

Susanne Holmström:

AN INTERSUBJECTIVE  
AND  
A SOCIAL SYSTEMIC  
PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM

PUBLIC RELATIONS INTERPRETED  
FROM SYSTEMS THEORY (NIKLAS LUHMANN)  
IN OPPOSITION TO THE CRITICAL TRADITION (JÜRGEN HABERMAS)

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## AN INTERSUBJECTIVE AND A SOCIAL SYSTEMIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM

IN GETTING BELOW THE SHALLOW SURFACE OF THE FOCAL CONCEPTS  
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE TODAY  
THE MAJOR SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF  
JÜRGEN HABERMAS AND NIKLAS LUHMANN  
HAVE PROVEN FRUITFUL AS FRAMES OF INTERPRETATION.  
BASED ON THEIR THEORIES, THIS DISSERTATION INTRODUCES AND DISCUSSES  
TWO PARADIGMS FOR REFLECTING THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PHENOMENON;  
THE *INTERSUBJECTIVE* AND THE *SOCIAL SYSTEMIC* PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGMS.  
THEY INDICATE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS  
FOR THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN TODAY'S SOCIAL ORDER.  
EACH PERSPECTIVE HAS ITS BLIND SPOTS  
BUT THE SWITCHING OF PERSPECTIVES ALLOWS US TO SEE MORE.  
HABERMAS' THEORIES MAKE IT POSSIBLE  
TO DISCLOSE THE IDEAL PERCEPTION  
WHICH SEEMS TO PREVAIL IN THE SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE,  
AND AT THE SAME TIME TO SET OUT NORMATIVE IDEALS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE.  
THE IDEAL IN THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PARADIGM IS  
TO REESTABLISH *THE SYSTEM'S* COUPLING TO *THE LIFEWORLD*.  
THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER MUST ACT AS AN INDIVIDUAL  
THROUGH *COMMUNICATIVE ACTION*.  
PUBLIC RELATIONS IS A MATTER OF ETHICAL ISSUES IN A NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE.  
WE MIGHT ALSO CALL THIS THE *ETHICAL*, THE *COMMUNICATIVE*  
OR THE *NORMATIVE* PARADIGM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS.  
THE KEYWORD IS *LEGITIMATION* IN THE *POSTCONVENTIONAL DISCOURSE SOCIETY*.  
LUHMANN'S THEORIES MAKE IT POSSIBLE  
TO DISCLOSE THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC MECHANISMS  
THAT CAN BE VIEWED AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE,  
AND TO SET OUT FUNCTIONAL CONDITIONS FOR PRACTICE.  
THE FUNCTION IN THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM IS  
TO ASSIST IN MAINTAINING (THE BOUNDARIES OF) THE ORGANISATION SYSTEM  
THROUGH *REFLECTION*;  
TO ASSIST IN ENSURING THAT SOCIETY'S DIFFERENTIATED SYSTEM LOGICS  
CAN FUNCTION AUTONOMOUSLY  
BECAUSE THEY ALSO UNDERSTAND HOW TO FUNCTION TOGETHER.  
THE SPHERE OF ACTION OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER  
IS DEFINED BY THE *SOCIAL SYSTEMS*.  
PUBLIC RELATIONS IS A MATTER OF FUNCTIONAL ISSUES IN A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE.  
WE MIGHT ALSO CALL THIS THE *FUNCTIONAL*, THE *REFLECTIVE*  
OR THE *COGNITIVE* PARADIGM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS.  
THE KEYWORD IS PUBLIC *TRUST* IN THE *CONTEXT REGULATED SOCIETY*.

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# I THE PERSPECTIVE: PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGMS

THE AMBITION IN WRITING THIS DISSERTATION IS TO OUTLINE POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PHENOMENON OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, UNDERSTOOD BOTH AS A SPECIFIC SOCIAL RELATION AND AS A SPECIFIC SOCIAL ACTIVITY WHICH IS BEING INCREASINGLY INSTITUTIONALISED AS A PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.

UNTIL RECENTLY, THE PHENOMENON HAS BEEN EXAMINED AND DESCRIBED MAINLY WITHIN A PRACTICE-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK. BY CONTRAST, THIS DISSERTATION AIMS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE EMERGING METATHEORETICAL RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC RELATIONS BASED ON THEORIES OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND SOCIOLOGY IN PARTICULAR.

THE OBJECTIVE IS TO ISOLATE POSSIBLE FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SOCIAL ORDER OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY.

TO THAT END, JÜRGEN HABERMAS' THEORIES ON BOURGEOIS SOCIETY AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION HAVE BEEN CHOSEN, AS HAS NIKLAS LUHMANN'S DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMS THEORY INCLUDING THE AUTOPOIESIS THESIS. THESE ARE CONTRASTING THEORIES, BUT TO A LARGE EXTENT THEY DEAL WITH THE SAME MOTIFS - MOTIFS WHICH ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC RELATIONS: SOCIETY'S STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES; INCLUDING THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS IN SOCIAL RELATIONS; THE NATURE OF COMMUNICATION AND THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE; AND A FUNDAMENTAL THEME: THE NATURE OF REASON.

LUHMANN HAS BEEN CHOSEN IN CONTRAST TO THE THEORIES OF HABERMAS WHICH HAS DOMINATED MOST OF THE DAWNING PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH IN DENMARK. HABERMAS PROVIDES A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PREVAILING PERCEPTION OF THE ETHICAL IDEAL AMONG PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS. HABERMAS' THEORY PLACES ETHICAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE PRACTITIONER TO PERFORM COMMUNICATIVE RATHER THAN STRATEGIC ACTION. I MAKE THE ASSERTION THAT THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AS ORGANISATIONAL ACTION HAS ESSENTIALLY A STRATEGIC POINT OF DEPARTURE AND WOULD THEREFORE BE JUDGED SOCIALLY UNACCEPTABLE - ILLEGITIMATE - IN A HABERMASIAN THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

BY USING LUHMANN'S THEORIES, THE DISSERTATION WILL ATTEMPT TO EXAMINE WHETHER IT IS POSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE THE PHENOMENON MORE FULLY FROM THE SYSTEMS-THEORETIC PERSPECTIVE THAN FROM THE HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE; OR TO CAPTURE THE PHENOMENON MORE COMPREHENSIVELY BY PROVIDING TWO PERSPECTIVES FOR THE OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS.

## **1. A METATHEORETICAL, REFLECTIVE APPROACH**

Public relations<sup>1</sup> is currently developing from a pre-theoretical activity into a scientifically based profession. Admittedly, it is more than forty years since the first book on public relations was published<sup>2</sup>, and there have been many since, often containing theories on how public relations should be practised. But these contain mainly normative assumptions based on isolated knowledge of practice and know-how, and lack the reflection of epistemological theory. Such theories are not sufficient to give a profession a scientific basis. This requires radically different reflective thinking, and theories that can place the inner logic of the phenomenon into a convincing synthesis.

While a growing number of public relations practitioners have been able in the past few decades to base their work on scientific theories, these theories have been drawn from, in particular, business economics, organisational theory and communications science. These theories have not been developed further into scientific theories of public relations. However essential and useful these theories may be to public relations research, they only examine parts of the phenomenon and operate within their own specific rationale.

It is only in recent years that we have seen the emergence of fundamental scientific research into public relations, especially at certain European universities where we are gradually seeing the establishment of public relations as a graduate study. This requires a position which rises over both practice, and fields of theory confined to practice, to a meta-level, and which can view the different sub-rationalities within public relations research from above. Only then will it be possible to capture a unity and inner logic in the phenomenon of public relations.

### **1.1 AN ANCHORING IN SOCIAL SCIENCE**

In fundamental scientific research into public relations it is necessary to choose the scientific discipline in which to anchor theory development. Public relations practice is commonly based in organisations, and mainly in the private sector. For that reason, many practitioners argue that public relations practice should be anchored in the sciences of *business economics* or *organisational theory*. To a large extent, public relations practice consists of communicative analyses and activities. Many would therefore support the placing of public relations research in the field of *communications theory*. A third possibility is to anchor it *within social science generally and place a special emphasis on sociology*. From this point of

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "public relations" initially, without having discussed it, as it is commonly used to refer to a specific professional activity. This dissertation will consider the phenomenon of public relations in a broad sense, ranging from a specific type of social relation and activity to a specific business practice and its self-understanding.

<sup>2</sup> Edward L. Bernays: *Public Relations*, 1952. Even perhaps Bernays' *Crystallizing Public Opinion* from 1927 could be considered public relations literature.

view, the actual focus of public relations is on conflicts between the different norms or interests of society.

I shall briefly discuss my choice of the sociological approach rather than the others. My arguments may initially be in the nature of claims, but will be developed further throughout the dissertation.

If we placed fundamental scientific research into public relations in the theoretical framework of business economics there would be a risk of the phenomenon being seen mainly in relation to an overall economic goal, and the context would be weakened<sup>3</sup>. If public relations research was based solely on communications science, it would not provide a scientific environment where it would be possible to examine the actual social function of the phenomenon.

**Public relations as a professional practice arose in pluralistic, democratic societies in the course of the present century and should be examined in connection with developments in structures and processes in society. It is therefore necessary to apply theories of sociology** to describe, analyse, interpret and discuss the phenomenon and to place its manifoldness in a meaningful whole.

To provide a brief background to the theories of social science I will discuss in this dissertation and which will form the foundation for the outlined paradigms of public relations, I shall sketch the social processes which seem to have led to the differentiation of public relations as a specific pattern of action.

## **1.2 THE DIFFERENTIATED SOCIETY**

The roots probably go back to the beginning of *the modern era* in the mid-1700s. The previous feudal society was characterised by unity and clarity. Social integration was maintained by religion and feudal traditions. Then the collective meaning that provided identity - religion in particular - was replaced by a reflective subjectivity. The collective action-coordinating orientation was no longer given.

*The Enlightenment* with its new knowledge reinforced the decisive change in the perception of the relationship between individual and cosmos which began during the Renaissance and the Reformation. Focus was now on *subjectivity*. At the same time, new technical inventions made *industrialism* possible. What followed was the breakdown of feudal society's old, traditional modes of production and living. Instead, *bourgeois society* emerged, characterized by the differentiation of society.

Political processes of democratisation isolated power, which previously was held by the prince/church. Industrialisation and the new liberal-economic ideologies isolated the production process to the capital-based *private enterprise*. This previously had a family-based unity. Society was differentiated into main areas, first and foremost, the political system, private enterprise and

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<sup>3</sup> At business schools, public relations has mainly been explained as "publicity" and placed under marketing as a sort of advertising tool. Within a market-economic paradigm, Philip Kotler has used the term *Marketing Public Relations*. Cf. *Marketing Management*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1967. For a criticism of this confusion see, for example, Rühl (1994b):7-8.

science. The transition from the stratified feudal society to the differentiated, capitalist industrial society marked the beginning of the development of pluralist social structures and rationalities. The increasing differentiation and disintegration gradually splitted society and necessitated a corresponding degree of integrative efforts to achieve social cohesion<sup>4</sup>.

**In the light of this development, the growth and institutionalisation of public relations can be seen as an expression of a new pattern of social action. Interpretations of public relations therefore involve the processes of integration and disintegration, but will have essential differences depending on the social scientific perspective.**

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<sup>4</sup> "Differentiation, which means development and increased complexity, requires integration, which means a reduction of complexity and is the core of the 'social phenomenon'." Thyssen (1991):8. Own translation from Danish.



## 2. PARADIGMS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

Jürgen Habermas<sup>5</sup> is the pillar for most of the dawning public relations research being carried out in Denmark. Several theses from the University of Roskilde have attempted to describe the phenomenon of public relations from within a Habermasian conceptual framework. Habermas' theories provides an inspiring approach to the subject, and are perhaps a particularly fruitful framework for studying public relations practice's ideal self-understanding. With Habermas, however, we risk ending up making moralising distinctions between good and bad, ethical and unethical, and it is unlikely that the judgement will ever be in the favour of public relations practice. As a form of strategic communication, public relations practice cannot in principle satisfy Habermas' conditions for ethical discourse<sup>6</sup>. It will always be judged unethical. This could seem like a dead end for research in public relations.

I therefore sought a social theory which could provide both a qualitative and quantitative contrast to Habermas, and a perspective from which it is possible to study other sides of the public relations phenomenon from a meta-level. It appeared to me that systems theory, and in particular the German sociologist *Niklas Luhmann*<sup>7</sup>, could offer a framework for understanding the public relations phenomenon which - perhaps in an interaction with Habermas, despite (or perhaps due to) the fact that the two theories contrast each other - could allow a deeper and more comprehensive insight into public relations.

I was confirmed in my choice of Luhmann when I learned that a number of German professors in recent years have used Luhmann's theories as the reflective paradigm for public relations research<sup>8</sup>. To me, these theories represented a surprisingly different approach. In the first place, they operate on a very different reflective and analytical level than the mostly practice-based literature. Moreover, they represent quite different positions and observations than the Habermas-based interpretations of public relations. However, no clear picture of public relations appears from the work of the German researchers, and I have not used them as a base for my own development of an outline for a systems-theoretic public relations paradigm, but rather as an additional source of inspiration.

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<sup>5</sup> German social philosopher, born 1929.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Burkart in Austria has also developed a concept on the basis of Habermas which he terms "understanding-oriented public relations work" (Burkart 1993). See Section III, 2.6. This in turn has been criticised by, for example, Rust (1993) who points out that public relations as a strategic form of communication is in principle unable to qualify as discourse in Habermas' sense. Cf. Bentele (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Born in 1927, until 1993 professor of sociology at the University of Bielefeld, Germany.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Franz Ronneberger at Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen-Nürnberg, Professor Manfred Rühl at Otto-Friedrich University in Bamberg, Ragnwulf H. Knorr at Erlangen-Nürnberg University, Professor Werner Faulstich at Lüneburg University and Professor Klaus Merten at Münster University.

For several decades, Habermas and Luhmann have criticised each other's theories<sup>9</sup> on key motifs in public relations research: society's structure and processes; including the role of the individual in social relations; the nature of communication and the role of language; and a fundamental theme: the nature of reason. In my attempt to develop a more complex interpretation of the public relations phenomenon, I shall include the paradigm of systems theory which can be seen as a contrast and complement to Habermas' subject-oriented paradigm of communicative action.

The paradigms of public relations developed from the theories of Habermas and Luhmann must not be attributed to these two theoreticians. Neither has conducted research on public relations<sup>10</sup>.

## **2.1 HABERMAS: THE PARADIGM OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION**

Jürgen Habermas is an outstanding analyst of society's democratic self-understanding, its background, beginnings and development. His aim has been to demonstrate that it rests on false premises in modern society. Habermas is based in the normative tradition of critical theory and is one of the most forceful advocates of the modern paradigm of reason in our time. He believes in the possibility that society can be coordinated by the principle of *reasoning* achieved in an ongoing intersubjective, value-oriented dialogue, a principle for dialogue constituted in the *public sphere*. He speaks *normatively* for a greater *humanising* of society.

Habermas divides society into the *lifeworld* and the *system*. The former consists of our stock of cultural knowledge, social norms and individual attributes, for example, whatever concerns the family, morals, religion, social organisations outside the working life and political bodies. Here, a *rationality of communicative action oriented towards understanding* prevails. The system comprises the entire complex of economic-administrative apparatus for the material reproduction of the lifeworld, as it is expressed in private enterprise and public administration.

The concepts of lifeworld and system should not be understood as empirical concepts but rather as different forms of rationality each of which has its own action orientations. They refer, therefore, to different spheres in society, different forms of social actions and different ways of coordinating actions.

Habermas' thesis is that in the social structure of late capitalism, the system has uncoupled itself from the rationality of the lifeworld and has developed its own technocratic *purposive rationality of strategic action*, where

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<sup>9</sup> Their discussion of their theories was published as early as 1971, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie - Was leistet die Systemforschung?*. I do not base my discussion of the contrasts between Habermas and Luhmann on this work. The theories which I discuss (Habermas on the communicative action and Luhmann on autopoiesis) have been developed since 1971.

<sup>10</sup> In *Bourgeois Society* from 1960, Habermas does however deliver a brief, but sharp, critique of public relations. Cf. section II of this dissertation, chapter 1.4.

efficiency and growth become goals in themselves, and therefore find it difficult to justify themselves in a meaningful way in society.

Habermas' analysis points to the opportunity of restoring the coupling between system and lifeworld by continuously justifying the system's action within the lifeworld's rationality. This is where a Habermas inspired paradigm of public relations suggests a possible function for public relations as part of an organisation's efforts to gain legitimacy in society. Public relations practice could be seen as a translator between the lifeworld's understanding-oriented rationality and the system's purposive rationality. The dialogue between these two rationalities takes place in the public sphere, and in our time this especially means the mass media. The lifeworld is an expression for the rationality of the organisation's "publics", while the organisation represents the system. The translation can be made in two directions; this depends on how the public relations practitioner views his/her professional objectives<sup>11</sup>. A critical issue here is to what extent public relations practice is capable of contributing to recoupling the system to the rationality of the lifeworld and thereby to reintegration in society. Or whether public relations is a tool for the system to force through its special purposive rationality, i.e. contribute to *the invasion of private particular interests into the public sphere* and thereby to the colonisation of the lifeworld.

In a Habermasian paradigm, we use a distinction between *communicative and strategic action* in the perspective on public relations. The distinction rests on whether public relations can be practised so as to have a *liberating* effect and hence contribute to strengthening social integration - or whether it infiltrates society's fundamental formation of consensus on the coordination of action with particular, systemic interests, i.e. has an *alienating* effect.

## **2.2 LUHMANN: THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM**

Niklas Luhmann is possibly the most prominent and sophisticated representative of the *systems-theoretic* view of society and a worthy parallel to Habermas in terms of scientific production, breadth, depth and importance.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Luhmann was known particularly as being anti-Habermas. He has since come into his own right<sup>12</sup>, possibly because motifs which are of major importance to Luhmann are also prevalent in the so-called post-structuralistic and post-modernistic debates<sup>13</sup>. Chief

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. modern public relations practice's self-understanding, e.g. Grunig (ed.), *Excellence*, 1992: 50-54, to what extent one professes to an *asymmetrical* or *symmetrical paradigm*, and which social role one assumes (*pragmatic, neutral, conservative, radical* and on the other side *idealistic or critical*).

<sup>12</sup> As an example: Already in winter-spring '96 I followed a lively debate in progress on the Internet about structural coupling vs. interpenetration, on systems' boundary marking etc. To subscribe to this mailing list on Luhmann's systems theory, send the message *subscribe Luhmann* and add your full name to [listserv@vm.gmd.de](mailto:listserv@vm.gmd.de).

<sup>13</sup> Neither systems theory nor Luhmann can however be classified as postmodern. Like Habermas, Luhmann has his roots in modernism.

among these are a critique of subject-based philosophy, the constructivist considerations in epistemological theory, the themes of decentralisation and the parallel developments in the natural sciences, especially the bio-sciences. Modern systems theory - Luhmann included - has in fact its origins in biological theories.

With his thesis of *autopoiesis*<sup>14</sup>, Luhmann developed systems theory into a theory on systems as networks of self-organising, self-thematising, self-legitimising, self-referential communications. Luhmann views society as an increasingly complex and differentiated cybernetic construction of autopoietic social systems, each constituted around its own *meaning*<sup>15</sup>. This increasing complexity has led to a greater division of labour in society. Social systems are grouped around function systems each with its special rationality and its *symbolically generalised media* which act like codes as relief mechanisms for communication within the particular function system. For example, the medium for the economic system is *money*, for the political system it is *power*, for the family system *love*. Here we do not find a lifeworld in contrast to the system - family, art and religion are all social systems.

Habermas accepts Luhmann's systemic conceptual framework in areas such as economics and politics, but is violently opposed to areas such as family and religion being defined as social systems. In turn, Luhmann considers Habermas' theories unrealistic, based on an obsolete European epistemological tradition. Consequently, Luhmann emphatically rejects subject-based social theories. In his theory, meaning is a pre-linguistic, subject-less concept, lodged in the social systems, where communication is also anchored because "individuals cannot communicate"<sup>16</sup>. He rejects Habermas' thesis on intersubjective, language-based communication. **According to Luhmann, all social action is anchored in social systems - not in human beings.**

Similarly, in Luhmann's theoretical universe it is naïve to imagine the possibility of a common reason in a society characterised by many different observation positions - where no one can claim to have a monopoly over a truth which is valid for all. **While Habermas can see the possibility of a common interpretive framework in the lifeworld, for Luhmann there are many 'realities'.**

Luhmann has given the following answer to a question on what constitutes the essence of his discussion with Habermas:

It's hard to describe. It is not only one-dimensional. And I see Habermas in a different way than he sees me. From his perspective, systems theory is an important but incomplete description of human society. So he tries to reach

<sup>14</sup> Autopoiesis = self-creation, Greek. The concept will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>15</sup> In German *Sinn* and not *Meinung*. Sometimes translated with *sense*, but since the authorized translation of my main source of Luhmann's theory, *Social Systems*, uses *meaning*, I have chosen to do so too.

<sup>16</sup> Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1990:31. More about this later in Section III of the dissertation, chapter 1.3. The allegation is based on Luhmann's definition of the concept of communication as constituting social systems, a unity composed of a synthesis between information, utterance and understanding. Human consciousness on the other hand lies in psychic systems; consciousness and communication will therefore always be one another's environment.

beyond the boundaries of systems theory. From my perspective, Habermas maintains a normative concept on rationality or *reason*. [...] To me, reason is a local matter. It depends on the context.<sup>17</sup>

While Habermas follows in the critical tradition of Marx, and others, where the researcher attempts to set out normative theories for a better society, Luhmann does not make any normative, moral decisions as to what is good or bad, merely an analysis of how society functions. **While Habermas criticises the system's boundary setting from a normative position, Luhmann's concern has a functional character: How do systems maintain their boundaries?** He briefly explains the objective of systems theory as:

In its modern version, it is a theory which describes how systems separate themselves from their environment and then encounters problems in maintaining their boundary. That's the essence of it. It can be further developed, it goes on ad libitum ...<sup>18</sup>

Thus, while Habermas regards social integration as an ideal goal for society, Luhmann sees this as a risk to society because integration threatens system boundaries. It is crucial therefore to an understanding of Luhmann (and also of Habermas) to realise the importance of shifting perspective when going from one theory to the other. It would be extremely erroneous to regard Luhmann as one who, from a Habermas worldview, construes a part of society - in this case the "monster", the system, and still less as one who defends it. In his analysis of the concept of the system, Luhmann takes a different point of departure than Habermas. He states that the system is a means of ensuring the survival of society, and subjects the phenomenon to a comprehensive analysis.

### **2.3 MAIN DIFFERENCES IN THEORY PARADIGMS**

The fundamental differences between the two theoretical paradigms of relevance to the interpretation of public relations can be tentatively illustrated as follows, and will be discussed in more detail throughout this dissertation.

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<sup>17</sup> *En djævelsk iagttager [A devilish observer]*. Interview of Niklas Luhmann by Ole Thyssen in Danish newspaper Politiken 31 July 1994. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

	<b>Habermas</b>	<b>Luhmann</b>
<b>STEERING DIFFERENCE</b>	Communicative action rationality/ strategic purposive rationality	System/environment
<b>PROBLEM</b>	Social integration of society; breakdown of system boundaries	System-internal integration; maintenance of system boundaries
<b>EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE</b>	From within/participant + from outside/observer	From outside/observer
<b>METHOD</b>	Normative and descriptive	Descriptive
<b>EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRADITION</b>	Intersubjective constructivism	Innersystemic constructivism
<b>SOCIETY</b>	Lifeworld & system	Centre-less network of social systems
<b>NATURE OF REASON</b>	Communicative rationality anchored in the lifeworld's common interpretive framework	Differentiated into various function logics
<b>OPTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL'S ACTIONS</b>	Liberated through communicative action. Alienated through strategic action.	All social actions are coordinated by social systems
<b>INTERSUBJECTIVITY</b>	Basis for communication and creation of reason	Does not exist
<b>MEANS</b>	Language > < symbolic media	Symbolic media
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	Oriented to intersubjective understanding > < borne strategically by symbolic media	Borne by symbolic media, inner-systemic
<b>IDEAL GOAL</b>	Reasoning with the objective of integration	Maintenance of system boundaries (desintegration)
<b>PUBLIC SPHERE</b>	Ideal (not empirical) principles for coordinating society's reason - Public > < private	No opposition between public and private

*Table 1: Certain fundamental differences between Habermas and Luhmann's theory paradigms.*

## **2.4 PARADIGMS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

The transition from Habermas to Luhmann entails a radical paradigm shift. For that reason, I believe it is possible to speak of two different paradigms of public relations.

I refer to the Habermasian interpretation as the *intersubjective public relations paradigm*, because the perspective is the individual's actions and intersubjective communication. The Luhmannian interpretation I have termed *the social-systemic public relations paradigm*.

The concept of public relations is discussed in this dissertation on a *reflective* level as opposed to the *practice* level. It is not the case in practice that one chooses to conduct public relations activities on the basis of one or other of the paradigms.

### 3. PERSPECTIVES ON REALITY

This dissertation adopts a theoretical approach. Empirical data appear only in the last section of the dissertation where the theories I develop are compared to and tested against practice literature. To avoid the risk that I should give practice and its ideal and self-understanding too great a subjective or local representation, I have chosen to represent the phenomenon by the international code of ethics for practitioners of public relations, the *Code of Athens*<sup>19</sup>, and a major work on public relations practice, the American *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*<sup>20</sup>, published in 1992.

#### 3.1 CODE OF ATHENS

The Code of Athens is seen as an expression of the ideal of public relations practice. The Code is based on the UN's Declaration of Human Rights from 1945 and sets out ethical guidelines for practitioners of public relations. It was ratified at the annual general meetings of both CERP (*Confédération Européenne des Relations Publiques*) as well as IPRA (*International Public Relations Association*) in Athens in 1965. The Code enjoins on practitioners to

endeavour to establish communications patterns and channels which, by fostering the free flow of essential information, will make each member of the group feel that he/she is being kept informed, and also give him/her an awareness of his/her own personal involvement and responsibility, and of his/her solidarity with other members. (Article 2)

undertake to establish the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for dialogue in its true sense, and to recognise the right of these parties involved to state case and express their views. (Article 7)

The dictates of the *Code of Athens* rest on ideals which, on closer analysis, have certain parallels to Habermas' conditions of ethical discourse.

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>20</sup> From here on, I refer to this book as *Excellence*. The book has been edited by Professor James E. Grunig. In addition to reading this book, I attended James and Larissa Grunigs' presentation of the book's main ideas at a lecture arranged by the Danish Public Relations Association and again at a lecture at the University of Roskilde in February 1992. (Larissa Grunig is likewise a professor and collaborator on the book.) *Excellence* is the result of an initiative undertaken by the *American Association of Business Communicators* in which they commissioned a group of researchers and practitioners to examine what constitutes "Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management". This extensive work (638 pages) refers to its mission as *the largest project in the history of public relations* (*Excellence*:xiii). The work aims to present "a general theory of public relations - a theory that integrates most of the wide range of ideas about and practices of communication management in organizations. The general theory integrates most of the available body of knowledge in public relations and expands it to an even more powerful body of knowledge." (*Excellence*:xiv).



### 3.2 EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

*Excellence* claims to formulate a general public relations theory, but is perhaps more in line with the particularly American practice of compiling different experiences from practice and publishing them as public relations theory. I believe therefore that it is justifiable to use the book as an expression of modern public relations practice's self-understanding.

*Excellence* explains the task of public relations as:

Public relations departments help the organization to manage their independence by building stable, open, and trusting relationships with strategic constituencies.<sup>21</sup>

The main argument is that *excellence* in public relations can only be achieved by so-called *symmetrical communication*:

We believe public relations should be practiced to serve the public interest, to develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, and to contribute to informed debate about issues in society.<sup>22</sup>

This concept of public relations is an extension of the four-model classification of public relations James Grunig and Todd Hunt put forward in the book, *Managing Public Relations*, published in 1984. These models were publicity/press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical communication and two-way symmetrical communication. The classification also contained a chronological overview, drawn from American practice. The press agency model is reported to have appeared around 1880, the public information model around the turn of the century, the asymmetrical model at about the time of World War II while the symmetrical model is of a more recent date. Even in *Managing Public Relations*, the symmetrical model was described as the ideal. The symmetrical model is discussed at length in *Excellence*, and a divide is drawn between this and the previous models:

Press agency, public information, and two-way asymmetrical are asymmetrical models - that is they attempt to change the behavior of the public without changing the behavior of the organization.<sup>23</sup>

The asymmetrical paradigm is

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<sup>21</sup> *Excellence*:11.

<sup>22</sup> *Excellence*:9.

<sup>23</sup> *Excellence*:39.

[...] the dominant worldview in public relations - the asymmetrical view that public relations is a way of getting what an organization wants without changing its behavior or without compromising.<sup>24</sup>

However, this is an attitude the book does not endorse, as it

steers public relations practitioners towards actions that are unethical, socially irresponsible, and ineffective.<sup>25</sup>

The symmetrical model is described as:

An organization that uses the two-way symmetrical model, in contrast, uses research and dialogue to manage conflict, improve understanding, and build relationships with publics. With the symmetrical model, both the organization and publics can be persuaded; both also may change their behavior. [...] Public relations is a symmetrical process of compromise and negotiation and not a war for power.<sup>26</sup>

The justification for symmetrical communication is that:

In the long run, the symmetrical view is more effective: Organizations get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want.<sup>27</sup>

There is an unmistakable assumption running through *Excellence* that lying behind the symmetry is strategic purposive rationality, and wherever *Excellence* recommends symmetrical communication the argument is *because it pays* - as it is one of the most *effective* ways to win over the organisation's constituencies to the side of the organisation. Excellence in public relations is measured in relation to the criteria *How, why, and to what extent does communication influence the success of an organization in meeting its goals?* Public relations - including the ideal of symmetrical communication - is equated with "communication that promotes the fulfilment of the organization's goals".

**With its ideal of symmetrical communication *Excellence* claims to use an ideal of ethical dialogue that has parallels to Habermas<sup>28</sup>, but justifies this with considerations reflecting strategic purposive rationality, thereby sending conflicting signals from the perspective of a Habermasian framework. I shall attempt to demonstrate that a systems-theoretic perspective provides a far more adequate explanatory framework.**

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<sup>24</sup> *Excellence*:38-39.

<sup>25</sup> *Excellence*:40.

<sup>26</sup> *Excellence*:39.

<sup>27</sup> *Excellence*:39.

<sup>28</sup> With an explicit reference to Habermas via Pearson, *Excellence*:58-60.

## **4. PROBLEM FORMULATION**

When I began to compare Habermas and Luhmann, it seemed to me that public relations practice, in its ideal self-understanding, takes its point of departure in a world according to Habermas, but in its behaviour is subject to conditions in a world according to Luhmann. I found it important to prove that despite the view that public relations practice's ideal self-understanding can be described with Habermas' theories, it is more a "world according to Luhmann" that sets the agenda for public relations practice.

This is an idea that underlies the entire dissertation, but it has given way to a more subtle wish to examine that which appears when one shifts the perspective on the phenomenon of public relations between two such different social science theoreticians as Habermas and Luhmann.

- \* What do we see when we shift from Habermas' normative distinction between communicative/strategic action to Luhmann's descriptive system/environment difference?
- \* When reason no longer has a common, lifeworld-based interpretive reference but is divided into different logics?
- \* When there is no one truth or reality, but many?
- \* How can the function of public relations be defined if its task, instead of being a question of breaking down system boundaries and promoting social integration, becomes a matter of maintaining system boundaries and preserving disintegration?
- \* How will we view the task of public relations if a social system justifies itself - and the role proposed in the Habermasian paradigm of legitimating organisations in public no longer gives any obvious meaning?
- \* How do we view the role of the public relations practitioner when we shift from a Habermasian perspective with an intersubjective, interlinguistic reason to a Luhmannian perspective where individuals are excluded from communication and the coordination of actions?

As all these questions arose, the unambiguous thesis: *the distinction ideal/'reality'* = *the distinction Habermas/Luhmann* gave way to a more subtle and potentially rewarding line of enquiry. To express it in Luhmannian terms: My ambition became to apprehend as much complexity as possible. At the same time, it became clearer that my intention is not normative. My aim is not to distinguish between good and

bad, right and wrong or ethical and unethical and, normatively, set out a code for the practice of good public relations. My aim is to investigate whether it is possible by adopting a systems-theoretic framework to describe the phenomenon more comprehensively than from the Habermasian perspective; or at any rate to describe the phenomenon more comprehensively by providing two perspectives for the examination of public relations.

Luhmann himself has emphasised that the system/lifeworld difference is merely one way of observing phenomena. There are many other differences<sup>29</sup>, and it is not a matter of discussing which difference is right or wrong but rather of asking which of them can reveal the greatest amount of complexity.

It is therefore my intention to investigate:

- \* whether, and if so how, the examination of the public relations phenomenon through theories of social science can reveal more complexity than the object itself can observe.
- \* whether, and if so how, the examination of the public relations phenomenon from different social scientific perspectives can point to different explanations of the phenomenon.
- \* what specifically we can uncover by examining the public relations phenomenon in a systems-theoretic perspective.
- \* and how the systems-theoretic examination differs from the examination in a Habermasian perspective.

My main line of enquiry in this dissertation will be to address the questions:

**By adopting a systems-theoretic perspective on public relations  
is it possible to describe the phenomenon more comprehensively  
than in a Habermasian perspective?**

**Or alternatively, is it possible to describe public relations  
more comprehensively by providing two complementary perspectives  
for this examination?**

It is my thesis that

**the two perspectives are a fruitful complement to each other  
in the attempt to understand the phenomenon of public relations;  
each theory has its function in the examination of the phenomenon,  
but a social-systemic public relations paradigm**

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<sup>29</sup> For example, labour/capital (Marx), ideas/interests (Weber) and mechanical/organic solidarity (Durkheim). Cf. Kneer & Nassehi:109.

**will more fully than an intersubjective paradigm  
reveal the complexity in modern public relations practice.**

**If we view modern public relations practice  
and its self-understanding from a Habermasian perspective  
the result seems contradictory and difficult to enclose  
in a convincing unity.**

**If, on the other hand, we view the phenomenon  
from a systems-theoretic perspective  
we have a more adequate explanatory framework  
and can more comprehensively describe the complexity.**

Moreover, one of the underlying assertions in this dissertation is that the ideal in public relations practice rests on the intersubjective paradigm, while practice in its behaviour is more likely to be anchored in the social-systemic public relations paradigm.

## **5. PERSPECTIVES**

### **5.1 SECOND ORDER OBSERVATION**

When an area becomes the focus of scientific enquiry, in a systems-theoretic explanatory framework it is subjected to a second order observation based on science's distinction true/false. Only by distancing ourselves from the object under investigation is it possible to expose its blind spots in a larger context and in this way observe a greater complexity than the object under investigation would be capable of observing itself:

A system like science, one that observes other systems and analyses them functionally, uses an incongruent perspective in relation to them. It does not simply trace how these systems experience themselves and their environment. And it does not simply duplicate the view of the self it observes. Instead, the system being observed is covered over with a procedure of reproducing and increasing its complexity that is impossible for it. In its analysis science uses conceptual abstractions that do not do justice to the observed system's concrete knowledge of its milieu or to its ongoing self-experience. On the basis of such reductions - and that is what justifies them - more complexity becomes visible than is accessible to the observed system itself.<sup>30</sup>

The perspective from which this dissertation has been conceived and written can be described as a 2nd-order observation in relation to public relations practice. According to the systems-theoretic concept of reflection, part of the development of public relations is the transition from *self-describing theories* - and here I refer to the pragmatic, application-oriented theories - to *theories of reflection*, which Luhmann defines as:

One can speak of *theories* of reflection if the system's identity is not only indicated in distinction to the environment [...] but also conceptually worked out so that comparisons and relations can enter.<sup>31</sup>

### **5.2 PERSPECTIVE SHIFT**

This dissertation examines public relations in the light of two fundamentally different theories of social science, with their different theoretical traditions and terminology. The shift in perspective will mark the dissertation, the sections of which will attempt to respect the theoretical perspective they are based on. This will also result in deliberate changes of style.

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<sup>30</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:56.

<sup>31</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:457.

Section II, which examines public relations on the basis of Habermas' theories, will respect these in terms of position, concepts and terminology.

Section III, which attempts to describe public relations in a systems-theoretic perspective, will respect the systems-theoretic position, concepts and terminology. I consider this important, even though Luhmann's language is difficult to approach. You almost have to learn a new language to read Luhmann<sup>32</sup>. It is not based on a familiar theoretical tradition or intuitive knowledge. But it is precisely this distancing from the everyday understanding of concepts which gives his language a distinctive precision and at the same time enables a check on understanding. I have attempted to make Luhmann's theories slightly more linguistically accessible than in the original texts, but this is only possible to a certain extent if the formulations are to be faithful references to Luhmann.

Both in Section IV, which compares the two paradigms, and Section V, which sketches some perspectives for public relations, I switch between the positions, concepts and terminologies of both perspectives.

### **5.3 METHOD**

The section on Habermas provides a short introduction to the main ideas in Habermas' extensive works and outlines an intersubjective public relations paradigm on the basis of theoretical developments which have taken place at the University of Roskilde since public relations was established there as a Master's course in 1986<sup>33</sup>.

The section on Luhmann presents the parts of Luhmann's theories that I consider relevant and necessary to an interpretation of public relations in a systems-theoretic paradigm. I bring in systems theorists [Ronneberger, Rühl, Merten, Faulstich, Bentele, Kneer & Nassehi, Willke] wherever they can assist in clarifying an area. Throughout, I attempt to clearly state whether my reference is from Luhmann in the original, or from the "Luhmann school". This is important, because Luhmann's position is the most radical in relation to Habermas. The positions of other systems theoretical researchers - Willke and Bentele for example - seem to veer towards a more Habermas-oriented tradition tending towards ideas of a common, all-encompassing normativeness. In a Luhmannian perspective, this constitutes the breaking down of boundaries, the boundaries of systems theory. They thereby forfeit the chance to develop optimal complexity in the formation of theory. It has therefore been important for me to retain Luhmann's sharp position in my systems-theoretic perspective.

My ambition is to outline possible implications of the interpretation of public relations in a systems-theoretic frame of reference and compare these

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<sup>32</sup> Kneer & Nassehi write concerning Luhmann's language: "The texts are so far away from natural language that an immediate approach is impossible.":12. Own translation from German.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. appendix B.

with a corresponding Habermas based interpretation, and not to carry out an exhaustive analysis of public relations. I attempt to follow Luhmann's functional-structural method when I describe a social-systemic paradigm of public relations. According to Luhmann, systems are not determined by structure, but oriented to function. I do not base the public relations phenomenon in an ontological tradition or describe it in terms of structure and elements as would have been the case if using earlier systems-theoretic analytical methods<sup>34</sup>, but attempt to pin down public relations as a possible solution in relation to the phenomenon's environment. To put it more simply, I do not attempt a description of modern public relations practice, as it understands itself today<sup>35</sup>. I do not start with a description of the structures of the world of public relations, i.e. consultancies, information departments within organisations, associations, courses or academic studies, or typical methods, ranging from analyses of trends in society, interest groupings etc. and strategic development to hearings, press conferences and so on. Neither do I include elements such as a case-based method would have.

A major purpose in developing a systems-theoretic public relations paradigm is to make a comparison with Habermas. In so far as I understand Luhmann, he himself points out that it is precisely the examination of differences that makes the development of theory more fruitful:

For instance, I find it more productive to begin theories not with unity, but with difference, and also not to end up with unity (in the sense of reconciliation), but with one, how shall I put it, better difference. That is why, for example, the relation between systems and environment is important to me, and also the functionalism, because it always means that you can compare something different with each other.<sup>36</sup>

The object of analysis in the final section of the dissertation will be not only the public relations phenomenon but also the theoretical public relations paradigms I formulate. The two paradigms can be seen as functional equivalences in public relations research. By examining their differences in relation to the environment and comparing them, the function of each paradigm is clarified further.

