

# Contextualizing and redefining authenticity in organizational communication



**Natascha Zowislo-Grünewald**

BUNDESWEHR UNIVERSITY OF MUNICH, GERMANY

**Jürgen Schulz**

BERLIN UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS, GERMANY

**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,

remains the ultimate goal. The debate is not new; on the contrary, the irreconcilable antagonism seems to be a remake of the sophistic refutations: An organization's and the public interest in PR seem to be opposed long-term, and PR's intermediary function is evaluated as mere image nurturing to be called into question. However, does this contradiction of interests, which brings the topic of authenticity to the core of the argument, have to be classified as such? Are there no other points of view on authenticity to be found, which give more latitude to PR as a mediator between an organization and the public(s) and, at the same time, do not devalue PR as untrue and false, as non-authentic?

In ancient rhetoric, *ethos* (speaker's attitude), *pathos* (audience's emotions) and *logos* (rational reasoning) were equal modes of persuasion (Aristotle, *Rhetorica* I.2, 1356a). Generally speaking, persuasion is to be understood as influencing people by way of communication — mediated by signs. Already during the Enlightenment, *ethos* and *pathos* were discredited as being less noble forms of communication, while proof through argument was assigned the nobler role of convincing. Already in ancient Rome, as Batstone (2009) argues, all kinds of relationships were characterized by the principle of masquerade; the core of being does by no means consist in a naïve, primordial, undisguised nature. Public and private forms of life demand different modes of representation. Authenticity in the classical meaning cannot be reached; rather, terms such as sincerity or truth themselves become concepts which serve image building functions. Obviously, image is the only realistic form of life; there is only an aesthetic, not authentic self.

As the current debate on authenticity clearly shows, organizational communication is suspected of not using rational arguments, but manipulative persuasion techniques. Since rhetoric does not explicitly relate to matters of fact, but to uncertainties and contingencies (Aristotle, *Rhetorica* I.2, 1357a), for the process of persuasion it is critical to find a balance between sufficient and insufficient causes which are to bring the recipients to decide for and commit themselves. Nowadays, when speaking of authenticity, one traditionally mostly differentiates between true being and mere image/deceitful appearance. This is the basis for the everyday differentiation between true essence or genuineness in being, and disguise through image/appearance, respectively. Although (ontological) difficulties are related to this concept, this differentiation does not lose its critical value for human beings and influences organization communication's fields of action. Correspondingly, the ontologically justified differentiation between authentic existence and deceitful appearance needs to be clarified for organizational communication's self-concept. 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.

The concept of core and shell or mantle has had a sustainable influence on the constructs of brand, or corporate, as well as organizational identity in general. One is reminded of the conceptualization of brand personalities (Esch, 2005) or the idea

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*

*Kommunikationsguerilla* (Blisset & Brünzels, 2001), for instance, registers a whole arsenal of techniques for simulation, fake, and camouflage. For guerrilla actions, for example, the commitment to authorship is a core element: Currently, it cannot be derived without a doubt from communicative measures whether these are subversive appropriations by the communication guerrilla or whether these are already monopolized by business communication. In other words, it is a matter of whether one has to deal with a subversive affirmation or an affirmative subversion. Thus, in the meantime, advertising spots with bizarre content circulate on the video portal YouTube (so-called viral spots), for which authorship is doubtful while corporations — despite or specifically because of these spots' success — deny any association or authorship.

Such self-referential forms of advertising<sup>1</sup> are not subjected to the classical semiotic principles any longer because the signs and symbols used hardly impart anything on the products advertised. Not the authenticity is the matter, but more and more the free play with irritating stimuli which entertain the spectator, but do not convey any meanings as concerns the essence of a product in terms of an argumentative truth through rational reasoning (*logos*). Here, the limit would be the dissolution of reality in pictures' referencelessness, as Baudrillard (1978, p. 10) puts it.

### 3.

Even for the naive audience, it should be obvious that there is a difference between meaning and saying. This dichotomy is a problem for communication people, since honesty is always in danger of being misunderstood. Honesty is incommunicable, because by way of communicating it becomes insincere. (Luhmann, 1984)

Where communication's authenticity and authorship cannot be determined by way of relationships of meaning, sincerity seems to be an appropriate means (on the relationship between authenticity and sincerity, see Trilling, 1974). However, it becomes obvious very quickly that there is a difference between meaning and saying. "One does not have to mean what one says" (translation by the authors; Luhmann, 1984, p. 207). This difference between information and message poses a problem to communicators because things being said — even though honestly meant — are always in danger of being understood differently. Thus, authenticity in the sense of sincerity is non-communicable because it becomes insincere by the process of communication (Luhmann, 1984, p. 207). This insight is especially tragic for organizations which ascribe the attribute of social responsibility to themselves — maybe because it is currently en vogue — and exactly by communicating this characteristic automatically can come under suspicion of acting against this very responsibility. Here, an explanation would be that the collective mind holds enough cases where organizations have obviously violated their own lip services.

