Public relations in society.
A new approach to the difficult relationships between PR and its environment

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ABSTRACT: In political and philosophical terms public relations and society appear to be at odds with each other. Public relations as the representative of individual interests is opposed to the general well-being of society. The contradictions between PR and society should form the basis for an analysis of the relationship between PR and society from a system theory perspective (Luhmann, 1996). In the course of the examination one can differentiate between three levels of PR and society: (1) *PR as part of society:* in this regard the question will be what PR does for society. (2) *Society in the PR environment:* at this level the question will be how organisations regard society and how PR constructs societal models. (3) *The entirety of PR sees itself as being apart from society:* in a dynamic perspective the question here will be how the reflexive expectations change the relationship between PR and its environment.

KEYWORDS: system theory, legitimacy, reference group

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INTRODUCTION

In political and philosophical terms public relations and society appear to be at odds with each other. Public relations as the representative of individual interests is opposed to the general well-being of society. The term "public relations in society" is therefore in itself already suspicious in that it seems to want to do PR for PR. Considered from this angle it would then be more appropriate to say "public relations and society" in order to clarify the contradiction between the representatives of individual interests and those of society as a whole. The relationship between public relations and *society* appears, therefore, to be a difficult one. This initial suspicion is strengthened by further observations in completely different contexts.

Firstly, opinion polls prove an acceptance problem of PR in the population and with journalists. Whilst for example in Germany 17% of the population have a high level or very high level of trust in PR specialists, for journalists this figure is only 3%, such that the results of surveys carried out by Bentele et al. (Bentele, Großkurth

& Seidenglanz, 2005, p. 113) are in part not representative. This also appears to be the case for PR specialists just like advertisers 30 years ago whose image problem Jacques Séguéla (1979) summarised with the request "Ne dites pas à ma mère que je suis dans la publicité… Elle me croit pianiste dans un bordel."

Secondly, from the individual perspective of an organisation with a PR function the rejection level can be even higher. Just as heterogeneous society is and its expectations of organisations in normal situations are, a (world) society can be just as heterogeneous in its rejection of an organisation in crisis.

Thirdly, in various international PR theory approaches the difficult relationship between PR and society is demonstrated. Whilst PR research in Germany was characterised for a long time by the approach of Ronneberger & Rühl (1992) in which PR assumes the function for society as a whole, Anglo-American mainstream PR theory places the PR function at organisational level (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

These contradictions between PR and society should form the basis for an analysis of the relationship between PR and society from a system theory perspective (Luhmann, 1996). Such a perspective has been applied in German communication sciences for just under 40 years for a wide range of different issues (Scholl, 2002). German PR research has widely adopted this — examples are Ronneberger & Rühl (1992), Knorr (1984) and Hoffjann (2007). And following Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann is the second German sociologist to be considered in international PR research (Holmström, 1996; 2009). The system theoretical toolkit promises to be of great value for the question as the reflexive structures and operational closeness of PR can be examined in detail.

From such a system theoretical perspective it appears sensible to talk about "public relations in society" because PR not only finds society around it but also includes it with each communicative message. PR "therefore encounters society in two ways: in itself and in its environment" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 383). In order to be able to observe PR problems, it is also necessary to take a look "inside" PR.

In the course of the examination one can differentiate between three levels of PR and society:

1. *PR as part of society:* in this regard the question will be what PR does for society. Is the problem, the solution of which PR is specialised in, to be found at a societal or at an organisational level? What consequences does PR have for society? For this, with a systemic theoretical basis, an organisational and theoretical theory approach is developed and this is presented internationally for the first time.

2. *Society in the PR environment:* an organisation such as a company, an association or a political party sees itself as being confronted with a never-ending number of challenges. At this level the question will be how organisations regard society and how PR constructs societal models. In this regard a theory approach of PR observation is introduced.

3. *The entirety of PR sees itself as being apart from society:* despite all of the PR differences, the similarities have the upper hand. The consequence is that in so-

ciety generalised expectations of PR are formed — for example mistrust of PR statements. In a dynamic perspective the question here will be how these reflexive expectations change the relationship between PR and its environment. How does PR deal with generalised scepticism and what counter strategies has it developed in this regard?

