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THE INTERSUBJECTIVE AND THE SOCIAL SYSTEMIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGMS:

TWO BASICALLY DIFFERING ROLES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE CORPORATE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract:

To get 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. Two paradigms for reflection on the public relations phenomenon are developed on their theories; the intersubjective and the social systemic public relations paradigms. They indicate fundamentally differing interpretations of the concepts of conflict and social responsibility, with crucial consequences 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 the public relations practice, while at the same time to set out normative ideals for the public relations practice. The ideal in the intersubjective paradigm is to restablish 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 is 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 the 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 strategic 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 is the *functional*, the *reflectice* or the *cognitive* paradigm of public relations. The keyword is public *trust* in the *context regulated society*.

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I PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SOCIETY'S DIFFERENTIATION

It is common understanding in public relations practice that practice deals with the managing of social responsibility[1], and with avoiding or solving conflicts between corporate behaviour and the general public perception of social responsibility.

Some recent internationally well-known examples are public protests against international investments (French oil company Total, Dutch and Danish breweries Heineken and Carlsberg) in Burma (Myanmar). Royal Dutch/Shell has seen public attention focus first on its aborted plans to dump the oil platform Brent Spar at sea, and then on its relations with the military regime in Nigeria. Not only the prospect of consumer boycotts are worrying these and an increasing number of companies. In addition, staff morale can suffer, political contacts can be upset, and sanctions can be imposed.

Such conflicts fundamentally reflect the differentiation of modern societies into differing rationalities. And the creation of social order today is a question of coordinating these differing rationalities.

1 Understanding the Role of Public Relations

In this perspective, 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.

In defining conflicts between these different rationalities on the question of social responsibility as the core of public relations practice, the nature of these rationalities, and the concept of social responsibility must be the focus of public relations research: What are these rationalities? Why does the corporate practice of social responsibility seem to play an increasingly visible and important role in corporate management? And is a collective understanding of social responsibility possible, changing as it does with historical and cultural values? Using the concepts in the everyday sense only will be detrimental to public relations research. To develop reflective theories capable of explaining the public relations phenomenon in the broad social context requires sociological theories to get below the shallow surface of these concepts.

Until recently, the phenomenon of public relations has been examined and described mainly in a praxis-oriented perspective. By contrast, this paper aims to contribute to the emerging metatheoretical research in the field of public relations. The paper is based on a thesis outlining 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.

2. Two Theoretical Perspectives on Public Relations

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.

For this purpose, two major sociological theories of our time have been chosen, Jürgen Habermas' theories on bourgeois society and communicative action, and Niklas Luhmann's development of systems theory including the autopoiesis thesis[2]. These are contrasting theories[3], 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. (Cf. table 1.)

Their basic disagreement rests with 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 embedded in constructivism; 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 *common interpretive framework* (the lifeworld), whereas Luhmann rejects the possibility of common reasoning. Reason is constructions by the various differentiated logics of the social systems.

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

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

3. Two Public Relations Paradigms

Interpreting the phenomenon of public relations from the perspective of Habermas and Luhmann respectively has led to the construction of two differing public relations paradigms, the intersubjective and the social systemic[4]. The conception of public relations paradigms should be perceived on the level of reflection, not on the level of practice. The objective of developing these paradigms is not normative, 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 of the interpretation of public relations in a systems-theoretic frame of reference and compare these with a corresponding Habermas-based interpretation.

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 the public relations practice rests rather on the intersubjective paradigm, while praxis in its behaviour is more likely to be described in the social-systemic public relations paradigm. However, if we view the practice of modern public relations and its self-understanding in a Habermas 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 seem to have a more adequate explanatory framework and can more comprehensively describe the complexity.

Analysing conflict and social responsibility within these two paradigms, it basically becomes a question of 1) whether public relations works between fundamentally different rationalities - a systemic and an intersubjective - or between conflicting systemic logics, and 2) whether a collective understanding of social responsibility is possible or not.

