

Participative Public Relations

An Integrative Approach to Participating in PR

Olaf HOFFMANN

Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences (Salzgitter)

1. Introduction

When *Greenpeace* occupied the oil platform *Brent Spar* in 1995, it wanted to encourage politicians to protect the North and Baltic Seas, although the occupation was initially aimed at inducing *Shell* to change its corporate policy. When, 15 years later, *Greenpeace* denounced the use of palm oil from ecologically questionable sources in *KitKat*, it was likewise following the goal of inducing the company to change its course. And when people elsewhere in the world form actions groups to attempt to prevent the construction of large department stores or production facilities, then they want to influence corporate decision making. These examples show that the first stages of protest target public mobilization. However, it is easy to forget that the focus of all these endeavors is the attempt to change the decisions of a company. This is nothing other than participation. Participation is thus a central category of PR. It is all the more surprising that this has hardly been taken into account in PR research. And this is even more surprising, considering that participation has experienced a new renaissance in the context of social media (e.g. Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

The examples further show that the ways in which participation processes should be organized, and how far participation demands may reach, are largely dependent on the corresponding perspective. Whereas stakeholders in protests often claim the right to participation, which has perhaps already been denied by a court of law, companies like to point out that decisions are their own private matter, or they stage participation or dialogue processes in order to silence critics. If participation in the context of PR is to be examined, these respective perspectives must be taken into account in equal measure. Such an integrative perspective is taken up in this article.

The goal of the article is to make participation useable for PR research. The research seeks connecting factors to participation considerations in PR research as well as in related research areas (Chapter 2). Subsequently, an inclusion-theoretical framework will be constructed on a system-theoretical foundation (Chapter 4), in which participation in PR can be located (Chapter 5). This theoretical approach will finally be operationalized (Chapter 6) in order to enable an empirical investigation.

An important note in advance: with participative PR, we are not developing a new management concept, such as Issues Management or Stakeholder Management, in its normative manifestation. We do not take the perspective that a high degree of participation is the optimal solution in every case. It becomes clear quite quickly that – from an instrumental organizational perspective – participation opportunities can awaken protest to begin with. Instead, we intend to develop an analytical or descriptive concept of participative PR, with which the issues of participation can be described.

2. Current state of research

The first considerations have already shown that participation is a 'natural' topic of PR or PR research. This initial hunch is also confirmed by pertinent PR definitions such as that by Long & Hazleton: "Public Relations is a communication function of management through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals" (Long & Hazleton, 1987: 6). If the close relationships with the environment are emphasized here and adaption is named, inter alia, as the mode of relationships, this implies nothing other than participation. The research programme *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* by James E. Grunig *et al.* (z. B. Dozier *et al.*, 1995) also goes in a similar direction. Thus, such PR is considered excellent that conducts symmetric PR rather than asymmetric PR, that acts externally as an advocate of corporate interests on the one hand, and as "advocates of the publics' interests in discussions with the organization's strategic planners and decision makers" (Dozier *et al.*, 1995: 13) on the other. This is participation in its essence!

It is therefore even more surprising that the topic of participation is only rarely an explicit topic in international PR research. It is more likely to be found implicitly, like in the definitions mentioned. In addition to approaches from PR research in the narrow sense, the following will also outline approaches from related areas, in which participation is addressed implicitly and/or explicitly. They will be differentiated according to the extent to which they (a) are normative, i.e. place the focus on the interests of the references groups, (b) are instrumental,

i.e. place the focus on the interests of organizations, or (c) describe participation on a macro level.

The concept of *Issues Management* pursues a traditionally instrumental perspective. In the focus of interest is the question of how companies can recognize (potential) issues early on and then deal with these in order to keep any damage to the company as small as possible. Although the concept of participation can be considered integral to this approach, there are few concrete indications of issues of participation (e.g. Heath & Palenchar, 2008). Ultimately, almost all PR approaches that describe PR from an *organizational perspective* belong to this tradition. They all ask the question of how organizational goals can be achieved or how problems can be solved. Whereas in large areas of Anglo-American research, participation is taken into consideration generally at least as part of changes in corporate policy (e.g. Cutlip *et al.*, 1985: 187), this remains an exception in German-language organizational PR approaches to this day (e.g. Hoffjann, 2011). Ultimately, participation remains an implicit topic in all this work; concrete indications of e.g. participation processes are not to be found here.

Within the context of participation, there is no getting around one of the most dazzling concepts in PR: dialogue. With introduction of the two-way symmetrical model by Grunig & Hunt (1984) at the latest, dialogue has become a central concept in PR – even if it played an important role long before this (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 23). On the one hand, the dialogue concept has retained a central position up to this day in PR research and PR practice in equal measure. On the other hand, the numerous attempts to provide a theoretical foundation for the concept (e.g. Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pieczka, 2011; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012) show how vague the understanding of this concept remains. Thus there are essentially two opposing positions: on the one hand, one can find the representatives of a descriptive understanding, in which dialogue generally means nothing other than the reciprocal reactions or the role exchange in a communication situation (Szyzka, 1996: 88). In contrast there are the representatives of a normative understanding, in which dialogue is understood as an open-outcome and thus particularly moral negotiation position (e.g. Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 308). A fundamental problem connects theoretically ambitious as well as practice-oriented, descriptive as well as normative approaches in equal measure: dialogue is not generally embedded in a superordinate theoretical framework, in which the relations between PR and its stakeholders are explained.