SOCIETAL DIVERSITY AS A PR PROBLEM

Public relations is, in literature, usually focused on the societal environment of a company — this is what makes PR different from market communication for example. The problems which organisations such as companies, associations and political parties encounter in society stem from the autonomous and, therefore, opinionated manner of operating. An automotive producer is an organisation in the economic system and wants to produce cars as cheaply as possible in order, subsequently, to gain as many buyers as possible. It initially seems necessary for commercial success that nature is burdened or that employees have to be dismissed — and this is functional. Environmental protection, the interests of employees and human rights are of no interest for the automotive producer provided there are no dysfunctional and, therefore, negative consequences for him or her. Faulstich refers to the "inevitable short winded auto-reference of a commercial company which is almost exclusively focused on its turnover and profits, but also the threat posed by competitors, but not society as a whole" (Faulstich, 1992, p. 24f.).

In a modern, functionally different society, organisations are on the one hand autonomous but not self-sufficient. The car manufacturer is dependent on both its suppliers and its customers. Beyond the economic system there are dependencies upon politics or the education system which is responsible for the training of potential employees. There are increasingly more systems for all organisations to limit the ability to act in very different ways (Luhmann, 1997, p. 763). The more the environmental systems/reference groups (for details see below — section *Public relations society model*) criticise the dysfunctional consequences of the system and at the same time remove those which are functional, the more this can lead to a situation for an organisation which threatens its very existence.

Clearly, organisations in modern society are almost always under permanent pressure to legitimise themselves. This represents a key feature of PR: *legitimacy* is understood as a successful attempt "to justify one's own objectives and intentions as lying in the common interest or as superior common goals" (Fuchs-Heinritz, 1994). The interests of a company or a political party are regarded as legitimate in a reference group if the latter accepts the decisions even if they are not convinced that the decisions are correct. Organisations which in the context of social interdependence have recognised legitimacy as a problem will, based on this, attempt to consider the social consensus of values and norms in their operations in order to gain legitimacy in terms of society and so as not to lose the necessary freedom

to act. The function of public relations is therefore legitimising the organisational function to the reference groups in society considered relevant.

Needs and criticism are always formulated and treated as topics outside the organisation. They endanger legitimacy and therefore represent a potential limit to future ability to act — an organisation will therefore always regard such environmental needs as limitations. In general, one could state: an organisation only has problems with parts of society if parts of society have problems with the organisation. All problems which have led to the emergence of PR are, therefore, problems which parts of society have with the organisation. Social diversity is therefore the initial PR problem.

SOCIETY'S ABILITY TO DISPENSE WITH PUBLIC RELATIONS

Although diversity in society is the initial PR problem, this problem only exists within organisations themselves. It is not social conflicts or conflicting interests themselves which represent a problem for organisations but only their possible effects on future freedom to act. Because organisations have recognised the risks stemming from the contradictions of their own actions and social needs, PR systems *in* organisations have differentiated themselves. PR systems exist in this way only as subsystems in an organisation. The PR function is therefore, in empirical terms, only to be observed as a secondary function. If we assume that organisations are part of a functional system (Drepper, 2003, p. 201) and communicate primarily with this code, then PR systems communicate secondarily regarding the legitimacy of the organisational function in order to primarily make a contribution to the organisational success.[1] The autonomy of public relations systems is also to be seen in that the common denominators of communication within this system are more significant than those between its communications and those of other subsystems in the organisational system, such as profits communication or communication with members.

The legitimacy and future freedom to act are initially just internal organisational problems. Environmental protection organisations are not interested in the consequences that their demands for stricter environmental limitations have on the future ability of companies to act. Therefore, PR is modelled as an organisational subsystem and not as a societal function system such as the economy or politics. The consequence of this is that there is no PR communication beyond organisations

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[1] The discussion regarding whether organisational systems are part of one, several or no functional systems (Drepper, 2003, p. 200ff.) will not be dealt with any further here as for PR modelling as selected here it is irrelevant. It seems to be less important whether PR communicates through the legitimacy of a private university focusing on the economic, commercial or other consequences. Ultimately, it should be common sense that PR does not communicate in the primary medium of legitimacy as PR would have been an end in itself — and would have risen to a societal function system "through the back door."

as a primary function. This is because PR and legitimacy are not ends in themselves — they only make *sense* in connection with the success of the organisation.

Because PR solves an organisational problem and not a societal problem, society could dispense with PR. Even without PR there would still be conflicts between companies and citizens initiatives, between governments and international human rights organisations or between two associations. These latent, manifest conflicts would on the one hand take a different course but would not change anything regarding the existence of social contradictions — either with or without PR.

