

Summary of dissertation

SUSANNE HOLMSTRÖM, M.SOC.SC. PUBLIC RELATIONS  
UNIVERSITY OF ROSKILDE, DENMARK:

**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).*

**This dissertation received 1st Prize  
of the European Public Relations Educational Award  
by CERP, Brussels, October 30, 1998.**

PUBLIC RELATIONS: PERSPECTIVES & PARADIGMS:**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)

## Abstract:

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 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 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*.

It is claimed that a meta-perspective is vital not only to fundamental public relations research, but also to the reflection by public relations practice to secure the profession's legitimacy in today's society.

## I PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SOCIETY'S DIFFERENTIATION

Until recently, the phenomenon of public relations has been examined and described mainly from a practice-oriented perspective. By contrast, this dissertation aims to contribute to the emerging metatheoretical research in the field of public relations. The dissertation outlines 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, with the objective of describing possible frameworks for understanding public relations in the social order of contemporary society.

The emergence and institutionalisation of public relations as a distinctive pattern of social action is perceived as a phenomenon of the modern era's social differentiation into various rationalities which necessitate interactive structures. When we define conflicts between these different rationalities concerning the question of legitimacy - socially responsible corporate behaviour - as the core of public relations practice, the nature of these rationalities must be the focus of public relations research. To develop reflective theories capable of explaining the public relations phenomenon in the broad social context therefore requires sociological theories.

### 1. Two Theoretical Perspectives on Public Relations

For this purpose, two major sociological theories of our time have been chosen, Jürgen Habermas' theories on *the bourgeois public sphere* and *communicative action*, and Niklas Luhmann's development of systems theory including the *autopoiesis thesis*<sup>1</sup>. These are contrasting theories, based in their own sociological traditions, the action and normative traditions, and the functionalist and descriptive traditions respectively<sup>2</sup>, but to a large extent they deal with the same motifs - motifs which are essential to the understanding of public relations: the structure and processes in society 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.

Their basic disagreement resolves round a fundamental problem of sociology: *The relation between the individual subject and the social structure*. From a normative, subject-oriented tradition, Habermas argues that it makes sense to work with individual categories on the level of social systems. Whereas Luhmann, from a functionalist systems-oriented position, maintains that in the evolution of modern societies, qualities have emerged where social relations can no longer be traced to conscious acts by individuals.

Both are constructivists; but an overall implication for the study of public relations when changing perspective from one to the other is Habermas' claim of *common reasoning* being constructed by intersubjective communication in a *collective interpretive framework* (the lifeworld), whereas Luhmann rejects the possibility of common reasoning. Reason is constructions by the various differentiated logics of the social systems.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* from 1960, Habermas does however deliver a brief, but sharp, critique of public relations.

<sup>2</sup> Their discussion on theory *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie - Was leistet die Systemforschung?* was published already in 1971.

## 2. Two Public Relations Paradigms

Interpreting the phenomenon of public relations from the perspectives of Habermas and Luhmann has led to the construction of two differing public relations paradigms, the intersubjective and the social systemic<sup>3</sup>. The conception of public relations paradigms should be understood on the level of reflection, not on the level of practice. The objective of developing these paradigms is not normative, that is not to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong or ethical and unethical and set out a code for the practice of good public relations. The ambition is to outline possible implications for the interpretation of public relations in a systems-theoretic frame of reference and compare these with a corresponding Habermas-based interpretation.

	JÜRGEN HABERMAS	NIKLAS LUHMANN
<b>Theory</b>	Bourgeois Public Sphere, Communicative Action	Autopoietic Social Systems
<b>Epistemological tradition</b>	Intersubjective constructivism	Inner-systemic constructivism
<b>Methodology</b>	Normative and descriptive	Descriptive
<b>Cognitive perspective</b>	From within/participant + from outside/observer	From outside/observer
<b>Rationalities of society</b>	Communicative rationality anchored in life-world's collective interpretive framework >> system's strategic goal rationality	Logics differentiated into a centre-less network of social systems
<b>Main objective</b>	Reasoning for social integration of society; break-down of system boundaries	Inner-systemic integration; maintenance of system boundaries
<b>Means</b>	Communication borne by language oriented intersubjective understanding - as opposed to interaction strategically borne by symbolic media	Inner-systemic communication borne by symbolic media
<b>Intersubjectivity</b>	Basis for communication and creation of reason	Does not exist
<b>Options for individual action</b>	Liberated through communicative action < > Alienated through strategic action	All social actions justified by social systems
<b>Types of interest</b>	Common, public interest > < particular, private interest	No opposition between public and private interests
<b>Guiding difference</b>	Communicative action rationality > < strategic goal rationality	System >< environment

Table 1: Some fundamental differences between the theoretical paradigms of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann.

What do we see when we shift from Habermas' normative distinction between communicative/strategic action to Luhmann's descriptive system/environment distinction? When reason no longer has a collective, 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 instead of being a question of breaking down system boundaries and promoting social integration - it becomes a matter of maintaining them 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 (see later) of legitimating organisations in public no longer gives any obvious meaning? How do we view the role of the public relations

<sup>3</sup> The elements for the intersubjective public relations paradigm have been developed at the University of Roskilde, Denmark under the auspices of Associate Professor Inger Jensen. The social system public relations paradigm is developed in my dissertation.

practitioner when we shift from a Habermasian perspective with an intersubjective, interlinguistic reason to a Luhmannian perspective where individuals are excluded from communication and coordinating actions?

