

Mediatization of society – Consequences for organizational communication

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Abstract

Mediatization serves as a starting point for developing a theoretical framework of external organizational communication. The overall importance of the mass media affects organizations: Organizations have to adapt to the logic of the mass media in order to gain attention in the media society. Thus, organizations make not only attempts to influence mass media; mass media also have an impact on organizations. The mutually dependent relationship between media and organizations is examined on the basis of a symbolic-interactionist communication theory. The structural characteristics of a mediated public sphere provide the backdrop for the complex relationships between mass media and organizations. Finally, the consequences of mediatization for organizations are discussed.

Keywords: organizational communication; mass media; mediatization; symbolic interactionism; public sphere.

Mediatization of society is an ongoing process which affects political and economic life. For a majority of the people mass media have become the main source of information on political, economic, and social matters. The overall importance of the mass media affects organizations: Organizations have to adapt to the logic of the mass media in order to “stay tuned” in the media society. External organizational communication becomes pivotal: It takes a boundary spanning role in mediating between the logic of the organization and the media logic. As a consequence of this adjustment to the media logic this logic shapes organizational behaviour.

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The aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework of external organizational communication which recognizes the importance of mass media for organizations. The account of mediatization serves as a starting point for the theoretical framework. The mediatization perspective suggests viewing organizations as intertwined with mass media. The core body of literature on external organizational communication, on public relations, and on communication management proposes a one-way-model of communication: The organization is seen as an autonomous communicator who attempts to inform or persuade its relevant target groups, and also the press as a key target group. This proposition fails to explain the interdependence between organizations and their external environment. The account of mediatization emphasizes the fact that organizations and mass media are linked – they react to each other. Thus, not only the possible influence of external organizational communication on media coverage should be studied but also the reverse impact of mass media on organizations.

To grasp this phenomenon a communication theory is needed which allows focusing on the reciprocal influence of organizations on the mass media and vice versa. In this paper, a symbolic interactionist position is offered. Next to this, the concept of the public sphere provides the background on which the relationships between organizations and mass media are elaborated. Three questions will be discussed in detail: 1. What exactly is the contribution of external organizational communication to the mediatization of organizations? This question deals with the function of organizational communication. 2. Which structural preconditions lead to the adaption of the organizational behaviour to the media logic? This question deals with the structures of the public sphere. 3. And finally, what are the consequences of the mediatization of organizations? In the first part of the paper I will specify the concept of mediatization. Secondly, I will explicate the theoretical foundation of organizational communication by drawing on a symbolic-interactionist perspective. The specific structures of the public sphere will be pointed out in the next section. In the concluding part the normative question of the consequences of the mediatization of organizations will be discussed.

1. The concept of mediatization

The term mediatization is currently used mainly in political communication research. In political communication mediatization points to the phenomenon that the citizens rely upon mass media as their principle source of information on politics, economics, and other parts of social life. Mediatization is often linked to the concept of Americanization and refers to the transformation of election campaigns (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). From a democratic point of view, the process of mediatization of politics is ambivalent. On the one hand the mass media make daily politics constantly visible to a large media audience. On the other hand politics reacts on the permanent observance by the mass media with sophisticated strategies to shape the news. Symbolic politics is one consequence: Political actions are more and more represented by dramaturgical symbolic values and not by substantial principal values (Edelman,

1988). The creation of “pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 1961) for the mass media has become a vast part of political communication. In the long run, politics itself become a spectacle. Critics fear that the adjustment of political communication to the demands of the mass media happens at the expense of political substance. But even if one does not share this sceptical view on the communication of politics one has to conclude that politics and the mass media are intertwined more than ever. The mediatization of politics thus refers to a symbiotic relationship between political organizations and the mass media.

