

4 Sustainability Communication as Field of Research

Lesson 01: Literature Review / Status Quo of a Research Area

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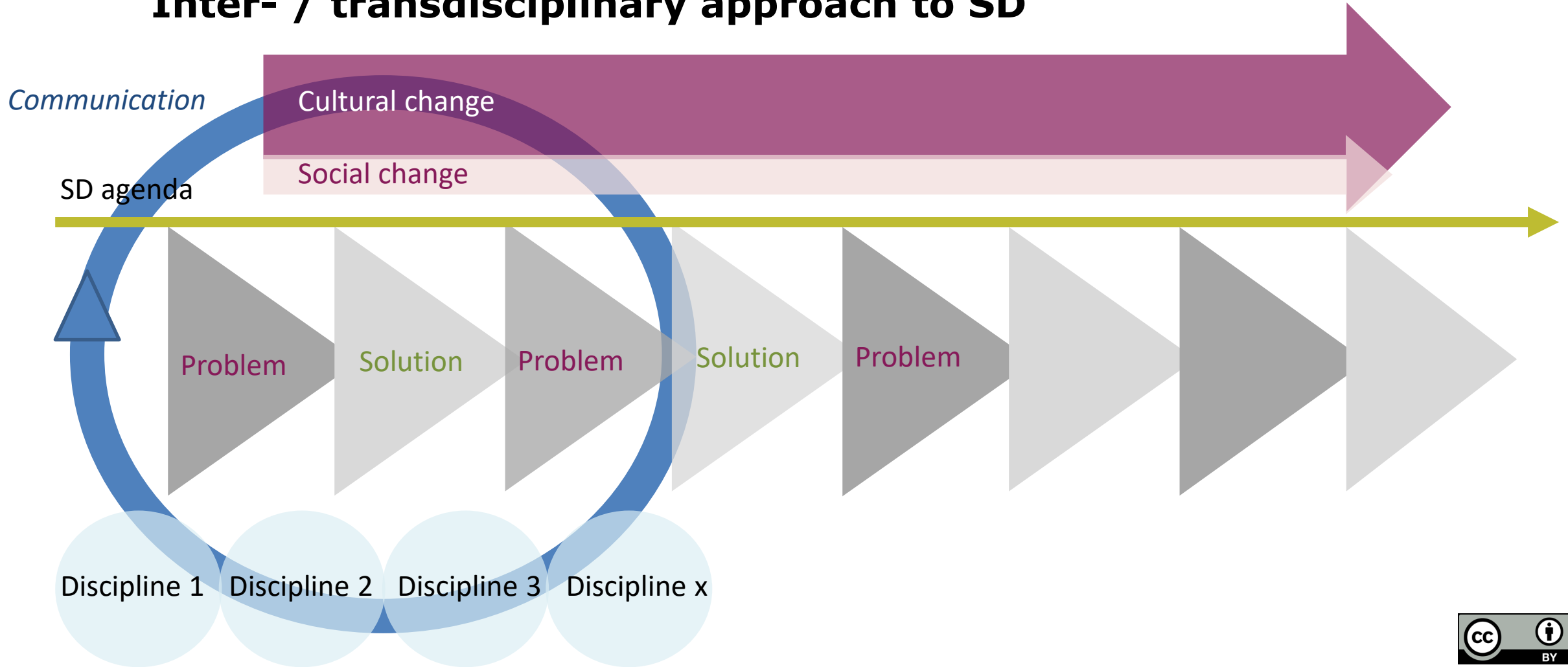
Where are we?