This also applies to the further development of the four Public Relations models and thus to the two-way symmetrical model of Grunig & Hunt (1984): the *mixed-motive model* developed by Grunig *et al.*

(Dozier *et al.*, 1995). In this, companies optionally employ symmetrical and asymmetrical practices to achieve their goals. As such, a traditional instrumental perspective is taken here again.

The conception of *Consensus-Oriented Public Relations (COPR)* by Burkart (1994, 2004) represents a special case in international PR research. On the basis of Habermas, he asks how communication is possible in conflict situations. However, his interest targets primarily the question of how communication can succeed in the Habermas sense. He does not consider questions relating to the reasons for participation how to participate or how to enable participation. Thus, he is less interested in issues surrounding organizational structures and processes.

Beyond PR research in the narrow sense, two discourses appear relevant. In the research on *Stakeholder Management*, issues of participation have been discussed repeatedly from a corporate perspective (e.g. Freeman, 1984: 162). Not least the huge number of publications on Stakeholder Management are likely to have contributed to the topic of participation being viewed from all three perspectives – implicitly as well as explicitly (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Freeman originally viewed participation normatively as the right of stakeholders to satisfy their demands (Freeman, 1984). An instrumental perspective followed quickly, in which the question was raised to what extent corporate goals could be better achieved by taking stakeholders into consideration, as well as the descriptive perspective, which rests on the assumption that companies in today's society have to also consider the interests beyond those of the shareholders (cf. Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Although described perspectives are very comprehensive, they offer few concrete indications, however, regarding the forms of participation that exist, which expectations both sides have of one another, and how participation processes are shaped specifically.

In this point in particular, the work on *public participation* has a unique feature: it is primarily a normative and primarily an application-oriented concept (e.g. Reed, 2008), with which a *democratic deficit* (cf. Hindess, 1997) of liberal democracies is to be overcome. Accordingly, it is often assumed here that political legitimacy develops, *inter alia*, through communication (Brettschneider, 2013: 327). Although this work seems very promising at first glance, a second glance suggests that it is less so in terms of the issues of this article: the normative character results in particular from the categorical difference that *public participation* is located in the public sphere, whereas this article focuses on the private sphere, in which companies are located. For this reason, a further discussion of this approach is hardly helpful.

These rather political scientific approaches also offer definitions of participation. Participation can be understood as the objective to influence decisions on the various levels of the political system, both directly and indirectly (Kaase & Marsh, 1979: 42). This is sometimes referred to as a 'participatory revolution' (Kaase, 1984), which we shall address in more detail later on. These definitions can be adjusted in terms of corporate PR issues and thus used: participation can be understood as the objective to influence corporate decisions directly and indirectly. This general understanding has to be further substantiated for the PR context.

From the outline of the current state of research, the three research questions can be derived.

Firstly, an *integrated perspective* remains an exception. It has been shown that in PR research in particular, the instrumental perspective, which places the focus on organizational interests, is predominant. If, however, participation is pursuing the goal of changing decisions, then it becomes apparent that such a perspective will always remain blind on one eye. Thus, from an integrative perspective, the stakeholders and the organization, their respective interests, motives, expectations and strategies are viewed in equal measure.

Secondly, a *comparative perspective* can only be found to a limited extent so far. In the previous few years, participation has been discussed in particular against the backdrop of the Web 2.0 and social media. This is based on the assumption that organizations are able to communicate more directly with their stakeholders using social media. However, such a singular view on social media and its participation character precludes us from finding out whether stakeholder contacts are intensified or whether this merely leads to substitution effects with other traditional forms of communication. The aim from a comparative perspective is to examine different new as well as traditional forms of communication, in order to examine functions and effects, but also changes.

And thirdly, an *historical perspective* appears promising. On a meso level, this would involve the question of how individual issues or stakeholders in an organization have changed over the course of time. It would be even more exciting to examine how social demands on an organization have changed on a macro level. Gerhards (2001) has shown that such an ex post analysis appears possible.

3. Research questions and PR understanding

What are the research questions that arise from these considerations? As we are interested in developing an integrative approach to participation in PR, three perspectives must be taken into account:

- From the external stakeholder perspective, *inter alia*: how are stakeholders involved? Which participation options do they expect and which (own) options exist? How do they use these? How can these participation expectations be elucidated for the special stakeholders that are journalists?
- From the organizational perspective, *inter alia*: how do companies process complaints and protest? How capable are they of learning? What image do they have of stakeholders?
- From the macro perspective, *inter alia*: how do participation offers and their use fit together? Where do expectations fit together? Where are there discrepancies?