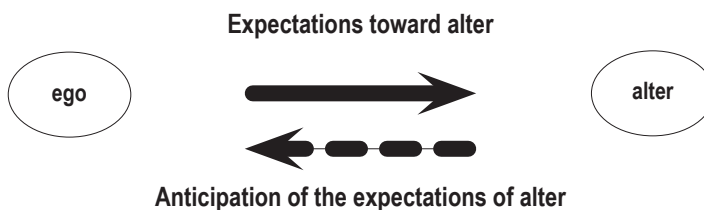
Does this observation hold true only for political communication resp. for political organizations? The mediatization of society no longer affects the political system only. It also affects economy, the arts, religion, science and other parts of society which can no longer act outside the focus of the mass media. Mediatization is a concept which applies to all parts of social life which may be of potential interest to a larger public.

Seen from the perspective of mediatization the relationship between organizations and the mass media is an interdependent one. Against this general statement it seems useful to look more closely at the theoretical foundation of this relationship. In the next chapter organizational communication will be described as a specific form of symbolic interaction.

2. A theoretical approach to organizational communication

Communication as symbolic interaction is principally oriented towards others. At least two actors – let us name them ego and alter – have to take part in the process of interaction. The specificity of communication is that the interaction is based on the use of symbols. Symbols are verbal and nonverbal signs which can be interpreted by the actors. According to Blumer (1973), significant symbols express a specific meaning and can evoke that meaning in the other person. The person who wants to evoke a certain response based on a meaning has to consider how the other will interpret the meaning. The process of symbolic interaction is a reciprocal one: Ego expects a certain reaction from alter and he anticipates the expectations alter may have towards himself. The reciprocal expectations structure the process of communication: see figure 1.

Figure 1



Both sides, ego and alter, hold expectations towards the other. These expectations are anticipations and therefore necessarily vague. They are based on assumptions and previous experiences: They are contingent. As this holds true for both sides we can speak of double contingency. As Parsons and Shils (1959: 15) put it: „This fundamental phenomenon may be called the complementarity of expectations, not in the sense that the expectations of the two actors with regard to each other's actions are identical, but in the sense that the action of each is oriented to the expectations of the other. Hence, the system of the interaction may be analyzed in terms of the extent of conformity of ego's actions with alter's expectations and vice versa. “ Indirectly, the authors refer to the possibility that the expectations do not correspond to each other. By writing this they had in mind situations of direct, face-to-face communication. The insecurity regarding the expectations of the other is characteristic for social interaction. Therefore people have developed techniques and strategies of interpretation to minimize this insecurity and to maximize the chance of success of the communication process. Specific conventions and rituals help to reduce the insecurity which is inherent in social communication.

In situations of mediated communication there are other techniques to minimize the failure of the communication process. Seen from a symbolic-interactionist view, the function of professional or strategic communication is to establish and maintain communicative relationships by identifying the relevant “other” and by anticipating the expectations of this other. If one regards the relationship between an organization and the mass media as symbolic interaction the function of strategic organizational communication would be to anticipate the expectations of the journalists in order to manage the communication process effectively.

But the relationship between organizations and journalists is a special one: There is a third party involved in the communication process – the media public. The public is no social actor in the traditional meaning of the term as it cannot act autonomously. With regard to the communicative relationship between organizations and the mass media the public plays the role of the “generalized other”. Its role and the roles of the other actors are shaped by the structural conditions of the public sphere. How the structure of the public sphere frame the relationship between organizations and the mass media is subject of the next chapter.

3. The structure of the public sphere as a frame for organizational communication

Nowadays the public sphere is a mediated public sphere. We cannot speak of a public sphere as a singular term any more. Instead, public sphere is a highly differentiated space for public communication. According to the issues of communication – politics, economy, arts, and science – there are many issue-related public spheres which exist next to each other. Next to this horizontal differentiation the public sphere is also vertically differentiated. According to the German sociologists Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991), an elementary level of public sphere is the sphere of loose encounters. The sec-

ond level constitute public events like party conventions, assemblies, and the like. The third and most important level is the public sphere which is constituted by the mass media. Here, all important issues of the media society are discussed.

