

7 Communication about Sustainability

Lesson 02: Media & Public Discourses

Assoc Prof. Dr. habil Franzisca Weder
School of Communication and Arts
The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

 Universität Bremen

ZMML
Zentrum für Multimedia in Lehre



Where are we?

Episode 7.1: Key concepts of communication

Episode 7.2: The „public“ & public discourses

Episode 7.3: Sustainability issues & crises

Episode 7.4: Sustainable Consumption



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

- A. The “public”
- B. The “public sphere”
- C. Public discourses



A. The “public”

The „public“ is conceptualized in relation to

1. space
2. media
3. individual actors



A. The “public”

1. „public“ in relation to „space“ means
 - approachable for everyone
 - accessible, audible, in sight
 - common good, related to the society
 - community, commune
 - „öffentliche Hand“



A. The “public”

2. „public“ in relation to „individual actors“, history means
 - Rousseau (L'opinion public, social contract)
 - Arendt (polis, agora, cultural public sphere)
 - Habermas (political public sphere, deliberative democracy; structural change/“Zerfall“)



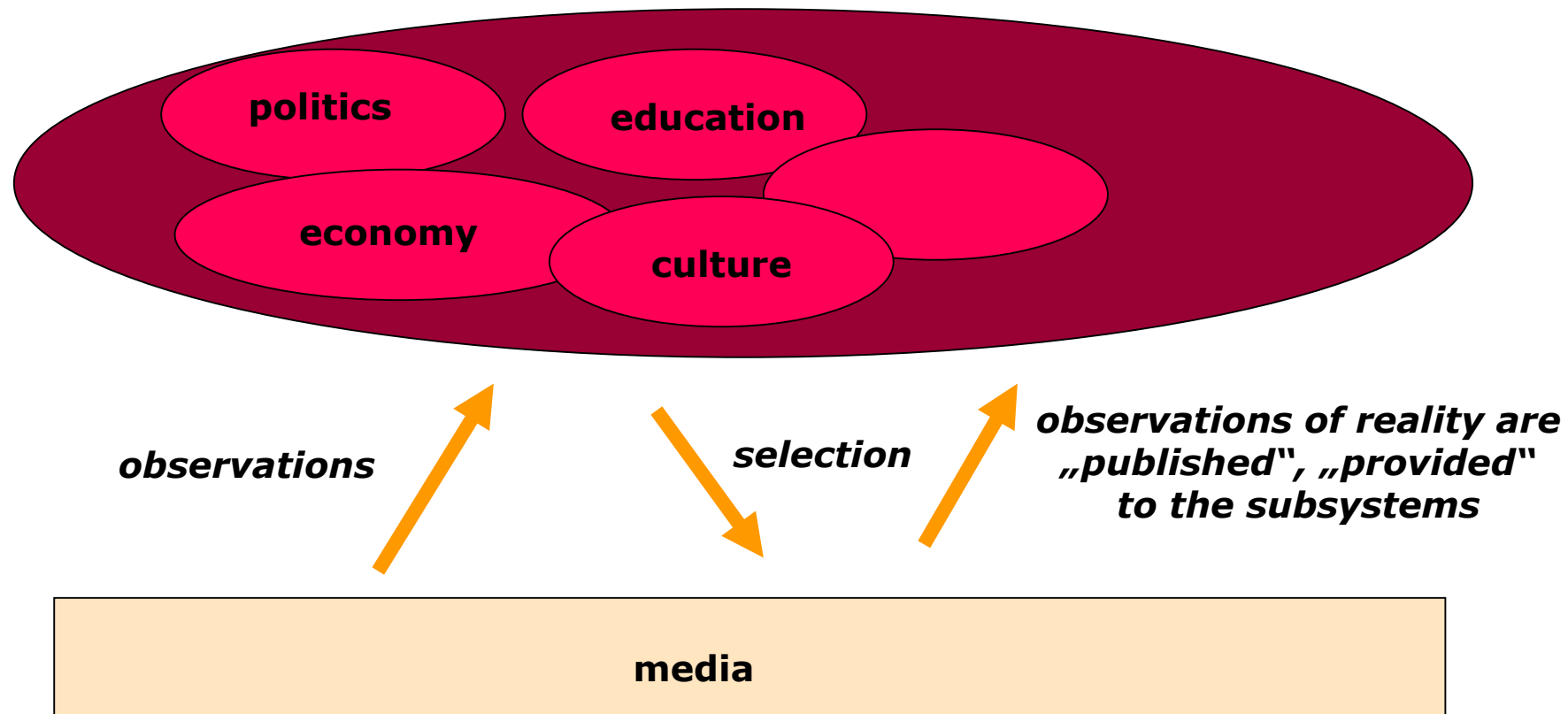
A. The “public”