For the following considerations it is useful to first clarify the understanding of PR. If participation is defined above as the objective to influence corporate decision making directly or indirectly, then only PR-relevant decisions should be considered here. So what does PR mean here? Here, legitimacy is identified as a key concept that has a long tradition in PR research – for example Everett (2000), Holmström (1996, 2005) and Metzler (2000). Organizations in a modern society are faced with an almost permanent legitimacy pressure, which has increased significantly in the past 20 to 30 years and will presumably continue to increase. *The function of Public Relations is the legitimacy of organizational function vis-à-vis those stakeholders in society that are considered relevant* (Hoffjann, 2011). PR essentially has two idealtypical strategies available for legitimacy purposes, which can be explained by the presumably oldest differentiation in PR: the difference between *talking and acting*. If companies fail with their talking, they must act in a different way than originally planned. From a systems theory perspective, talking can be conceived of as external context management and acting as corporate self-management (cf. Hoffjann, 2011: 68).

- *Talking*: if PR implies a cognitive expectation among the relevant stakeholders, the company can hold on to its corporate policy and try, for example by means of the external communication of self-descriptions, to change the environmental expectations of these stakeholders *vis-à-vis* the company and thus to legitimize the company. This strategy option can be termed as *external context management* by systems theory.
- *Acting*: if PR implies a normative-critical expectation among the relevant stakeholders and if a single corporate decision has the potential to threaten the legitimacy of the entire company, PR will try to change the own corporate policy. This can be modeled as *corporate self-management* by systems theory.

Legitimacy is thus also under threat in areas in which companies operate in legally acceptable ways. Protest is often greater in areas where stakeholders feel let down by the law but feel morally in the right. For companies, this means that they might be in the right in legal terms, but risk suffering enormous damage by the possible force of a public protest aimed at participation.

4. Systems theoretical inclusion theory as a theoretical framework

In order to redeem the integrative approach, we require a theoretical framework, with which firstly, organizational processes and structures can be described, secondly, the relations between organizations and their stakeholders can be elucidated, and thirdly, one that is open to describe the expectations of the stakeholders. The systems theory approach, developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann following Talcott Parsons (e.g. Luhmann, 1995), fulfills these requirements. Systems theory initially shaped German-language PR before entering international PR research increasingly during the past few years (e.g. Holmström, 1996, 2005; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). Luhmann's work includes descriptions of social sub-systems such as politics and economics, as well as comprehensive organizational-theoretic considerations (e.g. Luhmann, 2003). The concept of inclusion/exclusion also plays an important role for Luhmann; this will represent the theoretical framework for the approach of participative PR.

If Luhmann assumes that not only individuals, but also communication communicates, then the individual and the psychic system is part of the environment of society. However, this does not mean that people are not relevant to a systems theoretical analysis – otherwise, it could hardly be a *sociological* theory. The construct of the individual makes communication addressable: participants in communication are identified and addressed in the communication (cf. Luhmann, 1997: 106). Accordingly, a person can be classified as belonging or not belonging to a social situation. Inclusion refers to the fact that individuals are assigned places within the framework of which they can act according to the (assumed) expectations (cf. Luhmann, 1997: 621). On the level of functional systems (e.g. economics, politics, education, science) there is almost only inclusion: everyone can buy something, everyone can vote or express themselves politically, and everyone can or even must attend school. Full inclusion means that for every member of society, there is an opportunity to address them or the option to participate in every functional system of modern society (cf. Stichweh, 2005: 181). Modern society no longer possesses the basis to legitimize exclusion (Stichweh, 2005: 61). Whereas inclusion is

therefore the rule on the level of functional systems, exclusion is the rule on the level of organizations: we are not a member of most organizations. Here, the first conflict potential becomes apparent: on the one hand, everyone can have a say and/or is affected, on the other hand, he or she is not involved in the decision making.

The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are not fixed, but can change continually. Gerhards (2001) has described such a change process in Germany for important social subsystems such as politics, medicine, economics and law for the time period between 1960 and 1989. According to this, the inclusion demands of audiences (roles of the public) *vis-à-vis* the experts (roles of the experts) have changed hugely. Voters as the public do not just want to participate in elections any longer, but instead participate in concrete decision making (e.g. through demonstrations, petitions etc.). Gerhards calls this the uprising of the audience (cf. Gerhards, 2001: 167), which can be conceived of as an inclusion extension of the audience. Further examples: in journalism, the audience is no longer limited to the reading, hearing and watching of journalistic contributions, but wants to participate in journalism through criticism, topic suggestions and their own contributions (cf. Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). The rights and inclusion demands of laypeople or audience have risen in proportion to the roles of the experts in almost all areas, the reduction to a fairly selective role structure has been weakened (cf. Gerhards, 2001). Accordingly, Kaase wrote of a participatory revolution several years earlier (cf. Kaase, 1984).

5. Participative Public Relations: theoretical framework

How can the relationship between PR and its stakeholders be explained by inclusion-theoretic considerations? Which PR-relevant changes can be identified in which relevant social areas?

Firstly, these represent changes in the economy. Here, customers pursue higher demands, which can be divided into various dimensions. The notion of prosumers still aims at the marketing-oriented aspect that customers are becoming more involved in the development of products, until the boundaries between producer and consumer largely disappear. From a PR perspective, raised expectations are more relevant with regard to issues of legitimacy, which are geared towards the *how* in production: how are products manufactured? How ecologically sustainable is the production? Have employee rights or even human rights been violated? Whereas in earlier times, the product quality was the most important factor, consumers today are also interested in the 'moral' quality of products. This can be termed the *uprising of customers*, which is also relevant for issues of legitimacy and thus for PR.