- Episode 4.1:** **Literature review, status quo**
- Episode 4.2: Methodologies used / studies
- Episode 4.3: Institutionalization of sustainability communication
- Episode 4.4: Future methodologies, engagement



Recap

Inter- / transdisciplinary approach to SD

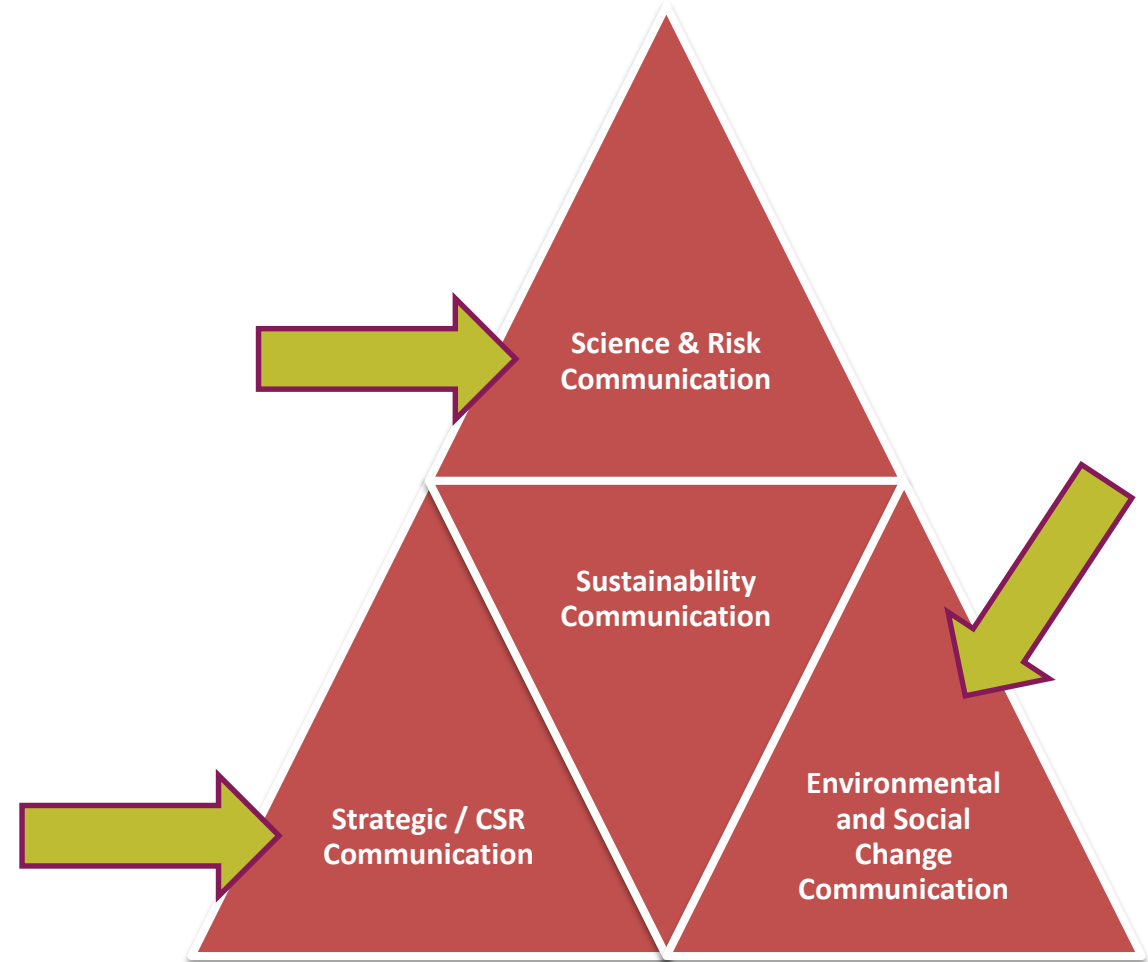
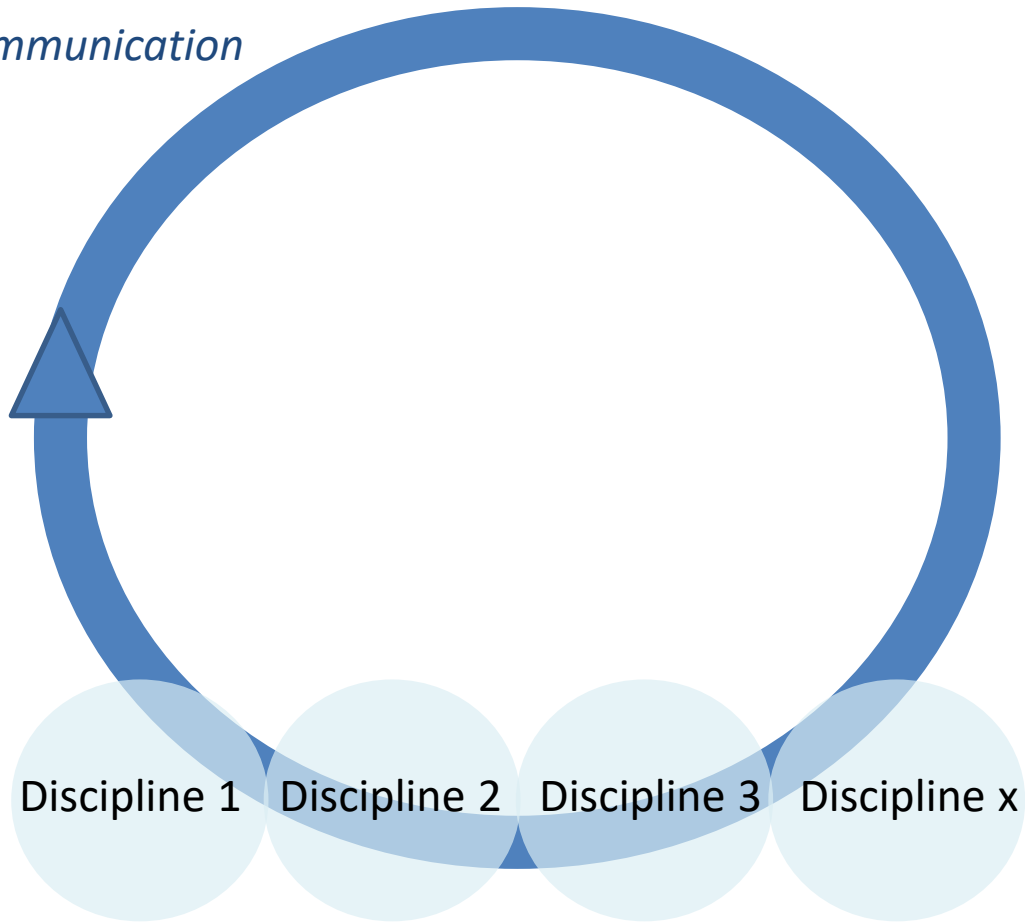




