

Contextualizing and redefining authenticity in organizational communication



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ABSTRACT: Public relations and its techniques and methods stand as an intermediary between an organization on the one hand, and the corresponding public or publics on the other. A contradiction is implicitly construed, namely that PR serving an organization's needs can by no means be serving the needs of the public(s) or *vice versa*. Presumably, PR which serves an organization's interests is oftentimes not true and seeks to project the best possible image. The public interest in PR, however, takes aim at the truth, the organization's self, the authentic core. Nowadays, when speaking of authenticity, one traditionally differentiates between true being and mere image/deceitful appearance. Organizational communication's challenge is that suspicious (self-serving) interests of the subsystems such as politics and business and, thus, inevitable deficits in truthfulness and sincerity are imputed. However, this paper (theoretically and practically) establishes why authentic communication is impossible and unnecessary at the same time and might even be a risk factor. Correspondingly, it also explores new perspectives for a different understanding of how to achieve corporate authenticity without disregarding legitimate rhetorical options and without being caught in a strict dichotomy of truth and falsehood.

KEYWORDS: public relations, authenticity, corporate communication, persuasion techniques



INTRODUCTION

Public relations and its techniques and methods stand as an intermediary between an organization on the one hand, and the corresponding public or publics on the other. A contradiction is implicitly construed, namely that PR serving an organization's needs can by no means be serving the needs of the public(s) or *vice versa*. Presumably, PR which serves an organization's interests is oftentimes not true and seeks to project the best possible image. The public interest in PR, however, takes aim at the truth, the organization's self, the authentic core. The demand for authenticity, i.e. to finally return to truthfulness in organizational communication,

of a clearly definable corporate identity. According to Gabler's economic encyclopedia, brand identity embodies the formative qualities of a brand that the brand stands for — initially towards the inside, later also towards the outside (Gabler, 2010, p. 2008). Even though the idea of identity inspired by social psychology (Mead, 1968; Goffman, 1959; 1963) has turned away from the dichotomy of image/appearance *versus* being and has been considering different identities' appropriateness for social situations (frames) as more significant instead (Marquard, 1979, p. 350), the core metaphor remains constitutive for the area of organizational communication and claims that an authentic identity also has to be lived to the outside.

This paper (theoretically and practically) establishes why authentic communication is impossible and unnecessary at the same time and might even be a risk factor. Correspondingly, it also explores new perspectives for a different understanding of how to achieve organizational authenticity without disregarding legitimate rhetorical options and without being caught in a strict dichotomy of truth and falsehood and of a mutually exclusive PR concept that either serves an organization's or the public interest. Authenticity is not the public interest's ultimate goal nor is it — when contextualized anew — necessarily a problem for organizations. Thus, authenticity as a PR concept, a tool even, does not find itself between conflicting priorities — between public demand and organizational needs — but rather helps to outweigh those.

THE LIMITS OF AUTHENTICITY IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

The fundamental question is whether authentic communication can be possible and/or desirable at all. The following considerations will make it obvious why a one-sided understanding of persuasion through realness (logos) as the ultimate goal is not suitable for conceptually designing corporate communication:

1.

For modern functionally-differentiated organizations, trying to differentiate between being and image is futile. Modernity does not allow for a comprehensive criterion to determine realness versus constructedness. Human beings' inability to acquire real knowledge about the world's nature has meanwhile been defined as an indeed positive characteristic. (Cassirer, 1924)

The impression is imposed that the inflationary call for authenticity is contradictory to missing factual options to actually be able to differentiate between image and being. Evidence to support this can be found in numerous ways — in theory as well as in practice.

At least since the epistemological positions of radical constructivism, an ontological notion of reality is put into question. Most impressively, modern art has been emancipated from the demand for reality's true embodiment. The search for the true being, for arcane realities and truths ends with the *avant-garde's* understand-

ing of art. Magritte irritated a pipe's realistic illustration by the remark "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") in order to make it clear that even an object's most realistic reproduction cannot be the object itself. The deployment of everyday objects within cultural reality — as reinforced by Marcel Duchamp — radically questions the idea of reality. "In this case, the relationship to truth puts the difference between a work of art which represents reality out of a privileged position and a simple item of reality into perspective" (translation by the authors; Groys, 1999, p. 19).



René Magritte, *Unfaithful language (The Treachery of Images)*, © C. Herscovivi, Brussels, fot. © Christie's Images/Corbis

From a system theory's point of view, the quest for authenticity is doomed to be futile in every case. As is generally known, in the course of society's differentiation according to originally mostly segmentary, then stratified, and eventually functional criteria, modernity does not have at its disposal a comprehensive criterion which helps to codify reality in terms of genuineness or authenticity, respectively. The realities of the business, the political and other functionally-differentiated spheres differ from each other with the result that, for instance, a politician loses political authenticity to enjoy business authenticity when switching the system; however, he or she might only gain limited authenticity due to his or her political history, even though he or she remains the same human being.