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, and that the ideal in public relations practice rests rather on the intersubjective paradigm, while practice is more likely to be described from within the social-systemic public relations paradigm.

## II JÜRGEN HABERMAS AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM

Jürgen Habermas has performed an outstanding analysis of society's democratic self-understanding, its background, beginnings and development, in order to demonstrate that it rests on false premises in modern society. Habermas' work is based in a normative tradition in critical theory and he 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*.

### 1. Lifeworld and System

For Habermas, modern societies are divided into two basically differing types of rationalities: Lifeworld and system. These conceptions should not be understood as empirical phenomena, rather as different types of rationality related to different ways of acting. The conceptions refer as well to different spheres in society as to different types of social actions, and to different ways of coordinating action.

*The lifeworld* is our common stock of cultural knowledge, social norms and individual abilities, all that relates to family, culture, morals, religion, shared communities outside work and political bodies etc.. The lifeworld is characterised by an intersubjective, *communicatively acting rationality of understanding*. It is by means of intersubjective communication that language generates reason as the integrative and coordinating rationality of society in the public sphere. Here the entrance of private, particular interests is condemned as unethical. Communicative action requires the use of language on which certain claims of validity can be made as to the outer, the inner and the social world; truth, trustworthiness, and rightness<sup>4</sup>.

Lifeworld's communicative action is a demanding process. As a relief mechanism part of societal action is transferred over to *the system*.

We find the system in the complex economic-administrative instrument for the material reproduction of the lifeworld, in private enterprises/economic life and public administration. Here, action is mediated by symbolic media such as money and power. Symbolic media are social standards capable of mediating highly compressed information. By virtue of their symbolic form mediated information can be connected in long chains of communication without the need of discussing and deciding over and over again the immanent pre-understanding. Here, language is used as a strategic means only, not as a means to reach mutual understanding as in the lifeworld's communicative action.

---

<sup>4</sup> These rules are the foundation of Habermas' discourse ethichs, to which James Grunig via Pearson refers as the theoretical frame for the concept of symmetrical communication (Excellence:308). I question this in my dissertation. Strategic thinking and acting is explicitly excluded from discourse ethical behaviour by Habermas, and Grunig explicitly defines public relations as part of an organisation's strategic communication.

## **2. The Post-Conventional Discourse Society**

It is Habermas' central point that, in society's evolution, the system has uncoupled from lifeworld's rationality and created its own technocratic, *strategic goal rationality*, where efficiency becomes a goal in itself. The system has, so to speak, forgotten its social responsibility. Therefore, whereas the system originally could legitimise itself by its base in the lifeworld rationality, it now becomes still more difficult to gain social acceptance for systemic action. The consequence is a change in demand for legitimacy of organisational activities.

Previously, goal rationality and symbolically generalised media relatively undisputedly ensured legitimacy for private enterprise, public administration etc. They were regarded as effective means to further the common good. Today, justification from the systemic logics of money and power is increasingly demanded through communicative processes in society, where individuals from a lifeworld rationality question the legitimacy of conventional values<sup>5</sup>. Habermas' analysis points to the opportunity of restoring the coupling between system and lifeworld by continuously applying the reason of the lifeworld to justify actions oriented to the systemic rationality.

**Conflicts in society relevant to the role of public relations are found where the system with its strategic goal rationality imposes itself upon lifeworld rationality. Solving these conflicts means reaching consensus on socially acceptable behaviour within the collective framework of the lifeworld in the public sphere. It is in such processes a collective norm concerning social responsibility is reached time and time again in the public discourse of the postconventional society.**

## **3. Ethical Public Relations - Recoupling System to Lifeworld<sup>6</sup>**

It is in this context the emergence and development of modern public relations practice is seen in the intersubjective paradigm as part of organisations' efforts to gain legitimacy in society, where the need for a specific activity to attend to a discursive social communication on behalf of the system's organisations may have arisen.

**It becomes the ideal task of public relations to reestablish the coupling between the lifeworld and the system, i.e. to reestablish lifeworld's rationality as the basic foundation of systems rationality and by doing so ensuring social acceptance for organisational activities.** (See table 2, the intersubjective public relations paradigm.)