Secondly, these represent changes in the political system. Voters want not just to participate in elections, but also to participate in political decision making between elections (Gerhards, 2001) – be it through demonstrations or referenda. Relevant to PR is the aspect of *which questions* are decided politically due to higher demands. Thus, for example, consumer protection issues have been regulated politically in many countries during the past few years, because citizens have considered this an area in need of regulation. In terms of PR, this development implies that the scope of action is becoming increasingly smaller. This *uprising of citizens* always carries the (implicit or explicit) threat: if a company does not solve a concern following direct pressure, stakeholders will attempt to place the topic on the political agenda and in that way effect a legislative regulation.

Thirdly, these changes can be observed in the public sphere. In addition to many differences, PR and journalism have in common that they try to produce publicity. It can be observed that the demands of the public to the way *in which* journalism and PR (in very different ways) produce publicity have changed. In terms of PR, it is likely that the private sphere of companies used to be acceptable to a much higher degree, whereas today, corporate secrecy is becoming far less acceptable. The *uprising of the public* involves primarily the demand for total transparency. Exclusion is no longer acceptable – people want to have their say in everything.

However, it would be a mistake to glorify these developments into a comprehensive and ubiquitous *uprising of society*. Rather, a growing discrepancy can be observed: on the one side, there are those who are increasingly uninterested in social aspects; on the other side is a section of society that monitors organizations as a *watchdog*, criticizes transgressions and demands comprehensive inclusion or participation. From an organizational perspective, this can be referred to as *participation paradoxes*: whereas in routine situations especially, companies are faced with a largely disinterested environment, showing, for example, little interest in CSR reports, stakeholders claim comprehensive participation rights in crisis situations, which companies are hardly able to satisfy any longer.

This participation paradox again shows clearly why comprehensive participation options do not inevitably lead to a higher level of legitimacy. On the one hand, ever since the situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1997), it is apparent that an open information policy can itself activate a latent public. On the other hand it would be naïve to assume that participation options always lead to legitimacy, unless a company were to satisfy every single stakeholder demand – but that would mean the direct road to ruin.

What are the benefits and opportunities as well as the disadvantages and risks of participative PR? Participation measures offer the opportunity for companies to recognize, evaluate and suitably react to social change – in other words, facilitating organizational learning (Gherardi, 2013). The crowdsourcing discourse should be viewed within this context, in which an attempt is made as part of public participation to use the knowledge of externals (Brabham, 2009). The particular opportunities of specific participation options lies in the early discovery of new demands and thus relevant changes (Van Leuven, 1980: 56), in order to therefore – from an instrumental perspective – keep the damage or costs for a company as low as possible by using appropriate measures. In the context of the staging of participation and dialogue measures, the advantage is that participation options can include and thus ‘silence’ critics. In contrast to this stand the disadvantages and risks, in particular the huge increase in complexity and the effort involved in participation measures. It involves a lot of time – also on occasion by senior management – to deal with the demands of stakeholders. In addition, it increases the risk that such participation offers can turn a latent resistance into an active resistance and awaken hopes of surrender. If a company invites stakeholders to a discussion, it has to expect that someone will attend and bring their own related expectations.

6. Participative Public Relations: operationalization

How can these general considerations on participative PR be consolidated and operationalized?

On the basis of these considerations, one can firstly distinguish between two *participation dimensions* (cf. Loosen & Schmidt, 2012): on the one hand, the relevance of the respective expectations has become clear: which expectations do stakeholders and PR have of one another? On the other hand, the question of participation opportunities: what options are there? And how are they used on the part of stakeholders and PR?

Secondly, the question must be answered as to which *participation actors* should be taken into consideration. With the integrative approach, the decision has already been made that the stakeholders are observed on the one hand and the organizations on the other. But what other differentiations can be made here? With regard to the stakeholders, it would appear useful to treat the group of journalists as a single group, because as an unaffected group or as professional observers, they have different expectations of participation, without this being wholly unimportant to them. By contrast, a further elaboration in terms of a stakeholder map only makes sense for a case study. In many cases, stakeholders such as residents, critical citizens’ initiatives, but also decision makers from

politics are meaningful. Such a stakeholder map is ultimately subject to the same limitations as any other identification of stakeholders, e.g. as part of the identification phase in the Issues Management process. The situation is more straightforward on the organizational side: here, in addition to PR, company management must be taken into consideration, as this sets out the framework conditions for participation. Thus, a PR department would not get very far with its participation endeavors if its company management does not consider legitimacy in general and the demands of particular stakeholders in particular as important.

In the following, the relationships between PR/company management as well as stakeholders in general will be elucidated, before the participation relations between PR and the special stakeholder group of journalists will be examined and operationalized.