3. „public“ in relation to „the media“ means
 - System theory: Mirror-model
 - Action / Theory of communicative action: public sphere, public opinion
 - Organization theory (arena model of the public sphere)



B. The "public sphere"

The media produce / reproduce the public sphere: Mirror-Model





B. The “public sphere”

The media produce / reproduce the public sphere

- Integration of societal subsystems in the society (socialization)
- Integration of individuals in the society, in societal subsystems (as citizens in politics etc.)



B. The “public sphere”

Arena-model of the public sphere

Media-level

- Assigned speaker & audience roles

Issue-level

- Assigned speaker & audience roles – but they can change

Encounter-level

- Speaker and audience roles are not assigned



B. Public sphere

„We call events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs“ (Habermas)

The **Public Sphere** is a „realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens“

Habermas defines the public sphere as a „society engaged in critical public debate“; conditions:

- the formation of public opinion (-> public value debate / public broadcaster)
- all citizens have access (-> media ethics, media freedom)
- Critique & control, debate over the general rules governing relations

Structural transformation (bourgeoise) (-> elite, power, private spheres, -> Frankfurt School)



C. Public discourses

Challenge: ‚Public Sphere‘

- „open“ for everyone
- deliberation of topics, issues and opinions
- emergence of public opinion
- BUT: who has the power, what are dominant voices, opinions?



C. Public discourse

Discourse

- spoken or written communication between people; debate or „serious discussion“ of a particular issue or subject
- a „social boundary“ that defines what statements can be said about a topic
- a system of thought, knowledge, or communication that constructs our experience of the world => Since control of discourse amounts to control of how the world is perceived, social theory often studies discourse with a focus on power (see Foucault)
- Disciplines working with the concept of discourse: sociology, anthropology, philosophy, discourse analysis (see Fairclough)
- Particularly political sciences understand discourse as closely linked to policy making / deliberation (see Mouffe, Laclau)



C. Public discourse

@Foucault:

- the enunciation (*l'énoncé*, “the statement”): a linguistic construct that allows the writer and the speaker to assign meaning to words and to communicate repeatable semantic relations to, between, and among the statements, objects, or subjects of the discourse;
- *discursive formation* identifies and describes written and spoken statements with semantic relations that produce discourses
- See Framing; narrative theories (following lecture 8, episode 2)



C. Public discourse

Relevance for Sustainability Communication?

„Ideal“ of the Public Sphere (Habermas) = Idea of sustainability

- Disregard of status (equality)
- Domain of common concern (every interpretation possible)
- Inclusivity (participation, engagement)

-> see Critical theories (feminism, heteronormativity, Fraser; etc.; and Habermas' „Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit“)



C. Public discourse

Relevance for Sustainability Communication?

A public sphere / public discourse on/about sustainability is necessary, because the **transformation of norms** needs public expression and ways in which contemporary public discourse reflects and represents, as well as imagines, social relations.



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Sustainability as new norm?



C. Public discourse

Relevance for Sustainability Communication?

Transformation = „normalization“

Normalization of Sustainability through communication = sustainability communication as set of simultaneous or subsequent discursive strategies which gradually introduce and/or perpetuate in public discourse some new patterns of representing social actors, processes and issues.

-> Important: these discursive strategies are initiated and recontextualised as part and parcel of wider – and in most cases pre-determined – forms of social, political and economic action designed to not only change the norms of social conduct but also to gain legitimacy from such a change and from the introduction of a related, “new” normative order (see Krzyżanowski, Wodak).



C. Public discourse

Open questions

- Is there a public discourse *about* sustainability? -> next episode about issues & discourses
- Possibly dominated by whom? -> last episode about sustainable consumption
- Bottom up; „norm-alization“? -> next lecture on communication for sustainability



Reflection

- In what contexts do you use the term “public”?
- In times of social media – is there still a “public sphere”, or are there rather different “spheres”? What drives the fragmentation of the public sphere (Habermas)?
- Where do you see a “public discourse” *about* sustainability happening?
 - In the media? And if so, in which kind of media?
 - Where else?
 - What are spaces for deliberation – if there are any? Spaces for public negotiation processes? What are the conditions? And what are the barriers?