In lieu of authenticity, the decision between participation and falling out (Luhmann, 1995) comes into play. This happens to hold true not only for the large subsystems of society, but also for the numerous social groupings which gather around temporary interests or hobbies and dissolve equally fast in order to find new criteria for different ways of participation. The fact that these criteria of inclusion and exclusion might clash with each other under certain circumstances and are therefore incompatible under authenticity's perspective is not worth mentioning.

Also from a brand identity's perspective as described above, to give attention to real inwardness proves to be virtually futile. On the one hand, theoretical sci-

ence and practice have agreed to consider brand essence to be substantially important since it is the basis for each and every marketing activity. On the other hand, Liebl and Mennicken arrive at the — especially for this concept's adherents — disillusioned finding: “brand essence even of well-known and assumedly strong brands is evanescently small, sometimes even nonexistent. [...] the essence tends to be trivial in strategic respect” (translation by the authors; Liebl & Mennicken, 2005, p. 16). Thus, not the essence is the problem. The challenge rather consists in coordinating complex, sometimes contradictory, offers of meaning for different stakeholder and recipient groups. Real truth can only have little to do with this; the search for truth — this applies to all stakeholder groups — would render any communication impossible. Also in terms of a role-related notion of identity, this kind of truth is not necessary to create sense by way of tactful contents adapted to the addressee.

2.

In the era of mediatization and eventization, especially the non-authentic can seem authentic depending upon the self-assurance of corporate presentation and socially-accepted discourse patterns that determine credibility.

Modern art points out why the non-authentic can become authentic due to a self-assured mode of display. “Ready-mades always look much more profane and more real than reality itself” (translation by the authors; Groys, 1999, p. 19).

Already before Walter Benjamin's famous paper *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*) was published in 1936, people's credulity as concerns film and photographic documents was used for the purpose of manipulation. For instance, the *ex post* retouching of personalities from pictures with Joseph Stalin after he has fallen out of grace are notorious. Accordingly, the art historian Jürgen Reiche observes: “No picture is authentic, no photograph is objective. The photographer decides subjectively. He tears something out of context, rules about place and time, determines angle of vision and lens — he stage-manages. [...] Photo journalism's history itself begins with a lie” (translation by the authors; Reiche, 2003, p. 16). At the same time, reproducibility offers additional means for the *ex post* manipulation of pictures.

While the doers of such manipulation originally remained concealed, simulation calls the difference between what is genuine and fake, what is real and imaginary into question over and over again (Baudrillard, 1978, p. 10), for instance in the cult movie *Blow Up* (1966) by the Italian producer Michelangelo Antonioni.

In the context of organizational communication, it is interesting that with simulation — apart from fundamental doubts about picture motifs' genuineness — it is not unambiguously traceable anymore which author is hiding behind the simulation or the fake, respectively. Long ago, these considerations became the fundament for decision making in strategic communication planning. *The Handbuch der*

In the case of the damaged offshore oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, BP's slogan — "Beyond Petroleum" — thus gains a new authentic meaning.

4.

Attempting to achieve authenticity through transparency — disclosure of all information — endangers connectivity in communication. Encompassing transparency tends to be tactless (Luhmann, 1964) and, thus, impedes the maintenance of communicative relationships between the corporation and its audience(s).

In his comedy *Le Misanthrope*, Molière depicts an idealist who has committed himself uncompromisingly to truth and, thereby, constantly hurts his environment's feelings. Thus, he indeed remains true to himself, but puts up with losing all social contacts. Accordingly, it is not seldom that authenticity stands for sincere inwardness ranging from lacking sensibility to pure impertinence by executives in politics and business and is nevertheless claimed an appropriate means of behavior by referring to genuineness. What is overlooked here is the fact that it is equally important for communicative relationships to perform services for others' images and to pay attention not to injure others' images. Accordingly, Goffman argues that the double effect of the rules of self-esteem and considerateness consists in the fact that, when meeting somebody, someone tends to behave in a way that he preserves both his own and the other interaction partners' image (Goffman, 1967, p. 16). The attempt to acquire trust through authenticity — defined as disclosure of possibly all information and thoughts — tends to be tactless (Luhmann, 1964) and jeopardizes connected communication. Reciprocally, also verifying one's counterpart's authenticity is evidence for mistrust and in turn generates uncomely feelings with the communication partner (as an example, see Gambetta, 1988, pp. 233–234).

5.

The idea to produce authenticity through insights into the private sphere, by getting within touching distance to the public, is naive and dangerous.