Therefore, PR does not contribute to the strengthening of the general well-being as Franz Ronneberger and Manfred Rühl (1992, p. 89) assume. The general well-being — however it should be defined — would only be strengthened if *all* societal interests were to be informed in *equal* measure. Ronneberger and Rühl here clearly alienate the economic model of the ideal market in which all forces concerned operate on a level playing field in the public eye. International NGOs, such as *Greenpeace* or *Amnesty International*, would, based on this, have the same opportunities to articulate their interests as the local citizens' interest group; the very journalistic selection criterion relating to relevance leads one to suspect that there is hardly any chance of equal opportunities in this regard. Just as the model of the ideal market cannot be realised this also applies to information regarding the interests of the organisation in public. It can be presumed that there would even be greater opportunities without PR and that powerful high status organisations would tend to be able to consolidate their positions with professional PR.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR SOCIETY

Although society would be able to dispense with the existence of PR, its consequences do not remain without significance for society. PR systems cause conflicts between the organisation and parts of society just as they solve them. They are able, at least to a certain extent, to integrate and disintegrate society, the societal consequences of PR are therefore ambivalent.

PR has in essence two strategy options at its disposal in conflict with social groups in order to legitimise the organisation (see Fig. 1).

When assuming cognitive expectations, that is to say reference groups which are willing to learn, PR will attempt to "push through" its own interests with public or non-public communication actions. In this regard PR acts or rather: PR escalates the conflict and disintegrates in societal terms. In system theory terms this can also be modelled as an external form of context governance. If one assumes normative expectations with respect to relevant reference groups, however, an organisation will rather change its own organisational policy — that is to say, undertake a business self-governance. PR organisations in such cases tend to "give in" they have an integrating effect when this occurs (Hoffjann, 2009). One can assume that as

a rule external context governance and business self-governance are always to be seen operating together.

Fig. 1. Ideal PR strategy options

In order to explain the window-in function (Post et al., 1982, p. 12), which can be described as self observation, we have to take a closer look at the organisational structures. It has already been said that, in addition to public relations, there are other subsystems in organisations. In a company these are, for example, the organisational management, the research department or the nuclear power division. In order to legitimise the organisation the interests of this internal environment are of significant importance to PR, whilst the interests of the external environment remain secondary. Through the formation of subsystems organisations increase their complexity on the one hand, and on the other hand this again leads to conflicts between the individual subsystems (Luhmann, 1964, p. 79). An example of such conflict would be between PR and product marketing. Here the same paradox which can be observed in functional systems at societal level is repeated at organisational level. On the one hand, its emergence demonstrates that its role is in demand and that, in societal/organisational terms, it is desirable, but on the other hand, other (sub-) systems complain about dysfunctional performance. Just as politics complains about the excessive salaries earned by board members, marketing complains about the, from its point of view, exorbitant attention paid to extremely costly environmental issues to which PR pays attention. With the formation of subsystems organisations such as companies "copy" social conflicts in their companies by using PR for their legitimacy. Although they are ultimately pursuing the same goal — in system theory terms: they operate with the same primary code — here conflicts become societal issues and are pursued with the same vehemence as outside the organisation. In contrast to modern society organisations such as companies have

one advantage: they are not just functional but also different in hierarchical terms. The organisational management will therefore decide on conflicts and thus bring them to an end. PR warnings regarding conflicts which have little chance of success can also be assessed differently by the organisational management.

If PR warns the organisation of societal developments which could endanger legitimacy, then it takes on an advisory role. In organisations PR is therefore a reflection body: it reflects on what effects organisational decisions could have in the environment. Journalism performs the same function for society if society permits self reflection (Marcinkowski, 1993). If one analyses the parallels of PR and journalism, without wanting to deny the differences — namely the different reference points (organisation *versus* society) and the lack of independence/external perspective of PR observations, then one comes to a surprising result (see Table 1). Success is dependent in both cases on the extent to which communication contributes to the changing expectations of the environment — with journalism this is for society and with PR within the organisation. In both cases this success endangers an increase of the discrepancy in complexity, for example through a reduction in the size of editorial departments/PR departments.[2]

Table 1. The self-observation function of journalism and PR

	Journalism	PR
Function	Enables society to self-observe: what are the current societal problems?	Enables the organisation to self-observe and reflects on its relations to society: what are the organisation's potential problems?
Success	Communication taken on board and assessed => follow-up communication in the medium of topicality and changes in environmental expectations.	Communication/recommendations taken on board in the organisation => change in organisational policy. PR provision requested.
Success limiting factors	E.g. increase in complexity discrepancy through downsizing editorial departments.	• Increasing complexity discrepancy leads to the focus on the most relevant reference groups. • Quantification of recommendations => allocating resources to demonstrate success.