The final section therefore compares and contrasts central ideas in the two paradigms: the function and fundamental rationale of public relations, the ethical role of the practitioner particularly in relation to the understanding of the

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<sup>34</sup> This is in opposition to Talcott Parsons' older structural-functional method which assumes social systems with certain structures, and looks for functional services that must be provided to ensure the survival of the social system. In Parsons' functional analysis, the major problem is the maintenance of the social system. Parsons' causal functionalism, which attempts to see a direct connection between certain system contributions and the survival of the system, is replaced by Luhmann with the so-called equivalence functionalism. Luhmann's theories are not concerned with revealing the relationship between cause and effect; they are more oriented towards the connections between problems and solutions.

<sup>35</sup> Allowances must be made for perceptions I have formed after many years' practice and which possibly comprise my blind spots in this dissertation.



*Code of Athens*, and finally the prevailing ideal of symmetrical communication which we encounter especially in *Excellence*.

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<sup>36</sup> Luhmann in *Archimedes und wir*, 1987:127. Own translation from German.

## **6. TO COMPLICATE THE SIMPLE**

### **- OR REVEAL GREATER COMPLEXITY**

The limits of this dissertation will not allow me to prove that 'the reality' in public relations practice reflect my interpretations, but I can point to implications for the understanding of public relations when the phenomenon is observed in the perspectives of the social theories employed. In systems theory's constructivist framework, it is also an important point that reality - including public relations - depends on the perspective from which it is observed.

Similarly, the method of this dissertation is not normative. I assume relatively uncritical positions on Habermas' and Luhmann's theories respectively as perspectives on public relations. My objective is not to undertake a critical comparison of the two theories - nor to take sides. I do not aim to provide an unequivocal statement on how public relations should be interpreted and understood. This approach would cut off further research, and it is my hope to open up, to provide inspiration for more subtle interpretations of public relations on the basis of general theories of social science.

The claim might be made that the reflections expressed throughout the dissertation only serve to complicate the simple. I would claim that simplicity in this case indicates that only the surface is seen. By employing the perspective of scientific theories, the dissertation aims at revealing a greater complexity than is possible for the object observed itself to see:

As a technique of scientific observation and analysis, the functional method allows its object to appear more complex than it is for itself. In this sense it overburdens its object's self-referential order. It undermines its object's intuitive evidences. It irritates, unsettles, disturbs, and possibly destroys, if the natural lethargy of its object does not adequately protect it.<sup>37</sup>

For me it has been rewarding to recognise in the abstractions I will embark on experiences and observations from my many years as a practitioner of public relations; and to understand connections I would otherwise not have seen.

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<sup>37</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995: 56.

## II JÜRGEN HABERMAS: THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PARADIGM

THIS INTERSUBJECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM IS BASED ON JÜRGEN HABERMAS' THEORIES CONCERNING BOURGEOIS SOCIETY AND ITS PUBLIC SPHERE, AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION.

HABERMAS DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN TWO TYPES OF RATIONALITY: 1) LIFEWORLD RATIONALITY WHICH COORDINATES HUMAN ACTIONS THROUGH INTERSUBJECTIVE COMMUNICATION BASED ON A COMMON INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK AND 2) SYSTEM'S PURPOSIVE RATIONALITY WHERE THE ACTOR'S ACTIONS ARE INTEGRATED BY MEANS OF VARIOUS MEDIA SUCH AS MONEY AND POWER WHICH WE FIND IN BUSINESS, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ETC. THE SYSTEM WAS ORIGINALLY EMBEDDED IN THE LIFEWORLD. IN ORDER TO RELIEVE ITSELF FROM HAVING TO REPEATEDLY COORDINATE ACTIONS BY MAKING THEM THE SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION, THE LIFEWORLD HAS SYSTEMATISED THESE ACTIONS THROUGH SUCH MEDIA. OVER TIME, HOWEVER, THE SYSTEM'S LOGIC HAS UNCOUPLED ITSELF FROM THE LIFEWORLD'S COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY TO BECOME AN AUTONOMOUS, ANONYMOUS LOGIC. THIS IS WHERE WE CAN POINT TO A ROLE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A FUNCTION WHICH CAN CONTRIBUTE TO RESTORING THE SYSTEM'S COUPLING TO THE LIFEWORLD'S RATIONALITY.

IN HABERMAS' RECONSTRUCTION OF THE IDEAL BOURGEOIS SOCIETY WITH THE PUBLIC SPHERE WHERE PRIVATE INTERESTS ARE SUSPENDED IN FAVOUR OF COMMON INTERESTS, WE MEET THE PRIVATE/PUBLIC DISTINCTION WHICH CAN CONTRIBUTE TO MAPPING THE OPERATIONAL SPHERE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS. WHEN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER JUSTIFIES HER SYSTEM-BASED ORGANISATION IN SOCIETY, THIS MUST BE DONE ON THE BASIS OF ARGUMENTS ANCHORED IN COMMON RATHER THAN PARTICULAR INTERESTS. USING HABERMAS, WE CAN DEFINE PUBLIC RELATIONS AS 'RELATIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE' - *PUBLIC RELATIONS* - AS OPPOSED TO FOR EXAMPLE THE *PRIVATE RELATIONS* OF MARKETING. ACCORDING TO HABERMAS, WHEN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER ENTERS THE PUBLIC DIALOGUE, CERTAIN LEGITIMACY CONSTRAINTS - VALIDITY CLAIMS - ARE PLACED IN COMMUNICATIVE ACTION; FOR EXAMPLE, THE CLAIMS TO TRUTH AND TRUSTWORTHINESS. HERE WE CAN SPEAK OF ETHICAL CONSTRAINTS PLACED ON THE PRACTITIONER.

A PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM BASED ON HABERMAS' THEORIES THUS ASSUMES A NORMATIVE CHARACTER; WE CAN SPEAK OF GOOD/ETHICAL/LEGITIMATE AND BAD/UNETHICAL/ILLEGITIMATE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE. IT IS ETHICAL, WHEN THE PRACTITIONER ACTS AS AN INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEING ANCHORED IN THE LIFEWORLD'S INTERSUBJECTIVE RATIONALITY AND COMMON INTEREST, SATISFYING THE CLAIMS ON COMMUNICATIVE ACTION - IN THIS WAY CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS THE SYSTEM'S RECOUPLING TO THE LIFEWORLD. IT IS UNETHICAL, WHEN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER ACTS ON THE BASIS OF THE SYSTEM'S PURPOSIVE RATIONALITY AND OUT OF A STRATEGIC INTEREST, THUS HELPING TO MAINTAIN OR EVEN DEEPEN THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE LIFEWORLD AND THE SYSTEM'S ANONYMOUS PURPOSIVE RATIONALITY - THUS CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIETY'S DISINTEGRATION.

At the centre of Jürgen Habermas' theories lie the structure and rationalities of society, and the function and character of the public sphere and of language. His theories extend broadly over the fields of social science, from the macro- to the micro-perspective, from the overall structures to the role of the individual human being in society. These theories, therefore, have provided a relevant and comprehensive framework for the development of a public relations paradigm. This places the role of the public relations phenomenon in a broader social context than previously possible with the narrower, practice-based theories of public relations. The latter failed to convincingly define and explain the phenomenon in the larger perspective. It has been inspiring to follow the development of a Habermasian public relations paradigm, a process which has been taking place at the University of Roskilde since the study of public relations was established in 1986.

The point of departure for the public relations paradigm developed at the University of Roskilde is the concept of *public relations* as opposed to *private relations*, as, for example, in marketing, and defines public relations practice as the activity whose purpose is to generate legitimacy for the commissioning organisation in the public sphere<sup>38</sup>.

As Habermas' social theories are extensive I shall limit my discussion to the frameworks which allow an understanding of the main interpretations which have been made of the public relations phenomenon based on Habermas' theories, and also permit a comparison with systems theory, which I shall consider in the following section.

Two central features characterize the conceptualization of society in Habermas' theories. First is the bourgeois society's understanding of itself and of the ideal forum where society's actions are coordinated through reason: *the bourgeois public sphere*. Secondly, a society divided into two modes of reasoning; the rationality of understanding found in the *lifeworld*, and the purposive rationality found in the *system*. They are central factors in the interpretation of public relations, as they are the platform and the divide respectively focal to public relations practice in a Habermas inspired interpretation.

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<sup>38</sup> I am not only referring to the communicative aspect - that public relations generates legitimacy (social acceptance); but also of the behavioural aspect - that public relations contributes to legitimate behaviour on the part of the commissioning organisation.

## 1. THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF BOURGEOIS SOCIETY

Relations to *the bourgeois public sphere* are central to public relations practice from a Habermasian perspective. In an attempt to define this abstract concept and our understanding of it, Habermas analysed and criticised the concept in his famous doctoral dissertation in 1962, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere - An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, and discussed it in the light of democracy which arose with the modern era of industrialism and the new pluralistic society around the year 1700.

In the previous feudal society private and public spheres overlapped. With the advent of industrialism, feudal power was differentiated into *private* elements (including *private* enterprise), and the *state* (which incorporated the institutions of public authority). Private elements developed into the sphere of bourgeois society, which now confronted the state as the actual area for private autonomy.

Subjectivity and private autonomy were quite new concepts following feudal society's mythical worldview. In order to protect this private sphere from the new state, a forum was established in line with liberal thinking where private citizens could gather to discuss public matters. This new abstract sphere of society, the *bourgeois public sphere* wedged itself in between the private sphere and the state as a protection against the influence of the state. Also, it became a means for citizens collectively to influence developments and the political decision-making process.

The public sphere of bourgeois society had its roots in the new bourgeoisie. In this public sphere, societal development is governed by *reason* as it is embodied in the *public reasoning* which *private citizens gathered as a public audience*<sup>39</sup> practise in this forum of discussion. For even though legislation is construed as power, in democracy's classical self-understanding it is not the result of political will, but of rational consensus<sup>40</sup>. The functions which the bourgeois public sphere must undertake are the critical search for truth and the normative, i.e. legislative, function based on reason.

Certain rules for dialogue apply to communication in the bourgeois public sphere<sup>41</sup>, in order that truth and reason can be achieved. Participation must be voluntary and equal. Opinions must be governed by common and not private interests. For rational consensus to be at all possible, it must be possible to protect those differences of opinion which always arise in discussion from enforced rectification. In *Bourgeois Society*, Habermas attaches great importance to the

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<sup>39</sup> The concept of public audience requires 1) free communication between participants, 2) that participants are free to define the problems and 3) the equal status of participants (an equality which is often independent of their private status).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Habermas 1962/1991:82.

<sup>41</sup> Dialogue is here used in its broadest sense, including the exchange of opinions in the press and on TV.

specific principles which apply to public discourse, and he develops these principles further in the following decades.

### 1.1 PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC

An understanding of the difference between the concepts of *private and public* is central to an understanding of public relations in a Habermasian perspective.

The classical bourgeois society of the eighteenth century considered market forces as laws of nature which would result in the optimal result for everyone if allowed to operate as freely as possible without interference from the public authorities<sup>42</sup>. In the classical division between public and economic interests 1) in the political area citizens meet in a public sphere where they exchange arguments and reach agreement on both rules and actions, so that their communication results in laws which they impose on themselves, while 2) the same persons meet in the economic area as private citizens in a market where they exchange commodities and agree on conditions of exchange.

This is a classical division, which is still observed in our contemporary understanding of society. We become sceptical if the spheres and roles are mixed. This is relevant to public relations practice for two reasons. Representatives of business corporations may not pursue private, financial interests in the public, political arena. And business corporations regard their area as private and by tradition disapprove of public interference. Thus in the classical bourgeois self-understanding, the *market* is an autonomous, private area, outside the scope of public interference. This self-understanding is fundamental to the capitalistic market economy and to the theory and practice of business economics.

From a Habermasian perspective, a decisive success criterion in *private* business' self-understanding is the greatest possible degree of autonomy, i.e. a minimum of restrictive legislation. To this end, business may use public relations practice as a protection and as a regulation of behaviour in relation to society in order to prevent a stricter societal regulation of the conduct of the business community.

When an issue is deemed no longer to have a merely private character, but is also a public concern, it is moved from the private into the public sphere; and it becomes an object of public discussion. In the Habermasian public relations paradigm, it is precisely these *public* issues in a business corporation or other organisation which form the field of public relations practice.

Taking Habermas' structural division of society as their point of departure, Bager and Glerup identify four types of relations<sup>43</sup> from which they map the sphere of operations for public relations practice.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. for example the invisible hand of classical liberalism.

<sup>43</sup> Bager and Glerup (1991) :37-40 and 105-106.

Relation	Emotional	Economic	Public	Administrative
SPHERE	Intimate sphere (private)	Social sphere (private)	Public sphere	State sphere
FUNCTION	Creation of culture	Material reproduction	Policy formation	Legislative/ executive/ judicial
CRITERIA	Affective	Economic gain	Moral/ethical	Legal evaluation

Table 2: Bager and Gleerup's types of relations, based on Habermas. My own model.

Market relations are located in the *social sphere*; e.g. the organisation's performance on the commodity market via the marketing/sales department and on the labour market via the personnel department.

Public relations is located in the *public sphere*. It is here that the part of social reproduction takes place which is concerned with *policy formation*, i.e. both the achievement of consensus on what constitutes *the good life* (among the literary public), and also how a *just society* can be achieved (among the political public). **Relations in the public sphere - public relations** - are therefore the discussion between free and equal citizens in a shared society, articulated opinions of a social and political nature, which are both reflected and of common interest, and which spring from a *moral/ethical* criterion. It is a crucial factor in our ideal understanding of society that policy formation does not take place outside relations in the public sphere.

In the *state sphere* we find the **legal** relations, whereas relations in the public sphere are concerned with **legitimate** relations. If a relation is governed by fixed rules or legislation, then the relation is anchored in the organisation's administrative departments. If it is a question of legitimacy - the acceptance of conduct and values in the public sphere - then it is a public relation, and it is the management of such relations which in many organisations has become specialised into public relations as a specific activity.

In the intimate and social spheres, we are still within the **private** area. The boundary between private and public is not static. Many issues, also in private companies, have over time moved from the autonomous private sphere and become part of common affairs in the public sphere. From being pure economic relations between private citizens they have become public relations.

Inger Jensen has expressed this idea thus:

In my opinion the very field of public relations is constituted in society in the historical process by which individuals experience that social values are influenced by the activities of private organisations as well as by governmental interventions. And by the historical fact that individuals as citizens claim the right and the duty to evaluate the legitimacy of these activities.<sup>44</sup>

In Habermas' theoretical framework, private enterprises and other organisations are increasingly required to *legitimate* their actions in public. *Legitimacy* involves *social acceptance* of the actions of an organisation - and does not refer to the *legality* of actions<sup>45</sup>. The concept of legitimacy is central to this interpretation of public relations, which thus becomes a process to earn and achieve social acceptance<sup>46</sup>.

Espersen has expressed this in his public relations dissertation as:

Public relations activities are an expression of the recognition that organisations as actors in the private sphere to an ever greater extent and through ongoing dialogue must take the public sphere into account. This public sphere is understood as the actors or groups in society who formulate public social values and, implicitly, the role of organisations in society.<sup>47</sup>

From a Habermasian perspective, it is reasonable to assume that the growing need for legitimacy in the public sphere can partly explain the appearance and growth of the public relations phenomenon in recent years.

## **1.2 THE DECLINE OF THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE**

The thesis which Habermas sets out in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is that the original democratic idea has been distorted. The public sphere of bourgeois society has been invaded by particular interests and can no longer function as a just forum for common reasoning or constitute a critical principle. Nevertheless we live with the illusion that the public sphere of bourgeois society functions according to the ideals which our ancestors drew up hundreds of years ago. As citizens, we have an innate understanding of this abstract social area which is rooted in the classical bourgeois society's ideal.

One of the most essential preconditions for the bourgeois public sphere was a private capitalistic system of free competition which functioned well.

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<sup>44</sup> Inger Jensen (1991):6-7.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. for example the different rationalities behind a much-used pattern for critical interviews: Interviewee (with reference to legality): It is within the framework of the law. Interviewer (with reference to legitimacy): *Yes, but is it within the spirit of the law?*

<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in the world of public relations, it is common to speak of two sides to public relations: the behaviour of organisations (= to earn social acceptance) and communication (= to achieve social acceptance by showing that the organisation is worthy of this).

<sup>47</sup> Jacob Espersen (1993):8. Own translation from Danish.



A pure market economy, however, was never achieved. Instead of a society composed of free and equal private citizens, there arose great class differences and interest groups with widely differing motives and power. By itself alone, the invisible hand was unable to ensure an effective and acceptable distribution of resources, and with the advent of collective organisations, we gradually saw the emergence of a mixed economy. Conflicting interests arose in the public sphere of bourgeois society, which if anything became a battleground for very unequal actors.

At the same time, the need arose for "the welfare state", which through various interventions could address the inequalities in society. While state interventions went deeper and deeper into the private sphere, the private sphere became more public. Two factors added to this development; firstly, the private power centres, by virtue alone of their size and influence, became incorporated into the state, and secondly, the fact that state regulation could only succeed to the extent that private organisations were consulted. Public authority was delegated to private organisations.

We therefore saw a dual tendency for the private and public realms to blend into each other. Thus, the foundation for the classical bourgeois society crumbled, i.e. the boundary between the public and the private.

Moreover, the platform which more than anything represented the bourgeois public sphere, the mass media, was quickly brought to serve commercial interests. Originally, the forum for public opinion was to be found in reading circles, at cultural soirées etc., real flesh-and-blood gatherings. With the expansion of the press, the public sphere entered a new forum for discussion of the common good between free and equal citizens. The press (or rather public media in general) developed, however, into institutions of social power, and became dependent on particular economic interests. The role of the press in the ideal conception of the bourgeois society is merely to disseminate and encourage public reasoning. In reality, public reasoning is influenced by the press and by the particular interests with access to the public via the press.

The public sphere of bourgeois society, according to Habermas, has been replaced by a new elite who makes the important decisions in society without the involvement of the majority of the population. This new "feudal class" (as Habermas has termed it drawing parallels back to feudalism, speaking of the "refeudalisation" of society) comprises the elite from the business community, the public sector, and the fields of culture/communications, interest organisations and politics.

Since the appearance of Habermas' construction and critique of the bourgeois public sphere in 1962, private interests have become even further integrated into societal policy formation. This has been done through the establishment of councils, boards, agencies and commissions and through the inclusion of interest organisations, the delegation of public authority, the segmentalisation of administration and the decentralisation of welfare services. We may therefore speak of **private policy formation**. This concept is examined by *The*

*Negotiated Economy Project*<sup>48 49</sup> and also discussed in the book, *Private Politics*, published in 1992. The authors point to certain traits in the organisation of the welfare state which have influenced the process of change in society over the past 15 years. Even today, there remain certain characteristics of the market and mixed economies, but they are coordinated in a *negotiated economy* defined as

The state form without a centre, where a significant part of the distribution of resources is decided by means of institutionalised negotiations between a number of independent decision centres within the state, organisations etc. which it is attempted to coordinate through language in a communicative arena and through negotiations in a negotiating arena.<sup>50</sup>

In the negotiated economy, societal policy formation is removed from the public sphere and often takes place in more or less private institutions without official participation by the state. Policy formation is undertaken in segments of the public administration, in institutional networks outside the sphere of direct political influence and in arenas where actors from these segments and networks are joined in a new way (*the communicative arena and the negotiating arena*). This coordination takes place within the framework of a common economic conception, the widely accepted *economic rationale*<sup>51</sup>. The critical reasoning of the bourgeois public sphere is replaced by the economic discourse.

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<sup>48</sup> *Projekt Forhandlingsøkonomi [The Negotiated Economy Project]* is located at the Centre for Public Organisation and Steering, Copenhagen Business School, and is concerned with describing changes in the most important social organisations over the past 15 years. The project demonstrates how both the market and mixed economies are now coordinated in economic negotiating institutions, to which the traditional political institutions have lost their monopoly on political formation as it moved to a more private realm - hence the title *Privat Politik [Private Politics]* for the book by Pedersen et al., 1992.

<sup>49</sup> In my opinion, the project is based more in systems theory than Habermas. I nevertheless refer to it in this Habermas chapter of the dissertation because Espersen's reconstruction of civil society's public sphere which I introduce below and which mainly lies within the frame of reference for the *Private Politics* project is anchored in the University of Roskilde's Habermas inspired public relations paradigm.

<sup>50</sup> *Privat Politik*: 46. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>51</sup> In the same way, it is possible to discuss an ecological rationale.

### **1.3 THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE**

In his 1993 public relations dissertation, Jacob Espersen proposes a reconstruction of the public sphere of bourgeois society based on *Private Politics*' analysis of private policy formation in the negotiated economy. The public sphere is not discussed at all in *Private Politics* but, partly due to the total absence of the concept from this study of policy formation in society today, he concludes that

The public sphere in the critical sense clearly does not exist in that context. The Danish population (not the critical public) are presented with a macroeconomic perception; dialogue is disseminated to the population without their active participation. Consequently, a majority of the Danish population accept the content of the dialogue. The population is activated into providing public acceptance for the macroeconomic perception. Thus the actors are successful in indirectly gaining popular legitimation for the institutional arrangement, where policy formation subsequently takes place.

But this does not constitute critical reasoning in a political public sphere.<sup>52</sup>

Instead, Espersen identifies **two types of public spheres**: one is the **private public sphere with institutional representation**, where policy formation actually takes place. The second is the **public sphere of the mass media**, which relates to an active idea with roots in the ideal representation of bourgeois society, where - despite the realities - we still believe we need to legitimate ourselves.

In the private public sphere, mutually independent actors formulate common interests in the communicative arena and implement them in the negotiating arena. The communicative arena is a verbalised interaction between the participating political actors in various forms of institutions all of which have been set up for the same purpose: policy, campaign and discourse institutions (e.g. economic secretariats, councils on ethics, ecology etc.). There is public participation in this arena, but only through the institutional representatives of the public interest organisations. Accordingly, **the public sphere has a structured form in contrast to the public sphere of classical bourgeois society.**

The classical picture of the political public sphere and its social role as described by Habermas [...] is replaced by the participation of the public organised into interest organisations in special policy formation processes. The idea of the public's institutionalised influence on the governing of society is replaced by the participation of interest groups in the institutional arrangements of the negotiated economy.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Espersen (1993):52. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>53</sup> Espersen (1993):112. Own translation from Danish.

The public sphere, as defined in Habermas' model, is not alone in decline - it seems to have been totally eliminated. Hence, the bourgeois public sphere, as we perceive it, has been rendered superfluous to policy formation in society. However, the perception of policy-making in a public sphere persists in our understanding of society and thus continues to have a legitimizing function<sup>54</sup>. Though the bourgeois public sphere, the perception of it has not. Consequently, the actions of organised interests must be legitimated in the public sphere.

#### **1.4 PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

While Habermas' theory about the bourgeois public sphere provides us with a convincing theoretical framework for public relations, it nevertheless offers, in its normative perspective, a strong critique of the phenomenon.

Habermas asserts that public relations practice abuses the traditional democratic functions of the public sphere by integrating them in the competition between organised private interests. In other words, he claims that public relations practice uses a forum which was designed for the exchange of opinions on matters of common interest in order to promote particular interests.

"Opinion management" is distinguished from advertising by the fact that it expressly lays claim to the public sphere as one that plays a role in the political realm. Private advertisements are always directed to other private people insofar as they are consumers; the addressee of public relations is "public opinion", or the private citizens as the public and not directly as consumers. The sender of the message hides his business intentions in the role of someone interested in the public welfare. The influencing of consumers borrows its connotations from the classic idea of a public of private people putting their reason to use and exploits its legitimations for its own ends. The accepted functions of the public sphere are integrated into the competition of organized private interests.<sup>55</sup>

Public relations activities claim to be concerned with issues which it is relevant to discuss in public - *public relations*. Behind these, however, lie *private* market relations which in the ideal conception of the public sphere of bourgeois society [b.s.'s public sphere] do not belong in the public forum, but in mass media's advertising sections. According to Habermas, the public relations practice *purports*

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<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Espersen points out that despite empirical evidence, journalists' conception of themselves as critics of government has increased significantly (especially since 1968) and that the level of conflict between the press and those in power has risen, and points to the "mass-mediatisation" of public debate (Espersen:96).

<sup>55</sup> Habermas 1962/1991:193. It appears from Habermas' description of public relations that the analysis relates to the type of public relations which Grunig & Hunt later termed two-way asymmetrical dialogue.

to work for the common good of society - but in fact promotes particular interests.<sup>56</sup>

Habermas therefore believes that the public relations efforts of organisations and enterprises have helped to transform and weaken the public sphere of bourgeois society. This has been done by removing public discussion from the public sphere by means of manipulative and demonstrative conduct towards the public. In this light we can view Espersen's description of the charades taking place in the mass media while the actual decision-making is performed in the institutions of the private public sphere. Espersen's updating and dividing of the public sphere confirms rather than contradicts Habermas' assertion that public relations practice attempts to gain public acceptance through "manipulative publicity":

Publicity is generated from above, so to speak, in order to create an aura of good will for certain positions. Originally, publicity guaranteed the connection between rational-critical public debate and the legislative foundation of domination, including the critical supervision of its exercise. Now it makes possible the peculiar ambivalence of a domination exercised through the domination of nonpublic opinion: it serves the manipulation of the public as much as legitimation *before* it. Critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity.<sup>57 58</sup>

According to Habermas, the conditions for participation in the public arena are, among others, that the discourse must be *free of coercion* and must be *governed by the common interest*. If we examine the "dialogue" which public relations practice engages in with contemporary fora for public communication, it is seldom free of coercion and governed by the common interest, but has economic or administrative backing, and promotes particular interests because its function is usually subjected to the economic imperatives of capitalistic society. This does not prevent the **appearance** being maintained of a discourse free of coercion and in the common interest.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, Bager and Glerup conclude that public relations does not only knowingly use but also maintains the fiction of the bourgeois society's ideal public sphere. Public relations practice plays on the lingering perception that

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<sup>56</sup> This can be seen in contrast to advertisements which honestly declare their intentions and are aimed at private persons as consumers - advertisers do not conceal their cards. Public relations, on the other hand, in a Habermas construction, conducts a secret game with hidden intentions and interests in order to influence public reasoning.

<sup>57</sup> Habermas, 1962/1991:177-178.

<sup>58</sup> The University of Roskilde project *Kritik af offentligheden* [Critique of the Public Sphere], on which I and others worked in the second year of our public relations studies in 1988, analyses how the public sphere works in real life. The point of departure for the project was the public debate of the water environment action programme in the mid-80s and the political decision-making process in the case. The analysis supports Habermas' theory that the function of the public sphere has changed from being a forum for informed reasoning to a potentially manipulable world for politicians and interest organisations.

<sup>59</sup> In public relations practice's ideal self-understanding, it would seem that practice actually strives to fulfil these conditions and not only attempts to appear as if it did. An example of this is the Code of Athens which I shall return to below.

private persons represent the reasoning public, and that as such they form public opinion. The purpose of the simulated common interest is to generate sales and a quasi-political credit for the transmitter. In a Habermasian paradigm, public relations practice is an attempt to disguise private particular interests as common interests.

Habermas' theories on the bourgeois public sphere provide an explanation for the traditional focus of public relations practice on relations to the mass media, and, moreover, lay down a normative critique of the practice for (ab)using the public sphere by promoting particular interests. With the introduction of the concepts of *system* and *lifeworld*, Habermas provides ammunition for a renewed attack on public relations practice - or for the defence of its justification.

## **2. COMMUNICATIVE ACTION**

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas sets forth a number of principles for *the discourse* as it should ideally be practised in the public sphere. Habermas later developed these principles so that in his magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981, he could present universal validity rules for language which would enable language to act as a bearer of meaning between individuals and thus as coordinator of *communicative action*. In connection with this, he developed his theory on the division of society's rationalities into the *lifeworld* where communicative action prevails, and the *system* where actions are strategically coordinated.

### **2.1 THE SYSTEM AS A RELIEF MECHANISM FOR THE LIFEWORLD**

The lifeworld/system distinction is not an empirical analysis of reality. The concepts should not be regarded as sociological areas, so that for example one is part of the system at work, and part of the lifeworld while relaxing at home with the family. They should rather be understood as different forms of rationality, two fundamentally different ways of reasoning, to which are attached different ways of coordinating actions. Habermas uses the distinction to arrive at an analysis of the different ways we as individuals can act today.

To find the roots of this division, we must return to the beginning of the modern era and industrialisation which saw the separation of independent areas in particular for the administration of society and for material reproduction. Thus, the lifeworld relieved itself of the increasing complexity by transferring a part of the social action over to the system.

The rationality of the lifeworld is based on a stock of culturally transmitted and linguistically organised patterns for interpretive understanding. It is our store of cultural knowledge, social norms and individual skills, whatever concerns, for example, the family, culture, morals, religion, social groups outside work and political bodies. It is here that *communicative action* takes place on the basis of certain fundamental, common values<sup>60</sup> and a conception of the good life and a just society. Language, as the intersubjective medium, is the bearer of communicative action, which is *oriented towards understanding* in order to coordinate human actions. This is an important factor in relation to systems theory, that for Habermas individuals are not just environments to each other; according to Habermas, language and culture are *intersubjective*. In this way, individuals relate to the same (life)world. Consequently, Habermas asserts that even though society *as a system* has been decentralized, it contains a *virtual*

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<sup>60</sup> Which, however, are not universally valid, but historically relative.

centre in the lifeworld - not necessarily as a reality but as an active projection<sup>61</sup>. Therefore, individuals can make universal claims according to their background which then meet similar claims made by others. Ideally, this triggers an ongoing dialogue in which individual claims are argued until consensus has been reached.

Lifeworld's communicative action is a demanding process. As a relief mechanism, part of society's action has been transferred over to the system. The system comprises all of the complex economic-administrative apparatus for the material reproduction of the lifeworld as it is expressed both in private enterprise and public administration. This is the domain of *strategic action*<sup>62</sup> which is coordinated by *purposive rationality* - a widespread cognitive-instrumental measure for organisational action and the principal approach to the solution of problems based on the technical-scientific domination of the world. Here, intersubjective communication is replaced by functional, goal-oriented interaction which is coordinated via symbolically generalised media<sup>63</sup> with money and power as the strongest. Symbolic media are a form of standardised norms which are pre-understood and therefore coordinate the actions of actors in a simple, flexible and effective manner, without the need to first achieve consensus through intersubjective dialogue.

Habermas accepts the necessity for symbolic media - but only in the system<sup>64</sup>. In the lifeworld, communication cannot be replaced by the symbolic media. An important factor for understanding public relations is that this claim relates not least to public reasoning. **Social integration must be based on the lifeworld's communication oriented to understanding and not on the purposive strategic "communication" of the system, which for Habermas does not qualify as communication.** In a Habermasian perspective, we "communicate" without communicating when the communication is strategic and unreflected borne by the symbolic media.

In the lifeworld, the parties concerned coordinate their actions communicatively, while processes in the system, according to Habermas, are not intentionally steered. Here actions are not coordinated as a result of agreement between actors, but in a decentral adjustment to a system *which nobody or everybody or somebody else has created*<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Habermas, *Der philosophische Discurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt 1985:417. It is on the basis of such considerations that Habermas can be characterised as a constructivist.

<sup>62</sup> Or instrumental action for non-social situations.

<sup>63</sup> A concept I shall discuss in the chapter on systems theory.

<sup>64</sup> This is in clear conflict with systems theory which does not recognise a non-mediatised lifeworld. I shall return to this in Section III on systems theory.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Thyssen (1991).



	<b>Lifeworld</b>	<b>System</b>
<b>TYPICAL EMPIRICAL AREAS IN SOCIETY</b>	Family, leisure, culture, morals etc.	Economic and political subsystems
<b>OPTIONS FOR ACTION</b>	Communicative action	Strategic action
<b>RATIONALITY</b>	Normative Oriented to values	Purposive Choice of objectives
<b>COORDINATION OF ACTIONS</b>	Intersubjective recognition, normative consensus	Symbolic media
<b>GOAL</b>	Consensus Quality of life	Efficiency Quantity
<b>MEANS</b>	Linguistic communication	Symbolic media
<b>ROLES</b>	Human beings	Employee/consumer Political participant/social welfare client
<b>REALISATION</b>	Self-fulfilment	Realisation of organisational goals
<b>AUTHORITY</b>	Legitimate	Conventional/legal
<b>METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE</b>	Participant	Observer

*Table 3: Key differences between system and lifeworld.*

## **2.2 THE SYSTEM AS A STRAIN ON THE LIFEWORLD**

Habermas' central thesis is that **whereas the system was originally closely coupled to the lifeworld as a practical relief mechanism, in the late capitalist social structure the system has uncoupled itself from the rationality of the lifeworld and has created a technocratic purposive rationality where efficiency becomes an objective in itself.** The various subsystems have each their demarcated, immanent efficiency objectives where, for example, money and power and the survival of the system may serve as sufficient, unreflected objectives in themselves. Actions are coordinated according to the autonomous standards of the system in question, and are uncoupled from reason in society.

**This means that whereas the system previously had meaningful justification in its coupling to the lifeworld, it is increasingly difficult for the system to achieve social acceptance.** We therefore see a change in the demands for legitimacy. Previously, purposive rationality and the symbolically generalised media (as effective tools for the common good) secured legitimacy for private enterprise, public administration etc. Now, however, society increasingly requires that the logics of money and power justify themselves through communicative processes. Antonsen and Jensen speak of a development from conventional to postconventional interaction and point to the fact that whereas the legitimacy of organisational activities was previously institutionalised through socially and symbolically generalised values, legitimacy is to an increasing extent becoming related to discursive processes on ethical questions. They point out that we seem to be in a transition between conventional and postconventional authority - authorities which are anchored in different norm sets, to which are attached different forms of rationality and communication<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Antonsen and Jensen ((1992), and Jensen (1993).

Form of interaction	Authority in social interaction	Legitimacy	Rationality in interaction
Post-conventional	Power, reward or punishment	Orders and obedience; legitimacy is irrelevant	(Historically prior to differentiation in forms of rationality and communication)
Conventional	Authority anchored in social roles and functions based on internalised norms and common values	Activities are legitimate when performed by socially authorised actors in accordance with socially/ symbolically generalised values and norm systems	Interaction based on socially and symbolically generalised values of a systemic purposive rationality
Post-conventional	Authority is subjected to discourse - procedures which reflectively formulate ideals and principles which test reasoning on norms and values	Actions are legitimate when they respect solutions as a result of discourse which in principle is open to all	Communicative action - based in the lifeworld's rationality of interpretive understanding

Table 4: Forms of legitimacy in relation to authority, rationality and communication. Adapted from Antonsen and Jensen (1992) and Jensen (1993).

Norms and values have become generalised in *the conventional order*, they have become embedded in systems and are generally taken for granted without further discussion. The lifeworld uses this as a relief mechanism by transferring part of the social actions over to the system where actions are systematised according to socially and symbolically generalised values to avoid repeatedly making them the subject of discussion between individuals.

In the course of time however, the system "forgets" that it has its roots in the lifeworld, and uncouples itself into its own purposive rationality. This creates a need for renewed discussion, where individuals question the legitimacy of the conventional values from the rationality of the lifeworld. We move into *the postconventional phase*.

In the postconventional form, essential values are not taken for granted, and actors are not authorised. On the contrary. Authority is granted to the discourse itself. New ideas, values, mutual understanding of the common good and social issues are all on the agenda for discursive processes between - potentially - all actors in society.

In this we find a plausible explanation for the emergence of modern public relations as being part of organisational efforts to achieve legitimacy in society. The ideal task for public relations would be to reestablish the coupling between the lifeworld and system; i.e. to reintroduce lifeworld rationality as the real anchoring of system rationality and thus secure social acceptance for organisational activities.

### **2.3 THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND PRINCIPLES FOR DIALOGUE**

When authority is given to the discourse itself, then legitimacy must rest on the principles and procedures employed in the attempt to find ethical solutions. The discourse must be anchored in the lifeworld's communicative action whose primary characteristic is that those involved, via a critical consideration of arguments, seek to arrive at mutual agreement. *Language* is central to this process:

[...] only communicative action is able to consider language as the medium for an uncurtailed process of understanding in which the "speaker" and the "listener" simultaneously - and consciously - relate to something in the objective, the social and the subjective world.<sup>67</sup>

For Habermas, language plays a crucial role in modern society as the filter for the transmission of culture (norms, opinions, values) - language, because it is the intersubjective medium in the intersubjective world of the modern era. The linguistically expressed interaction has taken over the role which in former times religious worldviews played as a means of social integration and coordination of action.

It is thus through language, through our (more or less conscious) ongoing exchange and modification of opinions that we create meaning, order, reason in our world. This reason is a communicative rationality; rationality is something we (two or more participants in the communication) reach through a critical consideration of each other's arguments. In order that this linguistic interaction can qualify as part of the ongoing communication which creates reason in society it must satisfy certain conditions for *ethical discourse*. We possess intuitive knowledge of these conditions; we usually do not need to speculate on whether the linguistic expressions we make or hear fulfil them or not. But Habermas has developed an analytical tool for examining language. Verbal

<sup>67</sup> Nørager (1987):46-47. Own translation from Danish.

expressions are, for Habermas, *speech acts*<sup>68</sup>, and the validity of these acts is tested according to the so-called universal-pragmatic *validity claims*. Fundamentally, they are claims to rationality. The validity claims therefore refer to the three forms of rationality (relating to the objective exterior world, the social world and the subjective inner world), and to a fourth relating to comprehensibility. The dimensions and claims of speech acts may be simplified as<sup>69</sup>:

<u>THE CONSTATIVE SPEECH ACT</u>	
Dimension: Nature	
the outer, <i>objective</i> world	
Claim: Truth	
<u>THE EXPRESSIVE/ REPRESENTATIVE SPEECH ACT</u>	<u>THE REGULATIVE SPEECH ACT</u>
Dimension: Transmitter,	Dimension: Society,
the inner, <i>subjective</i> world	the <i>social</i> norms
Claim: Trustworthiness, truthfulness	Claim: Rightness
<u>THE COMMUNICATIVE SPEECH ACT</u>	
Dimension: Language	
Claim: Comprehensibility	

*Table 5: The four basic speech acts.*

In addition, a speech act must relate to the basic attitude bearing it. If language is used to achieve mutual understanding, it is an expression of communicative action. If however it is engaged in to influence the other part, it is the strategic action of the system. In this case the action is not steered by communication: the symbolic media are action coordinators. Language is used as a *strategic means* and not as a means for achieving intersubjective understanding. These actions are therefore coordinated by the symbolic media and not by communication.

The precondition for legitimacy which communication must satisfy in the postconventional interaction is that it is borne by the lifeworld. If it is anchored in the system, it does not generate reason. We get an unreflected, strategic coordination of society's actions, anchored in the symbolic media. An essential factor in understanding public relations is **that public reasoning oriented to generating legitimacy can satisfy the conditions for ethical discourse only with the lifeworld as interpretive framework.**

<sup>68</sup> Based on English theories on speech acts by Austin and later Searle whose central idea is the double structure of speech: the *content* of a speech act (the locutionary) and the *way* it is presented (the illocutionary). An actor does not only *say* something in a speech act, but *does* something also. This allows language to be used strategically, to *obtain* an effect in the listener.

<sup>69</sup> See Ole Togeby's *Praxt* for a detailed introduction to and further treatment of Habermas' validity claims. Available only in Danish.

## 2.4 ACTOR OR OBSERVER - PARTICIPANT OR SPECTATOR

The discursive processes which are a condition for postconventional legitimacy are embodied in the lifeworld's communicative action. Communicative action is intersubjective - not intersystemic. We act as individuals - not as representatives of the system. The same is true for the public relations practitioner who is working for organisational legitimacy. A discursive process presupposes the participation of individuals whose actions are oriented to the lifeworld's mutual understanding. But what are our possibilities for acting as an individual and is it at all possible to be aware of whether or not we are acting as an individual or on behalf of the system?