When talking about authenticity, it is easily overlooked that differentiating between visibility and invisibility exclusively lies with the communicator. In a media society, the problem of persons' visibility is aggravated by the erosion of the boundaries between the public and the private sphere. One can observe that the protagonists apparently have increasing problems differentiating between private and public when displaying their true ego. Rather, the appropriate relationship between closeness and distance is critical. The advantage attention poses also a disadvantage at the same time. In this respect, in Georg Franck's (1998) *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit* one misses a chapter on the inflation of attention, which is foreboding whenever the private sphere is turned inside out through an attempt to increase (social) attention capital by authenticity misunderstood in such a way. As concerns

placing the established dichotomy of image and being with more up-to-date modes of differentiation. If connectability — i.e. corporate communication must allow for further communication — can be defined as the ultimate goal of authentic communication, it seems to be necessary to broaden the meaning of the buzzword “authenticity.” Then, authenticity does not have to stand for ontological reality, but also takes into account other important criteria for communicative relationships.

For this purpose, it is obviously convenient that the social tendency towards authenticity is increasingly defined by an authenticity of second order (Düllo, Schieleit & Suhr, 2000, p. 329). This means that the non-authentic acquires authenticity because it is not the origin that counts, but the perfect orchestration or staging. One can interpret this evolution also in a different way: Apparently, authenticity is nothing but an inflationary platitude used for diffuse attributions of reality. Thus, what would be more consequential than to substantiate this commonplace with meaningful differentiations?

Consistent *versus* inconsistent

Accordingly, the mutually exclusive relationship between natural being and communicative display could not serve as a benchmark for authenticity. It is replaced by an ascription of reality dependent on subjective ascriptions of meaning, for which Blumenberg accentuates the criterion of consistency: “Reality cannot be a quality quasi-adherent to things, but the epitome of a concordant perseverance of syntax of elements. Reality has always displayed itself as some kind of text being constituted by following certain rules of internal consistency. For modern times, reality is a context” (translation by the authors; Blumenberg, 1964, p. 21). Therewith, Blumenberg anticipates essential thoughts of Goffman’s theory (1974), in turn inspired by Bateson (1972). For organizational communication, these considerations are essential because they explain the necessity for positioning and defining patterns of interpretation, respectively, within certain frames of interpretation.

The criterion of consistency also qualifies frames of interpretation critical of consumption, when they refer to the illusionary world and the consumer’s glare, just as Gerhard Schulze points out with the example of the experience-driven society and of experience-oriented consumption: “Both acteurs [producer and consumer] work together. Persuasion belongs to the service feature. Useless are labels such as lie and truth, whenever it is primarily a matter of providing psychophysical processes to the end consumer by mutual consent of all involved” (Schulze, 1993, p. 20).

However, consistency does by no means imply that communication has to be non-contradictory. By understanding authenticity in terms of communication’s impressiveness, one inevitably comes across the paradox as rhetorical category, which certainly can destabilize the established practice of thought and speech and amaze, flabbergast, or even fascinate the recipient (Plett, 2002). With the term fascination,

maintain social structures. Not least does online communication owe its appeal to a boundlessly connectable world. Communities' other communication fora pursue the goal of sustaining communication systems by way of connectability long-term.

A core task of organizational communication likewise consists in building and maintaining communicative networks with their stakeholder groups. Connectability, therefore, is the necessary "unit of singular communication" (translation by the authors; Luhmann, 1984, p. 204). In contrast to an action-theoretical understanding of communication that discriminates between communication's successful and unsuccessful transmission performance, here "the emergence of communication is emphasized [through the criterion of connectability]. Nothing is being transmitted. Redundancy is generated, meaning that communication creates a memory which can be drawn on by the many in very many different ways" (translation by the authors; Luhmann, 1995, p. 117). Thus, expectations are pre-structured by the communication system's context. In the communicative context of innovation, by the way, the example of art renders comprehensible how, paradoxically, it is exactly unconnectability that (re-)produces connectability.

A list of authenticity's contextualizations could be expanded, for instance by the discursive perspective *credible versus incredible*: Under certain conditions, following established patterns of interpretation might contribute more to establishing trust than a corporation telling the absolute truth (see the controversy between Shell and Greenpeace in 1995). In addition, decreasing credibility advises organizations to talk to their stakeholder groups with multiple voices through multiple channels until the information is accepted and processed. This leads to another possible perspective: stakeholder groups' *inclusion versus exclusion* as perspective of communication management. As long as the process of decision making is assessed as impartial and fair by the stakeholder groups affected, a disadvantageous result will also be accepted and will not necessarily lead to a loss of trust. The degree of the relationship's inclusiveness and the regard for heterogeneous interests — as well as their verbalization — is especially critical beyond the era of one-way mass communication (Freitag, 2009; Weinberger, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Authentic organizational communication is not a matter of "realness" (Malik, 2001, p. 140), but the result of consistent, tactful, representative and credible performance — pathos and ethos as well as logos — which, in addition, is a positive contribution to all participants' frame of action (Public Choice). A corresponding form of communication would also fulfil its purpose as deception. Thus, authentic communication should not be ontologically opposed to deceitful corporate staging.

For organizational communication, authenticity is not a question of genuineness or reality to be experienced directly. The difference between the real and the imaginary has for some time become the topic of communication itself. Whoso-

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