Public relations practice could be seen as an "interpreter" between the communicative rationality of the lifeworld oriented to understanding and the system's goal rationality. The dialogue between these two rationalities takes place in the public sphere - often in the mass media. Lifeworld rationality is represented by the organisation's "publics", while the organisation represents the system. The "interpretation" can be performed in two directions; which depends on how the public relations practitioner views his/her professional objectives. A critical issue is the extent to which public relations practice is capable of contributing to recoupling the system to the lifeworld rationality and thereby to society's reintegration. Or whether public relations is a tool for the system to force through its goal rationality, i.e.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Antonsen and Jensen, 1992, and Jensen, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas has been the pillar for most of the public relations research carried out in Denmark, under the auspices of Assistant Professor Inger Jensen. In my dissertation, I concentrate the various openings into a paradigm of public relations. Roland Burkart in Austria has also developed a concept on the basis of Habermas which he terms "consent-oriented public relations" (Burkart/Probst 1991 - Burkart 1993). 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 the Habermasian sense. Cf. Bentele in Armbrecht and Zabel, 1994.

contribute to the invasion of private particular interests into the public sphere and thereby to the colonisation of the lifeworld.<sup>7</sup>

This seems to place public relations at the centre of the ethical processes in the creation of today's social order. It implies, however, that to ensure the ethical nature of the process, public relations' dialogue with the public on behalf of the commissioning organisation 1) must be based on the lifeworld's rationality of understanding: not the strategic goal rationality of the system, 2) must be performed by the practitioner as the conscious act of an individual subject; not on behalf of the system, 3) must be performed in a language complying with universal claims of validity. Also, 4) the motive for entering into a dialogue should be rooted in a genuine intention of reaching mutual understanding to further common interest.

If the objective behind the dialogue is strategic, the public relations practitioner's conduct is dubious. There is an important distinction between closed (revealed) and open (acknowledged) strategic communication. Still, to enter public discourse, driven by strategic objectives, is unethical according to the Habermasian paradigm.

In a Habermasian paradigm, we therefore use the *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 the fundamental consensus-formation on action coordination in society with particular systemic interests, i.e. has an *alienating* effect.

Habermas' theories seem particularly fruitful for understanding the idealistic and ethical demands on the individual public relations practitioner. If they are followed strictly, however, we seem to end up with a public relations paradigm which places unrealistic demands on the public relations practitioner, considering the possible frame of action in today's capitalist democracies. **Because public relations is anchored in strategic organisational activities, public relations practice reflected in the intersubjective public relations paradigm will always be judged unethical - socially irresponsible.**

Therefore, in this paradigm we risk ending up focusing on a moral evaluation of public relations practice - or rather of the public relations practitioner - as being good (if advocating lifeworld rationality in the system) or evil (if colonizing the lifeworld with system's strategic rationality). In my attempt to develop a more complex interpretation of the public relations phenomenon, I have therefore included the paradigm of systems theory which can be seen as a contrast and complement to Habermas' subject-oriented paradigm of communicative action.

### III NIKLAS LUHMANN AND THE SOCIAL SYSTEMIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM

In his analysis of the concept of social systems, Niklas Luhmann takes a different point of departure than Habermas. He states that social systems are a means for ensuring the survival of society, and subjects the phenomenon to a comprehensive analysis. He is the most significant representative of systems theory's sociological line today and a worthy parallel to Habermas in terms of scientific production, breadth, depth and importance<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the self-understanding of modern public relations practice. e.g. Grunig's Excellence, pages 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>8</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Luhmann was known particularly as being anti-Habermas. Luhmann has since come into his own right, possibly because motifs which are of major importance to Luhmann are prevalent also in the so-called post-structuralistic and post-modernistic debates. (Neither systems theory nor Luhmann can however be classified as postmodern. Like Habermas, Luhmann has his roots in modernism.) Chief among these are a critique of subject-based philosophy, the constructivist considerations, 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

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 Habermasian worldview, deals with a part of society only - in this case the system, and still less as one who defends it.

### 1. Social Systems

With his thesis of autopoiesis<sup>9</sup> Luhmann has developed systems theory into a theory of self-referential social systems, each created upon their own logic. He differs decisively from social theories based on the individual subject and rejects Habermas' thesis of intersubjective communication. Any social relation is possible only via social systems. Luhmann denies the possibility of a common framework of understanding - such as Habermas claims with the lifeworld. Even family, art and religion are social systems. Therefore, in today's differentiated societies, to reach an overall collective reasoning is impossible. Reason is rooted in the logic of each social system.

A social system emerges whenever two or more persons' actions are connected, first as an informal interactive system which then may develop into a formalised organisational system - an organisation, a corporation. A social system is an abstraction; in its primary *meaning*, which isolates itself from other meaning, takes on its own 'life', motivates and justifies itself in selective communication processes. In this way, social systems reduce the overwhelming *world complexity* by establishing *a difference between the system and its environment*. The identity of an organisational system is defined or limited not by offices, factory buildings, products or employees - but by what makes sense and what does not.

Meaning is the normative foundation of the social system; the boundaries of the system are normative; only cognitively do they open up. Cognition is bound to the specific logic of the observing system. Therefore, social systems observe and evaluate everything in terms of their own logic and create an image of the world in terms of their own perspective. The outer world is constructions within the observing system.

Furthermore, it is a dominant trait of modern societies that most social systems cluster around functional systems each having their **symbolic communications medium** - e.g. *money* in the economic system, *power* in the political system, *law* in the legal system, *truth* in the science system, *information* in the mass media system - as well as *belief* in the religious system, *love* in the family system - etc.<sup>10</sup>

Symbolic media ease communication within the functional systems, make high complexity manageable in the attached social systems and maintain the specific system identity against outside pressure. Each medium operates with its own standards of relevance and success and observes, interprets and understands the world from its own code and perspective<sup>11</sup>, and

---

theories. Unfortunately, Luhmann is still relatively unknown to an English-speaking audience. It was only in 1995 that his first major work *Soziale Systeme (Social Systems)*, 1984 (the second major work being *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft/The Society of Society*, 1997) was translated.