In his *colonisation thesis*, Habermas claims that money and power integrate individuals beyond their will. The rationality of the system has not only uncoupled itself, it has colonised<sup>70</sup> the rationality of the lifeworld. The market and state have achieved their independence as "a piece of norm-free sociality"<sup>71</sup> which imposes its imperatives on the lifeworld. This leads to

sectional planes that result when systemic constraints of material reproduction inconspicuously intervene in the forms of social integration and thereby mediatize the lifeworld.<sup>72</sup>

*Mediatization* means that the integrative mechanisms of the system intervene in social integration. Actions in the traditional lifeworld spheres are coordinated "unconsciously" by media such as money and power. This occurs when the material reproduction of the lifeworld is swallowed by the economic system whose imperatives influence the lifeworld. Individuals are "systematised" into economic roles such as wage earner and consumer and, correspondingly, to the role of social welfare client or participant in the political system<sup>73</sup>.

Taking the lifeworld as our point of departure, our perspective in a relation is participant oriented, and we speak individual-to-individual (also when we represent an organisation as transmitter). When our point of departure is the system, then our perspective is that of spectator; the individual has become *objectified*.

		Lifeworld	System
		Public administration	Market
<b>Roles</b>	"Human being"	Social welfare client Political participant	Employee Consumer
<b>Relation</b>	Social	Administrative/Judicial	Economic

Table 6: Roles and relations in lifeworld and system.

<sup>70</sup> Colonisation: Control and exploitation of foreign land or areas. Control involves the imposition of structures, exploitation the transfer of resources to the colonial power.

<sup>71</sup> Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, 1985:404. Own translation from German.

<sup>72</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1981/1984:II, 186.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Norager (1987):173.

Thyssen points however to the possibility of us as individuals effecting a "reverse freedom movement" by conscious attitudes to the system from the interpretive horizon of the lifeworld:

What is the relation between the systemic media and everyday communication, which deals *formally* with understanding and coordination, but which *substantially* can thematise money, power etc.? What does it entail that the media colonises everyday life and neutralises its dynamic? Is this a one-way process or is it possible to detect a reverse "freedom movement", so that the lifeworld recaptures its ability to understand and coordinate?<sup>74</sup>

According to Thyssen, the lifeworld/system theme is two-fold: 1) it relates to the money and power which can be consumed, and 2) it relates to an ideological attitude to the systems of money and power. Despite the fact that this duality can contain inner conflicts, because concrete actions can be subjected to a systemic imperative which "mocks" the ideology, Thyssen believes that it nevertheless has a reverse effect on the systems of money and power. Not by visibly empowering the individual consumer or voter, but by causing sensitivity to movements on the economic and political markets.

It would thus seem that colonisation does not only go in one direction - from the system to the lifeworld. It also applies in the other direction, so that the rationality of the lifeworld "humanises" the system. Examples of this could include *consumer boycotts* and *the ethical audit*<sup>75</sup>. Public relations practice can also be observed from this perspective.

To conclude, the public relations phenomenon can be explained in two ways in a colonisation context: **as part of the system's colonisation of the lifeworld - or part of the lifeworld's counter-attack**. Of vital importance here is whether the public relations practitioner is acting as an individual and participant oriented by the lifeworld's rationality oriented to mutual understanding, or as a representative of the system ("employee") and spectator oriented by a strategic purposive rationality.

## **2.5 ASYMMETRICAL OR SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION**

In Habermas' division of rationality and the concepts of communicative and strategic action, in his discourse ethics and his universal-pragmatic validity claims and in the tendencies towards changes in concepts of legitimacy, we have a framework for understanding a number of central concepts in modern public relations: *asymmetrical and symmetrical dialogue*. These are concepts which are

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<sup>74</sup> Thyssen (1991):132. Own translation.

<sup>75</sup> The latter could however be interpreted as a strategic, manipulative action on the part of the system to "placate" the lifeworld.

widely used in the field of public relations today<sup>76</sup>, but which in general public relations literature seem to be treated in a pragmatic manner and in clichéd formulations. With his universal validity claims for language, Habermas provides an analytical tool for more precise guidelines for the conditions that need to be satisfied in order that communication can be termed symmetrical.

There must be symmetry between the participants in the dialogue on each of the four types of speech acts. For the constative speech act with the validity claim to objective truth, it is, above all, a question of *(access to) the same knowledge*. As regards the representative speech act, the claim is above all to the subjective trustworthiness of the participants in the dialogue: both parts must enter the dialogue with *a wish to achieve mutual understanding - and the intention to act accordingly*. With regard to the social dimension of the regulative speech act, the condition is that *the dialogue is not distorted by the exertion of special power or influence by one of the parties over the other party*: each party is free and equal in a symmetrical dialogue. In the case of the communicative dimension, the participants in the dialogue must have *the same opportunity to understand and interpret the text and in the same way*.

Of vital importance is the type of rationality steering the communication. In order for communication to be symmetrical and be characterised as a dialogue which can fulfil its function of generating legitimacy in the postconventional form, it must be borne by the lifeworld's rationality oriented towards mutual understanding by both parts.

The conditions which need to be met from a Habermasian theoretical framework for the dialogue to be described as symmetrical as opposed to the concept of asymmetrical dialogue can be illustrated as follows in table 7. The decisive factor is that communication can be classified symmetrical only if it is undertaken as communicative action - and not driven by a strategic purposive rationality.

An interaction from system rationality to system rationality can also be termed symmetrical - but this is not communication. From the Habermasian theoretical framework, it is not possible to communicate from the strategic purposive rationality of the system. For the conditions for symmetrical communication to be satisfied, the participants in the dialogue must be anchored in the lifeworld, and the communication must be individual to individual. **If we communicate as spectators, e.g. as conveyors of an organisation's message, we do not satisfy the conditions for discursive processes which generate postconventional legitimacy by recoupling the rationality of the system to the lifeworld.**

Asymmetrical communication can mean, conversely, that system rationality is transferred to the lifeworld and contributes further to the colonisation of the lifeworld. The generation of reason requires symmetrical communication.

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<sup>76</sup> Inspired in particular by James E. Grunig, first in his book, *Managing Public Relations*, with Todd Hunt, 1984, later in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*, 1992.



Asymmetrical communication in public reasoning is, according to Habermas, an abuse of the public sphere.

<b>Concepts of dialogue in public relations according to Grunig &amp; Hunt</b>	<b>Participants in dialogue</b> 1. <b>Rationality:</b> 2. <b>Orientation:</b> 3. <b>Means:</b> 4. <b>Actor role:</b>	<b>Nature of dialogue from</b> 1. <b>Habermas' action concept:</b> 2. <b>Ethical evaluation according to Habermas:</b>
<b>Symmetrical dialogue</b> Postconventional legitimacy	1. Lifeworld <-> lifeworld 2. Understanding <-> understanding 3. Language <-> language 4. Participant <-> participant	1. Communicative action  2. Ethical conduct in the public sphere
<b>Asymmetrical "dialogue"</b> Conventional legitimacy	1. System <-> lifeworld 2. Strategy <-> understanding 3. Symbolic medium <-> language 4. Spectator <-> participant	1. Strategic action  2. Unethical abuse of the public sphere
<b>Not dialogue</b>  (Legality)	1. System <-> system 2. Strategy <-> strategy 3. Symbolic medium <-> symbolic medium 4. Spectator <-> participant	1. Strategic action  2. Unlikely to have access to the public sphere

*Table 7: The concept of symmetrical communication related to Habermas' types of communication.*

## **2.6 PUBLIC RELATIONS BETWEEN SYSTEM AND LIFEWORLD**

Just as Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere is central to emerging research into public relations in Denmark, so too is the system/lifeworld distinction. The theory on communicative and strategic action is a fruitful tool for an analysis of public relations practice and its self-understanding, and the uncoupling thesis, which describes changes in the anchoring of legitimacy in communicative processes, provides a framework for understanding the development and growth in the profession in the past ten years. As Mortensen comments:

The greatest potential [in Habermas' theories] lies perhaps in the assertion that the abstract logics of instrumental rationality, power and money, can be

required to justify themselves through communicative processes in modern society where everything is debatable.<sup>77</sup>

Central to a Habermasian paradigm is the role of public relations in these communicative processes. A decisive factor in a discussion of public relations is therefore to ascertain to what extent practice communicates, that is: contributes to a genuine dialogue in a desire to achieve mutual understanding which the actors intend to respect and act upon. Or whether the interaction which the public relations practitioner is commissioned to perform purports to be communicative, but is in fact strategic interaction.

Most public relation practitioners would say that communication<sup>78</sup> is central to their work, and that language is their most important means of communication. From a Habermasian perspective, however, it is possible to "communicate" without communicating when - although expressed by means of language - the actual bearers of the communications are the symbolic media. If practitioners of public relations use language to *achieve understanding, sympathy and support in the public spheres they have or wish to establish contact to [on behalf of their commissioning organisation]*,<sup>79</sup> with the principal intention of furthering the organisation's economic objectives and not of reaching mutual understanding - then language is not being used in an intersubjective manner but is steered by symbolic media, and from a Habermasian perspective is used asymmetrically as a means of manipulation.

It is only in an *intersubjective paradigm of public relations* based on language as an intersubjective means of achieving mutual understanding that it is possible to speak of public relations practice living up to the ideal for the public relations practitioner as expressed in the *Code of Athens*, of which Article 13 requires that the public relations practitioner

shall refrain from using any "manipulative" methods or techniques designed to create subconscious motivations which the individual cannot control of his/her own free will and so cannot be held accountable for the actions taken on them.

From the theoretical standpoint of Habermas, this statement implicitly requires that the universal-pragmatic validity claims to symmetry be satisfied.

Similarly, it is possible to understand the *ideal* conceptions of asymmetrical and symmetrical communication as expressing the purposive rational interaction and the communication oriented to mutual understanding respectively. The reason I emphasise the "ideal" dimension is because the symmetrical model in public relations literature is presented on the one hand as an expression of the

<sup>77</sup> Nils Mortensen in *Fra Marx til Habermas [From Marx to Habermas]*:270. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. for example the names of various public relations consultancies, and the many sub-titles - communication and management consultancy etc., and also public relations managers use of the job title communication manager or director.

<sup>79</sup> Extract from the definition of public relations from The Association of Public Relations in Denmark. Own translation from Danish.

wish for dialogue oriented to achieving mutual understanding with one's surroundings and on the other hand is recommended as an element of an organisation's strategic behaviour<sup>80</sup>. From a Habermasian perspective this constitutes asymmetrical, manipulative interaction, which fails to live up to the conditions for communicative processes which generate legitimacy in its postconventional form.

The Austrian Roland Burkart has drawn up a concept of public relations on the basis of Habermas and his universal-pragmatic validity claims which he terms *public relations practice oriented to understanding*. The object of this practice, according to Burkart, is not to overcome a conflict but to create a position which he calls a *definition of situation*<sup>81</sup>.

Levels of problem/ Tasks for ... -> PR activity phases	The objective world/ truth (theme/case matters)	The subjective world/ trustworthiness (organisations, institutions, individuals)	The social world/ rightness (legitimacy of interest)
Information	Have the relevant facts and concepts been presented and defined unambiguously and their consequences examined?	Have the self-image and own intentions been presented and examined? (Competent contact person.)	Has the self-interest been justified by arguments?
Discussion	Have the relevant facts and concepts been discussed?		Has the reasonableness of the arguments been discussed?
Discourse	Has agreement been reached on guidelines for evaluation of decisions in the case?		Has agreement been reached on guidelines for evaluation of moral decisions?
Definition of situation	Has agreement been reached on the facts?	Has agreement been reached on the credibility of the actors?	Was agreement reached on the actual moral decisions?

Table 8: Checklist for public relations oriented to understanding, Burkart:34 (from working paper by Szyscka). Own translation from German.

Similarly, it has been maintained that public relations as a strategic form of communication is unable to contribute to discourse in the Habermasian sense<sup>82</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Excellence.

<sup>81</sup> Roland Burkart, *Public Relations als Konfliktmanagement. Ein Konzept für eine verständigungsorientierte Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, Braumüller, Vienna:19-37 referred to in working paper by Peter Szyscka, Lüneburg University 1995.

<sup>82</sup> By Holger Rust, Die Entgrenzung von Wissenschaft und Praxis, in Bentele/Rühl Theorien öffentlicher Kommunikation, München: Ölschläger, Germany 1993:275-287 - cf. Günter Bentele, *Öffentliches Vertrauen-normative und soziale Grundlage für Public Relations* in Armbricht and Zabel (ed.), *Normative Aspekte der Public Relations*, Opladen 1994:154.

### **3. A PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS**

In his analysis of the bourgeois public sphere, his division of rationality into system and lifeworld and his communicative validity claims, Habermas' theories have proved to be a relevant and comprehensive framework for understanding the development of a public relations paradigm which widely encompasses the phenomenon.

A Habermas inspired interpretation of public relations is that practice, as a form of interpreter between the system rationality and the lifeworld rationality, contributes towards legitimating its commissioning organisation in relation to society's demands for the consideration of the common good. Bager & Gleerup define public relations therefore as *relations in the public sphere* and practice as the *handling* of these relations which are described as *social relations where participants in their role of citizens are oriented to reaching mutual understanding with each other with regard to a case in the political theme "the relationship between system and lifeworld"*.<sup>83</sup>

A decisive factor in an understanding of public relations practice is therefore whether the rationality of the practitioner is anchored in the system or in the lifeworld, or to what extent the public relations practitioner works in "the sectional planes that result when systemic constraints of material reproduction inconspicuously intervene in the forms of social integration and thereby mediatize the lifeworld"<sup>84</sup>, or to what extent practice contributes to the reverse movement. As Bager & Gleerup have expressed it:

The big question is whether the public relations function is colonising and thus destructive for the basic creation of meaning among members of society. And in addition to this - and perhaps of even greater importance - is it possible to carry out the public relations function so that it has a liberating effect and in that way actually supports democracy?<sup>85</sup>

**Possible interpretations of public relations in a Habermasian theoretical framework could be that practice either contributes to further mediatising the lifeworld or that it contributes to reestablishing the system's coupling to the rationality of the lifeworld.**

Many symptoms in public relations practice point to the *mediatisation thesis*. A Danish public relations handbook comments that

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<sup>83</sup> Bager & Gleerup (1991). Own translation from Danish.

<sup>84</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1981/1984:II-186.

<sup>85</sup> Bager & Gleerup (1991):187. Own translation from Danish.

Ultimately, PR has to bring about that the opinions of the interested parties and those in power are humanised, understood and accepted.<sup>86</sup>

Conversely, public relations practice's ideal self-understanding would seem to favour the *recoupling thesis* as it is expressed in the *Code of Athens*. From its anchoring in United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, the Code states

that, apart from "rights", human beings have not only physical or material needs but also intellectual, moral and social needs, and that their rights are of real benefit to them only in-so-far as these needs are essentially met; and that, in the course of their professional duties and depending on how these duties are performed, Public Relations practitioners can substantially help to meet these intellectual, moral and social needs.

Note the reservation "depending on how these duties are performed". If we interpret public relations as the practice which promotes legitimacy generating communicative processes between organisations and other actors then the **way** the practice is conducted is vital to the legitimacy of public relations practice itself.

The central question is to what extent it is possible to conduct public relations as a legitimate activity in a Habermasian paradigm. The prerequisite is communicative action in the public sphere. This entails:

- \* that the rationality bearing the communication must be anchored in the lifeworld - and not an expression of the system's strategic action
- \* that the intention of the communication is to achieve mutual understanding, which is respected and acted upon - not the isolated organisational objectives
- \* that the public relations practitioner acts as a citizen, as an individual - not as an "employee" and a representative of the organisation
- \* that the speech acts of the communication satisfy the universal-pragmatic validity claims which can be described as a requirement for symmetry in the objective, the subjective and the social worlds (as well as similar access to knowledge, similar intentions with regard to dialogue, free and equal participants in the dialogue)
- \* that the motive is the public common interest - not the private particular interest

If we consider public relations in a Habermasian perspective we look in particular at

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<sup>86</sup> Blach and Højberg (1989):20. Own translation from Danish.

- \* the ethical dilemma of public relations
- \* the form of the specific *public* relations which form the field for public relations practice as opposed to, for example, the *private* field of marketing
- \* the focus of public relations practice on the public sphere, and we obtain a framework for understanding the emphasis placed by public relations practice on relations to the mass media (this despite the existence of an actual private policy forming public)

However, it is the moral evaluation of public relations practice on the basis of communicative/strategic action which lies at the heart of the Habermasian perspective:

- \* public relations practice is good/ethical/legitimate when as communicative action it can contribute to recoupling the system to the rationality of the lifeworld; and thus generates legitimacy for organisational activities in a postconventional sense
- \* public relations practice is bad/unethical/illegitimate when as a strategic action it contributes to the system's colonisation and mediatisation of the lifeworld, i.e. counteracts the recoupling of the system to the rationality of the lifeworld; and is thus not capable of generating legitimacy for organisational activities in a postconventional sense

It is my claim that a strategic point of departure is fundamental to public relations practice as organisational action and that public relations practice therefore, from Habermas' theoretical perspective, is socially unacceptable - illegitimate. This creates a need for other social scientific perspectives to provide a more elaborate approach to the phenomenon of public relations.

### III NIKLAS LUHMANN: THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM

A SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM IS INSPIRED BY NIKLAS LUHMANN'S DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMS THEORY WITH THE THESIS OF AUTOPOIESIS IN SOCIAL SYSTEMS.

ALL SOCIAL ACTIONS ARE ANCHORED IN SOCIAL SYSTEMS. THEY ARE ABSTRACT SOCIAL NETWORKS CONSTRUCTED ON THE BASIS OF THEIR OWN SPECIFIC MEANING WHICH IS DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF THEIR ENVIRONMENT AND WHICH SEPARATES THE SYSTEM FROM THE ENVIRONMENT. IN THIS WAY A SPECIFIC PATTERN OF ACTION, SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE, ABILITY, MOTIVATION AND DYNAMICS ARE CREATED WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SYSTEM. IT IS THIS DIFFERENTIATION OF FUNCTIONS, TASKS AND SERVICES INTO DIFFERENT SYSTEMS WITH THEIR OWN SPECIFIC LOGIC WHICH, AS AN EFFECTIVE DIVISION OF LABOUR, IS THE FOUNDATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF MODERN SOCIETIES. CONSEQUENTLY, THE CENTRAL PROBLEM OF THE THEORY IS MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS' BOUNDARIES.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SYSTEMS DEPEND ON HUMAN BEINGS (BUT ARE NOT COMPRISED OF HUMAN BEINGS) AND CAN RANGE FROM ORGANISATION SYSTEMS, E.G. A BUSINESS ENTERPRISE, A MINISTRY OR A COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT, TO INTERACTION SYSTEMS, E.G. A MEETING OR A CONVERSATION. ON ANOTHER LEVEL WE FIND THE APERSONAL FUNCTION SYSTEMS WHICH ARE BASED ON SYMBOLIC MEDIA SUCH AS MONEY IN THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM, POWER IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM, TRUTH IN THE SCIENTIFIC SYSTEM, LOVE IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM ETC., AND IN WHICH MOST PERSONAL SOCIAL SYSTEMS FUNDAMENTALLY ANCHOR THEIR SPECIFIC MEANINGS.

LUHMANN'S THESIS OF AUTOPOIESIS STATES THAT SOCIAL SYSTEMS CREATE AND RECREATE THEMSELVES THROUGH A PROCESS OF CLOSED COMMUNICATION WHICH IS NORMATIVELY ANCHORED IN THE SYSTEM'S OWN MEANING. THE SYSTEM IS OPEN TO INFORMATION FROM THE ENVIRONMENT, BUT CREATES AN IMAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS OWN WORLDVIEW. A SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC INTERACTION WITH THE ENVIRONMENT HAS A COGNITIVE, NOT A NORMATIVE NATURE. THE POSSIBILITY DOES NOT EXIST FOR A SHARED INTERSYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE OR SHARED REASON.

EVERY SOCIAL SYSTEM BY NATURE RESISTS OUTSIDE REGULATION WHICH WOULD WEAKEN ITS MEANING BOUNDARIES, IMPAIR ITS INNER DYNAMICS AND THREATEN THE EXISTENCE OF THE SYSTEM. THIS OCCURS WHEN, FOR EXAMPLE, THE POLITICAL SYSTEM'S MEDIUM OF POWER OR THE LEGAL SYSTEM'S MEDIUM OF LAW ARE IMPOSED ON THE MONEY-MEDIATED ECONOMIC SYSTEM OR SCIENCE'S MEDIUM OF TRUTH. TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES TOWARDS INCREASING SELF-REGULATION AND DECENTRALISED RECIPROCAL CONTROL BETWEEN SOCIAL SYSTEMS CAN BE CONSIDERED A MEANS OF RESISTING EXTERNAL REGULATION. A REQUISITE FOR SELF-REGULATORY BEHAVIOUR WHICH TAKES THE ENVIRONMENT INTO ACCOUNT IS REFLECTION IN THE SYSTEM, I.E. THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND ONESELF AS THE ENVIRONMENT FOR OTHER SYSTEMS. A SYSTEM ENGAGES IN SELF-REGULATORY BEHAVIOUR FOR THE SAKE OF ITS OWN SURVIVAL.

IT IS MY THESIS THAT THE MEDIUM OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IS TO AN INCREASING EXTENT CO-REFLECTED BECAUSE IT IS REQUIRED AS A PREREQUISITE FOR THE AUTONOMY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS. AS THE THEORY OF AUTOPOIESIS STATES: A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF OPENNESS IS A PREREQUISITE FOR CLOSURE, WHICH IN TURN IS A PREREQUISITE FOR A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF

OPENNESS TO BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT RISKING THE SYSTEM'S EXISTENCE. THE OBJECTIVE IS TO STRENGTHEN THE NORMATIVE BOUNDARIES - BUT ALSO TO SECURE COGNITIVE INTERACTION WITH OTHER SOCIAL SYSTEMS. THE ULTIMATE OBJECTIVE OF REFLECTION IS THEREFORE TO GENERATE THE SOCIAL TRUST WHICH TO AN INCREASING EXTENT IS REQUIRED AS A PREREQUISITE FOR INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIAL SYSTEMS, THE MORE COMPLEX AND DIFFERENTIATED SOCIETY BECOMES. OTHERWISE, UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE ENVIRONMENT WOULD BLOCK INTERACTION.

IN THIS SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM WE CAN IDENTIFY A ROLE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS. VIA THE PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM (A FUNCTION SYSTEM COORDINATED BY THE MEDIUM OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY) PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE ENCODES AND DECODES IMAGES TO BE USED IN THE RECIPROCAL REFLECTION IN SOCIAL SYSTEMS. THE OBJECTIVE IS TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC TRUST BETWEEN SYSTEMS.

ALL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL SYSTEMS ARE COGNITIVE AND ANCHORED IN THE LOGIC OF THE SPECIFIC SOCIAL SYSTEM. THIS APPLIES ALSO TO PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE. AND BECAUSE COMMUNICATION, ACCORDING TO LUHMANN, IS NOT A RESULT OF HUMAN ACTION BUT A PRODUCT OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS, IN THIS PERSPECTIVE THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER IS WITHOUT ACTUAL INFLUENCE ON THE COORDINATION OF SOCIAL ACTIONS.



A common characteristic of the sciences in this century is the tendency to think in systems. System originally meant something composed of elements. The concept basically refers to a whole which is more than the sum of its parts. This is how the concept has been understood for centuries. Modern systems thinking originated in the 1930s with the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *The General Systems Theory*. He replaces the traditional difference between whole and parts with the concepts of system and environment, and focuses as much on relations as on the elements in a system. Systems thinking focuses on the interaction between parts, their reciprocal actions and influence. Instead of emphasising innate qualities in an ontological tradition, systems thinking proposes that these qualities are given importance only in interaction. This is a constructivist perspective. We owe to von Bertalanffy the recognition of the concept of organised complexity (as opposed to previously unorganised), and also the distinction between open and closed systems. By means of an exchange process with their environment, open systems can develop an inner dynamic and adapt their state when their environment changes, without having to completely change their system structure. The distinction between open and closed systems becomes more subtle in the second generation of general systems theory. Here the focus is more on the autological aspect of systems, which is expressed in the concept of self-organisation. This concept and its basic hypothesis, that systems control their inner state and maintain themselves and their inner processes by their own inner dynamics, is most clearly expressed in the concept of autopoiesis<sup>87</sup> which the Chilean biologists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco Varela developed in the 1960s and 70s. An important element in their theory is the principle which states that a prerequisite for the closure of the autopoietic system is its openness. In the autopoietic theory, openness and closure belong together.

Systems theory has spread to most other fields of science, from psychology to astronomy - and to social science where the theory is applied primarily to social systems. The systems-theoretic perspective considers social phenomena as the results of interactions between social structures and the functions these structures serve. Therefore, systems theory does not emphasise the individual but views society from without, from an observer's perspective<sup>88</sup>. The individual, and the values and aims of the individual, play a secondary role in relation to the purpose the individual serves in the larger structure in which the individual is situated. Systems theory asserts that the actors' social interactions are determined by the larger social order, and that such interactions serve to maintain this order.

From its origin as a linear mono-causative end-means model, systems theory has in recent decades developed into a poly-causative, circular system/environment paradigm. Pioneering this development in social science is the

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<sup>87</sup> From the Greek *autos* (= self) and *poiesis* (= creation)

<sup>88</sup> As opposed to the participant's perspective which, for example, is one of Habermas' two perspectives.

German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann goes much further than earlier systems theoreticians and replaces traditional theoretical concepts with a new and comprehensive set of concepts. However, he retains *systems theory* as his "trademark because it is in the domain of general systems theory one finds the most important groundwork for the type of theory we strive for here".<sup>89</sup> In his magnum opus published in 1984, *Social Systems*, Luhmann translates the biologists' thesis of autopoiesis to sociology. This is his thesis on social systems which create and recreate themselves in closed self-referential processes which require a certain amount of openness. Systems function simultaneously as open and closed systems:

We will designate systems as autopoietic when the elements of which they consist produce and reproduce themselves through the elements of which they consist. All what such systems use as their unity - their elements, their processes, their structure and themselves - is defined only within the system through precisely such elements. Or in other words: there is neither input of unity into the system, neither output of unity from the system. That does not mean that no relations to the environment exist but that these relations are on another level of reality than the autopoiesis itself.<sup>90</sup>

Within the field of social science, Luhmann's theory is based particularly on the American Talcott Parsons' structural-functionalist systems theory from the 1950s. Over the years, however, Luhmann has developed social scientific systems theory quite distinctly from Parsons. Contrary to Parsons, Luhmann does not assume that a social system always contains patterns of similar, binding, collective norms and values. The reason, according to Luhmann, is that in modern, diversified, differentiated societies it is difficult to find lasting, uniform value and structure norms. Luhmann, therefore, places function before structure and calls his systems theory functional-structuralism. The functional analysis assumes more importance while the structure-oriented perspective recedes into the background. In Luhmann's theory of functional-structuralism, social systems are no longer defined with the aid of specific patterns of values and norms but through the context of self-referential social actions.<sup>91</sup>

Luhmann's systems theory is surprising, different, inspiring - and comprehensive. This dissertation does not claim to provide an introduction to Luhmann's theories on social systems but will solely discuss areas which I have found to be central to an interpretation of public relations in a systems-theoretic paradigm.

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<sup>89</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995: Preface:1.

<sup>90</sup> Luhmann, *Die Autopoiesis des Bewußtsein*:403. In *Soziale Welt* 36, 1985:402-446. Own translation from German.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Kneer & Nassehi, chapter 3.1 *Funktional-strukturelle Systemtheorie*.

First I outline the perspective for observation - modern systems theory drawing mainly from Luhmann's theories - and then describe how I regard the phenomenon of public relations and its environment in a Luhmannian perspective. This will entail a high level of abstraction which avoids the reduction of complexity which concrete examples from "the real world" would involve.

I therefore say with Luhmann:

Our flight must take place above the clouds, and we must reckon with a rather thick cloud cover. We must rely on our own instruments.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995: preface:1.

## 1. LUHMANN'S THEORY ON SOCIAL SYSTEMS

When the actions of two or more individuals are connected, a social system is formed which separates itself from its environment. In their simplest forms, social systems are informalised *interaction systems* - e.g. a couple of individuals in conversation. On a more formalised level we speak of *organisation systems* - e.g. associations, business enterprises and governments, but also nursery schools, bridge clubs, communications departments etc.; we cannot equate an organisation system directly with an organisation. Finally, we have *society*, the most comprehensive social system of all:

[...] every social contact is understood as a system, up to and including society as the inclusion of all possible contacts.<sup>93</sup>

Social systems cannot survive without psychic systems, i.e. human beings. However, social systems *do not consist of human beings*. As psychic systems, human beings will always constitute the environment for social systems<sup>94</sup>.

Social systems	Psychic systems
Constituted of <i>meaning</i> processed by <i>communication</i>	Constituted of <i>meaning</i> processed by <i>consciousness</i>
<p>The societal system with subsystems: function systems</p> <p>Organisation systems (formalised)</p> <p>Interaction systems (informalised)</p>	<p>Human beings = persons, connecting points for social systems' communication.</p> <p>Environment for social systems</p>

Table 9: Characteristics of social and psychic systems respectively.

From Luhmann's comprehensive set of concepts on social systems, I shall focus on the following: complexity, meaning and boundaries of meaning, communication,

<sup>93</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:15.

<sup>94</sup> This also applies to employees in an organisation.

closure/openness (autopoiesis), observation, structural coupling, reflection and codes/symbolic media.

The main problem in Luhmann's systems theory is the *complexity* of the world. This complexity is reduced by distinguishing between system and environment. This distinction is achieved through *meaning*<sup>95</sup>. Meaning makes it possible to deal with complexity by creating boundaries which separate the system from its environment. Meaning is created and recreated through *communication*. The process takes place in a *closed*, self-referential process, but a certain amount of *openness* is necessary to allow in information which will stimulate the inner-systemic communication. Communication is coordinated by means of *codes* (*symbolically generalised media*) around which social systems are grouped in society's differentiated function areas. This allows for a division of labour with a high level of specialisation and complexity within each function area, but it divides society into systems each of which views the world from the perspective of its own logic and which closes around its specific meaning. The environment cannot penetrate the system, but can only influence it structurally from outside. Systems are thus *structurally coupled* to their environment. This is achieved by means of *observation*. *Reflection* is a higher form of observation. Here the system contemplates itself in relation to systems in its environment and is motivated to show some consideration to other systems. This is the role for public relations which I shall attempt to outline. Contrary to the Habermasian public relations paradigm, the social-systemic public relations paradigm proposes that this consideration does not have a normative character, but is motivated by a functional consideration for survival.

### **1.1 COMPLEXITY**

Everything in systems theory is system or environment - with the exception of the world<sup>96</sup>. Between the hypercomplexity of the world and human consciousness lies a vast gap. This is where social systems operate. They perform the function termed *reduction of complexity*. Social systems liaise between the infinite complexity of the world and the individual human being's capacity to process this complexity.

By establishing a boundary and constituting a difference between exterior and interior, areas of different complexity emerge. The world is always more complex than any system in the world. This means that in the world more events are possible than in the system: the world can assume more conditions than a

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<sup>95</sup> In German: Sinn (**not** Meinung).

<sup>96</sup> The world does not constitute a system as it does not have an environment to define itself in opposition to. Neither can it be considered an environment as this would presuppose a system which did not form part of that environment. The world is therefore neither system nor environment; it comprises all systems and their environments. It is the total of system and environment. Everything that takes place, takes place in the world. Cf. Kneer & Nassehi (1993):40.

system. Compared with the world a system excludes possibilities for itself, reduces complexity and in this way creates a higher order with fewer possibilities, towards which experience and action can orient themselves better. The division between interior and exterior gradually stabilizes a reduction of complexity, to accomplish a reduced selection of possibilities of experience and action.<sup>97</sup>

Social systems reduce world complexity by allowing only certain options to enter - and by excluding all others as *islands of reduced complexity*<sup>98</sup>. Therefore, the boundaries between system and environment mark a fall in complexity; the environment will always be more complex than the system.

At the same time, this allows the construction of a specific complexity within the boundaries of the system, anchored in the specific meaning of the system.

## **1.2 MEANING AND MEANING BOUNDARIES**

A system's specific *meaning* separates it from its environment. A social system is therefore quite abstract<sup>99</sup>, mainly meaning which develops and separates itself from other meaning. The concept of meaning is central to Luhmann's theory, but is understood in quite a different sense from its usual usage in sociology. It is central because it is meaning which constitutes and integrates social systems. Different because meaning is not a subjective concept. For Luhmann, meaning is a *pre-linguistic*<sup>100</sup> *functional* act of selection. He has defined meaning as:

primary, that is without reference to the concept of subject, because this as an identity constituted by meaning already presupposes the concept of meaning.<sup>101</sup>

Social systems' selection is not steered by human consciousness, but is an inbuilt process in social systems.

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<sup>97</sup> Luhmann, *Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität, über die Funktion von Zwecken in sozialen Systemen*, 1968:121. My emphasis. Own translation from German.

<sup>98</sup> Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, volume 5, 1970/1990, 1:166. Own translation from German.

<sup>99</sup> For example, in systems theory the boundaries of an enterprise are not walls or the factory gate (though they may symbolise boundaries of meaning), but what is meaningful to an enterprise. Outside the enterprise, something different gives meaning than within.

<sup>100</sup> Meaning is not created by language, contrary to Habermas' theory. Consequently, social theory cannot be based on language theory: "In social theory, the primacy of language theory as well as the concept of intersubjectivity must give way to the concept of self-referential, closed systems of social communication." Luhmann, *Wie ist Bewusstsein an Kommunikation beteiligt?* in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht/K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (eds), *Materialität der Kommunikation*, 1988:899.

<sup>101</sup> Luhmann, *Sinn als Grundbegriff der Soziologie*, in *Habermas und Luhmann*, 1971:28. Own translation from German.

Selection can no longer be conceived as carried out by a subject, as analogous with action. It is a subjectless event, an event that is triggered by establishing a difference.<sup>102</sup>

The system is enclosed within *meaning boundaries* which makes the difference between what makes sense within the system and what makes sense in its environment.<sup>103</sup>

Social systems are systems identified *by meaning*. Their boundaries are not of a physical nature (although of course physical boundaries, for instance of a territorial nature, can symbolise boundaries of meaning), but are boundaries of what may be relevant in contexts of meaning. Meaning is a particular strategy for the selective conduct under the circumstance of high complexity.<sup>104</sup>

Meaning assumes a life of its own in the form of the system, its own justification which gradually is no longer questioned. Meaning governs what the system chooses to regard as the world, as a manageable reality. As a result, meaning assists in the selection from the universe of possibilities; meaning is *identified structures of expectation*.

It is the difference in meaning between system and environment which constitutes a system and which is pivotal in Luhmann's systems theory. Meaning cannot cross boundaries. **Were meaning to cross boundaries, the difference between system and environment would vanish, the boundaries would be broken down and the system would disintegrate. The central problem for Luhmann is therefore to understand how systems maintain their boundaries intact.**

### 1.3 COMMUNICATION

Luhmann points out that

It is impossible to find a 'supporting substance' for meaning. Meaning supports itself in that it enables its own self-referential reproduction.<sup>105</sup>

This reproduction is achieved through communication. The system itself produces and reproduces its meaning - and thereby itself - by continuously connecting communication borne by meaning to communication. The social system's "production apparatus" is communication - the basic elements of a social system.

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<sup>102</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995: 32.

<sup>103</sup> Spencer Brown describes the boundary between system and environment as "A distinction, not a separation". George Spencer Brown: *Laws of Form* quoted in Rühl (1994).

<sup>104</sup> Luhmann, *Moderne Systemtheorien als Form gesellschaftlicher Analyse*, in *Luhmann und Habermas*, 1971:11-12. Own translation from German.

<sup>105</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:98.

Thus, a social system is constituted as an action system on the basis of communicative happenings, and using their operative means. The system generates a description of itself in itself to steer the continuation of the process, the reproduction of the process.<sup>106</sup>

In a Luhmannian theoretical framework, however, communication does not correspond to what we understand by the term in its common usage or in the usual tradition of communications theory. If we understand patterns of social behaviour to be social systems, as Luhmann does, this is contrary not alone to Habermas, but to virtually the entire philosophical and sociological tradition which describes social contexts in concepts of a subject philosophy where the human being is the ultimate social unit: society is made up of human beings, and communication is understood in relation to communicating subjects. This is not how Luhmann views communication. Human beings exist in social systems' environments, and are not instigators of communication. **According to Luhmann, communication is not a result of human action, but a product of social systems.**<sup>107</sup>

Human beings cannot communicate; only communication can communicate.<sup>108</sup>

Psychic systems (human beings) operate with meaning in closed consciousness contexts. Social systems operate with meaning in closed communication contexts. The systems of consciousness which form part of communication close around their self-reference. On the other hand, communication and consciousness are structurally coupled. One cannot exist without the other, but they do not merge into each other. They are two different, diverse systems which remain one another's environment. Consequently, we do not have some kind of super-system which includes communication and consciousness along the lines of a collective consciousness or Habermas' communicative action.<sup>109</sup>

Instead, Luhmann sets out his own *concept of communication oriented to selection*. **Communication is the selection of what is meaningful.** Selection is undertaken by the system itself and does not involve human choice. A system is self-reflected communication. The system creates and recreates itself by

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<sup>106</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:165.

<sup>107</sup> Just one of many examples which demonstrate Luhmann's collision course with the generally accepted concept of communication is a quotation from the Dutch professor of public relations, the theologian Anne von der Meiden: "perhaps it is time to rename the well-known concept of corporate communication and communication management with the term 'human communication'. Organisations do not communicate, individuals communicate. Business-to-business communication is a nonsense term: Business does not communicate, individuals do." von der Meiden:7.

<sup>108</sup> Luhmann in *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1990:31. Own translation from German.

<sup>109</sup> The reason why daily communication is considered human action is, according to Luhmann, because social systems reduce communication to utterance and impute this to action for individual persons. In this way, social systems ensure for themselves points of identification which they can refer to in the ongoing process of communication, But, he points out, **as soon as communication is considered an action of utterance the emerging character of the social is mistaken**. Cf. Kneer & Nassehi (1993):89.



processing complexity through the means of communication as an ongoing selection process.

In this way communication sets system formation in motion. As long as it continues, thematic structures and redundantly available meaning contents are formed. A self-critical mass emerges, which brings forth offerings that can be accepted or rejected.<sup>110</sup>

Communication functions as a *threefold processing of selection*<sup>111</sup> consisting of information, utterance and understanding between alter and ego<sup>112</sup>. The social system selects from several possibilities with regard to information, utterance and understanding. It is only when these three factors form a synthesis that it is possible to speak of communication. Understanding is a prerequisite. In public relations practice, understanding is usually used together with concepts such as empathy and support, concepts with psychological connotations<sup>113</sup>. Luhmann, on the other hand, does not regard understanding as an operation the purpose of which is to improve transparency between human beings, but as an inner-systemic product<sup>114</sup>. Every consecutive communication signals whether the previous communication has been understood as intended:

The fact that understanding is an indispensable feature in how communication comes about has far-reaching significance for comprehending communication. One consequence is that communication *is possible only as a self-referential process*.<sup>115</sup>

From this, it must follow that understanding is possible only within the same social system as it requires that ego and alter have the same frame of reference<sup>116</sup>. **Communication must therefore be understood as an inner-systemic selection process which cannot take place across a social system's meaning boundary.**

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<sup>110</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:173.

<sup>111</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:140.

<sup>112</sup> Where alter can be compared to transmitter and ego to addressee/receiver in common usage. Note that the addressee/receiver is prioritised.

<sup>113</sup> This is reflected in extracts from the definition of the Danish Association of Public Relations: [...] to achieve understanding, empathy and support in the public spheres [...] to attempt to achieve more understanding for the enterprise and its importance to society.

<sup>114</sup> As it will appear, Luhmann, unlike Habermas, does not believe that communication is a question of human beings adapting to each other, but rather for social systems "to seek and find attunements with regard to things in the world that are contingent, that is, that could also be otherwise". Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:158.

<sup>115</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:143.

<sup>116</sup> "One can speak of communication, however technical the trappings of the process may appear, only if a change in the state of complex A corresponds to a change in the state of complex B, even if both complexes had other possibilities for determining their states." Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:39.