II   JÜRGEN HABERMAS
AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM

Jürgen Habermas has performed outstanding analyses of the democratic self-understanding in society, its background, beginnings and development, in order to demonstrate that it rests on false premises in modern society. Habermas is based in a normative tradition in 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.*

1.   Lifeworld and System

For Habermas, modern societies are differentiated in 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, reliability, correctness[5].

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.

2. The Post-Conventional Discourse Society

It is Habermas's 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, where the system originally could legitimise itself by its base in lifeworld rationality, it now becomes still more difficult to gain social acceptance for systemic action. The consequence is a change in demands for legitimacy of organizational activities.

Previously, goal rationality and symbolic generalised media as effective means to further the common good relatively undisputed ensured legitimacy for private enterprise, public administration etc. Today, justification is increasingly demanded from the systemic logics of money and power through communicative processes in society, where individuals from a lifeworld rationality question the legitimacy of conventional values[6]. Habermas' analysis points to the opportunity to restore 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 responsible behaviour within the collective framework of the lifeworld in the public sphere. It is in such processes, a collective norm on social responsibility is reached over and over again in the public discourse of the postconventional society.

When entering upon these conflict-solving discourses on social responsibility, certain rules must be followed to ensure the ethical nature of the process: The base must be lifeworld rationality, participants must represent themselves as individual human beings, and language must fulfil the universal claims of validity (see above).

3. Ethical Public Relations - Recoupling System to Lifeworld[7]

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 the public relations and a discursive social communication on behalf of system's organisations may have arisen.

It becomes the ideal task of public relations to restablish the coupling between lifeworld and system, i.e. to restablish lifeworld rationality as the basic foundation of systems rationality and by doing so ensuring social acceptance for organizational activities.

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[8]. A critical issue 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 goal rationality, i.e. contribute to the invasion of private particular interests into the public sphere and thereby to the colonisation of the lifeworld.

In the intersubjective public relations paradigm's understanding of the corporate practice of social responsibility we seem to recognize the ideal self-understanding of public relations as expressed in the Code of Athens[9]. Also, the prevailing concept of symmetrical communication refers to Habermas' discourse ethics as its theoretical framework[10].

This seems to place public relations at the centre of the ethical processes of the creation of today's social order. It implies, however, that to fulfil ideal ethical requirements, public relations' dialogue with the public on behalf of the commissio-ning organisation

*   must be based on lifeworld's rationality of understanding: not the strategic goal rationality of the system

*   must be performed by the practitioner as the conscious act of an individual
subject; not on behalf of the system

*   must be performed in a languague complying with universal claims of validity

Also,

*   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 Habermas paradigm.

In a Habermas paradigm, we therefore use a *communicative/strategic action distinction* 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 in a public relations paradigm which places unrealistic demands on the public relations practitioner, considering the possible frame of action in today's democracies.

Because public relations is anchored in strategic organizational 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 shall therefore include 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

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 is Niklas Luhmann.

While Habermas follows in the critical tradition, where the scientist attempts to set out normative theories for a better society, Niklas Luhmann does not make any normative, moral decisions on what is good or bad, merely an analysis of how society functions. While Habermas criticises the system's setting of boundaries from a normative position, Luhmann's concern has a functional character: How do systems maintain their boundaries?

So, 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 social systems, Luhmann takes a different point of departure than Habermas. He states that social systems are a means of ensuring the survival of society, and subjects the phenomenon to a comprehensive analysis.

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 also prevalent in the so-called post-structuralistic and post-modernistic debates[11]. 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 theories.