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[2] In addition, the pressure to quantify recommendations leads to the fact that further resources are allocated to evaluation. With the window-in function, therefore, an attempt to quantify PR success is counter-productive. Just as society has to ask the question whether situations such as journalism are beneficial, organisations such as companies have to ask the same question. The success of public relations should therefore also be shown through following this advice. Controlling thus only makes sense with respect to external public communication.

SOCIETY FROM A PR PERSPECTIVE

Ultimately, PR feels like the famous Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela submarine captain (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 149f.). Just as a submarine can only be steered through internal instruments, PR can only observe the environment based on its own experience, knowledge and the resources available to it. "Objective recognition" is just as difficult as "objective environment description." In addition to not wanting a second consequence becomes apparent from self-reference: not being able to.

In view of the variety of social environment systems each of which represents a potential danger to legitimacy, the PR system appears, more than other systems, to be reliant on a different collection of information. If a newspaper editorial office, for example, has "overlooked" an issue which has been reported by a competitor, it can make up for this one day later. In PR this can lead to an existential crisis.

The variety of social environment systems also leads, however, to this enormous complexity having to be drastically reduced. Organisations are therefore hopelessly subordinate to issues in the sense of topics with conflict potential and of public interest (Röttger, 2001, p. 16). PR systems which observe the organisational environment always run the risk of overlooking something. Large organisations react to this problem by setting up large departments. But even departments of this nature are unable to overcome the problem of system relativity. Although each observation has a blind spot, in PR the blind spot is exactly what the environment hits: the fact that organisations "set and recklessly pursue their own values in absolute terms […]; the economy is looking for increased efficiency, politics for more power" (Beule & Hondrich, 1990, p. 149; quoted by Kohring & Hug, 1997, p. 27). PR can consequently only observe the internal and external environment through the glasses of the system.

PR tries to reduce this risk not only by (a) directly observing both the environment within and outside of the organisation and (b) observing how the external environment observes the organisation as a whole, but also (c) by observing how the internal organisation observes the external organisation. For public relations this is a critical correlation between internal and external organisational environments which will be described further in the text.

Organisations and their subsystems observe their system environment relations. Claims, demands and desires observed become, upon reflection therefore: the expectations of the environment, explained to the organisation (Luhmann, 1994, p. 83f.). As different subsystems are structurally linked to differing parts of the environment — product marketing to customer needs, the personnel department to the labour market, etc. — such system environment relations observations are very different. These "differences" are extremely important for PR because the social interdependence is here, potential conflicts and the resulting risks to legitimacy become apparent. In order to learn something about these differences PR observes itself in observing the second level system environment relations, separately from the rest of the organisation, and develops an understanding as to which problems other subsystems

have or could have with the organisational environment — it is therefore a second level reflection. Here PR attempts, to a certain extent, to observe the organisational environment through the "eyes" of other departments. In this way PR systems learn something about the interests of these other departments and, at the same time, about their relevant organisational external reference groups. However, this second level observation does not change anything in terms of the fundamental system blindness. Just as a company will always tend to regard commercial interests as absolute, its PR system will tend to regard legitimacy as more important than customer needs.