I would, however, point out that communications systems can arise between social systems - also organisation systems - in the form of zones of interpenetration between systems<sup>117</sup>. These can assume various levels of stability and permanence as formalised organisation systems as well as interactions which continually emerge and disappear. Luhmann writes of the necessity of the establishment of "auxiliary systems":

The eigen-selectivity of boundary mechanisms, boundary zones, and boundary lines reduces not only the external but also the internal complexity of a system, with the result that a contact mediated by boundaries cannot convey to any system the full complexity of another, even if its capacity for processing information would otherwise be sufficient. A system's internal organization for making selective relations with the help of differentiated boundary mechanisms leads to systems' being indeterminable for one another and to the emergence of new systems (communication systems) to regulate this indeterminability.<sup>118</sup>

In the following, when referring to systems theory, I shall use the concept of communication to apply to *communication with the same system reference*. What is usually referred to as communication and which most often takes place across systems references must suffice with the term "interaction"<sup>119</sup>.

#### **1.4 AUTOPOIESIS AND CLOSURE/OPENNESS**

The production and reproduction of meaning is thus a closed, self-referential process of selection. Luhmann calls this "auto-agility of meaning occurrences" "autopoiesis par excellence"<sup>120</sup>. Autopoiesis means self-creation and autopoietic systems create and recreate themselves in a closed process. When applied to social systems, which are created and recreated from transient elements such as decisions, orders etc. in an ongoing process, this means that communication is a closed process.

However, impulses from the outside world are necessary in order to stimulate the inner-systemic communication. In order for social systems to manage the ongoing reduction of the complexity of the world, it is necessary for them to develop their own complexity. According to Luhmann, the more complex a system is, the better able it is to react to changes in the complexity of its environment. In other words: social systems need a certain amount of openness in or-

<sup>117</sup> Interpenetration refers to mutual penetration of two different systems from which a new system arises in the interpenetration zone serving as a link between the two systems.

<sup>118</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:29.

<sup>119</sup> For the sake of clarity I would point out that Habermas would assert that Luhmann's conception of communication is precisely **not** communication.

<sup>120</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:66.

der to preserve their closure; a degree of external reference must be allowed into the system to make its self-reference fruitful. "Self-referential systems acquire information with the help of the difference referring to self and to something other (in short, with the help of accompanying self-reference), and [...] this information makes possible their self-production."<sup>121</sup>

All of this [system formation] differentiates itself as a process from an environment that themes keep handy, that can be intended in communication, and that produces events that the system can treat as information. Provided that participants perceive themselves reciprocally, the system finds itself in a kind of enduring excitation that both reproduces itself and can be stimulated from outside - like a nervous system. It thereby acquires a complexity of its own, and at the same time it reproduces order in the sense of reduced complexity.<sup>122</sup>

A social system can experience only a segment of the world. The extent of this segment is determined chiefly by the number of conditions and possibilities which have been accepted into the system. Through communication within the system, which enlarges the system's repertoire of themes, the system boundaries are expanded<sup>123</sup>. Even though communication is an *inner-systemic* activity, the system can derive stimulation from the environment for its communication in order to heighten its complexity. Communication can thus be understood also as the social system's reflexive analysis of itself.

**This understanding of systems as simultaneously open and closed is Luhmann's radical contribution to systems theory in social science.**

[...] closure does not serve as an end in itself, not even as the sole mechanism of preservation or as a principle of insecurity. Instead, it is the condition of possibility for openness.<sup>124</sup>

I interpret the thesis of autopoiesis to mean that social systems are *normatively closed*<sup>125</sup> and *cognitively open*. They are closed to questions relating to their fun-

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<sup>121</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:448.

<sup>122</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:173. Unlike Habermas, the purpose of communication is not the integration of consensus but rather dissent in order to generate unrest and thereby development: "[...] one can conceive of communication neither as a system-integrating performance nor as the production of consensus." Same:172.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:195.

<sup>124</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:447.

<sup>125</sup> This formulation borders on the impermissible as Luhmann's project is precisely to formulate a non-normative concept for the social. I use it nevertheless 1) in contrast to the term "cognitive" to point out that inter-systemic relations can only be cognitive, and 2) because the system's communication is anchored in an un-reflected worldview, standards internalised within the system, which can be compared to norms defined as "more or less binding, universal rules for human actions" (*Grundbegriffe der Soziologie*, Opladen 1995) within the system's boundaries.

damental worldview and rationale, for this is what keeps the system going. If this changes, the social system disintegrates and a new one emerges, but this is a hazardous process. Therefore, a social system does not question its own justification and logic. It closes itself normatively around its own rationale, but opens itself to information with regard to how it can operate most efficiently in relation to this rationale. The normative closure is a functional condition for openness<sup>126</sup>.

## 1.5 OBSERVATION

The openness which a social system can practise can be characterised as *observation*. As an operatively closed system, the system cannot communicate with its environment. It can, however, *observe* its environment and collect *information* for inner-systemic communication and in this way communicate on its environment. All observation is performed from the special perspective adopted by the observing operation - from a position which is invisible to the observer: the system's blind spot.

This means, first, that the system only sees what is meaningful in terms of its own logic. It is up to the system to define what it will permit to be designated as information. To use Bateson's much-quoted formulation, it must be *a difference that makes a difference*<sup>127</sup>, i.e. something which is perceived as relevant to the system - something that *makes a difference* to the system for the system to be motivated to communicate about it.

Second, the object of observation is interpreted on the basis of the system's own logic. When an item of information has been brought into the system's communication, the external impulses are decoded and they can assume a completely different character within the system. The conditions that trigger communication within the system - in Luhmann's words, irritation, excitation, disturbance - relate to inner-systemic operations and not a causal relation between system and environment.<sup>128</sup> Cross-boundary processes, as for example the exchange of information, are subject to other conditions for continuation (e.g., conditions of consensus) as soon as they exceed the boundary<sup>129</sup>.

How and what a system reacts to in its environment is therefore completely dependent on the system's own logic. An observing system can only recognise something which makes sense from its own frame of reference. Recognition is linked to the system's own logic. The observed object therefore cannot be

<sup>126</sup> Because social systems, according to the theory of autopoiesis, close normatively around the question **why**, and only open cognitively around the question **how**, then a system anchored in the political function system will not ask itself the question: "Why should we have more power?" or the economic equivalent: "Why should we earn more money?" because power and money are the normative foundation for the systems' establishment. They will ask: "How can we gain more power?" and "How can we earn more money?". "Why" questions are first possible in the reflection of 2nd-order systems. See chapter 1.7 below.

<sup>127</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972:315.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1990:40.

<sup>129</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:17.

"objective" or "real". And the logic of the observation is not the logic of the observed phenomenon, but the logic of the observing system. **For that reason, observation does not signify an exact reflection of the environment but an internal construction by the system of an environment external to the system.**

## **1.6 STRUCTURAL COUPLING**

Social systems cannot communicate with one another in a way which would cause meaning to cross boundaries. This would lead to attuning of meaning, the breakdown of boundaries and to the ultimate disintegration of the system. The environment therefore cannot penetrate a system and the impact of any influence is determined by the influenced system's own structure. The operatively closed systems are *structurally coupled* to their environment<sup>130</sup>. Organisation systems have an extensive and complex network of structural couplings to other systems.

For the use of structural coupling, social systems can provide *scenarios* or *images* for one another's observation and each decodes from these. **Structural coupling cannot be understood communicatively as mutual understanding, but the combination of scenarios or images and structural coupling makes a coordination between systems possible.**

The concepts of scenarios and images are of particular interest in the interpretation of public relations. A role for public relations could be to encode and decode scenarios and images in order to assist social systems' structural coupling<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> Luhmann in *Autopoiesis*, 1992:14. Structural coupling is based on the possibility for interpenetration between systems. The concept is not unambiguously defined in systems theory, as Åkerström Andersen (1994):254 points out. In January - March 1996, I followed an intense mailbox-discussion on Luhmann via the Internet. Among those participating were Detlev Horster, Hannover University; Lutz Bornmann, Kassel University; Sverre Moe, Community College Stavanger and Armin Nassehi. The subject of discussion was the definition of the concepts "interpenetration" and "structural coupling". Many claim that the concepts mean the same thing in Luhmannian theory. Luhmann took over the concept of interpenetration from Parsons, but in his later work replaced it with the concept "structural coupling". Participants in the discussion forum were, at the time of this dissertation going to print, agreed that Luhmann has not yet sufficiently developed the concept of structural coupling. I use the terms synonymously in answer to the central question: "How can systems influence, and be influenced respectively, when causality is impossible?" as Horst Wasser, Cologne, wrote in the mailbox-conference in February, 1996 (my own translation from German).

<sup>131</sup> For example, Knorr/Faulstich set out a concept in which the main task for public relations is precisely *image creation for structural homology* (*Image-Gestaltung für Strukturhomologie*). More of this later.

## 1.7 REFLECTION

Willke<sup>132</sup> describes structural coupling as

supervision, a reciprocal process of reflection in which blind spots in the system's internal communication become visible and are treated as if they can be changed. [...] The system in question then adjusts itself in relation to its independent interpretation and decoding of the blind spot.<sup>133</sup>

I do not understand Luhmann's structural coupling to be that radical. In the 1st order, structural coupling can be mere reciprocal observation, while *reflection* is a more demanding 2nd-order operation and possibly the most significant concept in a social-systemic interpretation of public relations.

Every observation is dependent on the mode of operation of the observing system and uses its own distinctness as its blind spot. Reflection, however, provides an opportunity to adjust these blind spots:

An observer cannot see what he cannot see. Neither can he see that he cannot see what he cannot see. But there is an opportunity to correct: the observation of the observer. Admittedly, even the observer by 2nd order is tied to his own blind spot, he could not observe otherwise. The blind spot is his apriorism, so to speak. But when he observes another observer he can see *his* blind spots, *his* apriorism, *his* latent structure.<sup>134</sup>

A system can progress to an observation of the 2nd order by shifting from a mono-contextual to a poly-contextual worldview. The mono-contextual actor considers a problem from a narrow, onefold perspective. This changes with the progression to a 2nd-order observation which adds a distinction to the first, and the worldview becomes poly-contextual.

Systems can be graded into three orders according to the nature and degree of self-observation.

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<sup>132</sup> Willke is the author of one of the most used German-language introductions to modern systems theory and is one of my secondary sources in my efforts to understand the theory. I have however learnt to read him with some caution as his interpretations are far less radical than Luhmann's and, for example, propose society's reintegration efforts while Luhmann actually considers integration as a potential threat to the maintenance of system boundaries.

<sup>133</sup> Åkerström Andersen (1994):254.

<sup>134</sup> Luhmann, *Reden und Schweigen*, 1989 (with Peter Fuchs):10-11. Own translation from German.

ORDER	NATURE OF SELF-OBSERVATION	CHARACTERISTICS
0	Self-observation	The system cannot observe itself.
1	Observation of self-observation = basal self-reference  <b>reflexivity</b>	Mono-contextual worldview. An either/or based on the binary schema. Problem considered from a narrow, onefold perspective. Self-observation supplemented with self-reflection. The systems reflects on certain qualities in itself.
2	Observation of self-observation's conditions = reflective communication =  <b>reflection</b>	Poly-contextual worldview. Observation performed from a higher perspective; is supplemented with an extra distinction; can see 1st-order observation's blind spots.  <b>Reflection =</b> production of self-understanding in relation to environment.  The system thematises itself and * finds its identity in its specific function, * understands itself as environment for other systems.  -> Self-restriction of own operative options out of consideration for survival and opportunities for development in other systems (= contingency control)

Table 10: Classification of systems according to degree of self-observation.

In the **0 order**, the system is capable of observing itself. In the **1st order**, this self-observation is supplemented by self-reflection. The system reflects on certain qualities in itself. It becomes capable of learning and of changing conditions in itself.

For the observer in the **2nd order**, self-reflection is supplemented by reflection on oneself as reflective. Luhmann distinguishes between the *basal self-reference* of the 1st order and the *reflective communication* of the 2nd order. For basal self-reference "the process must consist of elements (events) which, by relating their contexts to other elements in the same process, can establish a relation to themselves". Reflective communication as the "form of controlling communication, which belongs to a higher level, is more explicit (and therefore riskier), and must be reserved for special cases"<sup>135</sup>. It is a ramification which is produced in the communication on communication which the ongoing confirmation of communication gives rise to.

<sup>135</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:144.

From the observation of observation, the 2nd order observation can draw logical conclusions back to its own observation operations and can thus make its position relative. The reflective communication of the 2nd order, reflection, is an indication of the ability of social systems to thematise themselves and to understand themselves as appropriate environments for other systems. A prerequisite for reflection is an inner model of the environment to which the social system can relate its actions. **Reflection is therefore the production of self-understanding in relation to the environment. One can observe that there are meaning boundaries, and despite being blind to them (due to social systems' normative closure), it is possible to reflect on them (due to social systems' cognitive openness).**

In the complex environments of organisation systems, reflection involves the exercise of self-restriction by a system in order to secure its long-term existence by considering relevant environment systems' opportunities for existence and development. The system increases its sensitivity through reflection by recognising that it is operating in a network of structural couplings to other systems, and that by creating problems for others it could create problems for itself in the long term. However, as Luhmann points out, reflection is a risky affair for a social system as it can entail exposure and sacrifices in the short term in return for existence in the long term. Here we sense the closure/openness paradox of the autopoiesis theory: a system is forced to open itself to the environment in order to maintain its closure. I develop this idea below as the autonomy/interaction synthesis.

Reflection is thus an evolved ability which can predict potential conflicts between social systems, assess their consequences and propose behaviour correction within the system - voluntary contingency control. This does not mean that relations between reflective systems are now conflict free, but only that certain types of conflicts can be avoided as they would do more harm than good to all or one of the systems involved. Willke believes that

Reflection does not hereby exclude instrumental action and power as a steering medium for interaction between social systems, but makes the cost of such behaviour more visible, thereby making other forms of interaction more attractive.<sup>136</sup>

**Reflection is a crucial concept in the interaction between social systems in our time, and will be a key concept when I outline below a social-systemic paradigm of public relations.**

<sup>136</sup> Willke (1993):115. Own translation from German.



## 1.8 CODES/SYMBOLIC MEDIA

So far, my discussion of Luhmann's theories has focused on social systems as a phenomenon without regard to the historical environment. In the following, I examine social systems in a contemporary, historical context from the perspective of systems theory.

With the advent of modernity, the societal system has become differentiated into function areas, each having its own logic. Different areas of society have gradually switched from having other-references to being self-referential<sup>137</sup>. This is the case in politics, where the state has separated from the religious unity. Similar developments took place in other spheres, pedagogy and education have become differentiated from religion; science, education, medicine etc. have each developed their own code; the family has entered a separate private sphere with a special code of love; the law has separated from politics; private enterprise has uncoupled itself from religion and morals, and economic relations have been completely monetarised. A new form of primary differentiation of society has arisen; society's subsystems are no longer confined to localities or presence as in the case of the *segmentally* differentiated society, nor to the relatively impenetrable hierarchical layers of the *stratified* society<sup>138</sup>, but to societal *functions*.

Self-referential autonomy on the level of individual societal subsystems was first established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Previously, the religious positioning of the world occupied this functional site. Perhaps one can say that the reference to God intended in all experience and action functioned as the secret self-reference of the societal system.

With the societal system's switch from stratificatory to functional differentiation, it became necessary to replace the accompanying other-reference with an accompanying self-reference because the new type of differentiation burst open the hierarchical world order and made function systems autonomous. In the *economic system* of modern society, the accompanying self-reference was realized through the use of money as communication.<sup>139</sup>

This functional differentiation took place from the end of the fifteenth century and continued up to the beginning of this century. The social systems of our time have emerged and developed around these function areas - *apersonal* social systems

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. Kneer & Nassehi (1993):130.

<sup>138</sup> Segmental differentiation is the simplest principle: differentiation into equal/uniform subsystems as, for example, tribes, villages, families. In time, various forms of the social dimension are differentiated - role differences or to some extent division of labour - sacral roles, clan differences or age groups, and an increasing complexity leads to stratificational differentiation, where society is differentiated into hierarchical layers.

<sup>139</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, (1984/1995:461.

which have a different status than the *personal* organisation and interaction systems.

Today we have a society characterised by *functional differentiation*. Society has become differentiated into function areas, each having its own relevance and logic. Each function area has its special self-reference in *symbolically generalised media*, or "social standards", to improve the chance that an offer of communication is accepted, ensure acceptance for a selection and thus selection coupling, i.e. understanding. Symbolic media communicate highly compressed information which, thanks to its symbolic form, can be linked into long chains of communication without requiring the preunderstanding inherent in it to be discussed and decided time and time again. Preunderstanding is presumed in advance as a specific, anonymous logic.

In fact, communicative success in a Luhmann sense - i.e. communication which stimulates connection<sup>140</sup> - seems highly improbable. On the basis of *immanent improbabilities in the communication process*, he therefore develops the theory on symbolic media as "the evolutionary achievements that enter at those possible breaks in communication and that serve in a functionally adequate way to transform what is improbable into what is probable"<sup>141</sup>. Luhmann operates with three conditions of improbability<sup>142</sup>, and with a medium to help each of these: language, media of mass communication and, finally, the symbolic media.

Luhmann has based this on Parsons' media theory, but while Parsons believes that symbolic media have emerged to deal with the complexity of society - Luhmann believes that it is the symbolic media which make such complexity in society possible. Neither does he agree with Parsons that the symbolic media are steering mechanisms for social subsystems' interactions, but sees them as *codes for social systems' communication*. The symbolic media are a form of social codes which make successful communication possible in different function areas in the societal system<sup>143</sup>.

<sup>140</sup> "Communication is successful only if ego accepts the content selected by the communication (the information) as a premise of his own behavior. Acceptance can mean action corresponding to the directives communicated, but also experience, thinking, or processing further information under the assumption that certain information is correct. Communicative success is the successful coupling of selections." Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:58.

<sup>141</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:160.

<sup>142</sup> "At the zero point of communication it is first of all improbable that ego *understands* what alter means - given that their bodies and minds are separate and individual. [...] The second improbability refers to *reaching* the addressee. It is improbable for a communication to reach more persons than are present in a concrete situation, and this improbability grows if one makes the additional demand that the communication be reproduced unchanged. [...] The third improbability is *success*. Even if a communication is understood by the person it reaches, this does not guarantee that it is also accepted and followed." *Social Systems*:158. Instruments for this task are the dissemination media which it has been possible to develop on the basis of language. However, with the development of a large number of language and dissemination techniques, there is serious doubt as to which communication can stimulate connection. Cf. Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995, chapter 4: *Communication and action*.

<sup>143</sup> Luhmann bases his media theory on Talcott Parsons' theories from the 1950s and 1960s. Parsons introduces the concept of symbolically generalised media as forms of social standards which ensure a certain unity and general regulation in various areas of society. Parsons asserts that modern society has divided into the function areas of the economic system, the political system, the integrative system and the value-maintenance system each with its own steering medium: *money, power, influence and value commitment*. Society developed certain symbolic common denominators in its incessant attempt to restore the unity which is constantly at risk in an increasingly

To Luhmann, all communication is borne by media. Even areas which Habermas attributes to lifeworld - e.g., family, art, religion, are, according to Luhmann, coordinated by symbolically generalised media:

We would like to call 'symbolically generalized' the media that use generalizations to symbolize the nexus between selection and motivation, that is, represent it as a unity. Important examples are: truth, love, property/money, power/law; and also, in rudimentary form, religious belief, art, and today, standardized 'basic values'. In all these cases this - in a very different way for very different interactive constellations - is a matter of conditioning the selection of communication so that it also works as a means of motivation, that is, so that it can adequately secure acceptance of the proposed selection.<sup>144</sup>

For example, money is the symbolic medium for the economic function system and, correspondingly, other function systems have more or less developed symbolic media. Power<sup>145</sup> is the symbolic medium for the political function system, law for the legal function system.

Each symbolic medium has a specific distinction of selection which is encoded in the systems. The codes do not only *occur* in social systems; they are built into the social systems' meaning and thereby help to *constitute* social systems. Symbolic media can thus be conceived as a selection act, the function of which is to develop and maintain a specific system identity. Function systems are *islands of reduced complexity*, each of which develops its specific, manageable complexity in relatively autonomous areas where different evolutionary processes can take place relatively independent of one another.

The functional benefits of differentiation into function logics are thus that symbolic media

- \* facilitate communication within the function systems
- \* make it possible to adapt and steer high complexity and contingency
- \* allow a high complexity in the affiliated systems
- \* maintain the specific system identity against pressure from the environment

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divided society. These common denominators create similarities across differences and make it possible to manage differences quickly and easily. Luhmann's principles go beyond Parsons' four main systems. The schematism is not as important to Luhmann as the theory itself.

<sup>144</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:161.

<sup>145</sup> The strength of media does vary however. Luhmann states: "In the case of the *function system of politics* there is no exact isomorphy but perhaps exact functional equivalents. There is no exact isomorphy because the communication medium of power does not possess the same technical precision or highly integrative capacity as money. The use of power is not *eo ipso* a political phenomenon. Therefore the

On the other hand, symbolic media make interaction across function systems difficult. The nature of possible relations to the environment depends on the autopoietic system's internally-steered mode of operation. Each function system has its own perspective on a matter, and social systems with different function codes are not transparent to each other<sup>146</sup>. With the symbolic media, function systems close around their own logic. Each code is blind and uncomprehending of other codes.

## 1.9 IMPLICATIONS

Luhmann's conception of social systems has several implications for the further discussion:

**First:** All social actions are anchored in the social systems; it is social systems, not human beings, which set guidelines for social interaction. **Not human consciousness, but social system's communication steers social action.** To formulate it radically: Human beings are merely tools in social systems' processes of interaction and communication. **This would seem to make irrelevant the ethical constraints placed on the individual practitioner of public relations.**

**Second:** A social system observes and interprets everything on the basis of its own logic and creates an image of the world from its own perspective. **The environment is inner-systemic constructions.** This leads to the construction of just as many social "realities" as there are social systems. **This refutes the conception of contemporary public relations practice taking its inspiration from Habermas: the ideal dialogue based on a collective frame of reference and the symmetric communication claims.**

**Third:** Understanding is part of communication's three-step synthesis (after information and utterance). Since communication is a normatively closed, self-referential process, communication is possible only within the boundaries of the system: **Mutual understanding across system boundaries is impossible. This refutes the ideal in the practice of modern public relations which is to achieve "mutual understanding" between an organisation and its stakeholders.**

**Fourth:** Social systems open themselves only cognitively: **Relations between social systems can have only a cognitive, not a normative nature.** This refutes the Habermas-inspired interpretation of public relations as part of organisations' efforts to gain legitimacy on the basis of consensus on prevailing norms. **Public relations is subsequently a question of cognitive, not normative relations.**

**Fifth:** The central problem in this theory is to examine how social systems preserve their boundaries to the environment. **Protection of boundaries must be the guiding principle in a social-systemic paradigm of public relations.**

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system's unity in this system must be introduced via an additional self-description in order to provide a point of reference for the self-referential processing of information. This function is fulfilled by the concept of the *state*." Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:462.

<sup>146</sup> Kneer & Nassehi take the destruction of nature as an example. Religion considers this an interference in God's creation or perhaps God's interference with creation as a punishment; business views it as future investment disadvantage or advantage; politicians see an

**Sixth:** Communication in its usual meaning between systems, and language having primacy in communication has no place in Luhmann's systems theory. Instead, we speak of structural coupling and reciprocal reflection. **Perhaps this is where we can sense a task for public relations in the encoding and decoding of "images" for use in 2nd-order structural couplings, i.e. reciprocal reflection.**

In the ahistorical understanding of social systems' conditions of existence we have already discerned the contours of a public relations practice operating under radically different conditions than in the previously outlined intersubjective paradigm. However, in order to further elucidate the question of the emergence and possible function of the phenomenon, it is necessary to take a more historical view of the environment in which public relations as a phenomenon arose from and is developing in. Here, Luhmann has developed theories on the functional differentiation of society and the function and character of the symbolic media.

The next chapter will be less strictly Luhmannian. It will attempt to interpret trends in our time on the basis of Luhmann's theories with the continued aim of understanding the phenomenon of public relations in a systems-theoretic framework.

## **2. REFLECTION AS A PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL ACTION**

Social systems will at all times strive to heighten their complexity and strengthen their boundaries. A strong external reference imposed on the system's communication processes reduces complexity and weakens boundaries. Trends in modern society, seen from a Luhmannian perspective, can be interpreted as the attempts of social systems to free themselves of the external references of the political and the legal systems.

However, the media of law and jurisdiction as collective regulators serve as coordination and safety mechanisms for interaction between social systems. And the increasing differentiation means increasing specialisation, which in turn means an increasing interdependence between social systems across the different function areas. When social systems attempt, therefore, to reduce law and jurisdiction as regulation mechanisms, they have to impose a decentralised, mutual regulation mechanism on themselves in order to ensure interaction with each other.

The purpose of social order today, seen from a social-systemic perspective, would appear to be two-sided: firstly, to preserve the system boundaries of functional differentiation and further promote the development of their own complexity. Secondly, to ensure a high level of interaction - also between social systems across function areas. In other words: **the purpose is high complexity within and between social systems.**

**A new social order, which can be described as *context regulation*, would appear to imply a completely new pattern of interaction, based on *reflection as the principle of social action*.**

### **2.1 NO UNITY FOR SOCIETY**

Most social systems in modern society are clustered around specific function systems which have been developed around their own specific logic. Each logic creates a world in its own image and operates according to its own standards of relevance and success. Each of these logics continues to grow stronger. **This tendency is strengthened by the growing complexity of social systems, because the need for symbolic media increases accordingly and the symbolic media assume an increasing importance.**

Two characteristic features of social evolution which result from this are:

First, **the function systems close around their own specific logic to an increasing extent.** Whilst functional differentiation makes a high level of complexity and contingency in connected systems manageable and controllable, it nevertheless splits society into function specific perspectives. **This increases the function systems' strain on each other and weakens interaction between them.**

Second, **society can no longer be regarded as a unified whole.**

This is a crucial point in Luhmann's theory: there no longer exists an all-embracing perspective. Society is divided into distinct perspectives that cannot be reflected in each other<sup>147</sup>:

Thus the social system of modern society is at once the political function system and its environment within society, the economic function system and its environment within society, the scientific function system and its environment within society, the religious function system and its environment within society, and so on.<sup>148</sup>

In systems theory, society is defined as a system<sup>149</sup>. As is the case for other types of social systems, communication serves to ensure the ongoing reproduction of the societal system; this is not the result of some kind of "natural order"<sup>150</sup>. A communications breakdown in the societal system is a breakdown of society. Communication depends on a common frame of reference, based on a common meaning. In the functionally differentiated society, there is no central body that can transcend all system/environment differences and connect them through meaning. **The idea of society as a unified whole (whether we mean the global society or the "state") must be abandoned. Instead, society features as inner-systemic constructions in social systems.**

### 2.1.1 LUHMANN'S POSITION

These tendencies are an expression of the well-known concept, *the disintegration of society*, which we also met in Habermas' theories. However, whereas Habermas proposes integration as a solution, Luhmann takes a very different view on this matter. This is not only because he - unlike Habermas - rejects the possibility for a collective perspective in the lifeworld. It is rather that Luhmann, in contrast to Habermas, does not consider it problematic that systems erect boundaries around their own logic. On the contrary, Luhmann is concerned with how systems can maintain their boundaries. System boundaries actually serve a function: they allow a heightening of complexity - i.e. increased knowledge, better education and research, greater productivity, improved use of resources, advanced technology etc., the foundations of our industrialised or post-industrialised society. **Hence, integra-**

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<sup>147</sup> Similarly, systems theory's constructivist anchoring is marked here. For example, a private enterprise in the economic function system observes markets for trade and labour, whereas a party in the political system would see voters and labour market policy. Likewise, it is a political observation to see the world as a national state. Religion has a different perspective (with the exception of the Established Church); cf. the Pope's supra-national status in Catholic countries. Economics and science can be accepted as similar trans-national perspectives.

<sup>148</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:191.

<sup>149</sup> Society = "[...] the totality of all social communications that can be expected." Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:392.

<sup>150</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:150.

tion<sup>151</sup>, which would involve the breaking down of boundaries in favour of a common, all-embracing perspective, is not a functional solution for Luhmann.

It is important to emphasise Luhmann's position: disintegration serves a social function. Integration can undermine this functional ability. It is romantic and unrealistic to imagine that there could be a collective perspective in today's differentiated society. If it were possible, it would constitute a hazard as it would undermine the boundaries of social systems, thus destroying their inner dynamics and complexity.

I highlight Luhmann's position at the beginning of this chapter which will put forward various solutions to the strains of disintegration in a mainly Luhmannian theoretical framework. I do this in an attempt to prevent the following considerations on *reflection as a principle of action in society* being misinterpreted and cited in support of a collective, normative perspective. As far as I can see, this is actually a mistake which even systems theory researchers in the Luhmannian school are guilty of. I am thinking of Helmut Willke in particular, who speaks of re-integration in society in a way that tends in this direction<sup>152</sup>. Therefore, only to a certain extent have I allowed myself to be influenced by Willke and I focus sharply on Luhmann's position.

## 2.2 RECIPROCAL REFLECTION AS CONTEXT REGULATION

Luhmann gives a cue to both the problem and the solution in this central passage from *Social Systems*:

Societal rationality henceforth requires that the environmental problems triggered by society, insofar as they in turn affect society, be depicted in the societal system, that is, be brought into the societal process of communication. This can occur in particular function systems to some degree - as when doctors begin to perceive the illnesses that they themselves have caused. More typically, however, one function system burdens other function systems via their environment. Above all, there is no societal subsystem for perceiving environmental interdependencies. Such a subsystem cannot come about by functional differentiation because it would mean that society would occur a second time within itself. Modern society's principle of differentiation makes the question of rationality more urgent - and at the same time insoluble. Any retreat to a traditional semantics of rationality would fail in the face of this situation. As a result, many demand that politics assume total responsibility; others simply want to drop out. Both are impossible. Perhaps the only possibility is to formulate the problem with the requisite clarity, to improve functionally specific orientation to the environment, and to provide society's internal

<sup>151</sup> In systems theory, integration presupposes 1) a common language shared by the parts, 2) a basically shared view of the environment, 3) mutual information, 4) a higher certainty of expectation through contingency control.

<sup>152</sup> Willke (1993). For a criticism, see Kneer & Nassehi (1993):139.



burdens and displacements of problems with more transparency and controllability.<sup>153</sup>

I repeat the point of departure: system boundaries around logics which have been developed in functional differentiation must be preserved to safeguard and develop further the achieved level of complexity, and I add: *the societal division of labour developed in functional differentiation necessitates an increasing dependency between systems*. And I conclude that contemporary "control" - social coordination - must ensure both a high degree of autonomy in systems and also a high degree of interdependency between systems. The objective is **interaction which allows a high degree of complexity and differentiation**.

It is therefore no longer possible to turn to traditional means of social coordination such as central regulation or, for example, the self-regulation of the classical liberalistic market. In the central regulation model ("the absolute authority of politics"), the external reference would dominate system reflexivity. This would reduce the systems' identity, complexity and inner dynamics. In the liberalistic model, where regulation is decentralised to function areas, self-reference would completely dominate reflexivity. This would affect interaction and complexity between systems.

In order to allow **a high degree of both internal and external complexity**, Willke<sup>154</sup>, among others, on the basis of Luhmann's theories, points to *context regulation*. Context regulation is an alternative form of regulation<sup>155</sup> which involves an accompanying environment reference in system reflexivity, thereby permitting a high degree of complexity both within and between systems. It exists in *reflection as a principle of social action* and rests on the reflective ability of social systems.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:476-477. My emphasis.

<sup>154</sup> Willke (1993):chapter 6.

<sup>155</sup> In German, Willke uses the term *Steuerung* which can translate to both control and regulation. I prefer the more subtle and flexible *regulation*. "Regulation involves the form of organisation of the conditions of relatively autonomous actors which allows them to take effective, goal-oriented action (in relation to a specific environment). [...] Regulation is aimed at a specific *modus procedendi* in the system in relation to its environment." Willke (1993):121. Own translation from German.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Section III, 1.7 for more on reflection. The concept basically refers to an ability for a system to see itself in relation to other systems and to act on the basis of this recognition out of own interest. In the act of reflection, observation rises to a second-order position.

external complexity internal	low	high
	low	high
low	(premodern) repressive regulation	<b>Central regulation (socialism):</b> External reference dominates reflexivity. Systems' identity, complexity and inner dynamics reduced.
high	<b>Self-regulation (liberalism):</b> Self-reference will completely dominate reflexivity. Consequently, interaction and complexity between systems will suffer.	<b>Context regulation:</b> Accompanying environment reference in self-reflection. Permits high degree of complexity both within and between systems, i.e. connection and interaction without affecting autonomy and thus inner dynamics in the different function systems.

Table 11: Relation between system complexity and form of social regulation (developed from table 8, Willke (1993):272).

Reflection involves, on the one hand, that all social systems find their identity in their specific function and as such operate independently; on the other hand, it involves that they learn to understand themselves as the environment for, and interacting with other social systems, and therefore build restrictions and coordinating mechanisms into their decision-making processes and thus "learn to take into account in the selective understanding of their eigen-selectivity that of the other system"<sup>157</sup>. **Reflection is an illustration of the typical closed/open paradox of the theory of autopoiesis; the paradox here is the synthesis of autonomy and dependency - independence and interdependence.**

Of interest to this discussion, when speaking of reflection as a principle of social action, is the way it changes the usual perceptions of the concepts of independence and regulation as being in opposition to each other. **The higher the degree of independence, the higher the possibilities are for regulation.** Organisations with a high degree of reflection are capable of being open in a way which is quite different from formally regulated organisations, as they have sufficient complexity to simultaneously reflect on other-references and preserve their identity.

<sup>157</sup> Luhmann, *Interpenetrationen - Zum Verhältnis personaler und sozialer Systeme*. In *Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 6 - 1977:74. Own translation from German.

The model of context regulation therefore rejects the interpretation of regulation as causal control<sup>158</sup>, i.e. system reflexivity being controlled by other-reference, and replaces it with reciprocal reflection in a systems-theoretic framework of understanding. In other words: whereas, previously, the political-administrative system controlled social systems through legislation and jurisdiction, we now increasingly see consecutive processes of adjustment between social systems. The system boundaries remain intact and the aim is achieved: a high degree of complexity both in interaction between systems and within systems.

However, it is only when reflection is practised by all - or at least the majority of - interacting social systems that the self-restriction of the individual social systems can result in continual, long-term growth in social systems' opportunities through an improvement in their combined efficiency. **For that reason, reflection is an effective form of regulation only when it has become a principle of social action.**

A new principle of social action must entail a fundamental change in society's pattern of interaction. From a Habermasian perspective, we can see parallels to the transition to the post-conventional discourse society. More interesting, however, are empirical studies conducted by Danish researchers<sup>159</sup> which show that the regulation of society mainly occurs in ongoing adjustments between social systems. This new pattern can be interpreted as the model of context regulation with features similar to reflection as a principle of social action.

### 2.2.1 THE NEGOTIATED SOCIETY

On the basis of empirical studies of Danish society, Pedersen et al<sup>160</sup> have thus observed similar tendencies which they describe by the term *the negotiated society*. In the negotiated society, neither interests nor understandings of reality are given but always open to debate, and negotiations, not legislation, are the regulation mechanism. We could at first be tempted to see parallels to Habermas' discourse society, but in accordance with Luhmann, Raffnsøe & Pedersen point out that conflict rather than consensus is the regulator:

With the spread of negotiating relations, completely new concepts of social contexts emerge. Ideals of representative democracy tend to make us believe that social bonds are formed by the majority and its conversion into authority; when the negotiated society spreads, however, it appears that

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<sup>158</sup> Cf. Åkerstrøm Andersen (1994):252. Niels Åkerstrøm points out deliberations by the State on deregulation in favour of the development of alternative means of control.

<sup>159</sup> *The Negotiated Society Project*, Copenhagen Business School, project leader: Ove Kai Pedersen.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

strong bonds can be formed when the parties are forced by disagreement and conflict to constantly adjust their positions to each other.<sup>161</sup>

Likewise, they are in agreement with the model of context regulation when they point out that the decentralisation of regulation as reciprocal control in the systems is not a question of returning to the classical-liberal model. It is more likely that the political negotiating rationality, which actually must be based on reflection, has spread from the political function system out to the other function systems. Policy formation is transferred from the political system and is decentralised to social systems:

People often claim - almost imploringly - that market forces have won. By contrast, we would claim that the spread of negotiating procedures actually involves the market economy in a far greater societal exchange which is not only steered by supply and demand. [...]

Instead of saying that the market economy is expanding its domination, it would be more accurate to speak of an unlimited spread of parliamentarianism. The political negotiating rationality, based on a much broader interest base than the market economy, seems to have spread to all spheres of social life.<sup>162</sup>

This "broader interest" appears to cover the term "reflection", i.e. that social systems employ a broader perspective and a 2nd-order observation of their environment.

Such a negotiating rationality is based also on the idea of the larger context. Raffnsøe & Pedersen point here to the perception of a unified whole. The perception of society, of the "common good" **is reflected** to an increasing extent in the negotiated society's social systems:

Employer and employee organisations are far less concerned with asserting the inalienable rights of their members and speak much more of showing consideration for the economic situation of the country and of exercising restraint for the good of all.

[...]

As negotiating relations spread throughout Danish society, social actors have begun to present these perceptions of a unified whole. They have tied themselves and the Danish population to a collective, but also to a personal responsibility for a shared destiny.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Sverre Raffnsøe and Ove K. Pedersen: Udemokratisk demokrati (*Undemocratic democracy*). Essay in *Weekendavisen*, 2-8 June 1995. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Own translation from Danish.

Although illusory, this perception of a unified whole and shared destiny is an effective inner-systemic contingency control.

### 2.2.2 LUHMANN'S POSITION

It is important to mark Luhmann's position in this light. When systems improve their orientation to the environment through reflection and adjust to each other, this behaviour is in line with the theory on autopoietic systems as having cognitive, and not normative natures. It is not a question of common perspective or mutual understanding, nor shared goals, norms and values. On the contrary, this dynamic exchange sharpens the system's inner logic, and it is by means of these reciprocal self-restrictions that social order is eventually recreated in an ongoing process.

Luhmann's keywords *to improve orientation to environment, more transparency and controllability* therefore do not imply a breakdown of system boundaries in the form of common normativeness or central control.

A model having reflection as a principle of social action would, however, seem to require a common code, i.e. precisely that all-embracing unity that Luhmann speaks so strongly against. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the absence of unity in society does not mean that there cannot be a *perception* of such a unity. On the contrary, according to Raffnsøe & Pederesen, there is a growing perception of unity in society in the differentiated social systems, and this could well be a significant prerequisite for the reflection model.

The point, however, is that society is a product of inner-systemic constructions, built on the different logics of social systems, and not on one common logic. Hence, Luhmann's position does not refute the concept "reflection as a principle of social action" which in fact allows for the possibility for greater reciprocal consideration without having to concede mutual understanding, which, according to Luhmann, requires a shared reference.

## 2.3 PUBLICS

In Luhmannian terms, it also becomes clear that the concept of *public* as a possible expression of a collective normativeness must be abandoned. There cannot be one public that can reflect society in one common, all-embracing perspective. But that does not rule out the possibility that the perception of such a public exists as inner-systemic constructions in social systems, anchored in the world-view of the individual system. I do not, however, know of any material where Luhmann himself discusses the concept of public<sup>164</sup> and, therefore, base the following on Luhmann-based scientists as well as on my own conclusions.

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<sup>164</sup> In *Die Realität der Massenmedien* (The Reality of the Mass Media) published in 1996, Luhmann has devoted a chapter to the concept of public. At that time, however, this dissertation was finished, but I shall in later work discuss Luhmann's thoughts on this crucial concept in public relations research.

First I return to Espersen's reconstruction of the public sphere<sup>165</sup> based in particular on "The Negotiated Economy Project". Espersen sees the project in a Habermasian perspective. I choose to view it in a systems-theoretic perspective. In the negotiating society we find Espersen's "private public" where "*the parts are forced by disagreement and conflict to constantly adjust their positions to each other*"<sup>166</sup>. In a Habermasian perspective, this "private public" is criticised normatively for being a part of the system's colonisation of the lifeworld. In a systems-theoretic perspective, it is functional.