Recap

Disciplines

Communication





Recap

Perspectives on Sustainability

Science / CC Communication:

Sustainability as counter narrative (solution?) to climate change

Environmental Communication:

Sustainability as (moral) principle of change

Sustainability as principle of restoration / regeneration

CSR Communication:

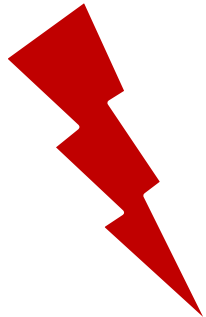
Sustainability as principle (moral compass) of action

Sustainability as label for “good behavior”, “used” in communication



Recap

Challenges



Communication about & of environment, risk, CC, CSR

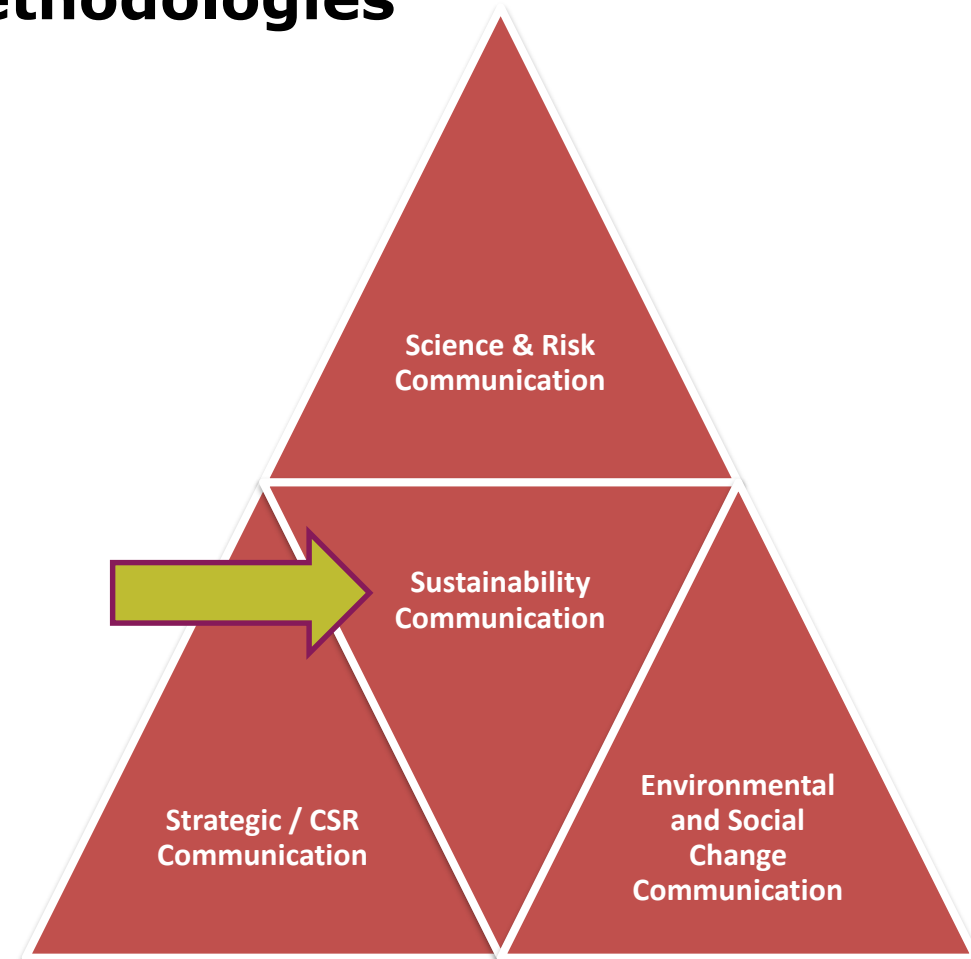


Communication *for* transformation



What was needed?

Media & communication perspective & theories, concepts, methodologies





Paradigms of Sustainability Communication



Paradigms

- **Pragmatic** (communication as structure; information, education, instrumental sense of communication, functionalist/structural perspective, description of reality)
 - *how to communicate sustainability issues to others*
- **Constitutive** (communication as process; symbolic action, social constructivism, sense making, define sth as problem, creates attention, evokes values, orientation, activates/stimulates engagement, exploration):
 - *sustainability communication as a process of creation of a mutual understanding of the normative concept of sustainability as well as the individual and societal possibilities of taking action (dialogue & discourse).*





We found: Sustainability Communication Research ...

Functionalist approach to sustainability communication

- Concept: Messaging
- Objective: Transparency
- Metaphor: Conduit
- Channels: Monological/one-directional
- Perspective: Sequential

Constitutive approach to sustainability communication

- Concept: Interaction
- Objective: Co-creation
- Metaphor: Connectedness
- Channel: Dialogical
- Perspective: Holistic



Where are we now (again 😊) ?

- Episode 4.1:** **Sustainability Communication as research field:
Literature review, status quo**
- Episode 4.2: Methodologies used / studies
- Episode 4.3: Institutionalization of sustainability communication
- Episode 4.4: Future methodologies, engagement



Learning outcomes

Learning outcome 1:

Describe the diverse nature of contemporary practices of sustainability communication on an individual, organizational and societal level, the relationship of strategic communication practices to other public communication practices, the role of stakeholders and publics and the communication practitioners in and outside of organizations (corporate, NGO, political and educational institutions etc.)

Learning outcome 2:

Develop comprehensive and well-founded knowledge in sustainability communication as field of study, an understanding of how other disciplines relate to the field and an international perspective on the field.

Learning outcome 3:

Understand the key elements of communication theories, strategies and tactics, and, thus, the character and operationalization of best practice sustainability communication planning frameworks.