A. PR/company management vs. stakeholders

In contrast to functional systems, the question of inclusion in organizational systems such as companies is clearly regulated in terms of membership: if you are not a member, you are part of the environment of the organization and thus part of its audience at the most. Through the formal criteria of membership, the asymmetry between a company and its environment is particularly pronounced. External stakeholders of PR such as residents, politics, churches, associations or conservation initiatives feel affected by corporate decisions, but as non-members, they have no direct influence on these decisions. It can be assumed that the inclusion demands of many external stakeholders are so great because they are so aware of their own powerlessness as non-members. The demand for transparency is such a sensitive issue because the transparency refusal of a company is usually interpreted as: “That’s none of your business”.

Companies are not self-contained, but are instead dependent on their environment in a variety of ways. In this way, decisions by the company are addressed within the context of the company’s environment and can lead to follow-up communication and follow-up actions in very different contexts: the city council denies a company permission to expand their site, because the company treats its neighbors inconsiderately.

Customers no longer buy the products, because they are convinced that the company is irresponsible in the way it treats its employees and nature. It is therefore in the interests of a company to promote understanding among the different stakeholders for their decisions, or to let them participate in their decision making – to whatever degree.

Two questions in particular arise here with a view to the issue of inclusion: firstly, this is the question already implied above, *who is identified as a stakeholder or who identifies themselves as a stakeholder*.

From a PR perspective, only those persons can be considered that are identified as such. If, for example, a new citizens' initiative is consciously tackling secrecy, PR can only react to this with difficulty. Inclusion is thus not possible. Conversely, people have to first perceive themselves a part of the audience/ as affected parties. If someone knows nothing about the existence of a company in his or her city, he or she will not feel like a part of the audience.

Secondly, the question arises as to *what participation demands of PR stakeholders refer to*. Increased inclusion demands can be seen on the one hand in the fact that PR stakeholders expect more transparency from companies, thus more information on the company. This is the 'communicative' side of PR, which in the above was termed the talking or external context management. On the other hand, the inclusion demand is also related to participation in corporate decision making: externals wish to be involved in internal company decision-making processes – this was termed acting or corporate self-management in the above. Thus, this would be less frustrating than ending a long phase of information and perhaps discussion by stating that the further decision making process is now 'a matter of the company'.

How can the dimensions of participation expectations and opportunities be put in concrete terms? In the relationship of PR to the external stakeholders, the heterogeneity of stakeholders, which ranges from individuals in the audience and members of citizens' initiatives to political decision makers, must be taken into account.

1. PR / company management

With regard to PR or company management, the following aspects of inclusion expectations can be distinguished:

- *Stakeholder image*: which groups are considered important? How does PR view the stakeholders?
- *Role perception*: how does PR interpret its own role (e.g. supporting a pluralist society vs. supporting the organization in achieving its economic goals; Röttger, 2000: 319)?
- *Strategic importance of participation*: what are the calculations underlying the importance of participation for PR / company management (e.g. as an early warning system, to ensure corporate freedom of action, collection of relevant information for other company areas)?

In terms of inclusion opportunities, the following aspects appear relevant:

- *Participative character of the measures*: the first question that arises concerns the specific measures that can be applied (e.g. telephone hotline, e-mail address, discussion evenings, Twitter accounts, Facebook profile, regulars' meetings with neighbors, round tables, regular lobby evenings). As part of the measures implemented, the participative character can also be assigned by which the three levels can be distinguished. As the information can also be interpreted in terms of a very broad understanding of participation, the information should be located on the first level here. This should be distinguished from the discussion or communication, in which PR is prepared to listen. Participation in the narrow sense can only be found on the third level, which deals with communication in the context of concrete decision making.
- *Institutionalization*: the question that arises here is whether or how the participation is institutionally anchored in work procedures. Do routines exist that deal with suggestions and criticism? How is company management involved here?
- *PR communications and corporate policy*: here, the focus is on the aspect of effects. To what extent are the arguments of the stakeholders taken into account? And with regard to corporate decision making: to what extent are external interests taken into account?

2. External stakeholders

The above-mentioned inclusion expectations are reflected in part in terms of external stakeholders. Here, a distinction can be drawn between the following aspects, which are in part based on the situational theory of publics by Grunig (1997):

- *Degree of impact*: how important is a company for which reasons (as a resident, as an environmentalist etc.)?
- *Participation motives*: what are the reasons for participation and what are the objectives of participation (e.g. greater transparency of a company, fundamental change in corporate policy)?
- *Assessment of influence*: how do stakeholders rate their own influence?
- *Degree of satisfaction*: here, general satisfaction with a company must be distinguished from the satisfaction relating to participation. In terms of the latter, the focus is on the following questions, inter alia: does a company involve external stakeholders? Has a company taken external interests into account in the past?

With regard to inclusion opportunities, the following aspects on the part of external stakeholders should be distinguished:

- *Participation practices*: to what extents are which options made use of? On which platforms beyond corporate platforms (e.g. beyond the company's Facebook profile in one's own Facebook group or participation in demonstrations) can activity be observed? Who are the target groups of the activities (the company, media, politicians, customers, 'like-minded' others)?
- *Degree of collectiveness orientation*: is participation viewed as an individual voice or as part of a larger – perhaps even self-organized – group?

