaby (2011), three important issues are ‘missing’ or need to be further developed. First, the view of institutions, as reflected in the concept of institutional messages, is too narrow. Institutions and organizations are viewed as agentic entities, and it is not stressed how institutional messages are crafted and how they serve specific purposes and interests. It matters to show that individuals and interests are actually underpinning institutional agency and action, and that communication is not just a ‘passive vessel or conduit for logics’ (Suddaby, 2011: 185). Second, Lammers is accused of overlooking new streams of institutional theory. Especially the role of rhetoric and persuasive communication, and how it is used strategically by actors to ‘construct legitimacy, enhance the diffusion of institutionalized practices or to manipulate institutional logics’ (Suddaby, 2011: 186). Finally, Suddaby claims that ‘logics and institutions are as much the product of, or are determined by, patterns of communication as they are causal elements’ (Suddaby, 2011: 187). This means that he suggests a move from Lammers’s perspective on ‘how institutions communicate’ to ‘how does communication institutionalize’ (Suddaby, 2011: 187). To Suddaby, institutional theory, at its core, is a theory of communication.

Instead of developing further Lammers’s theory of institutional messages as carriers of institutional logics, we would like to present an outline of a new theory about how
communication institutionalizes building on and contributing to the study of institutional work (cf. the first part of this article). In *Leadership in Administration* (1957), Philip Selznick brought up the question: Who is the most important agent of institutionalization at the organization-level? His answer was: It is the leader of the organization. Since then, Selznick’s theory of *institutional leadership* has been revisited by Kraatz (2009) who has identified seven types of institutional work accomplished by leaders: (1) symbolic manipulation; (2) creating formal structures; (3) making value commitments; (4) creating coherence; (5) maintaining integrity; (6) making character-defining choices; and (7) self-transformation (Kraatz, 2009: 74-82). Along the lines of this theory it now seems natural to bring up another question: Are there other important agents of institutionalization at the organization-level? The answer is yes, and one of these agents of institutionalization is the chief communication officer and the communication department (public relations as an organizational function or practice).

According to a growing number of sociologists, we are living in the age of *cognitive capitalism*, that is, an age where the knowledge economy is pivotal to society, but also an age where immaterial or symbolic phenomena such as mission, vision, values, culture, ethics, legitimacy, trust, image and reputation are crucial to most organizations and organizational fields (Moulier-Boutang, 2007). In terms of the new institutionalism, this seems to imply that common cultural-cognitive beliefs (cf. Scott’s third pillar of institutionalization) play a decisive role in processes of institutionalization.

In their essence, cultural-cognitive beliefs are communicative phenomena. Thus, in order for a belief to become a belief, it has to be communicated. In private and public organizations, the chief communication officer and the communication department (or similar structural arrangements) are responsible for the strategic communication of these cultural-cognitive beliefs on behalf of their organizations. It is through this communication that new structures of meaning are created, maintained or disrupted (cf. Lawrence and Suddaby’s 2006 three categories of institutional work) among both internal and external stakeholders. And the chief communication officer and the communication department interact with a wide range of stakeholders.

As pointed out by Hoffman (2001), *corporate branding* is perhaps the best instance of this organizational function or practice. Corporate branding is not only an ‘organizational recipe’ in itself (cf. Røvik, 1998, 2007); it is also a strategic process where the ongoing adoption (and interpretation) of new institutionalized norms in accordance with the local organizational context are linked to the corporate identity and reputation management of the organization. Corporate environmentalism and corporate social responsibility are just two examples showing how this process works (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

Of course, this new theory of how communication institutionalizes, which in fact is nothing more than a working hypothesis, needs to be improved theoretically and tested empirically. But so far it seems obvious to ascribe the public relations function of organizations a key role in many of the processes of institutionalism taking place at the interface between organizations and their social environment. It also seems possible to combine some of the insights from Lammers’s theory of institutional messages with this new approach inspired by Selznick (1957) and Kraatz (2009).
Another research agenda

This brings us to the presentation of the second research agenda in this article. We assume that communication in general, and public relations in particular, not only reflect but also contribute to the institutionalization of various types of ‘organizational recipes’ in private and public organizations. This contribution involves all types of rhetorical, discursive and/or communicative aspects, from the textual micro-level (words and texts) to the contextual macro-level (communication as a strategic management function) in/of the organization. We also assume that both the ‘senders’ and the ‘receivers’ of institutions, that is, the institutional context and the organizations, act as active interpreters that reformulate or even ‘reinvent’ institutionalized norms or ‘recipes’, as they are institutionalized by the organizations.

Based on these two key assumptions, we claim that public relations theory can serve as a useful framework for the empirical study of how public relations contributes to and reflects the institutionalization of regulations and norms and values in general, and cultural-cognitive beliefs in particular, in private and public organizations, and that it can be instrumental in helping us to answer the following set of research questions:

- Which kind of roles does public relations play in a process of institutionalization?
- Do these roles vary according to the various stages through which a process of institutionalization develops (before, during, and after)? Is there always more communication at the beginning of the process, and less communication at the end of the process, when the new institution is taken-for-granted (cf. Green’s rhetorical theory of diffusion)?
- Does the type of institution – regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive institution – have an impact on how public relations reflects or contributes to the process? Is there a special relationship between public relations and cultural-cognitive beliefs?
- Is it useful to distinguish between (1) the institutionalization of communication, (2) institutions in communication, that is, communicative genres (based on ongoing communicative interactions), and (3) the communication of institutions (Frandsen and Johansen, 2012)?
- To what extent can corporate branding be studied as an integrated part of many processes of institutionalization?
- To what extent can the new co-creational perspective in public relations research (cf. Botan and Taylor, 2004) account for the heterogeneity and the local interpretations when a process of institutionalization starts within a specific (private or public) organizational field, or across organizational fields?
- Would it be possible to replace the transmission and translation models with the co-creational perspective?

Concluding remarks

It seems inappropriate to end an article where cross-disciplinary collaboration has been the leitmotiv with a conclusion in the traditional sense. It would be much better to
conclude with an *en guise de conclusion*, as they do in France. However, we hope that
we have been able to demonstrate that the new institutionalism within organizational
sociology is a realistic approach when it comes to studying organizations, and that it may
contribute to the study of the institutionalization of public relations in private and public
organizations in substantial ways. We also hope that we have been able to show that
public relations research in itself may provide neo-institutional scholars with answers to
the intriguing question: How does communication institutionalize? If we have succeeded
in reaching both aims, we will have furthered the intellectual openness that we men-
tioned at the beginning of this article. We invite scholars from both disciplines to join us
and to continue the discussion.

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