Learning outcome 4:

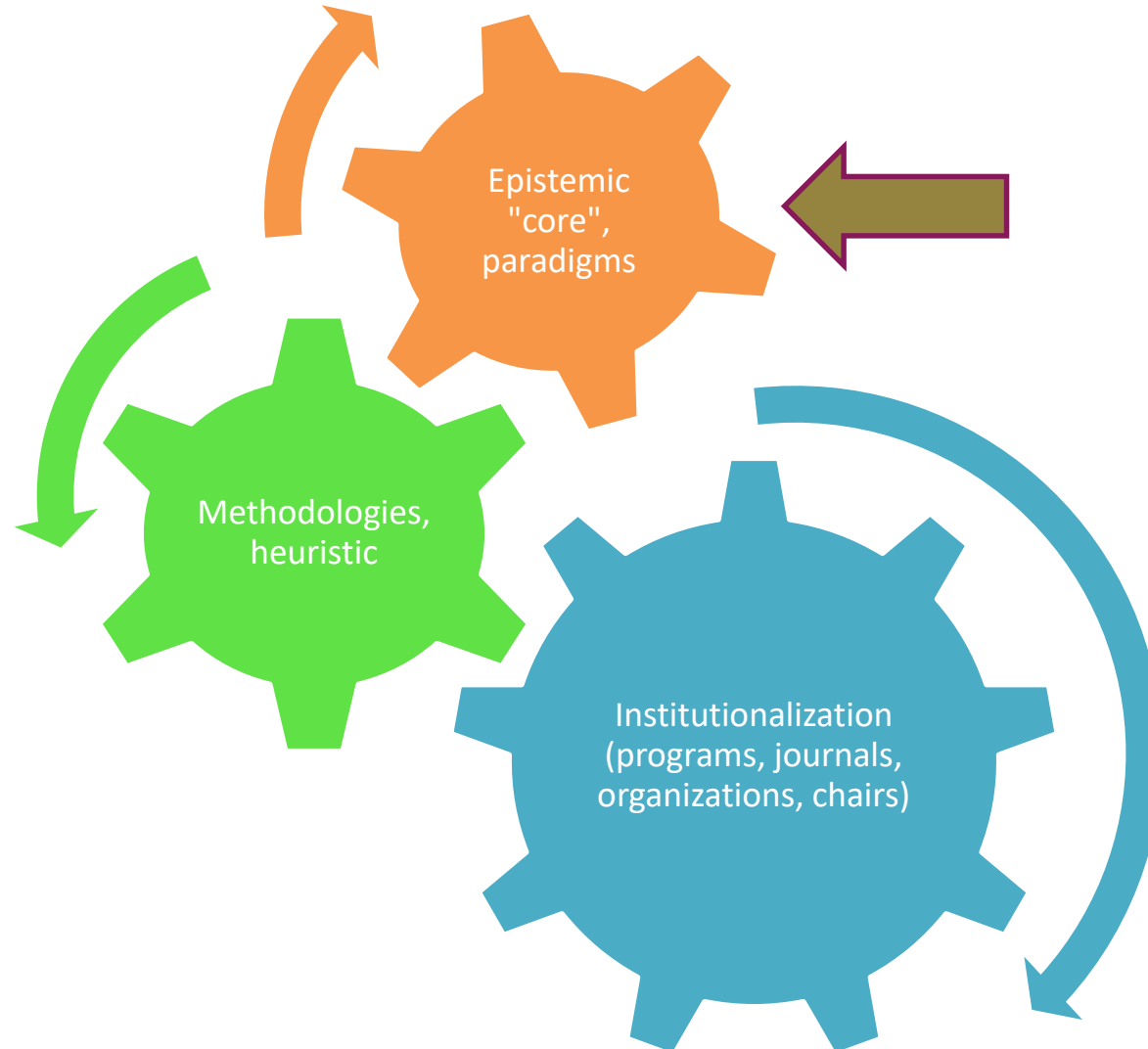
Advance your understanding of social and civic responsibility and develop an appreciation of the philosophical and social context of sustainability communication. Advance your knowledge and respect of ethics and ethical standards in relation to communication of, about and for sustainability.

Learning outcome 5:

Anticipate and Interpret current issues and challenges of a world in transformation and social change. Develop a deep understanding of and skills to create change, develop advocacy, leadership and authorship in and for sustainability communication.