1.   Social Systems

With his thesis of autopoiesis[12] 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 lifeword. Even family, art

and religion are social systems. Therefore, in todays'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 the main *meaning* (German: Sinn), 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; they open up only cognitively. Cognition is bound to the specific logic of the observing system. Therefore, social systems observe and evaluate everything from each their own logic and create an image of the world from each 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 in functional systems with each 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.[13]

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[14], and 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 each 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 it is possible to conclude that the increasing differentiation of social systems leads to the following characteristic features: **First,** the abandoning of a unity for society (whether we talk of world society or 'the state'). 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, we see a new pattern of interaction emerging, the new social order of *context regulation*, based on *reflection as the principle of social action.* Previously, the political way of thinking, mediated by the objective of regulating society, was limited to the political system. Now, it interpenetrates[15] with 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.

Social responsibility may be perceived as the symbolic medium of a functional system which has grown rapidly during the past decades, *the public communications system*. The function is to thematise and discuss the mutual strains of the functional systems, and to play a main part in the mutual, adjusting control. In system theory's world of abstractions the public communications system is defined not by certain institutions[16] 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 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[17]. 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 as unequivocal measure. There are as many perceptions of the concept of social responsibility as there are mediated system logics. An overall perspective no longer exists in society. This, however, does not prevent the idea of society as a common unity to exist as intra-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 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[18]

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 an interactive 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.**

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 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 interdepence 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 upon themselves self control as a substitute for law as main regulator and 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. as mentioned in the introduction.

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 the practice of corporate social responsibility differs decisively.

In the intersubjective paradigm, ethical public relations practice becomes a question of solving conflicts between two fundamentally differing rationalities, lifeworld's intersubjective reasoning and 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 organizational activities. The practitioner acts as an individual human being in the common interest.

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 special interest.

PUBLIC RELATIONS PARADIGM	THE INTERSUBJECTIVE (OR ETHICAL OR NORMATIVE)	THE SOCIAL SYSTEMIC (OR FUNCTIONAL OR COGNITIVE)
Theoretical foundation	Jürgen Habermas' theory on communicative action	Niklas Luhmann' theory on social systems
Society	Post-conventional discourse society	Context regulated society
Regulation of social order	Public discourse, communicative action	Mutual reflection based on the medium of social responsibility
Social responsibility	Legitimacy - the possibility of an overall collective norm based on public consensus	Intra-systemic reflections - as many concepts of social responsibility as there are social systems
Social responsibility's task	Recouple system to lifeworld rationality - integration	Maintain disintegration - but secure interaction between systems
Conflict	Between lifeworld's and system's rationality	Between differing system's logics
Solution of conflicts	Communicative action -> consensus	Mutual reflection -> 'consensus on dissent'
Interest behind public relations practice	Collective interest	Particular interest
Reflective distinction of public relations	Communicative action/strategic action	Reflective communication/ expressive interaction

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

1. Consensus or Dissent

Correspondingly, modern public relations practice's ideal of symmetrical communication - 'dialogue oriented towards mutual understanding' - differs significantly.

In the intersubjective paradigm, dialogue's ideal purpose and potential is mutual understanding oriented towards consent, 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, because all interaction is normatively rooted in the different
logics of the social systems and mutual understanding across system boundaries therefore impossible, and because the intention behind the dialogue will always be the special interest. Not desirable, because consent 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. According to Luhmann, 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"[19] by obtaining "consent on dissent"[20] - or in Luhmann's words to "nurse the kind of understanding that if not reconciles the different observers then allows them to exist side by side"[21].

Where consensus is the objective of public relations practice in the intersubjective paradigm's postconventional society, in the social systemic paradigm's context regulated social order constant conflict becomes the dynamics and motivation behind the continuous process of adjusting conflicting interests rather than the aspiration of consent.

2. Social Responsibility

In the intersubjective paradigm, corporate social responsibility becomes a question

of continuously justifying systemic activities in lifeworld rationality and 'the common good'. Social responsibility is a shared norm, reached via intersubjective dialogue.

In the social systemic paradigm, corporate social responsibility becomes a question of a social system reflecting on itself as environment to 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. furthers 'the common good'. This is a functional measure.