Münch<sup>167</sup> points to a division of labour between this "private public" and "the public" (without, however, using such terms). The non-public commissions take care of the negotiation of details in issues thematised in the public debate. Public debate alone does not give rise to any new solutions:

Here [in the non-public commissions] it is a question of the economic-moral work with details beyond public tribunals. It takes place in commissions where moral, scientific and economic experts develop common directions, norms and laws to which the occupation commits itself in order to adjust to economic demands as well as moral standard. Without this detailed processing of the public discourse in non-public rounds we would see an overheating of communications and tempers without new solutions being found. The increased communication leads to no new understanding and is subject to a quick depreciation, if only big words and mutual accusations rule.<sup>168</sup>

Likewise, Espersen constructs *the mass media public*, which, in the Habermasian perspective, is considered a form of charade. By contrast, in a systems-theoretic perspective, we can attribute a functional quality to "the mass media public" - or rather mass media publics, for we can no longer speak of one mass media public in the systems-theoretic constructivist approach and with the advanced state of communications technology.

In the Luhmannian school, the public is conceptualised and interpreted functionally as a *constructed process of communication in the mass media*<sup>169</sup>. It is given a constructivist function and is recreated in new forms in the mass media public, an auxiliary structure for public communication that corresponds to the perception of the existence of a certain amount of collective reality across systems. With the increasing complexity of society, and consequently

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<sup>165</sup> See Section II, 1.3.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. again Sverre Raffsnøe and Ove K. Pedersen: *Udemokratisk demokrati (Undemocratic democracy)*. Essay in *Weekendavisen*, 2-8 June 1995. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>167</sup> Richard Münch, *Zahlung und Actung: Die Interpenetration von Ökonomie und Moral*, Zeitschrift für Soziologie, Jg. 23, Heft 5, October 1994.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. My emphasis. Own translation from German.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):193-200.

the increase in contingency and uncertainty, the opinion of the mass media public (public opinion) plays an increasingly dominant role in societal interaction.

Merten describes this function as *constructing a collective reality*, and defines public opinion as

a communication process to select issues or problems of relevance or assumed to have relevance; these issues are established as themes, and opinions are exchanged in relation to them, mainly in the media. The presentation of opinions in the public provokes a selection of relevant, or assumed to be relevant, opinions which are accepted by the majority or appear to be accepted by the majority and hence achieve a political effect.<sup>170</sup>

Luhmann has defined public opinion as "the institutionalised theme structure of the process of social communication"<sup>171</sup>; correspondingly, Ronneberger & Rühl understand public opinion as "the potential of themes which today are presented and held topical in the public communication process principally by professional, organised institutions such as journalism, public relations and advertising"<sup>172</sup>.

For Ronneberger & Rühl, the function of the mass media public is *communication in order to create social trust*. I do not refute these definitions, but for the purpose of this discussion I will describe the function of the mass media public as to **thematise function systems' reciprocal strains in the societal communication process and thereby also to contribute to the reciprocal adjustment control**.

In this context, we can perhaps see a systems-theoretic explanatory framework for the growing *mediatisation* of society that Espersen speaks of in the Habermasian perspective. **As central regulation gives way to context regulation, the mass media public assumes a stronger controlling function by thematising in public communication strains in the societal system.**

I base this assertion, among other things, on a Norwegian study in which Hagen & Sivertsen<sup>173</sup> show that when the state deregulates an area public discourse via the mass media intervenes as a behaviour regulator.

### 2.3.1 PUBLIC OPINION AS BEHAVIOUR REGULATOR

Hagen & Sivertsen base their conclusions on a study of the coverage by the mass media of the Norwegian banking world in the period 1986-1992. The Norwegian state deregulated banking in the mid-1980s. This was done in order to

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<sup>170</sup> Dr. Klaus Merten, professor, *Funktion und Begriff von Public Relations*, article in the German public relations trade journal *PRmagazin*, 11/1992:43. Own translation from German.

<sup>171</sup> Luhmann quoted in Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):211. Own translation from German.

<sup>172</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):212. Own translation from German.

<sup>173</sup> Roar Hagen and Erling Sivertsen, *Private banks in the public discourse*, *Sosiologisk tidsskrift* nr, 4, 1993:275-294. This study is based on the theories of Niklas Luhmann.

strengthen financial markets by allowing free rein to market forces. Deregulation was an attempt to limit communication on loans to the symbolic medium of money. Instead, private banks became the subject of public discourse in the mass media. Whereas responsibility previously lay in the legislature, outside of the banking system, deregulation placed it within the banking system which was then forced to justify its actions as being collectively rational. Publicity in the mass media and public argumentation influenced the banks' pricing policies and service charges. Deregulation took an unexpected turn, because its consequences were open to public debate:

Public argumentation affects economic behaviour and constitutes an allocating mechanism that is neither market nor state, but what we denote as *public allocations*. This is a distinctive and functional alternative to both state and market.<sup>174</sup>

The central regulation of the state is replaced not by market regulation alone, but by a demand for inner-systemic reflection that recognises the "collective interest". These demands are thematised in public communication via the mass media. Consequently, the mass media public is not just a charade.

Hagen & Sivertsen distinguish between two systems of communication based on individual and collective rationality<sup>175</sup> respectively which systematically produce a difference in motives and actions:

Market-observations signify or refer to price differences and other differences in goods and services that constitute individual interest or preference. [...] *Public discourses*, on the contrary, signify or refer to collective interests. A course of action acquires meaning as a collective aim because of its collective consequences.<sup>176</sup>

Market observations are anchored in the symbolic medium of money, and are publicised in the mass media mainly through advertising. They occur in the communication system that is attached to the individual rationality. According to Hagen & Sivertsen, public argumentation is communicated via the medium of language and in the mass media mainly through editorials in the communication system attached to the collective rationality.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.:275.

<sup>175</sup> Hagen & Sivertsen's own theory development on the basis of systems theory and rational choice and game theory.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.:276.

<sup>177</sup> It is possible, from a Habermasian perspective, to assert that here we in fact have private and public relations, and strategic and understanding-oriented rationalities respectively; if so we would, however, have to be normatively critical of the banks' form of communication as it springs from a particular interest as demonstrated by Hagen & Sivertsen. I shall not discuss this from the differing Habermasian/Luhmannian perspectives, as the study was performed in a systems-theoretic explanatory framework, in which strategic considerations are understood as part of the "collective interest".



### 2.3.2 A FUNCTION SYSTEM FOR PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Hagen & Sivertsen provide the outline of a system for public communication that is borne by its own specific logic. Likewise, I lean towards Ronneberger & Rühl and Merten, among others, when I construct *the function system of public communication*. I deviate from Hagen & Sivertsen in my outline below in that I assert that public communication is borne not by language but by its specific symbolic media. And from Ronneberger & Rühl and Merten who also include advertising in the public communication system when I, together with Hagen & Sivertsen, differentiate between "market observations", which do not form part of the system of public communication, and "public argumentation". **The characteristic of public communication is not that it is publicly accessible. What is decisive is the logic that bears the communication.**

A description of the public communication system is not a matter of locating it physically in institutions and organisations - a discussion at lunch time in the canteen or over the dinner-table at home can just as well be characterised as a social system in the public communication system as can a feature on the TV news or a public meeting in the town hall. Social systems are not physically anchored, but abstractly anchored - they are composed of meaning. A newspaper, for example, is not one social system. It is many, each borne by its own code. As a business company, an advertising provider and a producer of stories with the purpose of selling copies of the paper, it forms part of the economic system. But what characterises the editorial section most is that it is (can be) borne by the logic of the public communication system.

**I see this public communication system as an auxiliary structure for communication in the societal system. Its function is to thematise and discuss function systems' reciprocal strains in the social communication process and thereby to contribute to the reciprocal adjustment control.** I believe we find the private public (negotiating institutions such as councils, commissions etc.) and the mass media public within this communication system or in zones of interpenetration. Some of these institutions and activities have the status of interpenetration zones between the public communication system and other function systems. The nature of these communication systems occurring in zones of interpenetration can vary from interaction systems that emerge and dissolve (meetings, hearings, telephone conversations etc.) to more formalised organisation systems.

It is possible to see parallels to Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, but the systems-theoretic anchoring is still clear. Even if we do assume the existence of a public communication system, it does not necessarily follow that there is a public that can reflect on society in one all-embracing perspective:

Above all, there is no societal subsystem for perceiving environmental interdependencies. Such a subsystem cannot come about by functional differen-

tiation because it would mean that society would occur a second time within itself.<sup>178</sup>

As I pointed out earlier, this does not preclude the existence of the perception of society as a unified whole in social systems attached to the public communication system. This means, however, that they each view society from their own perspective, so that public communication, though borne by the perception of a collective rationality, becomes a competition between different worldviews. In a systems-theoretic perspective, this does not express a lack of ethics, as it would to Habermas. It is a functional measure which enables social systems to preserve their identities, but forces them to practise reciprocal consideration.

### 2.3.3 SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A SYMBOLIC MEDIUM

My conception of the symbolic medium bearing the system of public communication is that of *social responsibility*.

To Luhmann, a symbolic medium is a preformed norm that presupposes the platform and framework for communication within a function area in order to secure the probability of selective couplings (selective understanding). The lens is focused, the perspective is given. When the function is to thematise and discuss function systems' reciprocal straining, the symbolic medium of social responsibility is employed to facilitate communication. We know what we are speaking of, we know that the horizon in the environment relates to matters that "signify or refer to collective interests" (Hagen & Sivertsen), and that our goal is our perception of "the common good". It is presupposed that selection in the communication cannot be undertaken alone on the basis of money, truth, power, love etc. We do not need to discuss whether an enterprise should disregard all other considerations in order to earn money. It is understood that money should be earned in a socially responsible manner. In the public communication system, all other codes yield to the medium of social responsibility. For example, money in the economic system yields to pollution, scientific truth yields to painful experiments on animals, family-related codes yield to environmental conservation. The power of the political system yields to democracy. The law of the legal system yields to justice. And so on.

But as Luhmann points out, media vary in strength and character. They can be more or less isomorphic<sup>179</sup>. Money - everyone knows what that is. But social responsibility? Luhmann would undoubtedly relate this to the concept of morals<sup>180</sup>. There are as many morals as there are function logics. Corre-

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<sup>178</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:477.

<sup>179</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995: 462.

<sup>180</sup> By morals, Luhmann understands a specific form of communication which operates with the distinctions good/bad and good/evil respectively, thereby expressing human respect or disrespect. It is not referred to a specific function system but occurs throughout society,

spondingly, I imagine Luhmann **would warn strongly against an uncritical perception of the concept of "social responsibility" as an unequivocal measure. For there are just as many perceptions of the concept of social responsibility as there are function logics.** Society cannot be reflected in society. Nobody can achieve the overview required for an all-encompassing truth. To highlight this point, I repeat a crucial quotation from Luhmann:

Thus the social system of modern society is at once the political function system and its environment within society, the economic function system and its environment within society, the scientific function system and its environment within society, the religious function system and its environment within society, and so on.<sup>181</sup>

Likewise, social responsibility must be inner-systemic perceptions rather than an isomorphic symbolic medium. **Social responsibility as a symbolic medium is formed according to whatever symbolic medium it is coupled to. In this way, the difference between the Luhmann-inspired and the Habermasian explanatory framework for the concept of public becomes clearer. Whereas Habermas views the lifeworld as an ideal and a possible shared interpretive framework, the symbolic medium of social responsibility involves many different interpretive frameworks.**

## **2.4 TRUST**

As previously discussed, in order to heighten complexity both within system boundaries and in interaction between systems, social regulation is delegated from the collective, central state regulation to social systems and achieved through reciprocal adjustments employing reflection as a principle of social action. Thus, deregulation stimulates the dynamics and development within the systems. The reflection improves the opportunities for reciprocal consideration and cooperation between the systems.

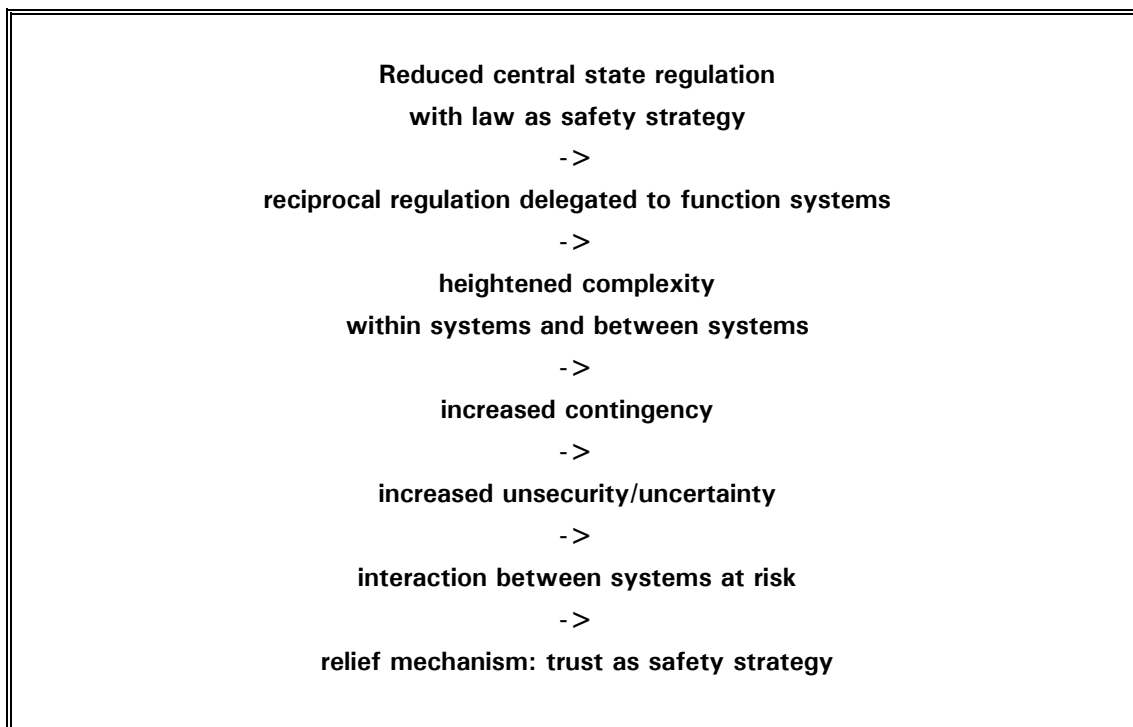
However, the increased complexity also *strains* interaction. The weakening of the common other-reference in systems and the increase in inner-systemic complexity strengthen the function logics. This tends to cause function systems to become even more estranged from one another. At the same time, because systems, to an increasing extent, have to take part in reciprocal regulation, interaction is strained; it also has to manage the reciprocal social regulation.

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and gives different results depending on whatever other code it is coupled to. There are clear parallels to the concept of social responsibility.

<sup>181</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:191.

This produces an extremely high level of complexity in interactions. Likewise, it leads to high contingency<sup>182</sup>, and thereby to increased uncertainty in interaction. In a situation of high contingency, it is difficult to observe and predict the behaviour of other systems and, therefore, there is a risk attached to entering an interaction. It may be necessary to relinquish social relations; interaction between systems is in danger. In such situations, the conventional means of regulation, the law, has been the most dominant safety strategy for the relief of uncertainty. Certain tendencies indicate that **the distinction trust/mistrust is increasingly acting as functionally equivalent.**



*Table 12: Safety strategy from law to trust.*

Trust is a fundamental social mechanism in the same way as legal systems, human rights and other norms for human relations.

[...] trust is a universal circumstance of action. This is concealed only because there are functionally equivalent strategies for security and situations almost without freedom of choice, for example, in the domain of law and organisation. But here too trust may be needed as a kind of redundant foundation for security if the usual behavioral regulations are shaken.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>182</sup> "Something is contingent insofar as it is neither necessary nor impossible; it is just what it is (or was or will be), though it could also be otherwise." Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:106. "Complexity [...] means being forced to select; being forced to select means contingency; and contingency means risk." Ibid.:25.

<sup>183</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:129. Another major contemporary social philosopher, Anthony Giddens, has said of trust: To predict trust involves a risk-benefit calculation in relation to the knowledge weaved into the social reflexivity. Because validity in the dynamics of the processes of modernisation is no longer only a question of truth but also a question of social acceptance, trust gains importance as a reflective regulation mechanism. Giddens in Bentele (1994):139.

Trust, therefore, serves the social function of making interaction possible in situations of high complexity.

When entering into situations with double contingency<sup>184</sup> is experienced as particularly risky, they [trust or distrust, ed] appear. The other can act otherwise than I expected precisely if and because he knows what I expect. He can leave his intentions unclear or be deceptive about them. As strategy, trust possesses greater scope. Anyone who gives his trust considerably widens his potential for action. He can rely on unsure premises and by doing so increase their certainty value.<sup>185</sup>

Trust is understood by Luhmann as an essential, indispensable mechanism for the reduction of complexity. Trust increases the action potential of social systems considerably; it makes it possible to act on uncertain premises, with over-contingent expectations, without firm knowledge but on the basis of trust, knowing it is possible to predict future actions with a certain amount of probability.

Trust does not have its own function system but is a phenomenon present in all media<sup>186</sup>. It must therefore be possible to relate it to the medium bearing the interaction in which trust is employed to secure success. In the money medium, one may trust that the company will earn money for the investors, that one will receive salary or payment. In the scientific system, one may trust that a group of scientists will discover truth. In the love medium of the family system, one may trust that one's partner is faithful. In the case of the system of public communication, borne by the medium of social responsibility, one may trust that a company is socially responsible and will not pollute, that science is socially responsible and does not expose animals to unnecessarily painful experiments etc.

German researchers<sup>187</sup> in a systems-theoretic frame of reference point to the concepts of *social and public trust* as an increasingly significant factor in interaction and communication in society. By *social trust* I understand *trust in social contexts*. Bentele defines *public trust* as a mechanism that

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<sup>184</sup> The concept of double contingency is central in Luhmann's theories, but I have chosen to omit it from this context as it is not adamant for outlining a systems-theoretic public relations paradigm. It builds on Parsons' theory on conditions for action options when contingency is doubled in interaction and communication. When two systems with each its contingency shall interact, double contingency occurs - in principle an endless number of options for selection and relation which leads to uncertainty: "Ego experiences alter as alter ego. But along with the nonidentity of perspectives, ego also experiences the identity of this experience on both sides. The situation is indeterminable, unstable, and unacceptable for both the participants." Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:121-122.

<sup>185</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:127-128.

<sup>186</sup> According to Luhmann, trust is not a specific medium but a common aspect of all media, their "futurity". Trust is not simple, but reflective: it builds on other's trust. It is reflected in the permanent possibility for mistrust.

<sup>187</sup> E.g., Bentele, *Öffentliches Vertrauen - normative und soziale Grundlage für Public Relations*, 1994 and Rühl, *Europäische Public Relations*, 1994.

has emerged as a special form of social trust in connection with the role of mass media in the public sphere. Rühl would seem to be using a similar understanding of the term when he points to the concept of public trust as a fundamental regulation mechanism today, but a concept that is not as well-structured as the law, and one that is without the theoretic and normative traditions of ethics as a regulator of behaviour.

Time	Method of social regulation	
1750-	positive law	Complexity too high ->
1980	-> morals and ethics, social regulators much older than positive law	Complexity too high ->
1990	-> public trust discussed as yet another regulator of many decision-making processes	

Table 13: Changing media for social regulation according to Rühl's article "Europäische Public Relations", 1994. Own table.

I shall give the concept of public trust a slightly different slant from both Bentele's and Rühl's usage of the term. I believe that this "public" form of the concept of social trust is related to the concept of social responsibility which I have already discussed as the new mantra in politics, where previously it was law<sup>188</sup>. I would imagine that when the medium coupled to the concept of trust is social responsibility - the medium in the system of public communication - then we may use the term *public trust*. Hence, it is not a question of trust propagated in the mass media, as it is for Bentele and Rühl, but rather a question of the bearing logic in the symbolic medium it is coupled to.

<sup>188</sup> "Responsibility is the new mantra in Danish politics. Previously it was law." Sverre Raffnsøe and Ove K. Pedersen: *Udemokratisk demokrati* (Undemocratic democracy). Essay in Danish weekly *Weekendavisen*, 2-8 June 1995. Own translation from Danish.

## **2.5 A PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Reflection as a principle of social action means that the regulation of interaction between social systems has passed from the political function system to the implicated actors. This new societal level of emergence implies that

- \* social systems develop their **own complexity** enabling them to thematise themselves while simultaneously reflecting their environment.
- \* a precondition for the autonomy of social systems is that they practise **self-control** and do not exploit all of their options and contingencies, but adjust them to their perception of a collective social responsibility.
- \* social systems practise **reciprocal control** in an ongoing adjustment process and through the imposition of sanctions such as blocking interaction with social systems that do not balance their behaviour against the perception of a collective social responsibility<sup>189</sup>.
- \* cognitive complexity in interaction between social systems increases; the social order is no longer formally controlled through a common, well-known system ("the State"), but is left to the systems themselves - in the form of self-control and also reciprocal control. Correspondingly, contingency and uncertainty in the interaction increase. This requires a counterbalance in the form of **increased social or public trust**.

The modern welfare society is based on an extremely high level of complexity in the differentiated social systems. This makes the possibility of a domineering central state control not simply difficult but also inexpedient because as an other-reference it weakens the inner dynamics in the differentiated social systems. In the Norwegian example we saw how the state chose to ease legislation governing the banking system in order to give free rein to market forces in the expectation that this would stimulate the system's money-regulated dynamics. But we subsequently learnt of the phenomenon in modern society: decentral social regulation mechanisms intervene to relieve function systems' reciprocal straining; social systems demand of one another reciprocal consideration, demand "social responsibility" based on the perception of society as a collective, all-embracing unity.

Whereas previously the political logic (understood as the social system whose function it is to regulate society) was contained within the political system, this communication system has now become interpenetrated with other function systems. Decentral policy formation allows a high level of inner-systemic complexity, but also entails a high level of complexity in interactions

between systems. This results in special zones of interpenetration and heightened activity in the public communication system via the medium of social responsibility. Here the strains that function systems subject one another to are thematised. The purpose of this is to increase reciprocal reflection by social systems, and consequently to generate trust as a safety strategy for interaction to relieve the media of law and concrete knowledge.

A major point in Luhmann's theories is that there is no one unity for society. Society is inner-systemic constructions within social systems. The same applies, therefore, to the concept of social responsibility. When the respective function areas reflect on the concept of social responsibility, this is always based on a view of society from that system's perspective, where it would be in the best interest of society to give higher priority to the private sector, to research, to education, to health services etc. respectively. This means that communication and interaction in the public communication system will always take place from many different reference points - and not from the common interpretive framework in Habermas' lifeworld. What we, in a Habermasian perspective, would call the colonisation of the lifeworld by private, particular interests, in a systems-theoretic explanatory framework is the thematising of different system perspectives, without them concurring. If this were not so, the act of prioritising "collective interests" of systems would lead to a breakdown of meaning boundaries which would weaken systems' identity and dynamics.

Similarly, it now becomes clear that society is not regulated by consensus, but rather by agreement on dissent: "strong bonds can be formed when the parts are forced by disagreement and conflict to constantly adjust their relative positions"<sup>190</sup>. This results in a context-regulated social order where conflicting interests are balanced in an ongoing process.

**A context-regulated social order must, therefore, cross autonomy and context, independence and interdependence - which is concordant with the open/closed paradox in the theory of autopoiesis. To facilitate the ongoing process of reciprocal reflection by social systems, structures of expressive or political character are developed which bind the differentiated units in a complex social order. These mechanisms function as transformers, translating and transmitting between the different media. It is perhaps in this light that we shall view the emergence and development of modern public relations.**

<sup>189</sup> For example boycotting companies, e.g. by omitting to buy their products, cf. the case in June 1995 of Shell's Brent Spar oil platform which was regulated not by political means but by the intervention of various other social systems.

<sup>190</sup> Sverre Raffnsøe and Ove Pedersen: *Udemokratisk demokrati (Undemocratic democracy)*. Essay in Danish weekly *Weekendavisen*, 2-8 June 1995. Own translation from Danish.



### **3. PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A REFLECTIVE STRUCTURE**

There are certain characteristics which in particular distinguish the emergence of public relations as a distinct pattern of action in a systems-theoretic explanatory framework:

- \* a precondition for the interaction of social systems is reciprocal reflection
- \* the public communication system spreads in accordance with its thematising and discussing of the increasing reciprocal strains of function systems<sup>191</sup>; social responsibility as contingency control is the new "mantra in the negotiated society"<sup>192</sup>
- \* public trust is increasingly becoming a precondition for interaction.

This means comprehensive changes and a new complexity in the environment of organisation systems. This is not automatically balanced by a corresponding inner-systemic complexity. In order to cope with this new complexity in the environment, inner-systemic complexity must be developed to enable the systems to practise reflection and interact with the public communication system. It is here we see the emergence of different forms of public relations structures. I maintain that these public relations structures

- \* heighten the complexity of social systems in function areas outside the public communication system, so that the inner-systemic complexity of these systems can cope with the heightened complexity in the public communication system
- \* and interpenetrate the public communication system through the establishment of various communication zones
- \* where public relations, from a 2nd-order observation, functions as a form of interpreter between the code of the commissioning system (money, power, truth etc.) and the code of social responsibility
- \* to encourage reflection in the commissioning system and to make it deserve public trust

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<sup>191</sup> The rationality that Hagen & Sivertsen describe as "public argumentation" and which characterises the public communication system spreads throughout society. It is in this context Raffnsøe & Pedersen state that "the political negotiating rationality, based on a much broader interest base than the market economy, seems to have spread to all the spheres of social life", cf. III 2.2.1.

<sup>192</sup> Cf. Raffnsøe & Pedersen.

\* and in the public communication system to assist in portraying the commissioning system as being worthy of public trust.

I contend that this is where we can outline an activity dealing with organisations' public relations in a modern pluralistic society, which has a central position as a sensor in social systems' autopoiesis. **It implies that far from all activities that today are designated as public relations can be captured by this outline. Conversely, it implies that many activities that are not designated as public relations today would be captured by the outline.**

### **3.1 PUBLIC TRUST**

Here we glimpse the outline of a phenomenon with a central position in the interaction pattern of the context-regulated social order, where the concept of trust is in focus as a safety strategy and precondition for interaction between social systems. Among many possible examples, I quote from the communication policy of one of Denmark's largest companies:

Of more importance, however, is to ensure that the environment Danisco is dependent on - or that depends on Danisco - is aware of what Danisco wishes to be. This knowledge shall serve to build the image of our company that we wish the environment to have - one that we can wholeheartedly vouch for. Among receivers of our information, we wish to build up a set of expectations which they can be sure that Danisco can and will honour. They must feel they can trust in Danisco.<sup>193</sup>

Similarly, Ronneberger & Rühl in attempting to define a systems-theoretic concept of public relations write:

The special societal effect public relations aims to achieve is, through the act of connecting or, more precisely, through connecting communications and interactions, a strengthening of public interests (the common good) and the public's social trust - at least to regulate the drifting apart of particular interests and to avoid mistrust.<sup>194</sup>

It is this concept of trust referring to social responsibility that I described as public trust earlier in this dissertation. Other forms of social trust relate to whether, for example, a company pays salaries on time, delivers the expected level of product quality etc. Public trust is based on the likelihood of being able to expect social responsibility, e.g. that a company will pay men and women equal pay for work of equal value, that natural resources will not be misused in production etc.

<sup>193</sup> Objectives and policies for communication, Department of corporate information, Danisco, June 1995:4-5. My emphasis. Translation from Danish.

<sup>194</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):252. In later literature, Rühl uses the term "public trust".

Isolated, public trust is of no value to social systems, but can be regarded as capital that can always be exchanged for resources that the system needs to obtain from other social systems. Without public trust the risk is, conversely, that other social systems will terminate the interaction. In the economic system, for example, this could mean that consumers refuse to buy the company's products, that employees refuse to work for the company, investors refuse to invest, politicians refuse to govern, science refuses to research etc.

In this interpretation, the task of public relations is **to encourage public trust**, which relates to expectations of social responsibility, but also to assist in **ensuring that public trust is deserved**. For trust carries obligations. When a social system is successful in gaining trust, it must continue to show by its actions that it is deserving of that trust. The social system commits itself to continue being trustworthy<sup>195</sup>, to being *credible*. Social systems must appear to be socially responsible.

It is possible to gain trust by creating an illusion about who one is, but it is only possible to maintain that trust and use it as a constant potential by keeping up the "deception".<sup>196</sup>

The task of public relations is therefore two-fold. First, it is to portray the commissioning system as socially responsible in order to gain the public trust that is necessary in interacting with other systems. Second, public relations has to assist in making the commissioning system deserving of trust. A precondition for maintaining public trust is social responsibility, understood as reciprocal reflection, i.e. the ability of a social system to understand itself as the environment for other social systems and to take this into consideration in the inner-systemic communication process.

### **3.2 PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Basically, this is a matter of managing an organisation's *public relations*. This outline of a social-systemic public relations paradigm will take a starting point in the name of the concept in an attempt to describe public relations as a specific pattern of action distinct from other interactive auxiliary structures. In the discussion of Habermas' work, we also started with the concept of *public*, but a Luhmannian perspective is fundamentally different as it does not distinguish between private and public. It is of crucial importance that we understand that the concept of public has a totally different character, even though we can base our definitions on concepts of rationality in both paradigms.

Social systems are anchored in meaning, in codes, in logics - not in institutions. Correspondingly, relations between social systems have to do with

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. Luhmann, *Trust and Power*, 1979: 64.

<sup>196</sup> Christensen, Falck, Skadhauge (1994):136. Own translation from Danish.

the meanings, codes and logics they are borne by - not the institutions linked through these relations. **Public relations is therefore not defined in terms of whether it is addressed to politicians, investors, the mass media, the local community, employees<sup>197</sup>**, but is defined by the meaning, code, logic bearing it. I therefore define public relations as *relations to the public communication system*. **Of critical importance in deciding if a relation is public is, therefore, whether its reference is the medium for the public communication system, i.e. social responsibility**. Public relations can thus play an important role in interactions with all the social systems in a social system's environment: employees, consumers, customers, politicians, the mass media etc. All of these systems, in fact, interact with the system of public communication which can be conceived of as a kind of market for public trust. Here social systems couple indirectly via the medium of social responsibility.

### 3.3.2 2ND-ORDER OBSERVATION

As will become evident, social responsibility serves as part of social systems' strategic considerations. Likewise, the practice of public relations serves as part of social systems' strategic considerations. Public relations structures must therefore be anchored outside the public communication system, and be anchored in another code than social responsibility<sup>198</sup>.

Earlier I pointed out that social systems view their environment from the perspective of their own logic, from the environment select only information that is meaningful in relation to their own logic and, moreover, interpret information on the basis of their own logic. If public relations practice is anchored in systems with a different logic than social responsibility, how then can public relations practice be at all aware of information from the environment with the code of social responsibility, and of what possible use could such information be if it is immediately reinterpreted in the light of the different fundamental symbolic media? Where demands made on the economy for less pollution or equal pay would promptly be dismissed with "No, it would reduce earnings". Demands to stop cruel experiments on animals would be met with "No, it would slow down research". Demands to stop political abuse of power would be met with "We'll get them silenced". And so on.

The solution to this is to understand public relations practice as a 2nd-order observation which, though fundamentally anchored in the code of the commissioning system<sup>199</sup>, to be functional must raise itself up over both this

<sup>197</sup> As when it is attempted to define the public relations practice with concepts such as "lobbying" (in particular of politicians), investor relations, press contact, publicity (aimed at the mass media) community relations, employee information.

<sup>198</sup> I do not include public relations structures in so-called moral organisations such as Greenpeace, WWF etc. who no doubt would consider their medium to be social responsibility. I will not discuss to what extent this view is justified here.

<sup>199</sup> The strategic intention of the public relations activity is to gain more money, more power, more truth etc. - though indirectly via the symbolic medium of social responsibility and the means of public trust.

code and the code of social responsibility, and from a polycontextual perspective assist in exposing the blind spots of the commissioning system<sup>200</sup>.

An alternative would be that public relations uses the code of social responsibility from the perspective of the commissioning system. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, social responsibility is not a fixed quantity, but a differentiated inner-systemic construction which is coloured by the logic in the social system using social responsibility in its process of reflection<sup>201</sup>.

### **3.4 THE REFLECTIVE TASK**

The phenomenon of public relations can be understood as a sensor in the process of autopoiesis, operating in the central field of systems theory between the system and its environment and relating to the problem: How can openness be achieved in spite of systems' closure? System communication will always be a closed operation, but by establishing structures of 2nd-order observation, it is possible to observe closure, and systems will then arrive at a new form of closure. Public relations practice can be understood in this context as one of the auxiliary structures of communication assisting systems with 2nd-order observation, with reflection. In this way, public relations reflects on where the commissioning system has set its boundaries and can assist its commissioning system to take account of the different meaning boundaries of other systems.

An important point to remember in this context is that public trust cannot be gained alone by changing the outward signals to match a socially responsible frame of reference. Public trust is a fragile affair. It can easily be damaged and instantly become mistrust, unless a social system is fully capable of reflecting on its position in the larger context and integrate in its inner-systemic communication that it is essential to its own long-term survival to prevent pollution, to stop cruel animal testing, to prevent abuse of power, and so on - in short, to practise social responsibility.

**The motive is functional, not ethical. The rationale is cognitive, not normative. In the context-regulated society, social systems must practise self-restriction if they want to uphold public trust in their social responsibility and avoid external regulation either in the form of restrictive legislation or in the blocking of interaction by other social systems.**

Reflection is not so simple. It is against the "nature"<sup>202</sup> of social systems. For that reason, the ability to thematise oneself and practise self-restriction through reflection requires processes that can develop the cognitive complexity of social systems and improve their ability to reflect on their environment.

**This is where we can outline the reflective task of public relations.**

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<sup>200</sup> See also III 1.7.

<sup>201</sup> In their public relations dissertation, *PR for PR*, Sune Larsen and Niels Bo Sørensen point out that the public relations practice recodes the language of market economics to the language of the public.

In what is traditionally called inward public relations, the particular task for public relations in a social-systemic paradigm can be

- \* to select and decode information from the public communication system in a 2nd-order perspective and transmit it into the commissioning system
- \* in order to strengthen self-reflection in the commissioning system
- \* so that the commissioning system can balance its behaviour in relation to expectations of public opinion
- \* and hence continue to be deserving of the public trust of relevant systems in the environment

Compare the passage from e.g. the Danish Association of Public Relations' definition "to adjust a company's policies and functions to public demands on the basis of an assessment of the company's reputation".

There are scores of examples from practice. One illustration of environmental impact is a *CERP Environment Paper, 1995*:

The public relations function constantly analyses the public opinion's views and judgements and for this reason is **requested to define the evaluation criteria able to assess the environmental impact** of the company's choices while establishing plans and taking decisions. [...] **Altogether, these "rules" and what emerges from the public opinion on the environmental issues allow** the PR professional **to identify the publics and the specific interests** to which the enterprise must refer.

Similarly, the code for environmental communications drawn up by the Danish Association of Public Relations and the State Information Service, September 1995, states:

We shall actively promote sustainable development. We shall do this by encouraging our employers, clients and organisations to draw up and implement a responsible environmental policy. [...] We shall do this by, whenever possible, advising our employers, clients and organisations to carry out regular environmental audits [...].

### **3.5 THE EXPRESSIVE TASK**

I understand the concept of public trust to mean the trust that is generated over the medium of social responsibility in the public communication system. The reflective task for public relations practice is to select and bring in information from this environment for use in the reflection of the commissioning system to make it deserving of public trust.

In order to generate this public trust in relevant environment systems, it is necessary, however, that social responsibility forms part of these systems' inner-systemic construction of the social system. The self-image as socially responsible has to be translated into an outward image as being social responsible if it is to generate public trust. Public relations practice has thus an *expressive* task in interaction with public communication.

In this context, the task is to **provide "images" for the processes of public communication**. In this context, images should be understood here in the systems-theoretic constructivist explanatory framework. If no one reality exists, images of reality are created. This is a reduction of complexity, a functional measure undertaken to facilitate interaction between systems. These are images of the reality of social systems and those that are transmitted in everything from telephone conversations and lectures to press statements, brochures, corporate magazines, videos etc.

**Here we can outline the expressive task of public relations.** In what is traditionally called outward public relations, the particular service for public relations in a social-systemic paradigm can be

- \* to create and transmit images on behalf of the commissioning system for use in processes of public communication
- \* in order to ensure that the public communication systems operate with a socially responsible image of the commissioning system
- \* which helps to strengthen public trust (and hence interaction with relevant environment systems).

Compare the passage from the Danish Association of Public Relations' definition "to attempt to achieve greater understanding for the company and its social importance through the provision of regular, widely distributed information" and "to gain understanding, sympathy and support in those public spheres they [i.e. the commissioning organisations] are or wish to be in contact with".

Various other sources are close to a similar constructivistic explanatory framework for the expressive task of public relations, and Ronneberger & Rühl's concept of image is defined as:

It is the self-images and other-images attached to the image that symbolically substitutes Ego and Alter, and those are images that makes information and understanding possible. Images are no channels. They take part in the communication and in this way in the success of display of esteem and of refusal of esteem.<sup>203</sup>

Knorr/Faulstich<sup>204</sup> point out that the central task for the function of public relations is *image creation* to achieve *structural homology*:

Public relations is image creation as explication and mediation of the meaning of the system in question with the objective of structural homology.<sup>205</sup>

An image is thus a "representation of meaning" that other social systems can relate to and act on so that interaction between systems is reasonably successful. It should not be confused with a company's attitudes - but rather that the environment actually understands the meaning of the system in a technical-functional sense. The purpose of this is to achieve cognitive agreement, and not normative understanding. Good image creation is a precondition for structural homology which in turn is a precondition for effective structural coupling between systems. Knorr/Faulstich do not agree with the concept of trust when used in a subject-based sense, but I believe it is possible to parallel structural homology with the systems-theoretic concept of trust.

Merten<sup>206</sup> also assigns a central role to the concept of image in public relations practice, but does not have the same ambitions as Knorr/Faulstich in terms of function. To Merten, *images*<sup>207</sup> are subjective constructions that act as substitutions for objects that we have no directly accessible information on, and no immediate or too limited experience of to *create a concrete picture of*. According to Merten, *images can be deliberately constructed, contingently, i.e. according to need*, and transmitted to the public through appropriate means, e.g. via press conferences, direct mailings, sponsorships and lobbying, opinion makers, VIPs etc. This, he claims, is precisely the task for public relations practice.

<sup>203</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):235. Own translation from German.

<sup>204</sup> Werner Faulstich bases his book, *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit - Grundwissen*, on an early theory of public relations based on systems theory by Ragnwolf H. Knorr, *Public Relations als System-Umwelt-Interaktion*, Wiesbaden 1984. Knorr lectured in *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* from a systems-theoretic perspective at the University of Nürnberg-Erlangen. I have come across his name in different literature lists in connection with Luhmann's.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.:72. Own translation from German.

<sup>206</sup> Klaus Merten, *Begriff und Funktion von Public Relations*, *Prmagazin* 11/92 (Germany).

<sup>207</sup> Merten defines the concept of image thus: By image is meant a consonant system of cognitive and emotive structure which humans form of an object (person, organisation, product, idea, event). Images are to be understood as subjective constructions which humans form especially of objects they have no directly accessible information on, and no immediate or too limited experience of to "create a concrete picture of". Images are therefore stable or objective, but changeable and selective and above all: it is possible to combine and construct them out of fictive structural elements and therefore, according to Merten, they correspond almost ideally with the information needs of contemporary media society.



Due to the constant need to consolidate the constructed reality of the mass media society, the stabilisation of an image as a relatively constant meaning structure requires, according to Merten, a continuous flow of information through the mass media in order to build a company's credibility and *create long-term trust*.

Similarly, Hagen & Sivertsen<sup>208</sup> speak of public relations practitioners as *impression managers*. Their study shows how Norwegian banks increased their involvement in public discourse through the establishment of information departments. Hagen & Sivertsen explain this phenomenon as *impression management, as attempts to manage impressions to their own [in this case the banks'] advantage, or as a means for banks to respond to certain aspects of the production process of news in the mass media*.<sup>209</sup>

There is a significant difference between Knorr/Faulstich's description of the expressive task of public relations and that of Merten and Hagen/Sivertsen. Knorr/Faulstich put forward an image concept which is functional in relation to the concept of public trust, as I do. The image construction must be based on the system's 2nd-order observation, on reflection. Agreement must be sought between the image and system structures. Merten and Hagen/Sivertsen, on the other hand, put forward an image concept which only represents the expressive side, without an anchoring in the reflective.