Furthermore, the public sphere is characterized by social and juridical norms. The freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, laws on media policy, laws on access to governmental information, the right to information for shareholders and advertising laws: These legal norms form the normative background against which the relationships between organizations and the mass media unfold.

Next to this, typical features of communication are prevalent in the media public sphere: As a rule, there is no direct feed-back from the public to the mass medium. Except from interactive features like phone-ins, or letters to the editor, the voice of the public is not heard directly, at least not in advance of the media coverage. Instead, the expectations of the media public are determined retrospectively on the basis of viewer rates or sold exemplars of newspapers.

Another characteristic of the media public sphere is that role-changing from communicator to recipient and back is usually not possible in mass media related communication processes. Instead, there are fixed roles of communicators, conveyer and the public. The role of communicators is taken by professional public relations experts and spokespersons. Journalists are in the role of conveyers (although they do not passively convey information but actively construct news). Finally, there is the “role” of the mainly passive, anonymous public. That means the expectations towards the other participants in the communication process are part of fixed roles. One expects from the other that he or she acts according to his or her role: The speaker and PR-person should communicate strategically, the journalist has to select and tell news and stories according to journalistic rules, and the public is expected to listen, watch or hear. Thus the active roles are reserved for professional communicators. Neither the general public nor loosely organized groups are expected to be heard in the public sphere of the mass media. The reason for this distribution of roles lies in the economy of attention: Attention is rare, and the possibilities to make oneself heard depend on the resources one can spend. Prominent politicians and influential organizations have better chances to gain attention from the mass media than a citizens’ initiative which has little resources. But there are other journalistic selection criteria like the spectacular. That is why an organization like Greenpeace produced dangerous and spectacular events to get attention in a media public sphere which is dominated by established actors. The activists of Greenpeace successfully anticipated the expectations of the mass media.

4. Preconditions for the mediatization of organizations

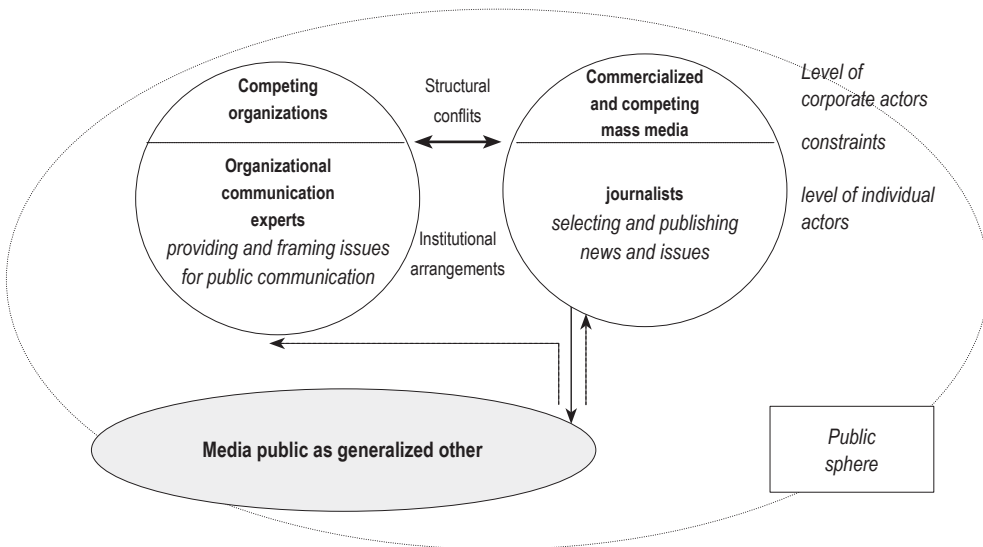
The relationship between organizations and the mass media is characterized by co-operation and by conflicts as well. Basic conflicts result from the different aims which organizations and the mass media have. Next to the basic conflict there is a common interest of organizations and the mass media: to reach the “generalized other”, the media public. In

order to co-operate effectively, communication experts of organizations and journalists meet each other in institutional arrangements: formalised situations like press conferences, where the respective expectations can be expressed and met in a formal way.