Where the objective of the practice of social responsibility as a common norm in the intersubjective paradigm is to reintegrate the rationalities of lifeworld and system,
in the social systemic paradigm the function of social responsibility is to impose upon social systems self-restriction in consideration of the inter-dependence of social systems without giving up the functional disintegration of society's different systems logics.

3. Collective or Special Interest

In the intersubjecive paradigm, the role of the public relations practitioner in the corporate practice of social responsibility is to act communicatively as an individual human being by performing an intersubjective dialogue in the public sphere. Public relations practice is anchored in collective interest and works for the collective 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 special 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 'collective interest' existing as a perception only to secure interaction between social systems, public relations practice will always work for the special 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 special interests. It is the only option, since no collective perspective for society exists.

Finally, to illustrate with a real-life example, showing the corporate practice of social responsibility on the question of pollution and environmental issues in the two paradigm perspectives: In the intersubjective perspective, the prime objective is doing good for the common good. In the social systemic perspective, the prime objective when taking environmental consideration is securing profits. A recent survey among members of the Danish Chamber of Commerce shows that still more corporations "speculate on the environment"[22]. A spokesman for the Danish Chamber of Commerce "does not try to make anyone believe that this is due to a love of flora and fauna. The success of the environmental line is mainly due to the fact that green products are easier to sell, and consumers are willing to pay more in return for a good conscience."[23] In an intersubjective paradigm, this strategic motive for practising corporate social responsibility reflects unethical behaviour. Whereas in a social systemic paradigm, it reflects functional behaviour.

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1. One example among many, reflecting modern public relations practice's self-understanding "Public relations is the practice of social responsibility." Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management:240.

2. 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 *Bourgeois Society* from 1960, Habermas does however deliver a brief, but sharp, critique of public relations.

3. Their discussion on theory *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie - Was leistet die Systemforschung?* was published already in 1971.

4. The intersubjective public relations paradigm has been developed at The University of Roskilde under the auspices of associate professor Inger Jensen. The social system public relations paradigm has been developed by me in my thesis *The Intersubjective and the Social Systemic Public Relations Paradigms*, University of Roskilde 1996. Among other researchers reflecting the public relations phenomenon from Luhmann's theories are German professors Ronneberger, Rühl, Merten, Faulstich.

5. 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). In my thesis *The Intersubjective and the Social Systemic Public Relations Paradigms* I question this. Strategic thinking and acting is explicitly excluded from discourse ethical behaviour by Habermas, and Grunig explicitly defines public relations as part of an organization's strategic communication.

6. Cf. Marianne Antonsen and Inger Jensen, *Forms of Legitimacy Essential to Public Relations*, 1992, and Inger Jensen, *Public Relations as a Field of Social Science*, 1993.

7. Cf table 2 for a model of the intersubjective public relations paradigm.

8. Cf. the self-understanding of modern public relations practice. e.g. 1) 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*), and 2) Tim Traverse-Healy's remark during a conversation at the IPRA congress in Frankfurt in October, 1993: "Basically, the big question in public relations today is whether we work for the organisation or for *the public*".

9. International code of ethics, adopted by CERP and IPRA in 1965.

10. See note # 5.

11. Neither systems theory nor Luhmann can however be classified as postmodern. Like Habermas, Luhmann has his roots in modernism.

12. *Autopoiesis (Greek);* self-creation.

13. 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. To Luhmann, the lifeworld is present everywhere in the social systems where you are confident with something. This means that there are as many lifeworlds as there are human beings. It is not a shared intersubjective horizon.

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

15. Interpetration 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.

16. 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.

17. 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.

18. Cf table 4 for a model of the social systemic public relations paradigm.

19. Ronneberger & Rühl:152. My own translation.

20. "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.)

21. Luhmann, *Soziologie des Risikos*, Berlin/New York 1991:247. (My own translation.)

22. Report in leading Danish newspaper Politiken (1996-10-22).

23. Idem.