### **3.6 OTHER SYSTEMS-THEORETIC PUBLIC RELATIONS ATTEMPTS**

The fate of prophets not to be appreciated in their native country evidently does not apply to Luhmann. Several German scientists refer explicitly to Luhmann in their rudimentary theories of public relations.

#### **3.6.1 FRANZ RONNEBERGER & MANFRED RÜHL**

Franz Ronneberger & Manfred Rühl<sup>210</sup> see public relations as an independent social system which is present on three levels: on the *macro*-level, public relations can be understood as a *function*, as *one of the most recent subsystems in the societal function system of public communication*, publicism. Ronneberger & Rühl mainly regard public relations as mass communication. Public relations as a subsystem has emerged as a result of the differentiation of the welfare society. In the form of *persuasive communication*, it covers a specific publicistic function, but still shows less self-complexity compared to journalism. The subsystem of public relations has at its disposal its own decision-making standards in order

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<sup>208</sup> See also III 2.3.1.

<sup>209</sup> Hagen & Sivertsen:288. I shall not discuss the interaction between the mass media and commercial organisations, but refer, for example, to the public relations dissertation *Erhvervslivet Rygter* (Corporate Rumours) by Eva Beckmann Larsen and Jeanette Spies. The dissertation, however, does not take a systems-theoretic approach to the subject.

<sup>210</sup> Franz Ronneberger & Manfred Rühl, *Theorie der Public Relations, Ein Entwurf*, Opladen 1992.

to develop powerful themes that compete with other themes to be accepted and disseminated in public communication. The specific social function of public relations is to strengthen social trust through connecting communications and interactions - "at least to regulate the drifting apart of particular interests and to prevent the emergence of mistrust"<sup>211</sup>.

On the *meso*-level, public relations can be understood as the *service* that maintains the mutual relations between the different societal function systems, thereby referring to exchange relations between function systems. As I understand Ronneberger & Rühl, the public relations service is a matter of making exchanges for public trust, which can in turn be exchanged for services of fundamental value to the system (money, truth, knowledge, power etc.). The services of the PR system occur wherever there is a need in other societal function systems (and within the PR system itself) for powerful themes to promote social trust in the public. This service is usually connected to organisations. Business and politics are the function systems in the welfare society that have particularly many mechanisms for the self-regulation of their complexity. For that reason, according to Ronneberger & Rühl, they require special public communication, public relations<sup>212</sup>.

The micro-level is concerned with *concrete tasks*. The perspective is public relations as an analysis and action system. Like other systems, the public relations system is autopoietic, and can itself develop structures in the broadest sense, including subsystems, with whose help the complexity and changeability of the environment is reduced.

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<sup>211</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):252. Own translation from German.

<sup>212</sup> Cf. Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):258-259. Own translation from German.

Level	Perspective	Character	Description
Macro	<b>Function</b> in relation to the entire societal system	Subsystem in the function system of public communication	Autonomously developed decision-making standards to produce and have ready powerful themes to compete with other themes in public communication for acceptance and processing. The special societal effect public relations aims to achieve is a strengthening of [...] the public's social trust through [...] connecting communications and interactions - at least to regulate the drifting apart of particular interests and to prevent the emergence of mistrust.:252.
Meso	<b>Service</b> in relation to other function systems	Inter-systemic relation (on markets)	Relations between the different forms of organisations in the PR function system and individual organisations in other societal function systems [...] PR services occur when organisations in the societal function systems seek or offer themes on the PR markets, from which they expect communicative impact so that such connecting actions are released in the public which strengthens public interest (the common good) and social trust.:298.
Micro	<b>Task</b> in relation to inner- and inter-organisational structures.	Organisational relations	Relates to decentral organisations with different objectives, and orients towards inner- and inter-organisational institutionalised relations. Exchange relations on the micro-level steer the decision programmes (strategies) developed within the organisation and thereby become concrete PR tasks. [...] The PR task is solved only when further communication and interaction occurs in connection with the theme the PR effort has brought about. A PR intervention is successful only when the publics gained through the PR communication act in agreement with the persuasive PR communication.:269.

*Table 14: Ronneberger & Rühl's public relations systems-theoretic concept. My own model and translation from German.*

Ronneberger & Rühl's concept is extremely comprehensive, extremely complex but also inspiring for the systems-theoretic view of the public relations phenomenon. Along the way, they explicitly reject Habermas as a foundation for research into public relations:

When Habermas [Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985] supposes that the sincerely engaged subjects could tie themselves to the collective identity, so that the society finds its own identity in the communicative discourse then he omits to problematise the outlined participation and competition processes among those affected by public relations. The challenge of an identity policy for public relations consists however today precisely in that the acentrically organised PR-system must attain this identity in the discussion with its environment.<sup>213</sup>

Their theory, however, bears the impression of having been developed by mass media scientists and does not stress - though explicitly based on Luhmann - the fundamental problem of preserving boundaries, which to me must be the point of departure for the development of a social-systemic paradigm of public relations.

### 3.6.2 RAGNWOLF KNORR/WERNER FAULSTICH

In his book, *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit - Grundwissen*<sup>214</sup>, Professor *Werner Faulstich* from Lüneburg University puts forward quite a different theory of public relations, based on an earlier systems-theoretic work by Ragnwolf H. Knorr who previously lectured in *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* (public relations) at the University of Nürnberg-Erlangen. This work is of particular interest, as Knorr worked closely together with Luhmann. Faulstich develops Knorr's ideas, and explains public relations on the meta-level not as an independent system, but as *interaction in society*, as the permanent relations of a social system to its environment and internal subsystems. From this is separated an action level where the concrete public relations activities are performed.

In the Knorr/Faulstich systems-theoretic conceptual framework, public relations is not a matter of consensus, but of homology:

From a systems-theoretical perspective the relation between public relations practice and ethics is *not* about consensus (as to opinions, convictions, values systems og values hierarchies), but about homology, i.e. about accordance in behaviour.<sup>215</sup>

The task of public relations in this theory is *image creation* as the explanation and transmission of the meaning of the particular system in order to achieve *structural homology*<sup>216</sup>. A social system has structural couplings to innumerable

<sup>213</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl:291. Own translation from German.

<sup>214</sup> Werner Faulstich, *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit - Grundwissen: kritische Einführung in Problemfelder*, Bamberg 1992. A further development of Ragnwolf H. Knorr, *Public Relations als System-Umwelt-Interaktion*, Wiesbaden 1984.

<sup>215</sup> Faulstich (1992):162. Own translation from German.

<sup>216</sup> Faulstich (1992):72. Own translation from German.

other systems, and it is of crucial importance to the social system's existence that these couplings are successful.

Structural homology describes the perfect image, a successfully formed system relation to the environment that up to now - with mistaken personalisation - has been understood as "the building of trust" or "the development of mutual trust". Structural homology does not mean that the goal of the system is adjustment to its environment or structural identity, but interaction in accordance with structure.<sup>217</sup>

In this way, Knorr/Faulstich indirectly compare the concept of structural homology with trust. Their rejection applies only to the concept of trust in the subject-based sense.

*Image* in systems theory is not defined in the usual sense where agreement with reality is not required (often quite the opposite). In the Knorr/Faulstich understanding of "image", there must be as close as possible accordance with different "target groups'" perception of the part of the system that it is of benefit to the system to interact with. Image is no longer a question of empathy or antipathy - but of the possibility for interaction. An image is a "representation of meaning" that other subsystems can relate to and act on, so that interaction between the systems is reasonably successful.

Thus, "image", from the systems-theoretic viewpoint, is no "effect", no involuntary or intentional rational-emotional-social "picture", not some or other result of personal communication relations, but an expression of the quality of the actual interaction between the system and environment systems in a partial public or in the media public. Image creation really means interaction as a dynamic and continuous process, inward and outward, in the objective reality - not as something "created", some pseudo-reaction based on a distorted, falsified self-presentation, but as a selection of factually-based and relevant factors of structure and meaning. *Image analysis is basically interaction analysis.*<sup>218</sup>

Thus, images provide relevant representations of meaning which it is possible to relate to<sup>219</sup>. If they are not defined it can lead to uncertainty, insecurity. Again, this leads back to the problem of complexity in interactions between systems with parallels to my discussion and proposed solution to this problem. Knorr/Faulstich do in fact reject the concept of trust, but explicitly in a subject-

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<sup>217</sup> Faulstich (1992):71-72. Own translation from German.

<sup>218</sup> Faulstich (1992):74. Own translation from German.

<sup>219</sup> Another point Knorr/Faulstich make is that a system has many images, depending on the system it structurally couples to. Structural characteristics A and factors B, which are relevant in interaction with one of the many environment systems, can be completely irrelevant in other environment systems. Here, structural characteristics C and factors D can be decisive for the desired structural homology.

tive understanding - not understood as a social-systemic safety strategy as I earlier described it.

### 3.6.3 KLAUS MERTEN

Professor Klaus Merten<sup>220</sup> has chosen systems theory as an interpretive framework because

it can establish connections at different levels - society, organisation and individual - and place them in relation to each other. Moreover, it is possible to illustrate analytically how all larger social systems are based on and controlled by the most simple of such systems: through communication.<sup>221</sup>

According to Merten, public relations is a new subsystem with quite specific structures which "almost unnoticed, have developed under the category of goal-oriented communication, and which attach to services in another diffuse subsystem: public opinion"<sup>222</sup>. Merten describes public relations practitioners as meta-communicators who decide what is communicated in public, when it is communicated, where, how and with what effect. Public relations practice, according to Merten, involves making "communicative efforts of every kind for the production and spread of communication that leads to dialogue in order to advertise its object"<sup>223</sup>.

Merten places the concept of image<sup>224</sup> at the centre of his constructivist systems-theoretic work and attaches a central role to the function of public relations in the construction of reality in a complex society:

Society is increasingly forced to allow and to construct images in compensation for guaranteed experiences, and the price is that these images need neither be true nor permanent. [...] The construction of images can be instrumentalised. Images can be deliberately and contingently designed, to be short-term, for economic reasons, and through appropriate strategies be publicised: this is precisely the task of public relations.<sup>225</sup>

Public relations has a strategic management function and is defined as

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<sup>220</sup> Professor Klaus Merten, article entitled *Begriff und Funktion von Public Relations* in the German public relations trade magazine, PRmagazin 11/92:35-46.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.:36. Own translation from German.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.:35. Own translation from German.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.:44. Own translation from German.

<sup>224</sup> Cf. also III 3.3.

<sup>225</sup> Merten (1992). My emphasis. Own translation from German.

a process implying intentional and contingent construction of desirable realities by means of production and consolidation of images in the public.<sup>226</sup>

Merten points out that this *management of fictive elements* can remain effective only as long as the fiction is believed and accepted by the receiver. When the fiction is exposed, it becomes counterproductive.

Merten's perspective captures only the part of the public relations function which I designate the expressive, and does not seem to see the reflective task which characterises modern public relations. Merten's interpretation is inspiring, however, as a contribution to the analysis of the expressive task.

#### 3.6.4 CHRISTENSEN, FALCK AND SKADHAUGE

In their study of public relations at the University of Roskilde, Jan Juul Christensen, Thomas Falck and Kenneth Skadhauge have also used Luhmann as a basis for an alternative to the Habermas-based paradigm. In their dissertation, *Dialogic Myths, Mythical Dialogues*, they criticise the use of Habermas in the modern public relations research programme:

The assumption of the research programme, that all issues can be debated in a consensus-oriented dialogue, is not realistic. [...] Jürgen Habermas' theories are responsible for the degenerating status of the research programme. In practice, it is not possible to distinguish clearly between system and life-world, strategic and communicative rationality. The pragmatic use of language involves an actual realisation of power mechanisms.<sup>227</sup>

Instead, they introduce Luhmann's theory of autopoiesis as a point of departure for a potential research programme and conclude that public relations problems are better understood in terms of Luhmann than Habermas. Public relations is not concerned with consensus-seeking dialogue and achieving mutual understanding, but with social systems' opportunities to achieve stability in an unstable world. The prerequisite for stability and interaction is also for them trust, which becomes an extremely important concept in Christensen, Falck and Skadhauge's *construction of a new foundation for PR*<sup>228</sup>. Similarly, the conclusion of the dissertation is that the 2nd-order observation is central to the task of public relations:

Instability is a condition on the 1st-order level. Systems cannot avoid their blind spots. The blind spot is a necessary condition which enables them to see. But on the 2nd-order level - in a dialogue *between* systems - it is possible to achieve stability in the form of meta-stability. And therefore, in a PR

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<sup>226</sup> Merten (1992):44. Own translation from German.

<sup>227</sup> Christensen, Falck, Skadhauge (1994):160. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>228</sup> Christensen, Falck, Skadhauge (1994):141. Own translation from Danish.

perspective, it is this dialogue between systems that is all-important. It is here in this 2nd-order dialogue that it *may* be possible to create meta-stability. It is here in the 2nd-order dialogue that the system can develop a greater sensitivity to its blind spots and an awareness of the contingency of its blind spots. The public relations practice thus becomes closely connected to the task of developing a system's awareness of its blind spots.<sup>229</sup>

I believe it is questionable, however, when Christensen, Falck and Skadhauge conclude by mixing Habermas and Luhmann:

A 2nd-order communication is therefore not a question of results. It is the process that is essential - the relation between systems - not what is agreed. And in this context - as criteria for criteria - Habermas' universal pragmatism is, in our view, a good proposal for discourse rules.<sup>230</sup>

This merging is tempting - not least because Habermas' theories appear so "humane" compared to Luhmann's social systems - but dangerous, because all of the assumptions of Habermas' universal pragmatism are based on a different view of society than that which Luhmann's theories reflect. In my view, such a construction, therefore, blurs the points that can be drawn from the distinction between Habermas and Luhmann.

### 3.6.5 CONCLUSION

However different concepts of public relations based on Luhmann and systems theory may be, they all disagree with the Habermasian paradigm with regard to the ideal of consensus and concur on certain common themes. The main problem in all concepts is to safeguard interaction between social systems, and a pervading means is the establishment of *trust*. Rühl<sup>231</sup> and Bentele<sup>232</sup> also regard the central task as: to assist in securing the social trust that has to relieve the uncertainty caused by the increasing complexity in society.

The parting of the waters in relation to the concept I put forward occurs in particular in the interpretation of

\* the form of interaction which is possible between social systems. In this respect, I do not believe that the other concepts of public relations clearly enough address the problem which is central to Luhmann: How do social systems maintain their boundaries? If, for

<sup>229</sup> Christensen, Falck, Skadhauge (1994):140. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>230</sup> Christensen, Falck, Skadhauge (1994):134. Own translation from Danish.

<sup>231</sup> Manfred Rühl, *The Public Relations Cycle in World-Society*, Bled paper 1994.

<sup>232</sup> Günter Bentele, *Öffentliches Vertrauen - normative und soziale Grundlage für Public Relations* in Armbrrecht, W. and Zabel, U., *Normative Aspekte der Public Relations*, Opladen 1994.



example, as Ronneberger & Rühl propose, public relations is understood as part of the public communication system - will public relations not assume a dysfunctional character in a Luhmann perspective because the practice will assist in breaking down the boundaries of social systems?

- \* the definition of the concept of *public trust*, where the other concepts would seem to base the definition on institutionalisation in the mass media - and not on the bearing medium.
- \* the whole issue of reflection, and what we may term the inward task of public relations. The other concepts mainly focus on the expressive task of public relations.

## **4. A PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS**

### **4.1 BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND INTERACTION**

It is precisely at the centre of the context-regulated society's paradoxical synthesis of *autonomy and interaction, independence and interdependence* that we find a function for public relations. This can seem contradictory on the surface, but a social-systemic theoretical framework would seem to room the complexity and reduce paradoxes to a meaningful whole. **In a context-regulated society, the social system's ability to reflect - the precondition for interaction - is the precondition for its autonomy, for the maintenance of system boundaries.**

Similarly, there is no contradiction in the function that can be outlined for public relations, i.e.

**to strengthen interaction between social systems**

by

strengthening social systems' cognitive complexity

to enable them to reflect on the conception of social responsibility

and correspondingly practise self-control

and by

strengthening social systems' ability to

manage the heightened complexity and create public trust

in interaction with other social systems

**and thereby strengthen social systems' autonomy.**

Systems theory and the context-regulated society's paradoxical synthesis of autonomy and interaction make clear that reflection on the medium of social responsibility and consideration for interdependence stem from strategic considerations. The motive is the need for autonomy in order to maintain boundaries and continue autopoiesis. When public relations is interpreted as an auxiliary structure to assist in strengthening social systems' reflection, **public relations practice will be based on similar strategic considerations in a social-systemic public relations paradigm.**

In this way, the discussion does not arise as to what extent public relations practitioners work for the public or the organisation, and neither do considerations of whether public relations is anchored in the public communication system or in its commissioning organisation. In addition to establishing structural couplings, public relations can establish varying communication systems in special zones of interpenetration between social systems in the function system of public communication and other function systems<sup>233</sup>. Luhmann points out to

<sup>233</sup> We can presume that such communication systems cover everything from interaction systems like telephone conversations to hearings, debates, press conferences etc. to the establishment of more formalised debating fora.

systems' being indeterminable for one another and to the emergence of new systems (communication systems) to regulate this indeterminability.<sup>234</sup>

But if it is to be functional in a social-systemic paradigm, public relations must assist in strengthening the meaning boundaries of the commissioning system. This means that public relations practice is dysfunctional if anchored in a different meaning than that of the commissioning system. At best, public relations would not at all be able to assist in the commissioning system's internal communication process and reflection, since they would be different systems. At worst, public relations could assist in breaking down the meaning boundaries of the commissioning system. **One could imagine that the Habermas-based intersubjective public relations paradigm, whose ideal task is to couple the system to the lifeworld's all-encompassing interpretive framework, in a social-systemic perspective would be considered as destroying boundaries and thereby be dysfunctional.**

#### **4.2 PUBLIC RELATIONS STRUCTURES IN A CHANGING WORLD**

One of Faulstich's important points is that the public relations concept of image creation for structural homology is not an interpretation of the empirical public relations reality but **rather an abstract, constructed ideal**. With illustrations from the public relations departments of German industrial groups, he points out that varying patterns of action are seen and that

a structural homology is not seriously intended, therefore the visible improvement in image at least partially consists of whitewashing.<sup>235</sup>

As Faulstich implies here, and as the literature on practice and observations from 'real life' also suggest, public relations is mainly and often exclusively practised in its expressive form - in the 1st-order observation. The 1st-order observation does not venture out into the hazardous reflective communication, but reflects only on the basis of its own logic, i.e. attempts to influence the environment only from its own frame of reference. It is only in the 2nd-order version<sup>236</sup> that public relations can assist with actual reflection in the commissioning system, which entails restricting one's own operative opportunities out of consideration for the survival and development opportunities of other systems (contingency control).

Instead of permanently defining public relations as 1st- or 2nd-order observation, I believe we can apprehend greater complexity by applying a more dynamic perspective to the phenomenon. According to Luhmann, social phenomena are not determined by structure (as they are to Parsons), but function-

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<sup>234</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:29.

<sup>235</sup> Faulstich (1992):125. My emphasis. Own translation from German.

<sup>236</sup> Where public relations in relation to its own logic will always be first-order observation. In the context above I refer to the observation public relations performs for the commissioning system.

oriented. Likewise, their structures are not static, but dynamic in relation to social evolution. As other structures, public relations structures develop dynamically in relation to their function. The function changes with the environment. In a functional perspective, we can perhaps see that public relations practice as an expressive function is functional only in a specific type of environment, while public relations practice must also be anchored in the reflective function to be functional in an environment characterised as context-regulated social order. In this perspective, it is possible to explain the public relations phenomenon in stages, where the previous 1st-order need is supplemented or replaced by a 2nd-order need.

In this way, it is perhaps possible to explain the decisive paradigm shift for public relations from the models of press agency, information and "asymmetric dialogue" to "symmetric dialogue" as a shift from 1st-order to 2nd-order observation. I shall discuss this in more detail in Section IV.

A dynamic perspective also means, in the words of Rühl, that

Reflecting the history of Public Relations in relationship to emerging modern society, it seems to be more promising to widen our perspective, looking into buildings not being named "Public Relations" yet.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Rühl, Bled 1994:9.

## IV PARADIGMS ON PRACTICE

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE AND THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGMS ARE LIKE DIFFERENT "LENSES" THROUGH WHICH WE CAN OBSERVE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE AND ITS UNDERSTANDING OF ITSELF, IN THIS SECTION ILLUSTRATED BY THE BOOK, *EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS*, AND THE CODE OF ETHICS, THE *CODE OF ATHENS*.

*EXCELLENCE* ADVOCATES THE IDEAL OF SYMMETRICAL DIALOGUE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME DESCRIBES THE FUNCTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AS BEING EMBEDDED IN STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS WITH THE SYMBOLIC MEDIUM OF MONEY AS THE BEARING RATIONALE. ON THIS BASIS, MODERN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE MUST BE DEEMED UNETHICAL. BUT IF WE VIEW *EXCELLENCE* - AND WITH IT MODERN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE - THROUGH THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC LENS, THE BOOK'S RATIONALE GIVES FAR MORE MEANING. THE GUIDELINES BECOME FUNCTIONAL WHEN THE FUNCTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IS SEEN AS ASSISTING IN SOCIAL SYSTEMS' AUTOPOIESIS - IN THIS CASE THE COUPLING OF AUTONOMY AND INTERACTION.

THE *CODE OF ATHENS* ENJOINS A PERSONAL ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY ON THE PRACTITIONER OF PUBLIC RELATIONS. THIS CORRESPONDS TO THE ETHICAL IDEALS IN THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PARADIGM WHICH REQUIRE THAT THE PRACTITIONER DOES NOT ACT STRATEGICALLY ON BEHALF OF THE ORGANISATION. IF WE VIEW THE *CODE OF ATHENS* THROUGH THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC LENS, THE REQUIREMENTS HAVE NO DIRECT MEANING. FOR IN THIS CASE THE PRACTITIONER, AS A PSYCHIC SYSTEM, CONSTITUTES THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SOCIAL SYSTEMS' COMMUNICATION - BUT IS NECESSARY AS A CONNECTING POINT FOR COMMUNICATION. THE *CODE OF ATHENS* MAY, ON THE OTHER HAND, BE UNDERSTOOD IN A SYSTEMS-THEORETIC FRAME EITHER AS A REFLECTIVE PROGRAMME FOR PRACTICE AND/OR AS AN IMAGE FOR GENERATING PUBLIC TRUST IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION PROCESSES. THE SAME APPLIES TO *EXCELLENCE*.

Habermas' and Luhmann's theories revolve around the same central themes, the coordination between the various rationalities in society. Their basic view and perspective is, however, so essentially different that their theories diverge in central areas in the interpretation of the role of the public relations phenomenon in the social order. Therefore we can talk in terms of different public relations paradigms: *the intersubjective public relations paradigm* developed on the basis of Habermas' theories on Bourgeois Society and communicative action and *the social-systemic public relations paradigm* developed on the basis of Luhmann's theory on autopoietic social systems.

The paradigms are not an expression of public relations practice but reflective tools for the observation of practice and its understanding of itself.

From among numerous possible examples, I have chosen to place the paradigm lenses on two expressions of modern public relations practice and its self-understanding: *Excellence of Public Relations* with its ideal of symmetrical dialogue and the code of ethics, the *Code of Athens*. I focus on certain central points: function, the basic rationale of practice, and the practitioner's sphere of action.

## 1. THE FUNCTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

### 1.1 INDEPENDENCE AND REGULATION

In *Excellence*, public relations is defined alternately as "the management of independence" or "the management of interdependence".

Organizations strive for autonomy from the publics in their external or internal environment that limit their ability to pursue their goals. Organizations also try to mobilize publics that support their goals and thus increase their autonomy. Having the autonomy to pursue their goals is important to organizations, because [...] effective organizations are able to choose appropriate goals for their environmental and cultural context and then achieve those goals.

Autonomy, however, is an idealized goal that no organization ever achieves completely. Thus, organizations work toward this idealized goal by managing their interdependence with publics that interact with the organization as it pursues its goals.<sup>238</sup>

Here we can in the Habermasian paradigm's private-public complementarity place the function in private enterprise's ideal of autonomy. In this conceptual frame, public relations seems more a question of defending the system against the lifeworld's recoupling attempts than the reverse.

Another interpretation is possible with systems theory's thesis of autopoiesis. Autonomy is necessary to safeguard the system's complexity and inner dynamics. The paradoxical contexts that Luhmann's autopoiesis thesis explains between autonomy and interaction, independence and regulation, closure and openness, seems to be reflected in *Excellence*. Viewed in this context, public relations is a means of avoiding intervention and ensuring independence. Openness, the 'interdependence with publics', is a necessary condition which one must 'manage', while pursuing one's goal. Structural coupling with public communication processes occurs only to increase the system's resistance, i.e. to avoid external regulation and ensure the necessary intersystemic interaction. *Excellence* concludes:

Building relationships - managing interdependence - is the substance of public relations. Good relationships, in turn, make organizations more effective because they allow organizations more freedom - more autonomy - to achieve their missions than they would with bad relationships. By giving up autonomy by building relationships, ironically, organizations maximize that autonomy.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> *Excellence*: 11. My emphasis.

<sup>239</sup> *Excellence*: 69. My emphasis.

This quotation supports the perception of the concepts of independence and regulation not as opposites but as two sides of the same coin. Seen in a systems-theoretic perspective, it is not 'ironic' that one increases one's independence by reflecting on one's environment. On the contrary, this is the rule for so-called reciprocal reflection in the context-regulated society. *Excellence* speaks of public relations 'managing independence' and at other times 'managing interdependence', apparently without distinguishing between them, and without going deeper into the meaning of these concepts, which after all in conventional terms are opposites. I interpret the concepts as parallel to independence and regulation in the sense outlined in Section III. In this sense the concepts are not to be understood as opposites. 'Managing interdependence' is a prerequisite for being able to 'manage independence'.

## 1.2 THE GOVERNING RATIONALE

In the intersubjective paradigm, the public relations practice has a choice between two governing rationalities: communicative, ethical practice for recoupling the system to lifeworld, or strategic, unethical practice that strengthens the system's decoupling from the lifeworld. In a social-systemic paradigm, on the other hand, the public relations practitioner will *a/ways* be fundamentally motivated by the commissioning system's logic.

In *Excellence*, money is the bearing symbolic medium for the rationale governing public relations practice<sup>240</sup>. A few examples of motives for public relations activities and for dialogue with the environment are:

Organizations do not want to be regulated by government or pressured by activist groups. Loss of autonomy costs money - to comply with regulations or to make changes to accommodate pressure groups. Having willing consumers and employees also increases an organization's autonomy, because fewer changes in behavior are necessary to sell them a product or to get them to work productively.<sup>241</sup>

When organizations manage these interdependencies poorly, the strategic public protest, boycott, go to court, or ask for government regulation to constrain the autonomy of the organization. All these activities cost the organization money. If strategic communication is successful, it should help to save the organization money even though it often may not help it to make money.<sup>242</sup>

<sup>240</sup> *Excellence* moves within the economic function system, business. Publisher: Association of American Business Communicators.

<sup>241</sup> *Excellence*:68. My emphasis.

<sup>242</sup> *Excellence*:27. My emphasis.



Protests, counter actions or legal actions anchored in other logics are translated into money. *Excellence* can be interpreted as an expression of the unethical version of the intersubjective paradigm, where communication is borne by a systemic medium instead of the intersubjective language. This, however, corresponds badly with *Excellence's* self-perception. *Excellence* sees itself as an advocate of symmetrical communication in public relations through the process of ethical dialogue. Therefore, it makes greater sense to reflect *Excellence* in a social-systemic frame of reference.

And when *Excellence* distinguishes between marketing and public relations, the distinction does not hold in a Habermasian interpretive framework, where the difference between marketing and public relations is determined by whether the relation is private/economic or public:

(...) we argue that the marketing function should communicate with the markets for an organization's goods and services. Public relations should be concerned with all of the publics of the organization. The major purpose of marketing is to make money for an organization by increasing the slope of the demand curve. The major purpose of public relations is to save money for the organization by building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission.<sup>243</sup>

In both cases, the relation is, according to *Excellence*, fundamentally borne by the medium of money. We find ourselves in an economic system logic, also when it comes to public relations.

### **1.3 A STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT**

In an intersubjective paradigm, it is the relation to the public which constitutes public relations practice. The practitioner operates from the perception of a common public. Public relations' principal objective is to legitimate its commissioner in public via recoupling to the logic of the lifeworld. In the ideal, relations with the public must not be based on strategic considerations.

In *Excellence*, on the other hand, strategic considerations lie at the centre of environment relations to be managed by public relations. Thus, according to *Excellence*, the *excellent*<sup>244</sup> practice of public relations adopts a strategic perspective in the choice of communication partners in the organisation's environment. The public relations practice is *the management of communication between an organization and its publics*<sup>245</sup> or *managed communications*:

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<sup>243</sup> *Excellence*:20. My emphasis.

<sup>244</sup> The concept 'excellent' is qualified in *Excellence* as a public relations department that helps its organisation to achieve its goals.

<sup>245</sup> *Excellence*:4.

Public relations and communication management describe the overall planning, execution, and evaluation of an organization's communication with both external and internal publics - groups that affect the ability of an organization to meet its goals.<sup>246</sup>

That is, managed communication with segments of the publics that mean something for the organisation's ability to achieve *its own* goals. The environment that constitutes public relations is not society as such in a dialogue on the common good but selected groups who must be dominated or controlled with the purpose of protecting the organisation and promoting its goals.

[Organizations] typically expect public relations to secure autonomy by [...] controlling or dominating outside groups.<sup>247</sup>

These groups are selected strategically and are actually termed *strategic constituencies*:

Strategic constituencies represent the groups that are deemed to be most critical to the organization, in terms of their potential for support or for adversarial action. They may also be called stakeholders or simply publics. [...] Whatever their designation, these organized bodies with consequences on the organization (or vice versa) represent the raison d'être for public relations.<sup>248</sup>

One can compare with systems theory which states that systems select parts of their environment for interaction, and only parts of it in order to reduce their environment's complexity and make it manageable. Ronneberger & Rühl write of the service provided by public relations in the process:

Through the formation of the public relations system the indefinable world as 'outside' is made into a delimited environment, in order to be transformed into a definable public relations world through the PR function. Through this function the delimited environment, connected reciprocally with the system, is defined relative to the systems, and conversely.<sup>249</sup>

Public relations contributes the specific complexity that can correspond to similar complexity in the environment. With the structures of public relations the complexity of the environment can be thematised in inner-systemic

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<sup>246</sup> *Excellence*:5. My emphasis.

<sup>247</sup> *Excellence*:68.

<sup>248</sup> *Excellence*:76. My emphasis.

<sup>249</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):107. Own translation from German.

communication, and the social system is strengthened in relation to its environment.

Similarly, in the following quotations from *Excellence*, it is possible to compare the formulation *reduce uncertainty* with systems theory's *reduce complexity*.

If public relations can identify the strategic publics in the environment and manage the organization's response to these interdependencies [...] public relations can help the organization reduce uncertainty and reduce conflict by stabilizing relationships with key publics on which the organization depends.<sup>250</sup>

The more an organizations needs a resource controlled by an outside group, the more control that group has on the goals and mission of the organization. Organizations dislike external control, however, and try to reduce the uncertainty in their environment.<sup>251</sup>

Equally, one can employ systems theory's concept of 'public trust', whose function it is precisely to reduce uncertainty and make interaction possible at high complexity.

*Excellence* at no point proposes an adjustment of norms according to a common interpretive framework in the rationality of communicative action. Public relations

[...] concentrates on the segments within the environment that most threaten the organization rather than on the total environment.<sup>252</sup>

*Excellence* speaks of the strategically selected segments of publics (strategic constituencies, publics); this points towards a social-systemic paradigm.

### 1.3.1 RISK COMMUNICATION

If we define the nature of the relation between the organisation and these publics more closely, *Excellence* points to publics who are victims of the organisation's behaviour:

Customer markets, in contrast to publics, usually do not have to buy the products of a given organization. Publics, in contrast, often cannot avoid the consequences of an organization's behavior: consequences such as pollution, discrimination, or chemical waste.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> *Excellence*:xx. My emphasis.

<sup>251</sup> *Excellence*:80. My emphasis.

<sup>252</sup> *Excellence*:76.

<sup>253</sup> *Excellence*:20. My emphasis.

The marketing department's responsibility is *customer markets* which are able to determine whether they want to be influenced by the organisation's behaviour or not. Public relations addresses itself to *publics*. One is a *customer* market and the marketing department's target group when considering whether to buy a product or not. One is a *public* and a segment of the public for the public relations department if one is poisoned by discharges from production, or if production contributes to destroying the rain forest, and so on. The equivalent to this in the Habermasian paradigm is explained by the concepts of private and public spheres.

With Luhmann, we can draw a parallel to the theory of *risk communication*, which provides the explanatory framework for positions expressing criticism of 'the system': grassroots movements, action groups, pressure groups and other segments of the public which have become more visible in recent decades. It is the presence of these positions that is often cited in practice-oriented public relations literature as an explanation for the emergence and growth of public relations.

Risk communication deals with the possibility of accidents in the future and is a significant phenomenon in modern society. Some crucial reasons are: 1) whereas in previous times God was given the blame for causing accidents and catastrophes, these are now attributed to human error; 2) the high level of observation in modern society; 3) systems' increased dependence on their own logic.

Luhmann's point is that by changing the observing perspective from the code of risk/safety to risk/danger, the different positions can be better exposed. This gives a greater possibility for observing **how** accidents and expectations of accidents are observed **by whom**. When one speaks of *risk* it is in connection with a decision one can make. When one speaks of *danger* it is in connection with the occurrence or the threat of accidents blamed on the environment. Risk is what the decision-maker confronts; danger is what the victim confronts. Through the code of risk/danger, the social aspect of risk behaviour assumes a central position.

In modern society, it is virtually impossible to avoid being observed. Therefore, decisions are constantly exposed to being observed as risks and dangers respectively. There are protest movements and action groups. In a Luhmannian perspective, we can regard these phenomena as catalysts for the self-description of the societal system. According to Luhmann, we can view social movements as the observers of society that from the victim's perspective use the code of danger and thereby make the problem of assigning accountability visible.

Similarly, *Excellence* says:

Publics [...] create themselves when people organize to deal with an organization's consequences on them.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *Excellence*:14.

Through public relations, these publics become "strategic constituencies" which

represent the groups that are deemed to be most critical to the organization.<sup>255</sup>

Public relations activity is thus governed by the commissioning system's need for autonomy to enable it to make decisions based on the risk perspective alone. To ensure this autonomy, it is necessary to include the victim reference in the reflection of the system.

### 1.3.2 STRUCTURAL IRRITATION

If the commissioning system at all includes the victim's perspective in its reflection, this is done for the sake of the system's liberty to continue to take independent decisions. Including the victim's reference in the reflection will, therefore, be determined by whether it is considered to have significance for the commissioning system. What is deemed relevant in the environment is determined in the social-systemic paradigm by the system's own logic:

The self-referentiality of each observation implicates that observations have their basis in the self-contact of the observing system and are modulated only by 'suitable' events in the outer world. Even the relevance of outer world events are defined by the observer's categories that governs information (binary schema, guiding differences).<sup>256</sup>

The relevance is closely connected to the concept of structural irritation:

Irritation, such as surprise, disturbance, disappointment etc., is always an inner-systemic condition *that does not have any equivalent in the system's environment*. Put in another way, the environment does not need to be irritated, to serve as a source of irritation in the system. Irritations appear only under the condition of structural expectations; and they are irritations only to the extent that they create problems for the system's autopoietic continuation.<sup>257</sup>

Crucial to deciding if events in the environment cause communication in the system is, therefore, whether they are thought to be of significance to the system's continuation. This perspective selects the environment systems that can either threaten the system's autonomy or, conversely, benefit its effectiveness. Similarly, *Excellence* states that

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<sup>255</sup> *Excellence*:76.

<sup>256</sup> Willke (1993):184. My emphasis. My own translation from German.

<sup>257</sup> Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1990:40. Own translation from German.

Public relations communicates with the publics that are most likely to constrain or enhance the effectiveness of the organization.<sup>258</sup>

#### 1.4 CONCLUSION

The perspective on the environment and the understanding of the public in modern public relations practice - as expressed in *Excellence* - seems to be most adequately explained in a systems-theoretic frame of reference. Whereas in Habermas we see a conflict between the concepts of autonomy and regulation, between particular and common interests, between private and public, this conflict is not reflected in *Excellence's* understanding of public relations where these concepts are woven together in a far more convincing manner in systems theory's autopoiesis thesis. With this governing the interpretation of public relations, statements like the following become adequate and unambiguous:

Public relations departments help the organization to manage their independence by building stable, open and trusting relationships with strategic constituencies.<sup>259</sup>

When *public relations* are managed, the guiding rationale is to ensure the organisation's independence, and the choice of dialogue partners and dialogue form are strategically managed, because

An autonomous system is [...] a system that on the basis of autopoietic self-control maintains specific environment relations that are indicated by the system's guiding difference and mode of operation.<sup>260</sup>

Therefore public relations does not address itself to the public as a forum for society's common reason in the Habermasian sense, but selects as publics those sections of its environment that are significant for the commissioning organisation's well-being.

It is difficult to speak of the intersubjective public relations paradigm's lifeworld <-> lifeworld relation in the public, when the motive for communication is to ensure the organisation's survival and when the dialogue partner is selected strategically. In an intersubjective paradigm, public relations practice, as advocated by *Excellence*, will be considered discourse-unethical - even

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<sup>258</sup> *Excellence*:13.

<sup>259</sup> *Excellence*: 11. I am aware that the quotation can also be interpreted as a struggle between rationalities in a Habermasian context, i.e. stable, open and trusting relations must be built in an understanding-oriented action rationale. However, the communication partners are strategically selected and the purposive rationale is to ensure the organisation's independence. From this follows that *Excellence* should also recommend crude manipulation and a complete absence of ethics. The main message in *Excellence* is, however, the opposite. Therefore a systems-theoretic explanation is more adequate, as I indicate several times in this dissertation.

<sup>260</sup> Willke (1993):72. Own translation from German.

though *Excellence* explicitly refers to Habermas' discourse ethics in its ideal. It would be more correct to interpret *Excellence's* description of the concepts of publics and public relations as part of efforts to make the environment *manageable* in a social-systemic public relations paradigm.

## **2. THE PRACTITIONER'S ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The concept of ethics plays a central role in public relations practice's ideal self-understanding. The various national and international public relations associations all have their code of ethics. They are often justified by the explanation that

the use of the techniques enabling them [public relations practitioners] to come simultaneously into contact with millions of people gives Public Relations practitioners a power that has to be restrained by the observation of a strict moral code.<sup>261</sup>

A common feature of these codes is that they set guidelines for the public relations practitioner's personal conduct in his/her work. Thus, the best-known and widely recognised code, the *Code of Athens*, enjoins on the practitioner to

- undertake to observe, in the course of his/her professional duties, the moral principles and rules of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Article 5)
- undertake to pay due regard to, and uphold, human dignity, and to recognise the right of each individual to judge for himself/herself (Article 6)
- refrain from taking part in any venture or undertaking which is unethical or dishonest or capable of impairing human dignity and integrity (Article 12)

The question is, however, what are the public relations practitioner's opportunities of acting in a manner prescribed in these codes? The answer is quite different in the two paradigms, and in *Excellence* it seems as though one line of action is encouraged while another is acknowledged.

### **2.1 TO BE A HUMAN BEING OR A PERSON**

For Habermas, a human being possesses the potential for reason. It is in dialogue with others that this reason is produced to which we as a society collectively orient our actions. We act from the awareness that we are involved in decision-making by taking part in the debate, in generating reason in society by allowing our voice to be heard. This is the basic conception of democracy and the conception that is the foundation for the ideals of public relations practice; it is up to the individual public relations practitioner to practise his/her profession in accordance with the principles of democracy as laid down in the *Code of Athens*, for instance, where the public relations practitioner

must endeavour to establish communications patterns and channels which, by fostering the free flow of essential information, will make each member of the group feel that he/she is being kept informed, and also give him/her an

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<sup>261</sup> *Code of Athens*, 1965.



awareness of his/her own personal involvement and responsibility, and of his/her solidarity with other members (Article 2).