<sup>9</sup> *Autopoiesis (Greek)*; self-creation.

<sup>10</sup> Habermas accepts the existence of symbolic media in the system - but claims the existence of a lifeworld where communication is mediated not by symbolic media, but by language. For Luhmann, the lifeworld is present everywhere in the social systems in which you feel familiar. This means that there are as many lifeworlds as there are human beings. It is not a shared intersubjective horizon. - Habermas and Luhmann both base part of their theories on Talcott Parsons' theory on steering media.

<sup>11</sup> An example: Destruction of nature: Religion considers this an interference in God's creation or perhaps God's interference with creation as a punishment; private enterprise views it as future investment disadvantage or advantage; politicians see an important issue for mobilising votes; the education system delves into ecological education programmes, because the



is blind to other media. Therefore, the symbolic media obstruct interaction between functional systems.

Modern welfare societies are based on a very high and increasing degree of complexity in the differentiated social systems. This means 1) that the symbolic media gain increasing importance, and the functional systems increasingly close around their own logic, and 2) that a dominating central state regulation is not only difficult, but also inexpedient, because as an external reference in the communication processes of the differentiated social systems it will weaken their inner dynamics.

## 2. The Context-Regulated Society

When analysing trends in society on the basis of Luhmann's theories we may conclude that the increasing differentiation of social systems leads to the following characteristic features: **First**, the abandoning of the possibility of society as a unity (whether we talk of world society or 'the state'). In the functionally differentiated society, there is no central body that can transcend all system/environment differences and connect them through meaning. Instead, images of society are constructed within the social systems. An overall perspective no longer exists. Society is differentiated into distinct perspectives which can no longer be reflected in each other. **Second**, a growing strain of the functional systems on each other endangers the interaction between the functional systems. **Third**, the increasing specialisation requires increasing interdependence between the social systems. **Fourth**, social systems are increasingly freeing themselves of the external, central regulation by political power and law in order to further increase their own specific complexity.

Instead, I believe we see a new pattern of interaction emerging, the new social order of *context regulation*, based on *reflection as the principle of social action*<sup>12</sup>. Previously, the political way of thinking, mediated by the objective of regulating society, was limited to the political system. Now, it interpenetrates other functional systems. *Context regulation* is a social order where social systems continuously adjust to each other by means of negotiation and mutual, decentralised control in consideration of the idea of a common society to secure interaction with each other. **We can perceive the concept of social responsibility as this regulating mechanism which increasingly supports or replaces the medium of law as the main coordinating mechanism of social order.**

REGULATION	Central	Decentral
REGULATING MECHANISM	Political power, law	Social responsibility

TABLE 3: SOCIETY'S REGULATION AND REGULATING MECHANISMS.

I perceive social responsibility as the symbolic medium of a functional system which has grown rapidly during the past decades, *the public communications system*. In defining this system, I point to the function of thematising and discussing the mutual strains of the functional systems, and of playing a main part in the mutual, adjusting control. I find it important to stress my understanding that in systems theory's world of abstractions the public communications system is defined not by certain institutions<sup>13</sup> or by public access, but by communication being mediated by the idea of social responsibility. It implies that public communication cannot be mediated only by money, truth, information, law, belief, love etc. We

problems are attributed to individual mistakes, and art discovers a new theme for an artistic description of the world. Cf. also Kneer & Nassehi:146.

<sup>12</sup> Partly also inspired by Willke, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Such as ethical commissions or the editorial departments of mass media. In this perspective, even informal interactive systems carried by the symbolic medium of social responsibility are part of the public communications systems - such as discussions with colleagues over lunch in the canteen, community meetings, press conferences etc.

do not discuss whether a corporation may neglect all other considerations to make a profit. We take for granted that money must be made in a socially responsible way.

But as Luhmann points out, the media vary in strength and character. They are more or less isomorphous. You know what money is. But social responsibility? There is undoubtedly a parallel to Luhmann's analysis of the concept of morals<sup>14</sup>. There are as many morals as there are mediated logics. Correspondingly, Luhmann would no doubt warn against an uncritical perception of the concept of social responsibility as an unequivocal measure. There are as many perceptions of the concept of social responsibility as there are mediated system logics. An overall, unifying perspective no longer exists in society. This, however, does not prevent the idea of society as a common unity from existing as inner-systemic constructions. But social systems perceive society and thus the concept of social responsibility from each their perspective. **The concept of social responsibility will never be a collective, all-embracing norm within a society.**

The concept of social responsibility is developed on the social systemic theoretical concept of *reflection*. Reflection is not easy for a social system. Reflection implies that a social system on the one hand finds its own identity, and as such acts *independently*; and on the other hand, in recognition of the *interdependence* between social systems, that it learns to understand itself as environment for other social systems and develops restrictions and coordinating mechanisms in its decision-making processes with regard to other social systems. **The motive is to secure the system's own autonomy as well as interaction with other systems; independence as well as interdependence.**