Overview





Overview

- A. Research field or discipline?
- B. Research questions
- C. Existing body of knowledge
- D. Epistemic “core”?



A. Research field or discipline?

What is SC?

Sustainability communication is a business strategy for companies who have integrated sustainability into their operational and strategic activities (Allen, 2006); it's about evidence-based strategies for making sustainability vivid, accessible, and comprehensible. (Robertson, 2019)

Sustainability communication is seen as an emerging field that integrates various research approaches and practices. (Godemann and Michelsen, 2011; Cox, 2012; Anderson, 2014; Fischer et al., 2016; Weder et al., 2021a, 2021b).



A. Research field or discipline?

1. Particular object of research or shared object?



Communication about & of Sustainability



Communication *for* transformation



A. Research field or discipline?

1. Particular object of research or shared object?
2. Body of knowledge referring to the object of research / not shared?
 - Ecological sustainability, economic opportunity, social inclusion
 - Discourse about sustainability as communicative process *within* society (Ziemann, 2011)
 - Sustainability Communication as global social process – accompanied by the media; SC to advance transformation processes towards more sustainable development (Adomβent & Godemann, 2011)



B. Research questions asked?

1. **Who** communicates about sustainability?
2. **What** is communicated about sustainability?
3. **To whom** is sustainability communicated?
4. **Which channels** are used to communicate (about) sustainability?
5. **What** are the effects of sustainability communication?



B. Research questions asked?

- Most of the literature approaches communication *about* sustainability or communication *for* sustainable development (Newig et al., 2013; Genc, 2017; Weder et al., 2021).
- In both dimensions, the functional, instrumental understanding of communication dominates and is increasingly explained and explored (Bjorn et al., 2019; Kuntsman & Rattle, 2019)
 - with a focus on sustainability reporting, social impact (Daily & Huang, 2001; McKenzie, 2004; chaudhuri & Jayarem, 2018)
 - on specific media to communicate sustainability (Huang et al., 2019; Maltseva et al., 2019; Fischer et al., 2017),
 - on dissemination strategies and pedagogical approaches (van Dam-Mieras et al., 2008; Djordjevic & cotton, 2011; Sparin & Timpson, 2012; Genc, 2017)
 - On participatory processes / skills & capability building in environmental studies/environmental management (van de Fliert, 2021; Reed et al., 2018)





B. Research questions asked?

Furthermore, as already explained, there is a link to the established fields of

- corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication (Elving et al., 2015; Diehl et al., 2017; Golob et al., 2017; Rasche et al., 2017; Weder et al., 2019) & corporate sustainability communication (Schlichting, 2013; Lock & Seele, 2015; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007; Weder, 2012)
- climate change communication (Stecula & Merkley, 2019; Nerlich et al., 2010; Schäfer, 2012; Forchtner, 2018; Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014; Kannengießer, 2020; see also: I. Neverla; M. Taddicken, M. Brüggemann) and
- sustainable consumption communication (Bilharz & Schmitt, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Linea et al., 2016; Fischer et al., 2017).



B. Research questions asked?

Questions:

Dominance of: who communicates about S. to whom through which channel with what effect?



Instead: What is communicated? How is it communicated? What is the nature and potential of a sustainability discourse, what about the cultural dimension?

Sustainability Communication as human and technology based activity of the reciprocal use of signs and the reciprocal interpretation of signs for the purpose of successful understanding, coordinating action and shaping reality



C. Existing body of knowledge

Growing body of knowledge in

- Media & communication studies
 - Science communication (climate change comm., **representation of S.**)
 - Public communication (**representation of S.**)
 - Strategic communication (CSR comm, reporting, **representation of S.**)
- Economics & marketing (consumer) research / combination with psychology (**effects!**)
- Education / Pedagogy („Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung) (**teaching S.**)
- Culture / art / writing



C. Existing body of knowledge

Cultures of sustainability

We remember: discussions about sustainable development are embedded in patterns of cultural perception and action (justice, equality issues)