But, according to systems theory, 'reality' is different. The concept of human being, subject, individual has no place in Luhmann's theory. By contrast, Luhmann uses the concept of **person**, as an addressee for social systems, i.e. a system and situation specific addressee for social communication; and **inclusion**, which is a person's participation in certain communications<sup>262</sup>.<sup>263</sup>

Luhmann's concept of person is related to the sociological concept of role, but differs in so far as role means general expectations of behaviour, detached from the role bearer, while person refers to the attribution and expectations of behaviour to a specific human being. Persons are structures for social systems autopoiesis, but not psychic systems or complete human beings<sup>264</sup>. A human being can perform as many persons. Communication decides through its structure which aspect of the human being is addressed. In the professional context, communication *includes* the public relations practitioner as a practitioner - and not, for instance, as a woman, a mother, a wage earner, a Catholic, a member of a political party or an environmental organisation and so on. Seen in the systems-theoretic perspective, the *Code of Athens* places irrelevant demands on the public relations practitioner as an individual.

## **2.2 THE HUMAN BEING AS ENVIRONMENT FOR SOCIAL SYSTEMS**

Organisations are social systems. Employees are psychic systems. Social systems cannot exist without psychic systems<sup>265</sup>. Social systems cannot communicate with the environment, but make use of a structural coupling via human beings as the system's *sensors*.<sup>266</sup> Structural coupling is based on the possibility of

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<sup>262</sup> Conditions of inclusion are directly linked to forms of social differentiation. In earlier forms of differentiation, inclusion applied to the complete individual. In the functionally differentiated society, individuals can be attached to various sub-systems at the same time. Modern society cannot determine the human being's ego-identity from without - whereas identity was fixed in advance in earlier societies. Today individuals expose themselves to 2nd-order observation.

<sup>263</sup> To this must be added the concept of the **individual** who is in part the 'psychic system's individuality' that emerges from the psychic system's indivisibility, in part the individual as a particular modern pattern of individual self-description.

<sup>264</sup> "Therefore, persons must be distinguished from those unities that are produced in the completion of the autopoiesis of a human being's life or thoughts." Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1990:33. Own translation from German.

<sup>265</sup> But in systems theory there is no hierarchy among types of systems. Psychic systems ('human beings') do not have a higher status than social systems (e.g. 'organisations').

<sup>266</sup> Luhmann writes that "[...] the closure of recursive communicative relationships does not liberate the system from the environment. It is and remains dependent on sensors that convey environment. These sensors are human beings in the full sense of their interpenetration; as psychic and bodily systems. This is why autopoietic, self-referentially closed systems depend on interpenetration. In other words, interpenetration is the condition of possibility for self-referentially closed autopoiesis. It enables the emergence of autopoietic systems by opening up environmental contacts on other levels of reality. Interpenetration makes it possible to keep functional levels of operative information processing separate and yet to combine them, and thus to realize systems that are open and closed to their environment at once." *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:410-411.

interpenetration between systems<sup>267</sup>. Interpenetration means that systems reciprocate by making their complexity available for one another's autonomous system building, for example, psychological and bodily systems as necessary persons for a social system's communication. But social systems *are not comprised of* human beings. Psychic systems are constituted by *consciousness*. They cannot be elements in the social system formed by communication. Psychic systems will always be environment for the system. This also applies to employees in an organisation, understood as one or many social systems.

An organisation is not comprised of human beings/employees and its conduct can no longer be regarded as the sum of individual action. An organisation is one or more social systems whose actions are collective, i.e. systemically coordinated in order that the system as a whole can assert itself as a unity on its environment in a certain way.

Despite naïve conceptions of communication and action, the content of systemic interaction does not depend on the intentions and interests of participating individuals but on imperatives in the operational processes of the social systems involved.<sup>268</sup>

Similarly, on the absence of subjectivity in social systems Luhmann states:

Drawing on concepts from the theory of self-referential systems - namely, the idea that systems, by their own operations, can devise a description of themselves and then observe themselves - one can detach the connection among communication, action, and reflection from a theory of the subjectness of consciousness (the theory that consciousness must pertain to a subject). Of course, we do not maintain that there can be social systems without consciousness. But subjectness, the availability of consciousness, its underlying everything else, is assumed to be the *environment* of social systems, not their *self-reference*.<sup>269</sup>

By contrast, human beings as employees are tied to the organisation system by so-called *membership*. This membership involves a complexity of expectations, which apply to all, as long as they are members of the organisation system. Membership is defined by the act of deciding to enter the organisation system, and

<sup>267</sup> According to Luhmann in *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:213, interpenetration means "an intersystemic relation between systems that are environments for each other. [...] We speak of 'penetration' if a system *makes* its own *complexity* [.....] *available for constructing another system*. Precisely in this sense social systems presupposes 'life'. Accordingly, *interpenetration* exists when this occurs reciprocally, that is, when both systems enable each other by introducing their own already-constituted complexity into each other." Günther Teubner interprets (cf. Åkerström Andersen (1994):125) Luhmann's concept of interpenetration only to relate to structural coupling between radically different types of systems.

<sup>268</sup> Willke (1993):193. My own translation from German.

<sup>269</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:170. My emphasis.

it is annulled on withdrawal. Along with membership it is also possible to assume some of the organisation system's other social structures: values, norms, positions. Consequently:

Anyone who would like to step forward as the system's spokesman and representative must do so within the system, because otherwise he cannot connect onto the system communication and its self-referential circulation.<sup>270</sup>

The human being has the status of a person who follows the meaning that directs communication processes in the various social systems that the person is a member of. As a psychic system, the public relations practitioner is not in fact part of the public relations social system or its commissioning system respectively, but environment to it. The public relations practitioner is a member of the public relations system or the commissioning system respectively, and acts as a person in the social-systemic communication. In systems theory human beings cannot communicate; they are only tools for social systems' communication: the actions of the public relations practitioner do not relate to the person as an individual, but as a representative of the system.

### **2.3 CONCLUSION**

In a Habermasian theoretical framework, the public relations practitioner has the possibility to consciously and reflectively choose his/her mode of practice. Therefore, in a Habermasian public relations paradigm, ethical responsibility for his/her actions is imposed on the practitioner. We meet this subject-oriented interpretation again in the *Code of Athens*.

These are ideals that cannot be observed in a systems-theoretic framework. Here the practitioner's role is considerably reduced. Public relations practice is subject to the social system's anonymous logic. The actions of the public relations practitioner, via membership of the public relations system or the commissioning system respectively, are subject to the meaning and objectives of this system for survival. When the public relations practitioner becomes a member of the public relations system/commissioning system, it is as a sensor in its autopoiesis. The meaning the practitioner must act on is fixed and signifies the framework the practitioner can act from. *Excellence* observes that

Many, if not most, practitioners consider themselves to be advocates for or defenders of their organization and cite the advocacy system in law as an analogy.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1955:471.

<sup>271</sup> *Excellence*:310.

This is a position the authors warn against, but at the same time they indicate, in different ways, that it is only possible for the public relations practitioner to function from the perspective of the commissioning system:

The worldview of a public relations department also relates closely to the worldview of the organization that sponsors it, a relationship that explains the underlying conditions necessary for excellent public relations.<sup>272</sup>

Similarly, Ronneberger & Rühl point out that the view on public relations must overcome two obstacles: one is that public relations has so far focused on the individual, for in that way the organisational nature of public relations remains largely unnoticed. The other is that normative perceptions of the ideal public relations practitioner neglect the division of work in organisations and attributes public relations decisions to personality structures and moral qualities, while decision structures specific to the organisation are ignored.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> *Excellence*:40.

<sup>273</sup> Cf. Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):184-185.

### **3. SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION**

The dominant message in *Excellence* is that excellent public relations uses symmetrical communication.

The symmetrical model was introduced by Grunig in 1984<sup>274</sup> as the most recent model in the development of public relations practice. The models are interpreted in an American context and, according to Grunig, represent an evolution. We have the *press agency* model from the decades before and around 1900; the *public information* model from the decades immediately after 1900; then the *two-way asymmetrical dialogue* model, which involves manipulation, is developed; and finally the *symmetrical dialogue* model is supposed to appear and be increasingly prevalent now at the end of the 1900's, and into the future.

Grunig describes more than he reflects on the development of practice. This is probably the reason why his classification may appear superficial. But it is interesting to compare his symmetrical dialogue model with the systems-theoretic school's thesis on the increased necessity for reflection as a principle for social action.

The concept of symmetrical communication is discussed in general terms:

The two-way symmetrical model avoids the problem of ethical relativism because it defines ethics as a process of public relations rather than an outcome. Symmetrical public relations provides a forum for dialogue, discussion and discourse on issues for which people with different values generally come to different conclusions. As long as the dialogue is structured according to ethical rules, the outcome should be ethical - although not usually one that fits the value system of any competing party perfectly.<sup>275</sup>

Explicit guidelines for what these ethical rules involve are not developed further: *Excellence* refers, however, directly to Habermas:

Pearson [...] produced the best developed ethical rationale for the symmetrical model, based primarily on Habermas's [...] concept of the ideal communications system<sup>276</sup>.

Likewise, the editor of the work, James Grunig, referred directly to Habermas at a lecture arranged by the Danish Public Relations Association in February 1993. The ethical rules for dialogue, which are the preconditions for symmetrical

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<sup>274</sup> In *Managing Public Relations* with Todd Hunt.

<sup>275</sup> *Excellence*:308. My emphasis.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

communication in *Excellence*, must therefore be based on Habermas' ethical discourse validity claims of speech acts. Here, the fundamental claim is symmetry in the communication partners' governing intentions with respect to the communication. For both, the intention must be anchored in a sincere wish for mutual understanding for the sake of the common good. If this is the case, then the conditions for ideal symmetrical communication are satisfied. Otherwise they are not. And if the intention is anchored in the system, the possibility for this ideal communication does not exist<sup>277</sup>.

The ethical requirements of the *Code of Athens* lays down similar guidelines for the public relations practitioner; these can be compared with Habermas' validity rules for symmetrical language actions. According to the code, the public relations practitioner must

endeavour to promote the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for dialogue in the true meaning of the word, and the right of the partners involved to advance their case and express their opinions (Article 6);

attempt to practise the profession with integrity, and always avoid language that can lead to ambiguity or misunderstanding, and to display loyalty and integrity under all conditions to maintain the confidence shown to him from his - former as well as current - clients or employers and from the public that is influenced by his actions (Article 9);

refrain from making truth subordinate to other claims (Article 10); from passing on information that is not based on fixed and established facts (Article 11); from using 'manipulative' methods or techniques which are intended to create an unconscious motivation that the individual cannot control by his own free will and therefore cannot be considered as being responsible for the actions that occur as a result hereof (Article 13).

Both *Excellence* and the *Code of Athens* would seem to place the concept of ideal symmetrical communication in the intersubjective public relations paradigm.

### **3.1 STRATEGIC SYMMETRY**

If we take a closer look at *Excellence*, however, we find a major discrepancy between it and Habermas. Symmetrical communication is based on strategic considerations of particular interests, which I shall illustrate below in passages from the book. When *Excellence* recommends symmetrical communication with parallels to Habermas, the argument is always *because it pays* - as it is the most *effective* way to ensure support for the organisation in relevant environment systems. Thus, *Excellence* takes us a step on the way to reinterpreting the

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<sup>277</sup> Cf. II 2.5.

concept of symmetrical communication in a social-systemic public relations paradigm.

The reason for selecting symmetrical communication is ostensibly ethical, but observe, in the quotation below for instance, which is just one example among many - that the reason for the wish to appear ethical is that this is the most effective approach for meeting the organisation's goals:

Essentially, this research shows that the two-way symmetrical model is the most ethical approach to public relations and that ethical public relations also is the model most effective in meeting organizational goals.<sup>278</sup>

And similarly:

If an organization is credible, then it will be more persuasive when it communicates.<sup>279</sup>

One might argue that the use of the symmetrical model in the Habermasian ideal is an expression of and presupposes a special symmetrical basic attitude to surroundings. If this is the case, one does not wish to exchange it for asymmetrical communication. But according to *Excellence, excellent*<sup>280</sup> public relations departments switch between the use of asymmetrical and symmetrical communication:

[...] excellent departments generally practice a mixture of the two-way symmetrical and the two-way asymmetrical models - a *mixed-motive* model - although their practice is more symmetrical than asymmetrical.<sup>281</sup>

The choice of models depends on the department and what works best:

[...] organizations change models of public relations as situations and issues change or they use different models for different programs.<sup>282</sup>

This *mixed-motive model* concurs with Faulstich, among others, when he claims that the public relations practice claims to be interested in dialogue and consensus - but only as long as this benefits the organisation<sup>283</sup>.

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<sup>278</sup> *Excellence*:308. My emphasis.

<sup>279</sup> *Excellence*:7.

<sup>280</sup> Where excellent public relations is equal to communications management that assists an organisation in implementing its goals.

<sup>281</sup> *Excellence*:19.

<sup>282</sup> *Excellence*:297.

<sup>283</sup> Faulstich (1992):125.

Organisations feel they are *forced* to communicate with their surroundings but do so against their will, and it is here symmetrical communication is recommended in the public relations efforts. A possible interpretation is that organisations with a clear asymmetrical intention choose to use symmetrical communication for strategic reasons. When symmetrical communication, which in a Habermasian context is an expression of communicative understanding rationality, is thus used for strategic ends, in the Habermasian ideal this is not symmetrical communication but manipulation.

### **3.2 CONSENT OR DISSENT**

Where consent is the goal for symmetrical communication in a Habermasian paradigm, so dissent is predominant in the systems-theoretic interaction.

Willke believes that in opposition to Habermas' focus on consent we find the reality (according to Willke) where meaningful 'communication' in society, e.g., collective bargaining, political disagreements, scientific debates etc., not only seem to be dissent-orientated, but actually draw on fundamental dissent for their dynamics and their motivation. It is quite true that all these dissent-governed "communications" take place within an institutionalised consensus on the general conditions of possible dissent; and in all these "communications" there are areas of agreement in the form of common convictions<sup>284</sup>.

But to make communication depend on consensus is hardly valid.<sup>285</sup>

If we look at the background for dialogue with the commissioning organisation's 'publics', which are the 'raison d'être' of public relations, we again find fundamental dissent as the background.

Publics [...] often cannot avoid the consequences of an organization's behaviour: consequences such as pollution, discrimination, or chemical waste.<sup>286</sup>

The major purpose of public relations is to save money for the organization by building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Cf. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1981/1984:I,287.

<sup>285</sup> Willke (1993):187. Own translation from German.

<sup>286</sup> *Excellence*:20.

<sup>287</sup> *Excellence*:20.



Strategic constituencies represent the groups that are deemed to be the most critical of the organization, in terms of their potential for support or for adversarial action.<sup>288</sup>

When the motive for dialogue arises from a basic conflict of interests, a systems-theoretic interpretation is more reasonable than a Habermas. To Habermas, the goal of symmetrical communication is a basic, common understanding. This seems an unrealistic goal when one interprets *Excellence*, where an example could be a large chemical enterprise and an environmental organisation. The ambition in this situation is more likely to be systems theory's "agreement on dissent"<sup>289</sup>.

### **3.3 SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION IN A SYSTEMS-THEORETIC PERSPECTIVE**

#### **- RECIPROCAL REFLECTION**

Even though public relations practice described in *Excellence* is not symmetrical communication in a Habermasian theoretical framework, I do not think we should necessarily dismiss the concept, but attempt to reinterpret it in a systems-theoretic framework. As Grunig & Hunt<sup>290</sup> speak of symmetrical communication as a phenomenon that appeared within public relations around 1980, it is perhaps possible to compare the concept with tendencies towards reciprocal reflection as a principle for social action which we see in systems theory's context-regulated social order. The concept of reflection, as I outlined it in the previous section, does seem to be mirrored in *Excellence*'s understanding of symmetrical communication. In the systems-theoretic paradigm, the concept of symmetry can be embedded in reciprocal reflection - which is strategically motivated. This is the logic that pervades *Excellence*.

This agrees with *Excellence*'s view of symmetrical communication:

In the long run, the symmetrical view is more effective: organizations get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want.<sup>291</sup>

The reason reflection must be reciprocal is that a system must benefit from its reflection to be motivated to perform it. This requires that the system's environment systems reciprocate in the process of reflection. The ability of social systems to thematise themselves as possible environments for other systems and reflect on interactions has a direct cost at the level of the individual system because reflection limits the system's options for action. This form of contingency

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<sup>288</sup> *Excellence*:76. My emphasis.

<sup>289</sup> Willke (1993):74.

<sup>290</sup> *Managing Public Relations*, 1984.

<sup>291</sup> *Excellence*:39.

control is not so straightforward for autonomous social systems as social actors. It is only at the higher level of inter-systemic connection that reflection will give dividends. Consequently, reflection can be implemented only as an alternating - symmetrical - action strategy and is bound to fail when only applied from one side<sup>292</sup>.

Similarly, the following passage from *Excellence* can be taken as advocating reflection:

Publics who are treated as equals of an organization and whose ideas are communicated to the organization - as well as the ideas of the organization being communicated to the publics - more often support or fail to oppose an organization than do publics whose behaviour the organization tries to change directly in the short term.<sup>293</sup>

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

The currently predominant concept in public relations, symmetrical communication, assumes two quite different meanings in the two paradigms. If we examine the ideal practice of public relations as expressed in the *Code of Athens* we find a number of conditions that compare with Habermas' validity claims of ethical discourse. We have an ideal that requires symmetrical communication of the public relations practitioner. If we look at *Excellence* as an expression of modern public relations practice's understanding of itself, we see signals that seem contradictory from within a Habermasian interpretive framework. *Excellence* recommends symmetrical communication according to Habermas' rules for ethical discourse, but throughout the whole book violates the basic conditions of symmetrical communication in a Habermasian sense by grounding public relations practice on the strategic rationale.

For that reason, I find it difficult to accept *Excellence's* ideal as symmetrical communication in a Habermasian sense, as *Excellence* itself claims it is, if the motive for choosing communication is to assist in promoting the organisation's own goals; if the objective is to safeguard the organisation's autonomy, and if the communication partner is strategically selected. I suggest that *Excellence's* understanding of symmetrical communication would be better described from within a systems-theoretic paradigm.

If we interpret *Excellence's* symmetrical communication from within a social-systemic public relations paradigm and within the conceptual frame of reciprocal reflection as a principle for social action in the context-regulated society,

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<sup>292</sup> "For reflection is an effective and superior type of action rationality when it is practised not only by a few, but by everyone or at least by most parts of an action context, i.e. when reflection has become the principle of action in a total system. Because then short term self limitations of the parts (via the detour of an increase in efficiency of the total) will results in a continuous, long term increase in the possibilities of the parts." Willke (1993):111. Own translation from German.

<sup>293</sup> *Excellence*:15. My emphasis.

the contradictions are removed. We arrive at a new interpretation of the concept of *symmetrical communication as reciprocal reflection*.

## 4. ETHICS OR FUNCTION

Observations from the perspective of the two paradigms of public relations practice and its self-understanding according to *Excellence* and the *Code of Athens* can be interpreted in a way that the ideal self-understanding rests on an understanding of society that points to Habermas' theory and the intersubjective paradigm - while the rationale bearing the behaviour points towards the social-systemic paradigm.

### 4.1 THE IDEAL AS FUNCTION

If we reflect on the *Code of Athens* and *Excellence* in a Habermasian and a systems-theoretic perspective respectively, we understand them to be parallel and different at one and the same time.

From a Habermasian perspective, both can be understood as part of public relations practice' legitimising efforts. Both aim to signal ethical behaviour in public relations practice. *Excellence* writes:

Only the two-way symmetrical model [...] represented a break from the predominant worldview that public relations is a way of manipulating publics for the benefit of the organization.<sup>294</sup>

From a systems-theoretic perspective, we can understand both the *Code of Athens* and *Excellence* in two ways.

Partly as *images*<sup>295</sup> or *scenarios* that are generated by the public relations practice for use in the reflection of other social systems in order to ensure support for public relations through public trust.

And partly as *programmes* for public relations behaviour - programmes<sup>296</sup> that must ensure a more poly-contextual perspective than the commissioning organisation's in order to strengthen the functionality of public relations practice as decoder of the images or scenarios in the process of reciprocal reflection.

The fact that the *Code of Athens* with its 'ethical' instructions for the individual public relations practitioner is grounded in a traditional subject-oriented humanistic tradition does not mean that there is no place for the code in a social-systemic paradigm. And it is probably not an expression of faulty programming that the code rests on an unrealistic basis in this perspective and does not take account of the restrictions the practitioner is subject to according to systems theory. On the contrary, the *Code of Athens* is in agreement with

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<sup>294</sup> *Excellence*:290.

<sup>295</sup> Cf. III 3.5.

<sup>296</sup> In the systems-theoretic sense a programme that in accordance with the meaning of the public relations system directs its 'members' = public relations practitioners as to how they should select according to the social system (public relations) they are members of.

society's understanding of itself, and behaviour according to the *Code of Athens* contributes to the public trust which is the precondition for interaction in society.

Similarly, *Excellence* can be regarded as such a programme, that programmes the public relations practitioner to behave in a way that can contribute to public trust in public relations practice.

The two functions we hereby ascribe to the *Code of Athens* and *Excellence* in a systems-theoretic perspective can be viewed as two sides of the same case: 1) as images or scenarios they contribute to the outward part of the process of reciprocal reflection, and 2) as programmes they contribute to the inward reflective task that places restrictions on behaviour in public relations practice in relation to other social systems.

#### **4.2 ETHICS ARE EFFECTIVE**

If we look at *Excellence* we find, in the Habermasian perspective, paradoxical reasons for ethical behaviour as this is an effective strategy to achieve organisational goals.

In a systems-theoretic perspective, ethics as an effective, strategic medium are not paradoxical. Here it makes sense to use the concept of ethics as it features in society's self-understanding and semantics<sup>297</sup> as a functional measure to achieve the social trust necessary for interaction in society.

*Excellence* in a Habermasian perspective is viewed as an expression of the system's colonisation of the lifeworld - but I maintain that the book in fact recommends what we in a Habermasian perspective would term a lifeworld-to-lifeworld dialogue from the system. Some might claim that Grunig & Co. are colonised by the system without being aware of it. I will only point out that the book as an expression of modern public relations practice's self-understanding can possibly be interpreted as laying an ideal Habermasian society as its basis while we find a social-systemic rationale behind the behaviour that can be observed in practice.

In a Habermasian perspective modern public relations practice's self-understanding as expressed by the book will be full of contradictions. If we read it within the framework of a social-systemic public relations paradigm it makes sense. For in a social-systemic public relations paradigm we seem to be able to speak both of the *ideal as function* and of *ethics as effective*.

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<sup>297</sup> NB: Ethics is used differently in systems theory than in the usual humanistic tradition, and differently than in everyday use. Luhmann understands the term ethics as the demanding, elaborate description that deals with moral problems and attempts to reflect on them. Ethics is defined as the reflection theory of morals, i.e. every cognitive description of morals.



## V PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARADIGMS

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE AND SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGMS OUTLINE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT ROLES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE COORDINATION OF SOCIAL ORDER.

HABERMAS' THEORIES MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO DISCLOSE THE IDEAL PERCEPTION WHICH SEEMS TO PREVAIL IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE'S UNDERSTANDING OF ITSELF, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME SET OUT NORMATIVE IDEALS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE. THE IDEAL IN THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PARADIGM IS TO REESTABLISH THE SYSTEM'S COUPLING TO THE LEWELWORLD. THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER MUST ACT AS AN INDIVIDUAL THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE ACTION. PUBLIC RELATIONS IS A MATTER OF ETHICAL ISSUES IN A NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE. WE MIGHT ALSO CALL THIS IS THE *ETHICAL*, THE *COMMUNICATIVE* OR THE *NORMATIVE* PARADIGM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS. THE KEYWORD IS LEGITIMATION.

LUHMANN'S THEORIES MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO DISCLOSE THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC MECHANISMS THAT CAN BE VIEWED AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE, AND TO SET OUT CERTAIN FUNCTIONAL CONDITIONS FOR PRACTICE. THE FUNCTION IN THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM IS TO ASSIST IN MAINTAINING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE ORGANISATION SYSTEM THROUGH STRATEGIC REFLECTION; TO ASSIST IN ENSURING THAT THE DIFFERENTIATED SYSTEM LOGICS CAN FUNCTION AUTONOMOUSLY BECAUSE THEY ALSO UNDERSTAND HOW TO FUNCTION TOGETHER. THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER'S SPHERE OF ACTION IS DEFINED BY THE SOCIAL SYSTEMS. PUBLIC RELATIONS IS A MATTER OF FUNCTIONAL ISSUES IN A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE. WE COULD ALSO NAME THIS THE *FUNCTIONAL*, THE *REFLECTIVE* OR THE *COGNITIVE* PARADIGM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS. THE KEYWORD IS PUBLIC TRUST.

EACH PERSPECTIVE HAS ITS BLIND SPOTS BUT THE SWITCHING OF PERSPECTIVES ALLOWS US TO SEE MORE.

FROM A HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE, THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE IN A METATHEORETICAL OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A PHENOMENON IS TO MAKE THE PRACTITIONER AWARE OF HIS/HER TASK, I.E. TO LIBERATE THE PRACTITIONER'S REASON FROM THE ALIENATING SYSTEMS LOGIC. IN THIS SENSE WE CAN SPEAK OF THE POSSIBILITY OF LEGITIMATING PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE. THIS POSSIBILITY DOES NOT EXIST IN THE SYSTEMS-THEORETIC PARADIGM. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE IS A 2ND-ORDER OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR USE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS' INNER-SYSTEMIC COMMUNICATION. IN THIS SENSE WE CAN SPEAK OF THE POSSIBILITY OF STRATEGIC REFLECTION IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS SYSTEM AND THE GENERATION OF PUBLIC TRUST.

## 1. THE BLIND SPOTS

A paradigm can be regarded as a social system. It governs a special perspective on the object that is observed. With the intersubjective and the social-systemic paradigms, different perspectives are applied to the observation of public relations. Like other social systems, each perspective has its blind spots, but by switching perspectives we have an opportunity to get behind the paradigms' blind spots. This makes it possible to see more than if we applied only one perspective. We obtain a better understanding of public relations as a phenomenon and obtain a more comprehensive explanatory framework when we attempt to perceive the phenomenon in the larger social perspective. We would undoubtedly see even more by incorporating even more theoretical perspectives; but we can achieve a lot with a combination of Habermasian and Luhmannian thought because they discuss parallel problems, and from fundamentally different basic views.

If we observe the intersubjective public relations paradigm in a systems-theoretic perspective, the blind spots are that the paradigm does not see that there is no opportunity for intersubjective communication; does not see that communication is inner-systemic and media borne; does not see that language has no liberating and reason-generating function; does not see that there is no common interpretive horizon; does not see that all social actions are motivated by social systems' differentiated logics.

Conversely, if we observe the social-systemic public relations paradigm from a Habermas perspective it is possible to claim that systems theory's blind spots are a failure to problematise power and hierarchy, the anonymous logic and human beings' lack of influence on social relations.

FROM A SYSTEMS-THEORETIC PERSPECTIVE WE SEE	FROM A HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE WE SEE
<p><b>Blind spots:</b>  <b>The intersubjective paradigm cannot see</b></p> <p>that communication is inner-systemic and media borne</p> <p>that there is no common interpretive horizon</p> <p>that all social actions are anchored in social systems</p>	<p><b>Blind spots:</b>  <b>The social-systemic paradigm cannot see</b></p> <p>the failure to problematise:</p> <p>power and hierarchy;</p> <p>the anonymous logic;</p> <p>individuals' role in social relations</p>

*Table 15: The switch of perspectives.*



One can see different things with the two theories, and instead of deciding in favour of one it might prove fruitful to allow both to supplement each other in the reflection on public relations.

## **2. THE SWITCH OF PERSPECTIVES**

### **2.1 INTEGRATION OR INTERACTION**

Both the intersubjective and the social-systemic public relations paradigms describe public relations as a phenomenon that occurs in the coordination of society's different rationalities. The character and ambition of coordination processes are explained differently by Habermas and Luhmann. The evaluation of public relations' coordinating role in social order is also given quite different interpretations in the two paradigms.

#### **2.1.1 THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE: LIBERATING OR ALIENATING**

The major question in the intersubjective paradigm is whether public relations practice is detrimental to the creation of the fundamental consensus on the common opinion of society. Does public relations practice impair integration - and even encourage disintegration - by *alienating* human reason by colonising it with the anonymous systems logic? Or can public relations practice be managed so that it contributes to *liberating* reason and furthering social integration?

Basically, this is a question of the extent to which the work of the practitioner is anchored in the lifeworld's understanding-oriented rationality or in the system's purposive rationality. If the public relations practitioner is anchored in a decoupled systemic purposive rationality, in a Habermasian perspective he/she can be criticised for contributing to a colonisation of the lifeworld, a distortion of democracy - to disintegration. If the public relations practitioner is lifeworld's advocate in the system; if he/she works to legitimate the system by recoupling it to the lifeworld rationality, then we can speak in terms of a liberating, integrating endeavour.

Practitioner's role	Anchoring	Effect
Participant	Lifeworld's human reason	Liberating = integration
Spectator	System's anonymous logic	Alienating = disintegration

*Table 16: Public relations in the intersubjective paradigm - liberating or alienating.*

### 2.1.2 THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE: A RELIEF OF OR STRAIN ON INTERACTION

The question to be addressed in the social-systemic paradigm is whether public relations practice can further reciprocal reflection between social systems. If so we can speak in terms of relieving interaction between social systems. This presupposes practice that does not limit itself to the expressive task of the 1st order. Practice must integrate the reflective task and promote inner-systemic 2nd-order communication. The objective is to contribute to social systems' reciprocal reflection in the efforts to prevent that social systems put such a strain on one another that the systemic interaction breaks down.

Role and anchoring of practitioner	Nature of practice	Effect
Tool for social system	Reflective - 2nd-order communication	Relieves interaction
Tool for social system	Expressive - 1st-order communication	Strains interaction

*Table 17: Public relations in the social-systemic paradigm - relief of or strain on interaction.*

Similarly, Ronneberger & Rühl set out certain goals for public relations in a systems-theoretic explanatory framework:

It is true that public relations can have a socially integrative effect when drawing attention to social consequences and related problems, also those that are difficult or impossible to solve. But it does not suffice with attempts to repair or to actualise themes which are not directly connected with the goals of the organisation. Bearing in mind the necessity in complex societies of making high complexity understandable by means of extensive information and constant efforts, the integration policy of PR cannot aim only at simplifying complex matters to facilitate understanding. A functional PR integration policy must be aimed at removing or avoiding the increasing strains in society.<sup>298</sup>

In this case public relations does not fulfil its function only through expressing social responsibility by means of 'actualising themes that are not directly

<sup>298</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992): 292. Own translation from German. Many researchers in the Luhmann school use the concept of integration in a positive framework. I am cautious in doing this, as Luhmann would no doubt describe integration as hazardous to the preservation of system boundaries.

connected with the goals of the organisation', nor by mastering 'communication' in a traditional, communicative-technical sense. Ronneberger & Rühl do not work with the concept of reflection, but the task of "removing or avoiding the increasing strains in society" suggests that public relations practice if it is to be functional cannot suffice with the expressive but must also include the reflective task.

## 2.2 ETHICS AND FUNCTION -

### COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND STRATEGIC REFLECTION

In their different understanding of society's rationalities and the character of the task of coordination the two paradigms lay down different criteria for evaluating public relations practice. One leads to a *normative* judgement of the *ethical* qualities of public relations practice, the other to a *cognitive* evaluation of the *functional* effect of public relations practice.

Inextricably linked to the concepts of ethics and function is the character of practice and the underlying rationale. In an intersubjective paradigm ethical behaviour will be equal to *communicative action*. In a social-systemic context we do not speak in terms of ethics but of functional behaviour that requires *strategic reflection*.

#### 2.2.1 THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE: ETHICAL COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

We might have termed the intersubjective paradigm the *ethical public relations paradigm*. This is where we discuss that public relations practice ought to be *ethical*.

Practice	Ethical	Unethical
Coordination	Integration	Disintegration
Communication	Communicative action	Strategic action
Rationalities	(System) Lifeworld <-> Lifeworld	System<-> lifeworld or System (lifeworld) <-> lifeworld
Governing motive	Common interest	Particular interest

Table 18: The preconditions for the ethical practice of public relations in an intersubjective paradigm.

Even though practice is conducted as an organisational activity, ethical practice springs from lifeworld rationality and is thus motivated by common interest. To have a liberating effect and contribute to the social integration of society practice must be ethical.

In an intersubjective public relations paradigm we have the good and the bad interpretation of public relations. In the good version public relations practice represents the lifeworld in the system, and communication follows the model *lifeworld <-> lifeworld* (communicative action). In the bad version public relations addresses the lifeworld from the rationality of the system: *system -> lifeworld* (open strategic action). To this is added the *really bad*, where public relations purports to address the lifeworld in an organisation's environment from a lifeworld rationality oriented to mutual understanding, i.e. *lifeworld <-> lifeworld*, but where the governing intention is in fact a strategic system rationality, and the model becomes: *system (lifeworld <-) -> lifeworld* (concealed strategic action). This constitutes manipulation though not always acknowledged as such, and in a strict Habermasian interpretation the ideal of symmetrical communication as it is described and justified in *Excellence* must be designated as such.

THE GOOD	lifeworld <-> lifeworld	communicative action
THE BAD	system -> lifeworld	open strategic action
THE REALLY BAD	system (lifeworld) - > lifeworld	concealed strategic action

Table 19: Ethical graduations in an intersubjective public relations paradigm.

### 2.2.2 THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE: FUNCTIONAL STRATEGIC REFLECTION

Practice in the social-systemic paradigm can neither be deemed good nor bad in an ethical sense. Public relations can be interpreted as a functional measure that can assist in relieving interaction between systems. In systems theory the evaluation of public relations practice becomes a question of functionality, i.e. to what extent practice fulfils its function. In contrast to the ethical paradigm, we can speak of *the functional public relations paradigm*.

Practice	Functional	Dysfunctional
Coordination	Relieve interaction	Strain on interaction
Communication/ interaction	Reciprocal reflection 2nd-order observation	One-sided reflection 1st-order observation
Governing motive	Preserve system boundaries	Preserve system boundaries

*Table 20: Preconditions for the functional practice of public relations in a social-systemic public relations paradigm.*

In a social-systemic paradigm public relations practice can be criticised for being dysfunctional if it does not further reciprocal reflection in social systems. The practice of good public relations in a systems-theoretic context must further reciprocal reflection, it must work within the framework of autopoiesis' paradoxical synthesis of autonomy and interaction. Social systems must continue their processes according to their own logic in order to maintain their inner dynamics and develop within their own boundaries; but also learn to see themselves as environments for one another in order to avoid strains which could cause the breakdown of interaction. I have chosen to use the term *reciprocal strategic reflection* to describe the social-systemic alternative to the intersubjective ethic<sup>299</sup>. *Excellence* writes:

One of the major purposes of excellent public relations is to balance the private interest of the organization with the interests of publics and society. Excellent public relations does so through planning and symmetrical communication programs. If excellent organizations are to be socially responsible, they need excellent public relations to help make them that way.<sup>300</sup>

To be socially responsible, public relations must balance the publics' and the organisation's interests, but on the basis of strategic considerations.

The ambition in systems theory is not similar to Habermas' integration efforts oriented to understanding in the common interest. It is limited to preventing "the drifting apart of particular interests". The logics of systems are legitimate because they are functional; but social systems must learn to live side

<sup>299</sup> See IV 3.4.

<sup>300</sup> *Excellence*:241.

by side for their own good through reciprocal reflection, and this is where we are likely to find the function of public relations. **In this understanding, organisations can live up to their social responsibility by balancing their own interests with those of their environments through reflective communication - out of consideration for their own well-being and on the basis of functional strategic considerations. Conflicts between particular interests and common interest are dissolved. You might almost say that particular interests are in the common interest.**

### 2.2.3 SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION:

#### COMMUNICATIVE ACTION OR RECIPROCAL REFLECTION

Both the ethical communicative action and functional reciprocal reflection can be paralleled with the ideal of *symmetrical communication* in modern public relations, but with quite different consequences for practice. There are fundamental differences in the two paradigms.

In the intersubjective paradigm, this ideal of symmetrical communication presupposes symmetry in the different dimensions of dialogue<sup>301</sup>. It is crucial that the dialogue partners have the same intention, namely to achieve mutual understanding that each intends to comply to - even though the outcome is not of immediate benefit to the organisation. Likewise, the dialogue partners must possess the same power - or more correctly: the dialogue must not be subjected to any form of power, concealed or open. In practice, this means for example that it is not symmetrical communication according to the rules in Habermas' discourse ethics if an organisation should threaten to move jobs to another municipality, or if 'the political consumer' should threaten to boycott a company's products. Symmetrical conditions also apply to knowledge. In practice, this means that an organisation must make all information available to the dialogue partner; according to the ideal, the selective knowledge made available at, for example, information meetings, in publicity material, house magazines etc., does not satisfy conditions of symmetry.

My conclusion is that Habermas' discourse ethics are inspiring for an understanding of public relations practice's ideal understanding of itself, as expressed in, for example, the *Code of Athens* and the concept of symmetrical communication, but public relations practice as a strategic, organisational activity will not be able to satisfy these conditions. It will always be deemed *unethical*. This does not mean that it is not possible to learn from these ideal claims - but the conditions must be reformulated and made applicable if we want to avoid ending in an unproductive, condemnatory dead end.

A social-systemic interpretive framework could be of benefit here, even though we have our doubts about assertions such as "individuals cannot communicate - only systems can communicate". Because here we have a framework to understand why conflicts arise between groups in society, and why

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<sup>301</sup> Cf. II 2.3.

they are so difficult to solve - and that in many cases they cannot be solved, but can only be acknowledged in order to get on speaking terms. This requires *reciprocal* reflection; it is here, for example, that *both* employers and workers in order to avoid conflict can assist each other to reflect on themselves as mutual environments on the basis of 2nd-order observations and the exchange of images<sup>302</sup>. This rests on an acknowledgement of dependency on interaction with relevant social systems in the environment, and reflection has a strategic motive. If the world is viewed only from the 1st-order observation of one's own logic, the risk of the breakdown of interaction is increased.

The differences between the ethical and functional behaviour patterns of the two public relations paradigms can be summed up as:

	<b>Habermas: Communicative action</b>	<b>Luhmann: Reciprocal strategic reflection</b>
<b>Rationality</b>	Lifeworld's common interpretive framework	The logics of differentiated systems
<b>Motive</b>	Understanding	Strategy
<b>Medium</b>	Language	2nd-order observation
<b>Goal</b>	Consent, mutual understanding	Dissent - stimulation of inner-systemic reflection (communication on communication)
<b>Function</b>	Social integration	To relieve interaction

*Table 21: Communicative action or strategic reflection.*

Where the ideal ambition in an intersubjective paradigm is to further common interests, in a social-systemic paradigm it is reduced to "at least preventing the drifting apart of particular interests"<sup>303</sup>.

<sup>302</sup> Cf. III 3.5 for the concept of 'image'.

<sup>303</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992): 252. Own translation from German.



## 2.3 THE PUBLIC

Relations to the public communication processes would seem constitutive for public relations in both paradigms, and both in the Habermas and Luhmann schools these processes have a coordinating function in society. But because the character of both processes and coordinations are different, the interpretation of public relations will be so too.

### 2.3.1 THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE

On the one hand we have seen efforts to establish a common forum for the formation of reason through intersubjective discourse oriented towards understanding-oriented discourse; this represents a possible ideal because we have the lifeworld as a common interpretive framework. In this form the practitioner in the ideal should engage as an individual in public debate in the common interest.