Luhmann points out that reflection is a risky venture for a social system. Reflection implies exposure and sacrifice in the short term in return for existence in the long term. In the context regulated social order, however, the social systems must require *mutual reflection* from each other. **Reflection becomes a precondition for the context regulated social order and fundamental to interaction between social systems.**

### **3. Functional Public Relations as a Reflective Structure**<sup>15</sup>

In the process where social regulation is decentralised into the functional systems, a multiplicity of coordinating mechanisms emerge. Their general task is to ensure that the social systems impose self control, and to tie up the differentiated units in a complex context. Such mechanisms are like transformers; they interpret and mediate between the different media. The objective is to increase mutual reflection within the social systems, and subsequently generate *public trust* as a safety strategy for interaction to relieve the media of law and actual knowledge. We may view public relations in this perspective, emerged however specifically to correspond to the growing public communications system, and perceive **public relations as the specific corporate activity of attending to relations with reference to the symbolic medium of the public communications system, social responsibility.** (See table 4: the social systemic public relations paradigm.)

This includes relations to all kinds of social systems in the organisational system's environment; employees, consumers, clients, politicians, mass media, moral organisations etc. - wherever the public reference is involved. **To conclude, public relations activities are**

<sup>14</sup> By morals, Luhmann understands a specific form of communication which operates with distinctions between good and bad and good and evil respectively, thereby expressing human esteem or disrespect. It is not referred to a specific function system but occurs throughout society, and gives different results depending on whatever other code it is coupled to. There are clear parallels to the concept of social responsibility.

<sup>15</sup> 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 reflexive paradigm for public relations research: Franz Ronneberger, Manfred Rühl, Ragnwolf H. Knorr, Werner Faulstich, Klaus Merten. However, no clear picture of public relations has emerged 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.

**defined not by the type of stakeholders or constituencies, but by the symbolic medium of social responsibility constituting the relations.** The objective of tending to these relations is twofold: 1) *the reflective task*; furthering reflection within the focal social system, and 2) *the expressive task*; furthering reflection on the focal system within social systems in the environment. Only then can we talk of *mutual* reflection and functional public relations.

A social systemic public relations paradigm seems to reflect the paradoxical demands made on public relations practice to secure the independence of a social system by nurturing its interdependence with other social systems, and seems to make a meaningful synthesis in a social order with the objective of high complexity within as well as between social systems. Independence and interdependence become two sides of the same coin. With the emergence of a context regulated social order it becomes a precondition for the autonomy of the organisational systems that they impose self control upon themselves as a substitute for law as the main regulator. In this way, they do not freely enact their options and contingencies, but adjust according to the idea of a collective social responsibility. The controlling function is increasingly supplemented or replaced by the public communications system. Correspondingly, legal sanctions are supplemented by mutual sanctions by agents, such as blocking interaction with organisational systems not living up to the idea of a collective social responsibility. For instance the prospect of consumer boycotts, suffering staff morale, damage to political contacts etc.

**In a context-regulated social order, reflection on social responsibility is the precondition for interaction, interdependence and context, and ultimately for the autonomy, the independence, and the maintenance of the organisational system.**

#### IV PERSPECTIVES

In both paradigms, we find public relations in the conflict zones between the different rationalities of society. The nature of these conflicts differs, however, fundamentally in the intersubjective and the social systemic public relations paradigm. Consequently, the role of public relations in today's social order differs decisively.

In the intersubjective paradigm, ethical public relations practice becomes a question of solving conflicts between two fundamentally differing rationalities, the lifeworld's intersubjective reasoning and the system's anonymous logic, by ways of ethically conducted discourse, to reach consensus on a collective norm of social responsibility. The objective is to legitimize organisational activities. The practitioner acts as an individual human being in the common interest.

PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM	THE INTERSUBJECTIVE (OR ETHICAL OR NORMATIVE)	THE SOCIAL SYSTEMIC (OR FUNCTIONAL OR COGNITIVE)
<b>Theoretical foundation</b>	Jürgen Habermas' theory on communicative action	Niklas Luhmann' theory on social systems
<b>Society</b>	Post-conventional discourse society	Context regulated society
<b>Regulation of social order</b>	Public discourse, communicative action	Mutual reflection based on the medium of social responsibility
<b>Social responsibility</b>	Legitimacy - the possibility of an overall collective norm based on public consensus	Inner-systemic reflections - as many concepts of social responsibility as there are social systems

<b>Social responsibility's task</b>	Recouple system to lifeworld rationality - integration	Maintain disintegration - but secure interaction between systems
<b>Conflict</b>	Between lifeworld's and system's rationality	Between differing system's logics
<b>Solution of conflicts</b>	Communicative action -> consensus	Mutual reflection -> 'consensus on dissent'
<b>Interest behind public relations practice</b>	Common interest	Particular interest
<b>Reflective distinction of public relations</b>	Communicative action/strategic action	Reflective communication/ expressive interaction

TABLE 5: TWO PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGMS' REFLECTIONS OF CONFLICT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.