The system–environment relations are relevant to PR because it has to formulate causal descriptions à la "Where is the cause of a problem?" Such decisions are operational fiction and indispensable in developing the appropriate strategies. In addition, the "link" between internal organisational and external organisational system environment observation on the part of PR initially makes seemingly "absurd" requirements on the organisation possible to recognise and understand. Thus in Issues Management, for example, one mechanism for early recognition is the Inside-Out perspective in which specific organisational interests form the starting point for the analysis (Liebl, 2000, p. 94). Ultimately, PR uses this knowledge of the interests and areas of conflict of other subsystems through its own direct observation of the organisational environment and by attempting to observe the organisation through the "eyes" of external organisation reference groups, such as environmental protection groups. On the one hand, this knowledge increases the level of complexity as PR is aware of additional interdependencies and areas of conflict; on the other hand, complexity is significantly reduced as there are endless conflicts and interdependencies within society.
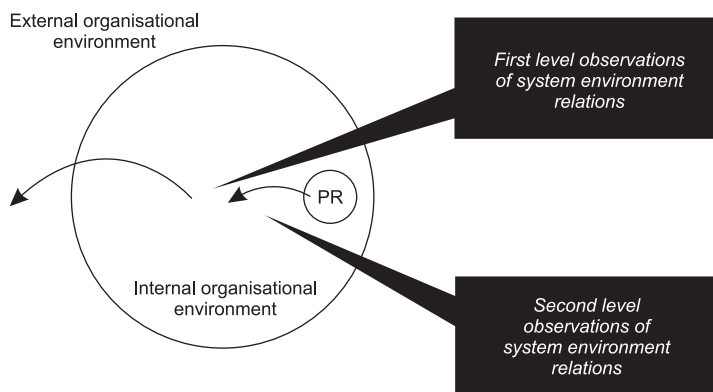

Fig. 2. PR system environment observations

PUBLIC RELATIONS SOCIETY MODEL

Now that the conditions for environmental observations have been explained, the question as to the PR society model arises and also the criteria on which it is based.

Like all organisations PR systems create a simplified environmental model "for decision-making and communication reasons […], upon which they are coordinated" and such "environmental models are not wrong, but functional, but they assume additional balancing organisations with reality" (Luhmann, 1964, p. 222) . The environmental models developed serve as operative fiction. One can criticise their discriminatory power of selection of the groups to be addressed, but there is no alternative. What is highly risky is the selection of environmental systems because this selection is one of the first operations in PR planning and is therefore critical in observation terms.

Before selection takes place, however, the identification, that is to say recognising and naming environmental systems, occurs. Such environmental systems are generally described as reference groups. What characterises reference groups?

- In the *social dimension* the term reference group makes it clear that PR always observes groups in their relationship to the organisation. Even if every organisation has an almost endless number of reference groups, it is the hierarchical aspect which makes sense in relation to the organisation. In addition, the term "group" here is used in a wide sense. To constitute a reference group one or several common features suffice and no form of social integration or sense of belonging on the part of these people is assumed. However, it is frequently assumed that people which belong to such a common category will react in a similar way under certain circumstances (Klima, 1994). A reference group can therefore be organised very differently: it can comprise individual people who have criticised the company without knowing anything about one another, it could equally be the Catholic Church as an institution just as the citizens' initiative or a group in society such as pensioners. The different levels of organisation in reference groups are therefore an additional problem for PR when observing the environment.

- In the *factual dimension* a reference group forms its relationship to the organisation through a specific issue. If, however, such a relationship is formed — for example, a citizens' initiative which wants to prevent a chemical plant being extended — then in the factual dimension additional issues can also play a role. Because a conflict leads to generalisation — the citizens' initiative will later also criticise emissions and possible dismissals. For the monitoring of organisations this means that organisations, to conserve resources, will initially seek out risky issues and therefore come into contact with new, relevant reference groups (Ingenhoff, 2004, p. 53), organisations however will observe the issues very carefully when it comes to the relevant existing reference groups ("opponent observation").

- In the *time dimension* the relevance of reference groups is subject to large changes. An event which occurs can make a previously irrelevant reference group a significant risk to legitimacy. Grunig and Hunt clarified the connection between the time dimension and relevance with their theory of situative parts of society (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 147ff.).

The term "reference group" is preferred to other terms such as target group or stakeholder because it has "the least amount of baggage." Although the terms tar-

get group and stakeholder are frequently used diffusely, they have acquired a kind of common understanding. Stakeholder management comes from business studies and focuses on the integration of interests which are affected by the firm's decisions (Freeman, 2010). The target group principle should, according to Szyszka, be the driest as a specific form of the reference group: target groups are "those reference groups towards which PR actions — or other communication activities — (should) be undertaken. For the period of time of such PR activities these selected reference groups become target groups; when such activities end they revert to their status of 'normal' reference groups" (Szyszka, 2005).

Because every organisation has an almost infinite number of reference groups, PR is forced to select and assign a hierarchy to these reference groups. The relevance assigned to a reference group stems from its potential to impose sanctions which this system recognises in the event of a conflict. The public relations system legitimises the respective organisational function with regard to these systems. Systems which do not have a relevant sanction potential but do have cognitive expectations remain largely out of the picture — however, this may be the result of an erroneous assessment and this reference group may be able to damage the organisation.