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<sup>1</sup> On the topic of self-referentiality in advertising, see Bishara, 2008.

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

the interplay between public and non-public acting, Kantorowicz's (1957) two-body theory is a helpful differentiation: Whenever a representative of politics or business is unable to hide the natural body's passions any longer, he or she becomes unsustainable as a representative and literally, with his or her second body, plunges into the first (Galling-Stiehler, 2007, p. 43). Privacy's disclosure in the public sphere — whenever it is necessary due to representative reasons (Huth, 2007) — demands refinement and cannot be navel-gazing.

## 6.

Apart from endangering connectable communication and undermining one's trust in others and *vice versa*, the aspect of morale or ethics always resonating with the topic of authenticity is no less threatening.

Morale — according to Luhmann — is to be understood here as a special kind of communication which carries allusions to esteem or contempt (Luhmann, 1990, pp. 17–18). The authentic is good, while the non-authentic is despicable. Whoever frames authenticity with the help of self-commitments, codices, etc. will think of himself as a good person (Luhmann, 1990, p. 21) and not miss out on any occasion to disesteem dissenters. However, empirically speaking, moral communication is close to controversy and, thus, resides close to violence (Luhmann, 1990, p. 26). Ultimately, the question whether the differentiation between good and evil is good or rather bad itself cannot be answered (Luhmann, 1990, p. 27).

Nevertheless, authenticity's impossibility — from theoretical as well as practical perspectives — is commonly seen as being disadvantageous despite the risks and impracticabilities shown. In spite of the questionableness, or even dangerousness, of an ontological differentiation between being and image and the concept of authenticity associated therewith, the wish for authenticity in the relationship between organizations and their environment remains alive. Therefore, it is worth wondering whether authenticity — though differently defined and analogous to the challenges described above — can still be a sustainable concept.

## A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHENTICITY IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Language is not in itself a sufficient means of determining whether a person is trustworthy. Proving oneself requires tougher tests than cheap talk. (Gambetta, 2009, p. 8)

Despite the reasons detailed above, authenticity still remains a quality criterion for communication managers. The heated and controversial debate in media ethics shows how morally laden the issue of lying in PR is. In any case, it seems to be appropriate to take the social want for authenticity seriously. However, only when re-



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,

Heinrich (1985) — in contrast to an everyday linguistic application — describes a modality of reception for which Caravaggio’s picture of Medusa is prototypical. This means when the spectator feels spellbound and destroyed by the same token.

With his philosophy of symbolic forms, Ernst Cassirer (1924) delivers a theoretical offering for this purpose in order to turn the *haut goût*, namely that human beings can experience reality only in an indirect way, into something positive. Thus with Cassirer, the analytical limitations of human cognition become a positive characteristic, which is even understood as a unique ability to confer meanings to the world by way of symbolic interpretation (Cassirer, 1944, p. 337).

### **Tactful *versus* tactless**

Communication wanting to be experienced as authentic requires trust in the discipline of expression and tactfulness (Luhmann, 1968, p. 88). Tactfulness is a quality (Huth, 2000, pp. 507–542) which has been widely neglected in marketing and management literature, even though tactfulness is critical for nurturing one’s image and reputation. A theoretical fundament is Erving Goffman’s (1967) already mentioned analysis on interaction rituals.

The perspective of tactfulness mainly acquires strategic potential by being situational, which is significant for organizational communication. In contrast to the commonplace “strategic planning,” which builds upon instruments and plans, strategy here means to measure a given situation with regard to different stakeholder groups. Exploiting the circumstances optimally by way of reasoning is essential, deriving advantages from them and, where required, letting oneself be carried away (Jullien, 1999, pp. 32–33). For communication managers oftentimes propelled by some sort of control fetishism, this unfortunately seems to be a venturesome idea. Luhmann (1964) views instrumental rationality and routine actions as boundaries of tactfulness. Insofar, tactfulness is a correlate to the consequences of society’s differentiation into functional subsystems.

### **Connectable *versus* unconnectable**

The aspect of connectability through communication as emphasized by Luhmann (1984) proves to be not authentic whenever it proves to be inappropriate for a communicative situation. This means that further connections are not allowed for and stakeholder groups’ or publics’ expectations are disregarded.

The mass media purport such a principle by being geared to connectability. They usually generate a sequence of expectedly unexpected contributions and, thus, generate and evolve topic careers. The mass media are interested in stories, but not in isolated communication units. At this point, it needs to be mentioned that this principle also determines communication in more simple social systems where human beings are anxious to keep communication connectable in order to build and

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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