In the social systemic paradigm, functional public relations practice becomes a question of reflecting on conflicts between differing systemic logics by means of the co-medium of social responsibility. The objective is mutual self-regulation and adjustment in a society of continuous conflicts and disagreement. By reflecting on social responsibility, social systems gain public trust as a safety strategy to ensure autonomy as well as interaction. The practitioner acts as system's representative in the particular interest.

### 1. Consensus or Dissent

These fundamental differences between the two paradigms also imply significantly different interpretations of modern public relations practice's ideal of symmetrical communication - 'dialogue oriented towards mutual understanding'.

In the intersubjective paradigm, the dialogue's ideal purpose and potential is mutual understanding oriented towards consensus, based on the collective interpretive framework of lifeworld rationality. In the social systemic paradigm, consensus is not possible and probably not even desirable. - Not possible, 1) because all interaction is normatively rooted in the different logics of the social systems. Mutual understanding across system boundaries is therefore impossible. And 2) because the intention behind the dialogue will always be the particular interest. - Not desirable, because consensus would mean a collective understanding based on a collective normativeness, and this would mean a weakening or demolishing of system boundaries, and thus of the evolutionary attained specialisation and complexity of modern societies. If we follow Luhmann's theories, the functional ambition of public relations practice would rather be: Consent on dissent, i.e. an understanding of the differences and the need for these. Reflection as the precondition for the context regulated social order is not a question of reaching either a common perspective or mutual understanding, not to mention common objectives, norms and values. On the contrary, it is a continuous process of dynamic interchange, conflict and mutual restrictions which ultimately leads to the creation of social order.

So, where the ideal ambition in an intersubjective paradigm is to reach mutual understanding and consensus, in a social systemic paradigm it is reduced to "at least prevent particular interests' drifting apart and prevent mistrust"<sup>16</sup> by obtaining "consent on dissent"<sup>17</sup> - or in Luhmann's words to "nurture the kind of understanding that if not reconciles the different observers then allows them to exist side by side"<sup>18</sup>.

**To sum up: In the intersubjective paradigm's postconventional society consensus is the objective of public relations practice. Whereas constant conflict becomes the dynamics and motivation behind the continuous process of adjusting conflicting interests in the social systemic paradigm's context regulated social order.**

### 2. Social Responsibility

In the intersubjective paradigm, corporate social responsibility becomes a question of continuously justifying systemic activities in the lifeworld rationality and 'the common good'. Social responsibility is a common norm, reached via intersubjective dialogue.

In the social systemic paradigm, corporate social responsibility becomes a question of a social system reflecting on itself as an environment for other social systems, imposing upon itself self-restriction and -regulation. No unity of society exists. A collective intersystemic perspective is not possible. There are as many perceptions of social responsibility as there are mediated system logics. When the functional systems reflect upon the medium of social responsibility, it is always from their own perspective, where a higher priority to trade and business, to research, to education, to health etc. is understood to further 'the common good'. This is a functional measure.

**To sum up: In the intersubjective paradigm the objective of the practice of social responsibility as a common norm is to reintegrate the rationalities of lifeworld and**

<sup>16</sup> Ronneberger & Rühl:152. My own translation from German.

<sup>17</sup> "Verständigung über Dissens kann produktiver sein als der Versuch, Verstehen auf den Sonderfall von Konsens zu verengen." Willke:74. ("To agree on disagreement might be more productive than the attempt to limit understanding to the special case of consensus." My own translation.)

<sup>18</sup> Luhmann, *Soziologie des Risikos*, Berlin/New York 1991:247. My own translation from German.

system. Whereas, in the social systemic paradigm the function of social responsibility is to impose upon social systems self-restriction in order to consider the interdependence of social systems without giving up the functional disintegration of society's different systems logics.

### **3. Collective or Particular Interest**

In the intersubjective paradigm, the role of the public relations practitioner is to act communicatively as an individual human being by performing an intersubjective dialogue in the public sphere. Public relations practice is anchored in the common interest and works for the common interest. Public relations practice is an ethical mechanism in society (- but if acting strategically an unethical mechanism!).

In the social systems paradigm, the practitioner's only option is to act as system's representative. The role of public relations practice is to relate to the public communications system, co-reflecting on the medium of social responsibility. This public communications system does not imply the possibility of a public capable of reflecting on society from a collective, all-embracing perspective as with Habermas. Therefore, public communication becomes more of an arena of continuous negotiation between conflicting particular worldviews, between different social realities - a functional fora for the mutual adjustment of special interests. In a society consisting of particular interests only, with the idea of 'common interest' existing as a perception only to secure interaction between social systems, public relations practice will always work for the particular interest as a functional mechanism in society.

**According to Habermas' theories, it is unethical to enter the public sphere representing private or particular interests. According to Luhmann's theories, it is functional to enter the public sphere representing particular interests. It is the only option, since no collective perspective for society exists.**

### **4. Paradigms on Practice: Symmetrical Communication and Code of Athens**

The intersubjective and the social-systemic paradigms are like different "lenses" through which we can observe public relations practice and its self-understanding. In my dissertation, these phenomena are illustrated by the book, *Excellence in Public Relations*<sup>19</sup>, and by the code of ethics, the *Code of Athens*<sup>20</sup>.