The potential to impose sanctions is ultimately measured/assessed in the "system's" currency. A local government is therefore relevant to a company for a direct and an indirect reason. It has the direct potential to impose sanctions because it can inhibit commercial leeway which can in turn lead to reductions in turnover. It has indirect potential to impose sanctions because many other reference groups focus on the position of the regional government.

Accordingly, journalism has only an indirect potential to impose sanctions on PR or the parent systems. Journalism can therefore never be a "target group" for PR activity in terms of guaranteeing future leeway for relevant reference groups which have the capacity to impose sanctions, such as politics — the "target group" is always the decision-makers, whereby journalism only plays a role of mediator. The fact that journalism creates its reality based on its own criteria must not and need not be justified further here.

Journalism, however, is extremely significant for PR because the important reference groups focus on journalists' reporting and because journalism is able to significantly influence legitimacy in the eyes of the relevant reference groups. In addition, journalism is able to synchronise different reference groups with differing interests in their rejection of the organisation at least temporarily and therefore create a "large scale fire." Consequently, public relations could dispense with the existence of journalism but would find it hard to dispense with journalism as it exists.

SOCIETY'S SCEPTICISM REGARDING PUBLIC RELATIONS

The increasing level of scepticism regarding PR on the part of society described at the beginning has less to do with the self-centred, not wanting to, part of PR than

its supposed "secretiveness." PR can change very little about this however and this will be shown further in the text in system theory terms.

If *legitimising vs. non-legitimising* is merely to be observed as a secondary code, then this means that PR in a company will always talk about legitimacy with reference to the commercial consequences, and that PR in a political party will focus on the political consequences. In addition, there can only be (secondary-coded) PR communication *in* the organisation — *outside of* the organisation this finds no connection in the legitimacy medium. The consequence of this is that PR communication in the environment is only recognised as such but not as (secondary-coded) PR communication. Organisations are therefore generally thought to be responsible for PR communication. A reference group can, if need be, make a judgement and assume that it is a PR communication.

Discourse regarding the relationship between PR and journalism is an empirical index for this seemingly abstract thesis. In this regard the realisation that "press releases are only a part of political public relations and perhaps not the most important part" has existed for a long time (Donsbach & Wenzel, 2002, p. 385). The fact that external PR communication can also be observed in press conferences and conversations with journalists is trivial. But what about parliamentary debates or the appearance of board persons at annual general meetings? It seems plausible that the increasing significance of legitimacy and therefore PR is to be found not only in increasing PR budgets and increasing numbers of employees but also in that members of organisations who do not have PR goals communicate secondarily about legitimacy. The board chairman's statement regarding the new company CSR project is just as much a PR communication as the brochure and a press release issued on the same subject.

Secondary-coded communication cannot in general be recognised as such in the environment of the organisation. In addition, for PR the fact is known that "hiding" one's own interests is one of the most important PR strategies. Based on this there is a growing mistrust on the part of journalists (Weischenberg, Malik & Scholl, 2006, p. 127), who in the meantime suspect any form of organisational communication as a general "PR suspicion."

Mistrust of PR stems from the inability to recognise PR communication and the ensuing "calculated misunderstandings." These systemic reasons must have made a significantly greater contribution to the legitimacy problems of the legitimacy producers than the much discussed PR mishaps.

CONCLUSIONS

System theory analysis has shown why society could dispense with PR. The consequences of societal diversity for organisations and the resulting problem of necessary legitimacy can only be observed in organisations. PR however is not without consequences for society because it both strengthens and weakens the one-sided

manner of operating by considering societal interests and changing the policy of an organisation.

In the further course of the analysis the initial suspicion of difficult relations between PR and society has been confirmed and explained in theoretical terms. The development of societal interests and not discussing one's own interests coupled with the non-recognisability of PR communication in the organisational environment lead to organisations' communication increasingly often being regarded as "generally PR suspicious" and also a PR system mistrust.

These legitimacy problems of legitimacy producers are primarily not to be attributed to PR disasters nor to a lack of a PR code. The legitimacy problems are intrinsic to the system. And this is why there is no way out of the legitimacy problems. PR is in a credibility trap: the more the "truthfulness" of the statements and the "selflessness" of decisions is stressed, the greater the mistrust of PR will be.

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