C. Existing body of knowledge

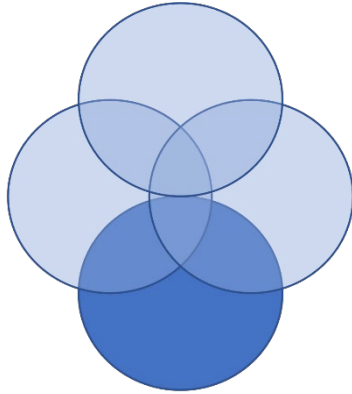
Cultures of sustainability

In contrast to a techno-scientific understanding of communication (which has yielded a number of complex transmission models) the social and human science description of communication begins with face-to-face contact (Ziemann, 2011)



C. Existing body of knowledge

Communication *in* sustainable
development



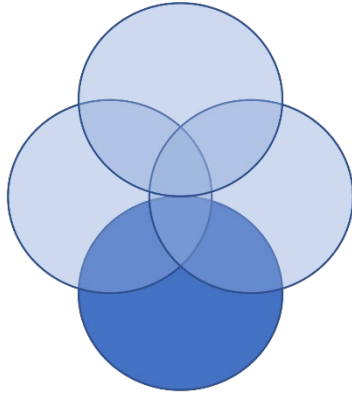
culture / communication as
4th dimension of
sustainability

(Hammond, 2019; Soini & Dessein,
2016; Soini et al., 2015; Brocchi,
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Michelsen, 2011; 2013; Weder et al.,
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C. Existing body of knowledge

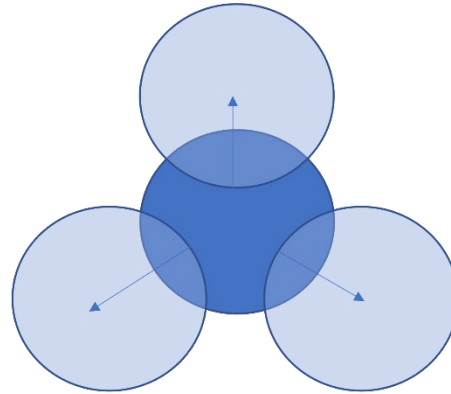
Communication *in* sustainable development



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Communication *for* sustainable development



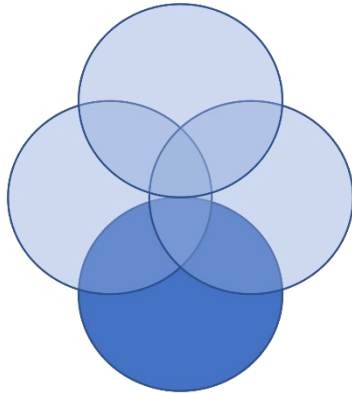
Communication as social
practice leading to
transformation

(Spinozzi & Mazzanti, 2019; Balta Portolés & Roig Madorran, 2013; Weder, 2021; (UN, 2021; Forum d'Avignon, 2014; COST Action IS1007; Weder, 2021)



C. Existing body of knowledge

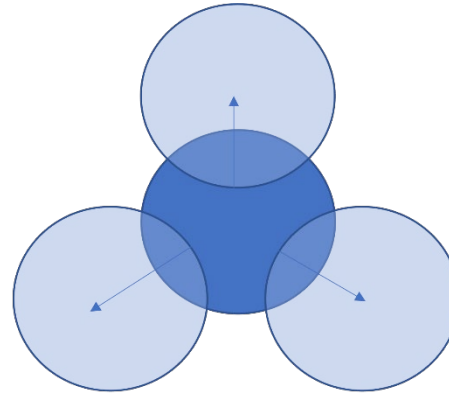
Communication *in* sustainable development



culture / communication as 4th dimension of sustainability

(Hammond, 2019; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Soini et al., 2015; Brocchi, 2010; Holtrings, 2015; Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; 2013; Weder et al., 2021; Karmasin & Weder, 2008; Weder, 2012; Agyeman, 2007)