*Excellence in Public Relations* advocates the ideal of the 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, the practice of modern public relations must be deemed unethical in an intersubjective paradigm. But if we view *Excellence in Public Relations* - and with it the practice of modern public relations - through the social-systemic lens, the book's rationale is far more meaningful. 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

<sup>19</sup> *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management from 1992*, edited by James Grunig, is one of the major works in modern public relations literature, promoting the concept of symmetrical dialogue.

<sup>20</sup> International code of ethics, adopted by CERP and IPRA in 1965.

systems' communication - but is necessary as a connecting point for communication<sup>21</sup>. The *Code of Athens* may, on the other hand, be understood in a systems-theoretic conceptual frame either as a reflective programme for practice and/or as an image for use in generating public trust in public communication processes. The same applies to *Excellence*.

### **5. Consequences to Research and Practice**

The value of the metatheoretical approach of this dissertation might be questioned. It is, however, my firm belief - based not only in a personal conviction, but in the theories of Habermas as well as of Luhmann - that such a level of reflection is vital not only to fundamental public relations research, but in parts also to practice.

To research only such an approach will get aloof the various perspectives and inner-systemic rationales of organisation and communications theory, and of observations within practice - however essential and valuable this research may prove. Naturally, this meta-perspective has its own blind spots, but the observation is of a higher level - a level required in the attempt to understand the role and implications of public relations in today's social order.

As to practice, this dissertation does not spell out methodologies for daily use, but surely it is possible to develop methodologies based on the two reflective paradigms; the dissertation outlines the contours of an idealistic and a functionalistic paradigm for practice, and - and this is my point - **discloses the mechanisms and theories behind the methodology, thereby giving the practitioner the insight which to me is the foremost precondition of legitimacy in public relations practice.**

In a Habermasian perspective, this insight makes the practitioner aware of his/her task, i.e. liberates the practitioner's reason from the alienating systems logic. In the systems-theoretic paradigm, the epistemological insight 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 reflection in the public relations system; reflection which is the precondition of public trust.

---

<sup>21</sup> According to Luhmann, communication is not a result of human action, but social systems' selection of what is meaningful.

## REFERENCES AND LITERATURE

Antonsen, Marianne og Inger Jensen, *Forms of Legitimacy Essential to Public Relations, in Management and Competition*, ed. Mogens Kühn Pedersen, Department of Economics and Planning, University of Roskilde, Roskilde, 1992.

*Autopoiesis, En introduktion til Niklas Luhmanns verden af systemer [An Introduction to Niklas Luhmann's World of Systems]*: ed. Jens Christian Jacobsen, Forlaget Politisk Revy, Copenhagen, 1992. (Danish).

Bager, Majken F. og Margit G. Gleerup, *Public Relations som samfundsvidenskabeligt genstandsfelt, [Public Relations as a social scientific research object]*, public relations dissertation, University of Roskilde, 1991. (Danish.)

Bentele, Günter, *Öffentliches Vertrauen - normative und soziale Grundlage für Public Relations* in Armbrecht, W. og Zabel, U., *Normative Aspekte der Public Relations*, Opladen, 1994. (German.)

Blach, Thomas & Jesper Højberg, *Håndbog i information og public relations, [Handbook of information and public relations]*, Borgen, Copenhagen, 1989. (Danish.)

Burkart, Roland, *Public Relations als Konfliktmanagement. Ein Konzept für eine verständigungsorientierte Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, Braumüller, Wien, 1993. (German.)

Christensen, Jan Juul, Thomas Falck and Kenneth Skadhauge, *Dialogiske Myter - Mystiske Dialoger, [Dialogical Myths - Mystical Dialogues]*, public relations dissertation, University of Roskilde, 1994. (Danish.)

*Code of Athens, Code d'Athènes*: code verified by the European Public Relations association CERP (Comité Européenne des Relations Publiques) og International Public Relations Association in Athens, May 1965, .

Espersen, Jakob, *Politiske partiers strategiske perspektiv [The Strategic Perspective of Political Parties]*, public relations dissertation, University of Roskilde, 1993. (Danish.)

Faulstich, Werner, *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, Grundwissen: kritische Einführung in Problemfelder*, Wissenschaftler-Verlag, Bardowich, 1992.

Grunig, James E. ed., *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, New Jersey, USA, 1992.

Grunig, James E. og Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1984.

Habermas, Jürgen, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, Neuauflage 1990. 1. edition in 1962, Luchterhand Verlag, Neuwied. (German). English translation: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere - An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989/1991.

Habermas, Jürgen, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, bind I og II, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1981, Neue Folge Band 1988. English translation: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volumes One and Two, translated by Thomas McCarthy, Heinemann, London, 1984.

Habermas, Jürgen, and Niklas Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie - Was leistet die Systemforschung?*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1971. (German).



Hagen, Roar og Erling Sivertsen, *Private Banks in the Public Discourse*, Sosiologisk tidsskrift, No. 4 1993, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo.

Jensen, Inger, *The Nature of Public Relations - and Systems Theory*, CERP Research Committee paper, 1991.