	PR	External stakeholders
Participation expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder image • Role perception • Strategic importance of participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of impact • Participation motives • Assessment of influence • Degree of satisfaction
Participation opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participative character of measures • Institutionalization • PR communications and corporate policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation practices • Degree of collectiveness orientation

Fig. 1: Participation expectations and opportunities. Source: based on Loosen & Schmidt, 2012.

The respective participation expectations and opportunities can be placed in relation to one another, resulting in a participation level and participation distance.

• *Participation level as a comparison of the respective participation opportunities*: here, the focus is on the question of which opportunities exist and how these are used. The participation level can be elaborated according to the three dimensions. In the time dimension, the question arises as to whether participation measures exist in the long term or the short term, e.g. on the occasion of a concrete issue. The subject dimension enables a specification of what the participation measures refer to. This includes, on the one hand, the participative character of the measures – the introduced distinction between information, communication / discussion and participation –, on the other hand, however, the institutionalized forms as well (e.g. customer advisory board, regulars' tables). Finally, in the social dimension, it can be shown which stakeholders are taken account of or which stakeholders participate. For this, one might refer to considerations from the Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation'. However, this exhibits

a decisive difference: it cannot be considered normative in any way. The above-described participation paradoxes are associated with the thesis that participation does not largely exist with regard to many companies because stakeholders are simply not interested in a particular company or do not have a problem with a particular company. Once again, the reflexive character of the relationships becomes apparent:

Professionalisation of activism is in some respects a direct response to the growth of stakeholder participation as a key element of issue management. Processes such as community consultation or corporate social responsibility or stakeholder engagement have accelerated and formalized participation by external parties (for example, volunteer Community Advisory Panels) (Jacques, 2006: 414).

Participation distance as the extent of agreement between the respective participation expectations: what are the respective expectations like – and how large is the agreement and/or the discrepancy? (cf. Loosen & Schmidt, 2012)

B. PR vs. journalism

It may be somewhat surprising to speak of participation relations in the relationship between PR and journalism. And indeed, this demands a differentiated approach against the backdrop of the journalistic role.

The participation of journalism refers initially to 'talking'; in other words, traditional press activity. Here, two aspects of the 'craft' should be mentioned primarily, when, for example, editors directly or indirectly formulate expectations, make more professional film material available or postpone a press conference. This also includes expectations of, for example, greater transparency in the press relations of a company. And finally, background talks have a dual function (Jarren & Röttger, 2009: 35-38): on the one hand, PR can explain its own position and thus promote understanding among journalists – in this way, PR can influence reporting. On the other hand, PR learns a lot about how it is perceived by journalists. Such background talks thus function as an early warning system with a large participative character. All of this is influenced by the respective role perceptions: do journalists see themselves as neutral mediators of information, or as controllers of politics and economics (Weischenberg *et al.*, 2006)? And: does a PR manager primarily wish to support a pluralistic society or the company in achieving its economic objectives (Röttger, 2000: 319)?

The participative character can go so far as to make participation in the relations to journalists refer also to corporate 'action'. If, for example, PR notices early on through the reactions of journalists that a corporate position might meet with great resistance in the future, then the early warning system of the journalistic background talk can lead to a

corresponding change in corporate policy.

It has become clear that in the relationships to journalism as well, participation is a crucial element. It has also been shown that the above-mentioned aspects can also be applied to the relations between PR and journalism, if they are adjusted to the specific role context.

C. Method design

It has become apparent that an empirical investigation of the participation relations introduced and developed requires a multimethod design. In terms of PR/ the company, expert interviews with representatives of PR departments and company management are necessary, whereas on the stakeholder side, in addition to quantitative stakeholder surveys, expert interviews with decision makers from politics and administration and/or opinion leaders, e.g. from pressure groups, are also important. Moreover, a content analysis of PR material as well as of forums on, e.g. *Facebook*, would also be useful. Here, the information and discussions on official corporate platforms as well as in groups and/or profiles of pressure groups should be taken into account. In two preliminary studies, which were carried out in 2013 as part of a research seminar, these methods have already been applied with the exception of the content analysis. Relevant insights were gained, which have been included in the further development of the theoretical framework as well as in the operationalization. This has shown, for example, the familiarity and local anchoring of a company had a huge relevance for the involvement and interest in participation opportunities. These are only two examples of the large number of intervening variables, which limit the scope of the results in the face of the case study character. This must also be taken into account in the comprehensive empirical investigation on the basis of the outlined approach, which is currently in preparation.

	Methods	Preliminary study steel (2013)	Preliminary study bank (2013)
PR / company management	Expert interviews PR department and company management Content analysis of PR material or social media offers	4 representatives from corporate communications	2 representatives from PR and company management
External stakeholders	Quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, if required	419 citizens in the city of the company HQ	497 citizens from the district in which the bank operates
Journalism	Expert interviews with relevant journalists	2 journalists	1 journalist

Fig. 2: Method design.