If we follow this thought through to the end we seem to end with the question of whether a function like public relations has any place in this ideal. *Will public relations practice not just become systematic alienation of the public debate?* I believe we can interpret the quotation below to mean that whereas previously the possibility existed for, for example, the company manager/owner to shift from the role of a private individual to a citizen of society in the public debate on common affairs, the equivalent is not possible for the professional public relations practitioner, who has only a systemic interest in the debate he/she contributes to:

... organizations practised what he called private relations before they practiced public relations. With private relations, organizations either did not feel obligated to communicate with publics, or organizational executives communicated directly with publics without the intervention of manipulative public relations practitioners. Although Olasky did not use the term symmetrical, his discussion suggests that private relations were symmetrical before press agents made public relations asymmetrical.<sup>304</sup>

Similarly, in *Bourgeois Society* Habermas ascribes a disintegrative function to public relations (in his terms: 'cultivation of opinion') by suggesting that public relations practice is partly to blame for the invasion of the public sphere by particular interests<sup>305</sup>. Public relations activities pretend, according to Habermas, to deal with themes that are relevant to a discussion in the public sphere, to deal with *public* relations with the lifeworld as the common interpretive framework for a dialogue oriented to mutual understanding. In the background, however, lies a

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<sup>304</sup> *Excellence*:290 on M.N. Olasky, *Corporate public relations: A new historical perspective*, Hillsdale, New Jersey; Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987. My emphasis.

<sup>305</sup> See quotation II 1.4.

*private* market relation and a purposive system logic that, according to the ideal understanding of the bourgeois society, is not justified a place in the public sphere<sup>306</sup>.

### 2.3.2 THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE:

#### THE PROCESSES OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

The problem is radically changed when we base it in Luhmann's theories. The public consists of functional communication processes that strengthen the societal system's reflective capacity and to an increasing extent assist reciprocal regulation in *the context-regulated society*. In order to maintain interaction between the systems, certain expectation structures in the form of public trust are established via the medium of social responsibility. Public communication is one of the societal system's relief structures. The processes take place in innumerable social systems of different character, and there is no parallel to a common interpretive framework such as Habermas' lifeworld. The bearing medium is weak and marked by the various differentiated inner-systemic constructions of society. Structural public relations couplings with the public communication processes are borne by strategic considerations to maintain the commissioning system. Here, we see the need for a function capable of coupling to the environment from a 2nd-order observation.

### 2.3.3 WHAT IS THE ACTUAL DIFFERENCE?

When we in a social-systemic public relations paradigm define the concept of the public, it must not be confused with Habermas' ideal conception of a sphere where society's reason is formed and action coordinated according to a common interpretive framework. In Luhmann's work there is no possibility for a collective all-encompassing reason, or for a concept such as social responsibility with a fixed form for "it would mean that society would occur a second time within itself"<sup>307</sup>. Society is only differentiated inner-systemic constructions, and the same is true for the conception of social responsibility.

Some will perhaps argue: This is exactly what Habermas describes, the invasion of the public sphere by particular interests! This, however, is meaningless in systems theory where we cannot distinguish between particular and common interests, where there is no alternative in the form of a common interpretive framework as with Habermas. Instead of a normative condemnation, the perspective of the problem is therefore geared towards a functional solution: the concept of social responsibility as a necessary medium in social systems' reflection on the basis of the *perception* of a common society - and hence the

<sup>306</sup> I am aware that this description is based on a more than 30-year-old observation of public relations practice and that practice has developed since. However, it continues to look as if public relations is practised from a strategic goal rationality (cf. e.g. Excellence), and this is the important point when, in a Habermasian paradigm, we speak of the possibility for an ethical practice of public relations.

<sup>307</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:471.

necessity to consider common interests. The processes of public communication become markets<sup>308</sup>, with which the differentiated function systems in various ways can couple structurally (and the better a system is at observing its environment, the better it becomes at this interaction). Coupling allows both the introduction of 'images' to influence the concept of social responsibility according to one's own logic, and also the provision of images for use in inner-systemic reflection.

Concepts of the public	Habermas' description of the ideal: The bourgeois society	A Luhmann perspective: The system of public communication
Function	Reason formed to coordinate society's actions, ideally on the basis of a common interpretive framework - but difficult in practice.	Thematises function systems' reciprocal straining in communication processes. Establishes structural couplings across function systems for use in reciprocal reflection to secure public trust as a precondition for interaction.
Organisation	Common intersubjective forum	Function system for social systems' public communication via the fluid medium of social responsibility
Process	Discourse in the lifeworld's rationality of understanding	Strategic encoding and decoding of images

Table 22: Character and function of the public according to Habermas and interpreted according to Luhmann.

## 2.4 LEGITIMACY OR PUBLIC TRUST

Both paradigms deal with the concept of social responsibility - a central concept in public relations practice's understanding of itself. *Excellence* maintains that:

Public relations is the practice of social responsibility.<sup>309</sup>

With both paradigms the central task for public relations will be to generate *social acceptance*. In the intersubjective it becomes a question of *legitimizing* organisations in society, and in the post-conventional society this means re-

<sup>308</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl define markets as intermediary communicative systems, as a coordination principle. Markets allow a coordinated publication of thematised messages. "In this sense market models are developed to solve different social problems through services and return services which again are produced by flexible organisation capable of dispositions and determinations - without any centrally directed unity being a precondition". Ronneberger & Rühl (1992): 263. Own translation from German.

<sup>309</sup> *Excellence*:240. My emphasis.

establishing the system's coupling to the lifeworld rationality through processes of ethical discourse.

In the social-systemic paradigm it becomes a question of *creating public trust*, and in the context-regulated society this means to establish and to deserve expectations of social responsibility - a concept that, however, changes according to the system logic using it.

The public relations paradigms observe the same tendencies but when reflected in the respective theoretic paradigms they are interpreted differently. Whereas the goal in the intersubjective paradigm is to agree on common standards of behaviour in society - consensus -, the goal in the social-systemic paradigm is rather to get different norm sets to coexist - to accept their dissent<sup>310</sup> - or to "cultivate the type of understanding which even if it does not reconcile the different observers at least allows them to exist side by side"<sup>311</sup>.

## **2.5 CONSCIOUS PARTICIPANT OR TOOL FOR SOCIAL SYSTEMS**

When the practitioner's role is observed from the two paradigms, we see the fundamental difference between Habermas and Luhmann: the relationship between the acting individual and social systems. Whereas Habermas assumes that it is still possible at social system level to work in a meaningful way with categories of individuals, Luhmann claims that modern society has developed emergent characteristics which mean that social relations can no longer be attributed to individual action. Thus Luhmann distances himself categorically from subject-based social theories. Accordingly, he does not stress intersubjective, language-based communication as does Habermas. Communication is borne by symbolic media and is thus anchored in the system logic. Language can only be a possible aid. It is this dissent on the individual's role in social relations that forms the basis of the different perceptions of rationalities in society and the nature of communication. Perceptions that define the sphere of action of the public relations practitioner differently in each paradigm.

Within Habermas the prerequisite for the ethical practice of public relations is that the practitioner acts as a *participating, responsible individual* - consciously and according to the lifeworld's rationality of understanding. This requires communicative action, which in turn requires ethical behaviour. If the practitioner acts strategically on the basis of system logic, the practitioner is just an observer in the processes, and does not take personal ethical responsibility.

The picture we can draw with Habermas of the unethical public relations practitioner can in fact be compared with the practitioner's possible role in a social-systemic paradigm. Here *the human being is just a tool for the social*

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<sup>310</sup> As Willke states: "Acknowledgement of dissent can prove more productive than the attempt to confine understanding to the special case of consensus." Willke (1993): 74. Own translation from German.

<sup>311</sup> Luhmann, *Soziologie des Risikos*, 1991:247. Own translation from German.

*systems' autopoietic communication process.* Although human beings are necessary as transmitters of communication, communication is nevertheless anchored in the social system's meaning, not in human consciousness, and the human being acts on the basis of the meaning of the social system. The point in relation to Habermas is that here *there is no other option.*

## **2.6 2ND-ORDER'S PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS**

A shift of perspective between the two paradigms can be listed as in table 23. With the two paradigms we see essentially different roles for public relations practice in social order and also different spheres of action for the public relations practitioner.

With Habermas' theories it is possible to understand the ideal concept that seems to prevail in public relations practice's understanding of itself. We can also use Habermas to define the precise requirements of normative ideals for public relations practice. In the intersubjective paradigm the ideal will be to re-establish the system's coupling to the lifeworld. The public relations practitioner must act as an individual through communicative action. The task will be to legitimate organisational action. The forum is the public sphere on the basis of the lifeworld's common interpretive framework and with consensus as the ambition. With Habermas public relations thus becomes a question of ethical problems in a normative perspective. We might also call this is the *ethical*, the *communicative* or the *normative* paradigm of public relations. The keyword is legitimation.

Conversely, Luhmann's theories make it possible to understand the social-systemic mechanisms which can be understood as the framework for public relations practice, and to outline certain functional prerequisites for practice. In the social-systemic paradigm, the function is to assist in maintaining organisation systems' boundaries through strategic reflection; to assist in ensuring that the differentiated systems logics can function autonomously, because they also understand how to function together. Consensus or common understanding is not possible; the ambition is rather to acknowledge dissent. The public relations practitioner's sphere of action is defined by the social systems. Public relations becomes a question of functional problems in a cognitive perspective. We might also call this the *functional*, the *reflective* or the *cognitive* paradigm of public relations. The keyword is public trust.

PARADIGMS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS	HABERMAS: THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PARADIGM	LUHMANN: THE SOCIAL-SYSTEMIC PARADIGM
<b>Perspective</b>	Normative	Cognitive
<b>Coordination task</b>	Re-establish systems' coupling to lifeworld	Maintain social systems' boundaries - autonomy through interaction
<b>Character of problem</b>	Ethical	Functional
<b>Scope of problem</b>	Integration or disintegration - liberate or alienate reason	Relieve or strain interaction
<b>Objective</b>	To benefit the common interest	To prevent the 'drifting apart' of particular interests
<b>Means</b>	Communicative action	Strategic reflection
<b>Ambition</b>	Consensus	Acknowledgement of dissent
<b>Horizon</b>	The public - ideally a common interpretive framework	Systems of public communication related to differentiated function logics
<b>Social order</b>	Post-conventional	Context-regulation
<b>Type of social acceptance</b>	Legitimacy	Public trust
<b>Sphere of action for practitioner</b>	Individual - participant	Spectator - outside social systems Tool for social systems

*Table 23: Comparison of the intersubjective and the social-systemic public relations paradigms on key points.*

So which of the two paradigms is most adequate in describing the phenomenon of public relations? In the constructivist spirit, which both Habermas' and Luhmann's theories represent<sup>312</sup>, the answer must be: it depends on which aspect of the phenomenon one wishes to describe. The perspectives view different aspects of the phenomenon of public relations. And it also depends on the worldview one uses as a perspective.

Habermas and Luhmann represent different worldviews. Accordingly, they challenge each other's theories of having blind spots. For Luhmann, Habermas and the 'critical' sociology is therefore not theory - let alone *critical* theory - merely an expression of an irresponsible superior attitude:

It is just as cheap as irresponsible to set up ideals, which circumstances does not live up to, and then complain about the not ever fulfilled promises of the bourgeois revolution. In this attitude I see no theory, let alone critical theory. If instead you start with the improbability of what functions as well as normal, it is possible and above all more precise to acknowledge where the system operates inconsistently in relation to its own structural requirements and threatens itself.<sup>313</sup>

In turn, Habermas objects to Luhmann, saying that

behind the attempt to justify reduction of world complexity as the prime reference of social scientific functionalism hides the unfulfilled obligation of hegemony conforming questions, on the apology for the established for the sake of its continued existence<sup>314</sup>.

Luhmann responds to Habermas' criticism by stating that Habermas uses political concepts to criticise scientific theory. There are no causal relationships between scientific statements and political views, says Luhmann, and therefore it is an insufficient simplification to ascribe particular political implications to his theories, instead of enquiring about their theoretic interpretational power.<sup>315</sup>

Luhmann's attitude has provoked many other accusations of cynicism, conservatism etc. from researchers with roots in a normative tradition, but Luhmann himself maintains that the only scientifically responsible position is to attempt to **present** the truth; this is the only 'moral' good in a scientific perspective, at any rate if one views society from the perspective of his theory,

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<sup>312</sup> Luhmann with greater consequence than Habermas.

<sup>313</sup> Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, Volume 5: 132. Own translation from German.

<sup>314</sup> Habermas in *Habermas & Luhmann, Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*: 170. Own translation from German.

<sup>315</sup> Cf. Kneer & Nassehi (1993):45.

and therefore a point that follows as a natural extension of his theory. According to which there is no united perspective, and consequently no common morality.<sup>316</sup>

But if one chooses to view the world from a Luhmannian perspective, where no common truth is possible, where social actions are anchored in social systems, not in individuals, this inevitably leads to the question: Of what epistemological advantage are metatheoretical considerations of public relations in a social-systemic perspective? Why on earth do we use resources on dissertations such as this?

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<sup>316</sup> In his theories Luhmann warns directly against moralising on the grounds that morals can never be common and will often lead to conflict instead of agreement.



### **3. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE**

From a Habermasian perspective, insight into the phenomenon of public relations gives the individual the possibility to act; an intersubjective public relations paradigm actually assigns the normative ideal of public relations to the practitioner, insight sets the practitioner free of the alienating system logic in order to act in the lifeworld rationality of understanding. It becomes clear that greater insight into societal mechanisms and action patterns surrounding public relations can lead to a perception that confronts those involved in public relations practice with a choice: the classic choice between liberation and alienation.

But what advantage can we gain in the knowledge we can gain in a systems-theoretic perspective, if as human beings we are left outside the social systems? A social-systemic public relations paradigm, as I have outlined it, seems to give the practitioner the single possibility of getting the machinery of society to work a little more smoothly and be satisfied with 'as long as it works'. For is it at all possible to apply a critical perspective to 'our' system? Yes - because a characteristic of individuals as psychic systems is that we interpenetrate with innumerable other social systems and can transmit information between social systems<sup>317</sup>. Research into public relations can be transferred from the scientific system over to other systems where public relations is practised. In further research into the development of the phenomenon of public relations it might prove interesting to observe and analyse the extent to which public relations practice is able to decode from a 2nd-order observation<sup>318</sup>.

One might also argue that if the public relations system has developed communication of the 2nd order, then critical research into public relations is a contemporary opportunity for the public relations system to increase its reflective complexity and thereby strengthen its contribution to reciprocal reflection, which, in this dissertation, has been proposed as the central function of modern public relations. This research can thus in a systems-theoretic perspective be interpreted as elements in the internal communication of the scientific system as well as images or scenarios transmitted by another system - in this case the scientific - for use in the reflection on the phenomenon of public relations in other of society's social systems.

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<sup>317</sup> Münch has formulated an interesting theory on employment as an interpenetration zone between economics and morality. With the increasing importance of employment in the individual's identity, morality is transferred via employment to the economy (and vice versa!). This explains the increasing moral sensitivity in the economic system. Münch (1994).

<sup>318</sup> Franz Ronneberger's experience (to date) is that the cognitive openness of the practice is of first order. In the first issue of the journal *Public Relations Forum für Wissenschaft und Praxis*, November 1995, he says: "It is my experience that practitioners want recipes, and nothing but recipes". Own translation from German.



## REFLECTIVE EXCURSUS

### SYSTEM, INTERACTION OR COMPLEXITY?

In this outline of the social-systemic public relations paradigm I have not problematised the perception of public relations as a social system. My objective has been otherwise: to observe which function public relations can have in a systems-theoretic perspective and which perspectives this will entail for the interpretation of the public relations practice, especially in contrast to the Habermas based paradigm. This does not mean that I am not aware that this will influence a further interpretation, whether and if so how public relations can be defined as an independent social system. This is, however, an extensive analytical project that I can only touch briefly on within the framework of this dissertation.

My assertion is that we can consider public relations as heterogeneous structures. To avoid the reduction of only discussing whether public relations is a social system, we can perhaps apprehend greater complexity by viewing public relations in several systems-theoretic conceptual frameworks.

To be able to select from the environment - to identify the structures relevant to observe - our point of departure must be the unity we believe constitutes public relations. The unity we tentatively can propose for modern public relations structures - though some are (as yet) not termed public relations - is perhaps that they

- \* couple structurally or interpenetrate with the system of public communication understood as processes of communication on the perception of common moral societal values: on the medium of social responsibility
- \* interact on the basis of a 2nd-order observation
- \* with the aim of generating public trust in the commissioning system

On the basis of this unity we can choose to view public relations as a *basic development feature* in societies reaching a stage of complexity where reciprocal reflection and public trust become a prerequisite for interaction. In extension, we can perhaps view public relations as an *emergent form of interaction* that curbs uncertainty by means of persuasion.

Or we can view public relations as a *complexity* developed in social systems to enable them to handle changes in the environment. Public relations structures extend system boundaries, so the system can contain the theme of social responsibility. In this respect, Luhmann cites ecology as an example of distinguishing between complexity and system.

The conceptual distinction between (the concept of) system and (the concept of) complexity is central to the following analyses, because they concern complex systems. Anyone who cannot distinguish between system and complexity is denied access to the domain of ecology. Ecology is concerned with a complexity that is not a system because it is not regulated by a system/environment difference of its own. This is why it is so difficult, in this case, to understand the *unity* of the plurality, a unity that is not produced as a self-referential system but rather is constituted by observation and intervention.

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Can public relations then be described as complexity, as the system's ability to observe public relations themes? Possibly - but not just as complexity.

Perhaps we should look at public relations as a medium - *a necessary code in social systems* with the distinction *social responsibility or not: generate public trust/public mistrust*. We can perhaps speak in these terms when public relations manifests itself as a way of thinking, as an attitude integrated into the organisation's decision-making processes. A medium that compels 2nd-order observations, reflection. As this, we can also describe public relations as an *institutionalised form of self-observation*.

Or is public relations more like a 1st-order code for the particular form of interaction that has emerged in social evolution, with the code to generate public trust or not, or to convince or not, or a type of persuasion code: rhetoric as a bearing *medium* in line with power, money, truth etc.? Admittedly, this 1st-order characteristic falls outside the unity I have described for modern public relations, but the idea is challenging.

Or can public relations be defined as a social system? Or is public relations just an expression of the fact that individuals call their actions public relations - but otherwise deal independently of each other - so that we cannot speak of a system? The emergence of a social system requires the establishment of a difference from the environment - meaning boundaries that make a difference to what gives meaning within and outside the system. The system has to be able to process itself as an independent identity and from without to be acknowledged and to be addressed as such. As Luhmann expresses it:

There is agreement within the discipline today that the point of departure for all systems-theoretical analysis must be *the difference between system and environment*. Systems are oriented by their environment not just occasionally and adaptively, but structurally, and they cannot exist without their environment. They constitute and maintain themselves by creating and maintaining a difference from their environment, and they use their boundaries to regulate this difference. Without difference from an environment, there would not even be

<sup>319</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:31. My emphasis.

self-reference, because difference is the functional premise of self-referential operations. In this sense *boundary* maintenance is system maintenance.<sup>320</sup>

Perhaps one could claim that public relations yet has problems defining its identity as a social system, inwards and outwards. Perhaps the case is that the social system of public relations's difference from the environment has yet not been stabilised<sup>321</sup>.

Ronneberger & Rühl describe public relations' development into a social system:

Presumably developed societies does not emerge a public relations system until their total societal communications potential has reached a relatively high complexity level. Then this system also produces public relations structures, which so to speak serve as a store to master situative public relations communications. Public relations then positions itself as work, as trade or as profession based on its own communication forms' particular conditions of success, which differ from former times' way of communication just as much as from everyday life's way of communication.<sup>322</sup>

If we postulate that public relations is a social system - which function system does it then belong in? With difficulty we can postulate a unity for public relations as social system, if we find the phenomenon alternating as an expression of the economic system, the political system, the scientific system etc. In that case public relations can be characterised only as one of the phenomena I discussed above - a complexity or a necessary code in various other social systems. The question here is whether public relations as a social system belongs in the function system of public communication - or whether outside the public communications system a special function system can be identified, whose objective is to relieve interaction between function systems with the code of interaction/or not - in everyday language 'communication/or not'? Where to place various publicity disciplines and where to place public relations?

Or has rhetoric liberated itself as an independent system?<sup>323</sup>

Conclusion: On the basis of the unity I have postulated for public relations we can possibly find public relations as structures in the societal system at different stages as heterogeneous expressions of the same tendency: the need of the

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<sup>320</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1984/1995:16-17.

<sup>321</sup> But on the basis of the unity described above we can, for example, exclude journalism and marketing from public relations. While journalism is supposed to work from the code of social responsibility it is not anchored in the organisation's systems outside the system of public communication, and marketing does not integrate with the system of public communication via the code of social responsibility.

<sup>322</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl (1992):179. Own translation from German.

<sup>323</sup> Asmund Born in conversation, July 1995.

context-regulated social order for heightened complexity in interaction between systems and, correspondingly, heightened inner-systemic complexity to match this.

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## DICTIONARY OF NIKLAS LUHMANN'S SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY

*SOCIAL SYSTEMS*, WHENEVER REFERRED TO BELOW = NIKLAS LUHMANN'S *SOCIAL SYSTEMS*, 1984/1995.

Accompanying self-reference: The self-reference required by all autopoiesis is *accompanying self-reference*. "Pure self-reference in the sense of "relating only and exclusively to itself" is impossible. If it came about, any accident whatsoever would de-tautologize it. One could even say that if it came about, all accidents would be redundant and functionally equivalent with regard to the determination of what is indeterminate." *Social Systems*:446.

Autopoiesis: Greek for self-creation. Autopoietic systems create and recreate themselves in a closed process. Transferred to social systems, which are created and recreated in the shape of transient elements such as decisions, resolutions, commands etc in an ongoing process, this implies that communication is a closed process. Cfr Section II, Chapter 1.4.

Basal self-reference: Self-reference where the basic distinction is between element and relation, not environment/system. "The minimal form of self-reference, without which autopoietic reproduction of temporalized systems would be impossible." Higher orders of reference are reflexivity and reflection. *Social Systems*:443.

Blind spot: See observation.

Closure: "Closure does not serve as an end in itself, not even as the sole mechanism of preservation or as a principle of insecurity. Instead, it is the condition of possibility for openness." *Social Systems*:447.

Communication: "Communication grasps *something* out of the referential horizon that it itself constitutes and leaves *other things* aside. Communication is the processing of selection." *Social Systems*:140. Social systems' internal selection of what is meaningful. The unity of information, utterance and understanding. Social systems' elements, i.e. their no further dissolvable ultimate units. "[...]communication sets system formation in motion. As long as it continues, thematic structures and redundantly available meaning contents are formed. A self-critical mass emerges, which brings forth offerings that can be accepted or rejected. *Social Systems*:173. Social systems' communication and psychic systems' consciousness remain environment to each other. In Luhmann's theory social systems communicate - human beings do not. Cfr Part II, Chapter 1.3.

Complexity: The basic concept of Luhmann's functional-structural systems theory. The totality of all possible events and conditions. Something is complex when it can assume at least two conditions. Between the ultimate world complexity and the human consciousness there is a vast gap. This is where social systems step into function. They

take on the task of reducing complexity. I.e., social systems mediate between the indeterminable world complexity and the individual human being's capacity of complexity processing. "We will call an interconnected collection of elements "complex" when, because of immanent constraints in the elements' connective capacity, it is no longer possible at any moment to connect every element with every other element. The concept of "immanent constraint" refers to the internal complexity of the elements, which is not at the system's disposal, yet which makes possible their "capacity for unity". [...] Organized complexity means nothing more than complexity with selective relations among its elements." *Social Systems*:24. "Complexity [...] means being forced to select; being forced to select means contingency; and contingency means risk." *Social Systems*:25. Cfr Section II, Chapter 1.1.

Contingency: "Something is contingent insofar as it is neither necessary nor impossible; it is just what it is (or was or will be), though it could also be otherwise." *Social Systems*:106.

Differentiation, systems: Repetition of system formation in the system. *Social Systems*:18. The subsystems thus generated then act in a mutual system/environment relationship. "The system acquires freedom and the autonomy of self-regulation by indifference to its environment. Therefore one can also describe the differentiation of a system as an increase in sensitivity to what has been determined (what is capable of being connected internally) and an increase in insensitivity to everything else - that is as an increase in dependence and independence at once." *Social Systems*:183.

Double contingency: The concept of double contingency is a major issue with Luhmann. It is a further development of Parsons' theory on the problem of the conditions for the possibility of actions when contingency is doubled in interaction and communication. When two systems with each their contingency are to interact, double contingency arises - in principle an infinite row of possible selections and reactions and thus uncertainty: "Ego experiences alter as alter ego. But along with the nonidentity of perspectives, ego also experiences the identity of this experience on both sides. The situation is indeterminable, unstable, and unacceptable for both the participants." *Social Systems*:121-122.

Element: "The elements composing the system can have no duration, and thus must be constantly reproduced by the system these elements comprise. This goes far beyond merely replacing defunct parts, and it is not adequately explained by referring to environmental relationships. It is not a matter of adaptation, nor is it a matter of metabolism; rather, it is a matter of a peculiar constraint on autonomy arising from the fact that the system would simply cease to exist in any, even the most favourable, environment if it did not equip the momentary elements that compose it with the capacity for connection, that is, with meaning, and thus reproduce them. Different structures may exist to accomplish this, but only ones that can withstand the radical trend toward immediate (and not merely gradual, entropic) dissolution of the elements." *Social Systems*:11. "[...] an element must be what functions for a system as a unity that cannot be further dissolved (even if, viewed microscopically, it is a highly complex compound).

When one says "cannot be further dissolved", this also means that a system can constitute and change itself only by interrelating its elements, and not by dissolving and re-organizing them." *Social Systems*:22. *Communication* is social systems' elements, i.e. their no further dissolvable ultimate units.

Emergence: Indicates the emergence of a new level of order, which cannot be explained from the qualities of the material and energetic base. "We will call an order or a quality emergent when it can no longer be explained simply by the aggregation of parts or by the accumulated qualities of the parts." Willke (1993):154 (my own translation from German). "Thus emergence is not simply an accumulation of complexity, but rather an interruption and new beginning in the constitution of complexity." *Social Systems*:23.

Environment: "The environment is always more complex than the system itself." *Social Systems*:182.

Ethics: The **reflective** theory of morals. By ethics Luhmann understands the demanding, elaborating description, which engage in the problems of morals and endeavour to reflect upon them. In opposition to the philosophical tradition which by ethichs mainly understands the work with the **justification** of moral judgments.

Evolution: Indicates the structural changes of a system by self-referential enforcement of selection and variation.

Function: The dynamic aspect of a social system: the social processes securing the maintenance and stability of the system in a changing environment.

Functional-structural method, the: Luhmann rests on Parsons' structural-functional method (see later), but puts function before structure and therefore calls his theory functional-structural. The functional analysis steps into the foreground, whereas the structure oriented perspective recedes into the background.

Information: "Information occurs whenever a selective event (of an external or internal kind) works selectively within the system, namely, can select the system's states. This presupposes a capacity for being oriented to (simultaneous or successive) differences that appear to be bound to a self-referential operational mode of the system. "A 'bit' of information," as Bateson says, "is definable as a difference which makes a difference." (Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, San Francisco, 1972:315) This means that the difference as such begins to work if and insofar as it can be treated as information in self-referential systems." *Social Systems*:40.

Interpenetration: "[...] an intersystem relation between systems that are environments for each other. [...] We speak of "penetration" if a system *makes* its own *complexity* [...] *available for constructing another system*. Precisely in this sense social systems presuppose "life". Accordingly, *interpenetration* exists when this occurs reciprocally, that is, when both systems enable each other by introducing their own already-constituted complexity into each other". *Social Systems*:213. "[...] the closure of re-

cursive communicative relationships does not liberate the system from the environment. It is and remains dependent on sensors that convey environment. These sensors are human beings in the full sense of their interpenetration; as psychic and bodily systems. This is why autopoietic, self-referentially closed systems depend on interpenetration. In other words, interpenetration is the condition of possibility for self-referentially closed autopoiesis. It enables the emergence of autopoietic systems by opening up environmental contacts on other levels of reality. Interpenetration makes it possible to keep functional levels of operative information processing separate and yet to combine them, and thus to realize systems that are open and closed to their environment at once." *Social Systems*:410-411. In Günther Teubner's interpretation (according to Åkerström Andersen (1994):125), Luhmann's concept of interpenetration deals merely with structural coupling between radically different types of systems. Systems theoretical researchers seem to disagree as to precise demarcations and definitions of the concepts of interpenetration and structural coupling, but to agree on the opinion that the concepts are not completed by Luhmann. (Internet: Diskussionsforum zur soziologischen Systemtheorie Niklas Luhmanns: [Luhmann@listserv.gmd.de](mailto:Luhmann@listserv.gmd.de)/Winter-Spring 1996).

Meaning (Sinn): Social and psychic systems process complexity in the form of meaning. "Meaning is the continual actualization of potentialities." *Social Systems*:64. Meaning is a self-referential phenomenon: Meaning continuously refers to meaning and not to not-meaning. Luhmann defines meaning as "a surplus of references to other possibilities of experience and action." *Social Systems*:60. "Social systems are identified by meaning. Their boundaries are not of a physical nature (although of course physical boundaries, for instance of a territorial nature, can symbolise boundaries of meaning), but are boundaries of what may be relevant in contexts of meaning... Meaning is a particular strategy for the selective condition under the circumstance of high complexity." Luhmann, *Moderne Systemtheorien als Form gesellschaftlicher Analyse*, in *Luhmann und Habermas*, 1971:11-12 (own translation from German).

Meaning takes on its own life in the form of a system, and is its own justification which is gradually no longer questioned. Meaning is steering what the system chooses to let be valid as the world, as a manageable reality. Meaning is thus a means to select in the universe of possibilities; *identified structures of expectation*. "It is impossible to find a 'supporting substance' for meaning. Meaning supports itself in that it enables its own self-referential reproduction. *And only the forms of this reproduction differentiate psychic and social structures.*" *Social Systems*:98. Cfr Section II, Chapter 1.2.

Morals: The communication which operates with the distinction **good/bad** and **good/evil** respectively, thus expressing human **esteem/respect** or **disrespect**.

Observation: An observation consists of two moments (factors?): Distinction and indication. To observe something means to indicate it within the framework of a distinction. Every observation is bound to a blind spot. The observer uses a distinction, which he however cannot indicate by means of this distinction, and therefore cannot observe. "Observation is merely the management of a distinction - for instance that between

system and environment." *Social Systems*:178. The constructivist position is marked by observation being a systems-internal operation. Cfr Section II, Chapter 1.5.

Operation: "Reproduction thus does not mean simply repeatedly producing the same, but rather reflexive production, production out of products. To emphasize that we do not envision the unchanged preservation of a system, but rather an occurrence on the level of elements, which are indispensable for the preservation and change of the system we will call the reproduction of eventlike elements *operation*." *Social Systems*:49.

Organisational systems: "Social systems which reproduce themselves over membership conditions and decision techniques. - Organisational systems constitute another type of action systems. Social systems can be characterised as organised when membership is subject to certain conditions. [...] By means of conditions for membership the organisation succeeds in reproducing highly artificial ways of relatively durable behaviour". Luhmann in *Soziologische Aufklärung*, 5. bind, 1970/1990-2:12 (own translation from German). This means that an important function for organisations is to establish particular sequences of events, which cannot be expected similarly in the environment of the system, thereby making the organisation predictable for members as well as non-members.

Persons: Are not systems, but the identification points of communication. Social systems secure for themselves internal points of connection by perceiving communication as actions (of utterance) and by attributing them to individual persons. This means that persons are construed unities serving the purpose of expectation and attribution of behaviour; but they are not psychical systems, and not at all complete human beings.

Programme: "[...] pre-given conditions for the correctness of the selection of operations." Luhmann, *Ökologische Kommunikation*, Opladen 1986:91 (own translation from German). Programming opens the system to external meaning.

Process: "Processes (and the concept of process is defined by this) result from the fact that concrete selective events build upon one another temporally, connect with another, and thus build previous selections into individual selections as premises for selection." *Social Systems*:45.

Psychic systems: Autopoietic systems whose no further dissolvable ultimate units are thoughts and conceptions respectively. The elements of consciousness have the character of events, i.e. they are of shorter, momentaneous character only.

Rationality: See reflection.

Reduction of complexity: The central function of social systems. Relief or reduction of the possible conditions or events. Social systems reduce world complexity by excluding possibilities. In this way it is not impossible for all possible conditions and events to occur in the system. By reducing possibilities social systems facilitate orientation for the participating persons. Social systems are 'islands of reduced complexity' - 'Inseln ger-

ingerer Komplexität' (Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, Volume 5, 1970/1990 1:116) in an over-complex world. The boundaries between system and environment thus also mark a fall of complexity.

Reference: "The concept of "reference" should be defined in a way that moves it closer to the concept of observation. With it, we would like to designate an operation composed of the elements distinction and indication (in Spencer Brown's sense). This concerns the indication of something within the context of a (likewise operatively introduced) distinction from something else. Referring becomes observing when the distinction is used to acquire information about what is indicated (which generally requires distinctions that are understood narrowly). Normally referring is accompanied by an interest in observation and thus by an interest in acquiring information. Nevertheless, we would like to keep the terms observation and interest or motive separate to maintain the possibility of using concepts like system reference and self reference without implying the possibility of or interests in observation." *Social Systems*:439-440.

Reflection: Production of self-understanding in relation to the environment. The system thematises itself, finds its identity in its particular function, and understands itself as environment to other systems. In the context-regulated society reflection leads to self restriction of own operative possibilities by means of consideration to other systems' possibilities of survival and development (= contingency control). "We will speak of reflection when the basic distinction is between system and environment. Only in reflection does self-reference exhibit the characteristics of systems reference; only here do the two conceptual domains overlap. The self is the system to which the self-referential operation attributes itself. It is an operation by which the system indicates itself in contrast to its environment. This occurs, for example, in all forms of self-presentation that assume the environment does not immediately accept the system in the way it would like itself to be understood." *Social Systems*:444. "This higher level of control is attained by social systems' orienting themselves to themselves - to themselves as different from their environments. [...] We describe as reflection a case in which system reference and self-reference coincide. [...] reflection requires introducing the difference between system and environment into the system. When this occurs from the viewpoint of the unity of this difference, we will speak of rationality." *Social Systems*:455. Also cfr Section II, Chapter 1.7.

Reflexivity, processual self-reference: Self-reference where the basic distinction is between before and after elementary happenings. "Here the self that refers itself is not an aspect of the distinction but a process constituted by it." *Social Systems*:443. An order of reference above basal self-reference and below reflection.

Selection: "Selection can no longer be conceived as carried out by a subject, as analogous with action. It is a subjectless event, an event that is triggered by establishing a difference." *Social Systems*:32.

Self-observation: The introduction of the system/environment-distinction within the system, which constitutes itself with the help of that distinction; self-observation is thus



the operative factor in autopoiesis, because for the elements to be reproduced, it must be guaranteed that they are reproduced as elements of the system and not as anything else." *Social Systems*:37.

Self-reference: "[...] designates the unity that an element, a process, or a system is for itself." *Social Systems*:33. One can call a system self-referential if it itself constitutes the elements that compose it as functional unities and runs reference to this self-constitution through all the relations among these elements, continuously reproducing its self-constitution in this way. In this sense, self-referential systems necessarily operate by self-contact; they possess no other form of environmental contact than this self-contact." *Social Systems*:33. There are three forms of self-reference: basal self-reference, reflexive (processual) self-reference (reflexivity) and reflection. With Luhmann, the concept of self-reference, reflexivity and reflection is detached from its classical location in human consciousness or in the subject and transferred to the domain of objects, namely to real systems as the object of science.

Social system: When two or more persons' actions are connected, a social system always come into being with a special meaning, and separates itself from the environment through this meaning. Social systems are autopoietic systems, which in a recursive-closed process continuously produce communication from communication. According to this understanding, the social (det sociale?) constitutes an independent, emergent level of order. "[...] a social system is constituted as an action system on the basis of communicative happenings, and using their operative means. The system generates a description of itself in itself to steer the continuation of the process, the reproduction of the process." *Social Systems*:165. Cfr Section II, Chapter 1.

Societal structure: A society's form of differentiation in subsystems as well as the form of mutual relationship between subsystems, and between subsystems and the overall society, and the subsystem's relationship to itself.

Society: "[...] the inclusion of all possible contracts." *Social Systems*:32 "[...] the totality of all social communications that can be expected." *Social Systems*:392. All interaction systems and all organisational systems are part of society, but you cannot say that society is a multiple of interactions or organisations. Society is not an interaction - system, since it includes actions between presently absent. Neither is society an organisational system: You cannot step into or out of society. The society is more than the sum of all interaction systems and organisational systems, for in the societal system a multitude of actions occurs which is not produced by interaction systems or organisational systems. Society is a system of higher order, another type of system.

Structure: The system elements that are independant of short-term variations in the relation between system and environment. **Structure** and **process** are two forms of - strengthening the selection in social systems. Structures fulfill this function by exclusion, processes gain a pre-selection through the selection of suitable possibilities of connection. Structures reduce the fundamentally infinite number of possibilities of connection to an extent that can be anticipated. "Structures comprehend the open com-

plexity of the possibility that every element could be connected with every other one, in a narrower model of relations that are "valid", customary, predictable, repeatable, or whatever is preferred. Through this selection, they can instruct further selections, by reducing the constellations that can possibly be surveyed at any moment." *Social Systems*:44.

Structural coupling: This particular designation for a relation between two systems means that structurally coupled systems refer to each other, but at the same time operate autonomously and remain environment to each other. We talk about structural couplings to indicate a particular dependence/independence-relationship between systems. In later literature, Luhmann has replaced Parsons' term *interpenetration*, which he used e.g. in *Social Systems*, with structural coupling. Cfr Section II, Chapter 1.6.

Structural-functional method, the: According to this method, a sociologist first examines the structures of a social system to indicate the functions fulfilled to maintain the system. This method indicates the structural framework to decide whether the action processes are directed functionally or dysfunctionally. The maintenance of the social system is the foremost problem of the structural-functional analysis. The method is developed by Talcott Parsons since the 1930es.

Symbolically Generalised Media: "We would like to call 'symbolically generalized' the media that use generalizations to symbolize the nexus between selection and motivation, that is, represent it as a unity. Important examples are: truth, love, property/money, power/law; and also, in rudimentary form, religious belief, art, and today, standardized 'basic values'. In all these cases this - in a very different way for very different interactive constellations - is a matter of conditioning the selection of communication so that it also works as a means of motivation, that is, so that it can adequately secure acceptance of the proposed selection." *Social Systems*:161.

System: The totality of a quantity of elements and their relations to each other. But to Luhmann "the long-established idea that systems exist as elements *and* relations among these elements", does not suffice. "[...] because of complexity, carrying out the process of relating elements requires selections, and thus relationship cannot be simply added onto the elements. With those selections, the process of relating qualifies elements by cutting off some of their possibilities. In other words, the system contains, as complexity, a surplus of possibilities, which its self-selectively reduces. This reduction is carried out through communicative processes, and therefore the system needs a "mutualistic" basic organization - that is, attribution of its elements to complexes that are capable of communication." *Social Systems*:39.

Trust: "... trust is a universal circumstance of action. This is concealed only because there are functionally equivalent strategies for security and situations almost without freedom of choice, for example, in the domain of law and organization. But here too trust may be needed as a kind of redundant foundation for security if the usual behavioral regulations are shaken." *Social Systems*:129. "One of the most important consequences of double contingency is the emergence of *trust* or *distrust*. When entering

into situations with double contingency is experienced as particularly risky, they appear. The other can act otherwise than I expected precisely if and because he knows what I expect. He can leave his intentions unclear or be deceptive about them." *Social Systems*:127-128.

Understanding: "The fact that understanding is an indispensable feature in how communication comes about has far-reaching significance for comprehending communication. One consequence is that communication *is possible only as a self-referential process*." *Social Systems*: 143. Understanding therefore is not possible across system boundaries.

The world: Not a system, because it has no environment; neither is it environment, for any environment presupposes a system which is not part of the environment. The world is neither system nor environment; it comprises all systems and their environments. The world is the unity of meaning of the difference between system and environment.