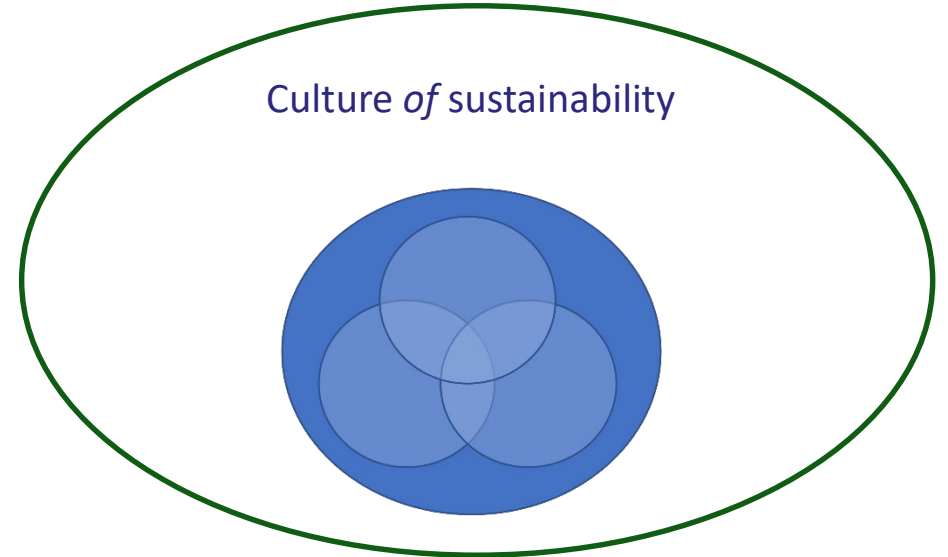
Communication *for* sustainable development



Communication as social practice leading to transformation

(Spinozzi & Mazzanti, 2019; Balta Portolés & Roig Madorran, 2013; Weder, 2021; (UN, 2021; Forum d'Avignon, 2014; COST Action IS1007; Weder, 2021)

Culture of sustainability



Sustainability discourse: reflexivity, s. as intrinsic social value, mediatization and normalization



D. Epistemic “core”?

Does „Sustainability Communication“ have an epistemic core?

- Popularization concepts (concepts, plans be made known to the general public, offer concrete orientation for action)
- Innovation & alliance concepts (social, technological innovations should be initiated; variety of social actors should work together; strategic networks)
- Information & education concepts (content and aspects of SD need to be implemented in the education system; learn about S & develop reflexive competences)

BUT: Research concepts – not yet developed: interdisciplinary scientific discourse, development of own perspectives and applications needed – especially for economic and political actors



D. Epistemic “core”?

Does „Sustainability Communication“ have an epistemic core?

SC: as process of mutual understanding dealing with the future development of society at the core of which is a vision of sustainability (Godemann / Michelsen, 2011)

Mutual understanding on:

- An individual level
- An organizational level
- A societal level and:

... between individuals and institutions, between institutions and within institutions, in schools & Universities, in the media, in politics, in communities and at a regional, national and international level



D. Epistemic “core”?

Does „Sustainability Communication“ have an epistemic core?

...not yet ..

- Sustainability studies and other scientific engagement with the notion of sustainable development has an interdisciplinary, as well as transdisciplinary character (Weder et al., 2019).
- common ground of understanding sustainability communication as introducing an understanding of the world, that is of the relationship between humans and their environment, into social discourse (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011).



D. Epistemic "core"?

Does „Sustainability Communication“ have an epistemic core? ...not yet ..

- ...a critical, constructivist, cultural perspective need to be strengthened
- acknowledges not only consensus as primary goal of or condition for communication, but dissensus is particularly important for the continuation of communication (every communication invites protest)
 - offers a way to explain the difficulty in communicating new ideas and knowledge to others
 - learning as intentional, self-controlled process & social learning
 - handling complexity
 - new knowledge and new experiences have to „fit“ so that they are compatible with previous experiences and insights
 - risk needs to be taken into consideration
 - lifestyle vs. way of life
 - public discourses & normalization of „new“ values



Reflection

1. How would you describe the status quo of research in the area of sustainability communication?
2. Which are the disciplines that deal with sustainability communication so far?
3. Which perspective on and understanding of communication is dominant in the research so far?
4. Why does it make sense to bring in a cultural, critical and rather social-constructivist perspective in communication?