7. Conclusion

Participation according to the integrative approach has been introduced as a relevant category for PR and PR research. It represents a theoretical framework, outlined on the basis of systems theoretical inclusion theory in particular, with which, by means of the dimensions of participation expectations and opportunities, the participation level and the participation discrepancy have been carved out. In this, numerous insights of PR research have been incorporated, making clear the integrability of the approach.

Similar to the concept of dialogue, the notion of participation also appears to be inflated time and again. In actual fact, however, several reasons argue for a more sober view of participation. *Firstly*, comprehensive participation would not be more moral from an ethical perspective per se, because each decision in favor of particular stakeholder interests is simultaneously a decision against those of other stakeholders. The decision to close down a production facility for environmental reasons is, at the same time, a decision against jobs in the respective region. This is closely linked to *secondly*, namely that a high level of participation does not guarantee legitimacy. As already argued, the opposite might in fact be the case: thus, new demands may become manifest by participation opportunities themselves, and can lead to the mobilization of one or more stakeholder groups. *Thirdly*, measures of participative PR are relatively reliable in contributing to an early recognition of issues than with non-participative PR. However, because this is facilitated in particular by a huge increase in complexity, the costs are obvious: the processing of complexity is extremely effortful and can severely slow down decision-making processes – and thus lead to paralysis.

For these reasons, it is the task of PR practice to match participation expectations with the appropriate participation opportunities at the right time. The integrative approach introduced here can undoubtedly provide important insights. It is, however, a task for future research to further develop this analytic approach into a management concept.

Bibliography

- Arnstein, S. R., "A ladder of citizen participation", in *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 1969, 35(4), pp. 216-224.
- Brabham, D. C., "Crowdsourcing the public participation process for planning projects", in *Planning Theory*, 2009, 8(3), pp. 242-262.
- Bretschneider, F., "Großprojekte zwischen Protest und Akzeptanz: Legitimation durch Kommunikation", in F. Bretschneider, & W. Schuster (eds.), *Stuttgart 21. Ein Großprojekt zwischen Protest und Akzeptanz*, Wiesbaden, VS-Verlag, 2013, pp. 319-328.

- Burkart, R., "Consensus oriented Public Relations as a solution to the landfill conflict", in *Waste Management & Research*, 1994, 12, pp. 223-232.
- Burkart, R., "Consensus-oriented Public Relations (COPR) – a conception for planning and evaluation of Public Relations", in B. van Ruler, & D. Vercic (eds.), *Public Relations in Europe. A Nation-by-Nation Introduction to Public Relations Theory and Practice*, Berlin, Mouton De Gruyter, 2004, pp. 446-452.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M., *Effective Public Relations* (6th ed.), Englewood Cliffs, Pearson Education, 1985.
- Donaldson, T., & Preston, L., "The stakeholder theory of the corporation. Concepts, evidence, and implications", in *Academy of Management Review*, 1995, 20(1), pp. 65-91.
- Dozier, D. M., Grunig, L. A., & Grunig, J. E., *Manager's guide to excellence in Public Relations and communication management*, Mahwah, Erlbaum, 1995.
- Everett, J. L., "Public Relations and the ecology of organizational change", in R. L. Heath (ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, Inc., 2000, pp. 311-320.
- Freeman, R. E., *Strategic management: a stakeholder approach*, Boston, Pitman, 1984.
- Gerhards, J., "Der Aufstand des Publikums. Eine systemtheoretische Interpretation des Kulturwandels in Deutschland zwischen 1960 und 1989", in *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 2001, 30(3), pp. 163-184.
- Gherardi, S., "Is organizational learning possible without participation?", in S. Weber et al. (eds.), *Organisation und Partizipation*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2013, pp. 29-43.
- Grunig, J. E., "A situational theory of publics: Conceptual history, recent challenges, and new research", in D. Moss, T. MacManus, & D. Vercic (eds.), *Public Relations research: An international perspective*, London, International Thomson Publishing, 1997, pp. 3-48.
- Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A., "Models of Public Relations and communication", in J. E. Grunig et al. (eds.), *Excellence in Public Relations and communication management*, Hillsdale, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992, pp. 285-325.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T., *Managing Public Relations*, New York, Wadsworth Inc. Fulfillment, 1984.
- Heath, R. L., & Palenchar, M. J., *Strategic issues management: organizations and public policy challenges* (2nd ed.), Los Angeles, Sage, 2008.
- Hindess, B., "Democracy and disenchantment", in *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 1997, 32(1), pp. 79-92.
- Hoffmann, O., "Public Relations in Society. A new approach to the difficult relationships between PR and their environments", in *Central European Journal of Communication*, 2011, 4(1), pp. 63-76.
- Holmström, S., *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)*, Roskilde, 1996.
- Holmström, S., "Reframing Public Relations: The evolution of a reflective paradigm for organizational legitimization", in *Public Relations Review*, 2005, 31, pp. 497-504.
- Jaques, T., "Activist 'rules' and the convergence with issue management", in *Journal of Communication Management*, 2006, 10(4), pp. 407-420.
- Jarren, O., & Röttger, U., Steuerung, "Reflexion und Interpenetration: Kernelemente einer strukturationstheoretisch begründeten PR-Theorie", in U. Röttger (ed.), *Theorien der Public Relations. Grundlagen und Perspektiven der PR-Forschung* (2nd ed.), Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, pp. 29-49.
- Kaase, M., "The challenge of 'participatory revolution' in pluralist democracies", in *International political science review*, 1984, 5, pp. 299-317.
- Kaase, M., & Marsh, A., "Political action. A theoretical perspective", in S. Barnes, & M. Kaase (eds.), *Political action*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications Ltd., 1979, pp. 27-56.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M., "Toward a dialogic theory of Public Relations", in *Public Relations Review*, 2002, 28, pp. 21-37.
- Long, L. W., & Hazleton Jr. V., "Public Relations: A theoretical and practical response", in *Public Relations Review*, 1987, 13(2), pp. 3-13.
- Loosen, W., & Schmidt, J.-H., "(Re-)discovering the audience. The relationship between journalism and audience in networked digital media", in *Information, communication & society*, 2012, 15, 6, pp. 867-887.
- Luhmann, N., *Social systems*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Luhmann, N., Organization, in T. Bakken, & T. Hernes (eds.), *Autopoietic organization theory: Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's social systems perspective*, Oslo, Copenhagen Business School Press, 2003, pp. 31-52.
- Luhmann, N., *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997.
- Metzler, M. S., "The centrality of organizational legitimacy to Public Relations practice", in R. L. Heath (ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, Inc., 2000, pp. 321-334.
- Pieczka, M., "Public Relations as dialogic expertise?", in *Journal of Communication Management*, 2011, 15(2), pp. 108-124.
- Reed, M.S., "Stakeholder participation for environmental management: A literature review", in *Biological conservation*, 2008, 141, pp. 2417-2431.
- Röttger, U., *Public Relations – Organisation und Profession. Öffentlichkeitsarbeit als Organisationsfunktion. Eine Berufsfeldstudie*, Wiesbaden, Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000.
- Saam, N., "Nachhaltigkeit transformativer Verfahren politischer Partizipation? Theoretische Unmöglichkeiten und Konsequenzen für die Evaluierung", in N. Kersting (ed.), *Politische Beteiligung. Einführung in dialogorientierte Instrumente politischer und gesellschaftlicher Partizipation*, Wiesbaden, VS-Verlag, 2008, pp. 255-269.