Jensen, Inger, *Public Relations as a Field of Social Science*, paper presented at Danish Public Relations Association's (DPRF) conference "Excellent Public Relations" ,1993.

Kneer, Georg og Armin Nassehi, *Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 1993. (German.)

Larsen, Eva Beckmann og Jeanette Spies, *Erhvervslivets Rygter [Corporate Rumours]*, public relations dissertation, University of Roskilde, 1994. (Danish.)

Larsen, Sune og Niels Boe Sørensen, *PR FOR PR*, public relations dissertation, University of Roskilde, 1992. (Danish.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität, über die Funktion von Zwecken in sozialen Systemen*, Tübingen, 1968. (German.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, Volume 5, Opladen 1970/1990. (German.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Interpenetrationen - Zum Verhältnis personaler und sozialer Systeme in Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 6, 1977. (German.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Trust & Power*, 1979.

Luhmann, Niklas, *Soziale Systeme, Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1984. (German.) English translation: *Social Systems*, Stanford University Press, California, 1995.

Luhmann, Niklas, *Die Autopoiesis des Bewusstseins*, in *Soziale Welt* 36, 1985. (German.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Ökologische Kommunikation*, Opladen, 1986. English version available: *Ecological Communication*, translated by John Bednarz, 1989.

Luhmann, Niklas (with Peter Fuchs), *Reden und Schweigen*, Frankfurt/M., 1989. (German.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/M., 1990. (German.)

Luhmann, Niklas, *Soziologie des Risikos*, Berlin/New York 1991. (German.)

Meiden, Anne von der, *The Embarrassment of Advice*, paper, published in *International Public Relations Review*, Vol 17, #4, 1994, Geneva.

Merten, Klaus, *Begriff und Funktion von Public Relations*, paper in the German public relations profession's publication *PRmagazin*, 11/1992. (German.)

Mortensen, Niels in Sørensen and Fivelsdal (ed.), *Fra Marx til Habermas [From Marx to Habermas]*, Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne, Copenhagen, 1988. (Danish.)

Münch, Richard, *Zahlung und Actung: Die Interpenetration von Ökonomie und Moral*, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, Jg. 23, Heft 5, Oktober 1994:388-411. Universität Bielefeld, Fakultät für Soziologie/Ferdinand Enke Verlag, Stuttgart. (German.)

Nørager, Troels, *System og livsverden, Jürgen Habermas' konstruktion af det moderne (System and Lifeworld, Jürgen Habermas' Construction of the Modern)*, Forlaget ANIS, Århus, 1987. (Danish.)

Pedersen, Ove K., Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen, Peter Kjær, John Elberg, *Privat Politik [Private Politics]*, Samfundslitteratur, Copenhagen Business School, 1992. (Danish.)

*Public Relations Forum für Wissenschaft und Praxis*, red. Peter M. Gregor, Dr. Kurt Hesse, Werner Wunder, ERMA-Verlag, Nürnberg, 1/1995. (German.)

Raffnsøe, Sverre og Ove K. Pedersen: *Udemokratisk demokrati [Undemocratic Democracy]*, essay in Danish weekly Weekendavisen, June 2-8 1995. (Danish.)

Ronneberger, Franz & Manfred Rühl, *Theorie der Public Relations, Ein Entwurf [Theory of Public Relations, a Proposal]*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen 1992. (German.)

Rühl, Manfred, *Europäische Public Relations [European Public Relations]* i Armbrrecht, W. og Zabel, U., *Normative Aspekte der Public Relations [Normative Aspects of Public Relations]*, Opladen 1994. (German.)

Rühl, Manfred, *The Public Relations Cycle in World-Society*, paper for International Public Relations Symposium in Bled, Slovenia, July 8-11 1994.

Szyszka, Peter, *Einführung in die Öffentlichkeitsarbeit [Introduction to Public Relations]*, working paper, Lüneburg University 1995. (German.)

Thyssen, Ole, *Penge, Magt og Kærlighed, teorien om symbolsk generaliserede medier hos Parsons, Luhmann og Habermas [Money, Power and Love - the Theory of Symbolically Generalised Media at Parsons, Luhmann and Habermas]*, Rosinante/Munksgaard, Copenhagen 1991. (Danish.)

Thyssen, Ole, *En djævelsk iagttager [A Devilish Observer]*, interview with Niklas Luhmann, in Danish daily Politiken, July 31, 1994. (Danish.)

Weber, Johannes, *Unternehmensidentität und unternehmenspolitische Rahmenplanung [Corporate Identity and Corporate Policy Planning]*, Planungs- und Organisationswissenschaftliche Schriften, Prof. Dr. Werner Kirsch, Universität München, München 1985. (German.)

Willke, Helmut, *Systemtheorie: eine Einführung in die Grundprobleme der Theorie sozialer Systeme [Systems Theory: an Introduction to the Basic Problems of the Theory of Social Systems]*, Stuttgart; Jena: G. Fischer, 1993, 4. edition. (German.)

Åkerstrøm Andersen, Niels, *Selvskabt Forvaltning [Autopoietic Public Administration]*, thesis, Center for Offentlig Organisation og Styling, Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen 1994. (Danish.)