But because there are various competing organizations on the one hand and on the other hand limited space in the media and limited public attention new conflicts arise. All of them attempt to shape public opinion. They try to set the media agenda and to frame social issues according to the organizational interest. They observe the mass media in order to find out how the competitor presents himself in public. Thus the media offer a kind of forum for competing views and interest. But at the same time the media are no passive transmitters of the views of social actors. By selecting, highlighting or de-emphasizing issues they themselves contribute to the formation of public opinion. Conflicts and controversies among competing actors are newsworthy. The media's incentive prompts them to exaggerate the degree of conflict even when there is a consensus among the competing actors. But regardless whether the media cover real or self-made conflicts: The presentation of conflicting points of views in the mass media leads to a public discussion on controversial issues.

Under the conditions of a democratic pluralist society and a market economy there is a relatively high level of insecurity regarding the expectations. At the same time the necessity to build strategic coalitions rises. In the place of the triadic relationship between organization, mass media and public we see a multiple relationship between many competing economic and political actors, commercialized and competing mass media and a fragmented public. On the level of corporate actors – organizations and media organizations – there are structural conflicts. On the level of individual actors institutional arrangements secures the necessary co-operation. The overall framework for this his mutual relationship of conflict and co-operation is the mediated public sphere (see figure 2).

Figure 2: relationship between organizations and mass media in the media public sphere



The multiple competitive and co-operative relationships between various organizations and between mass media and organizations are the preconditions for mediatization effects on organizations. The fact that issues will be treated as competitive and conflicting forces organizations to go public in order to set their issues on the public agenda. This is a challenge for organizational communication. The function of organizational communication is to anticipate the expectations of various others – competitors and media – in order to improve the possibility to frame important issues according to the interest of the organization.

5. Consequences of the mediatization of organizations

The theoretical concept of organizational communication which was developed here took its starting point at the mediatization of society and argued that organizations of all kind become “mediatized” themselves by anticipating the logic of selecting information by journalism and by observing media related activities of competing actors. Unlike systems theory the perspective of this paper stems from the theory of action, i. e. the theory of symbolic interaction. In combination with reflections on the public sphere organizational communication was modelled as a strategic function of organizations which aims on providing and framing relevant issues for public communication by anticipating expectations of other professional communicators in the media public sphere.

The higher the degree of institutionalization of organizational communication, the higher the possibility that effects of mediatization of the organization will occur. What are the consequences of the mediatization of organizations? The concluding part of the paper turns to this question.

On the basis of the model which was developed so far, institutionalization of strategic external organizational communication can be seen as the ability of an organization to *systematically* reduce the insecurity of expectations of the communicative other by the use of certain social techniques. Issues monitoring, the use of opinion polls and surveys and media analysis are instruments to screen and interpret the expectations of the various others with which organizations are confronted. By monitoring and surveying, organizational communication will be able to actively participate in public communication instead of reacting on issues which are already set by other actors.

Effects of mediatization of an organization will occur when this anticipative way of communication has repercussions on organizational behaviour. When an organization plans and implements decisions with regard to the expectations of mass media we see a weak mediatization effect. A strong mediatization effect occurs when decisions would not have been taken without the anticipation of the logic of the mass media. The effects will become stronger as the communication departments gain more influence within the decision structure of an organization. Sometimes the orientation towards the logic of the mass media will be dysfunctional: for instance, when decisions which would need time are speeded up by the demand of actuality by the media. At the same

time, mediatization can lead to more publicity and – at least under the preconditions of a functioning public sphere – therefore to more transparency for the general public. As the age of mediation is still going on, mediatization effects on organizations will become ever more important. The mediatization effects are a challenge for organizational communication and for scholars of organizational communication alike.

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