- Stichweh, R., *Inklusion und Exklusion: Studien zur Gesellschaftstheorie*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2005.
- Szyszkka, P., "Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Perspektiven des Dialogbegriffs", in G. Bentele, H. Steinmann, & A. Zerfaß (eds.), *Dialogorientierte Unternehmenskommunikation. Grundlagen, Praxiserfahrungen, Perspektiven*, Berlin, Vistas, 1996, pp. 81-106.
- Theunissen, P. & Wan Noordin, W. N., "Revisiting the concept 'dialogue', in Public Relations", in *Public Relations Review*, 2012, 38, pp. 5-13.
- Valentini, C., & D. Kruckeberg, "Public Relations and trust in contemporary global society: A Luhmannian perspective of the role of Public Relations in enhancing trust among social systems", in *Central European Journal of Communication*, 2011, 4(1), pp. 91-108.
- Van Leuven, J. K., "Measuring values through public participation", in *Public Relations Review*, 1980, 6(1), pp. 51-56.
- Vesnic-Alujevic, L., "Political participation and web 2.0 in Europe: A case study of Facebook", in *Public Relations Review*, 2012, 38, pp. 466-470.
- Weischenberg, S., Malik, M., & Scholl, A., *Die Souffleure der Mediengesellschaft. Report über die Journalisten in Deutschland*, Konstanz, UVK, 2006.

Empowered Spaces

The Political and Everyday Life

Johanna STENERSEN

Örebro University, Sweden

With the aim to study Nicaraguan women's civic engagement an ethnographic approach seemed given. But the choice to apply a *critical* ethnographic approach is more of a commitment – there is a purpose with the study that goes beyond answering the research questions. The aim to critically assess participation and communicative practices is based on a critical analysis and a wish to take the critical argument further.

Ethnography as such is multimodal and offers a range of methods and the possibility to combine these for the best purpose of the study (Höijer, 1990). Empirically, the study draws on ethnographically collected material during field work in Nicaragua, Central America between 2008 and 2010, such as individual and focus group interviews, participant observations from a variety of situations in the informants' 'ordinary life', and audio-visual material from organized events (workshops, radio studio recordings, demonstrations etc.). In this article the quotes mainly derive from focus group interviews and informal conversations with young women during an educational workshop about citizenship and gender that was held by the Nicaraguan NGO Grupo Venancia¹ in Matagalpa, Nicaragua in March 2011. My particular interest is to discuss how the informants define, talk and act out their civic engagement, what civic participation and identity means to them and how they actually take part in different actions. There is a strong correlation between methodology and critique, and critical ethnography should be perceived as both intervention and contribution to societal

¹ Grupo Venancia is a feminist civil society organization located in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. It was founded in 1991. The name Venancia derives from a rural woman who fought for better education and living conditions in the 1960s and who joined forces with the FSLN and participated in the 1979 revolution. Grupo Venancia specializes in popular education and communication and its members are active at the local, national and international level.