Strategic Communication and the Public Sphere From a European Perspective

Günter Bentele and Howard Nothhaft

Scholars researching strategic communication, public relations, communication management or other related fields, at least in the Western world, have a tendency to treat the public sphere as a given. Although sociologists, philosophers and political theorists quarrel about the details, common sense reassures us that by and large the public is aware of what Öffentlichkeit, as is called in German, is about. But as soon as one engages in discussion it becomes clear that common sense is, in fact, not commonly understood. The concept is disputed along with others such as political, society or democracy. Even people from the same country do not always agree on what is public and what is private. And the question of what belongs in the public sphere, what normatively should be the object of public debate while in reality something else is being debated publicly, while others think it should not be debated, seems to be particularly complex. The following chapter traces the influential conceptualization of the public sphere in the works of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt respectively and builds further theory on this continental or ‘European’ tradition of thinking about the public sphere.

Historical Aspects

It would be convenient and safe to begin a treatise on the public sphere in the eighteenth century, when the phrase began to mean more or less the same as it does today (cf. Hölscher, 1978). Many authors do this – however, we shall go further back in history because we believe that the existence of the public sphere is not only a product of Enlightenment philosophy or liberal democratic reasoning. The public sphere as we know it today is also the contemporary phenotypical manifestation of anthropological constants, that is, characteristics of the human animal, the zoon politikon, and the way it lives together with other members of its species. What we refer to as the public sphere in our hypercomplex modern societies is certainly something that only emerges with higher forms of civilization that have risen beyond mere survival. But the public sphere of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is the functional equivalent of other institutions in simpler, that is, less complex, modes of living. Over centuries, certain characteristics of the human beings’ way of living together have been transposed in accordance with the realities of their respective societies, civilizations or cultures. But if one were to postulate that there was no public sphere, or a negligible public sphere, in a particular period of time, for example the Middle Ages, one would need to explain why this was, and what stood in its place.
From ‘Primitive’ Societies to Classical Antiquity

The idea of a public life, as opposed to private affairs on the one side and affairs of office on the other, can be dated back to classical European antiquity, that is, Greek (~750—50 BC) and Roman times (~250 BC–500 AD). Whether the concept goes back even further, and whether there was a proto-public life in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, and Sumerian civilizations, is difficult to say with certainty. For our further discussion it is important to bear in mind, however, that these ancient cultures pursued grand projects such as the building of the great pyramids or coping with the great rivers, respectively the Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris. This suggests some concern for the well-being of the public, admittedly, but first and foremost such projects served to unite the people under their ruler’s yoke.

The Public, the Private and the Secret: the Duality of the Public Sphere

German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) famously argued that participation in the common, shared or public sphere of the polis—by listening and engaging in discussion at the public place, the agora—was a privilege of the free, that is, those who had risen above caring for daily subsistence and the necessities of the private household, the oikos (cf. Arendt, 2010, pp. 38–47; for English see Arendt, 1958). Habermas (1990, pp. 57–58; 1962), one of the world’s eminent thinkers about Öffentlichkeit (Calhoun, 1992), adds that it was in the public sphere of the polis that equals met as equals (homoioi) to determine who was the most noble (aristoi). It was in the public sphere that the truth came to light while the cruel necessities of everyday life were shamefully hidden away in the household. That also meant, conversely, that a harsh and revealing light was shed on individuals vying for acclamation in the public sphere. The affairs of private men who were not interested in politics—so-called idiotai, the roots of the modern word ‘idiot’—, and who therefore did not lead a full life according to the classical ideal, were left in the dark. We have here, an important motif and a dominant metaphor: a duality characterizing the public sphere from its very beginnings to the globalized world of the twenty-first century. Once the necessities of life are taken care of, the zoon politikon seems to develop the urge to distinguish itself among equals. The public sphere, be it the blogosphere, the coffee house, the village marketplace or the fire around which the warriors squat, constitutes a place where one can get up and step out into the light. And the metaphor of light and darkness (Imhof, 2003, p. 194) already conveys the duality: The place is bathed in harsh light because it is a place of acclamation as well as a mechanism of control. That is why the concept of publicness has two opposites: private on the one hand, secret on the other. The individual is left in darkness as long as she or he lives a private life only, but if she or he wants power and influence, that is, public office, she or he has to be able to cope with the light. What she or he does is no longer private because if someone is in charge of the fate of the tribe or the kingdom or the empire her or his every aspect (health, opinions) is important—therefore they cannot be allowed to be secret.

The Public Sphere is the Sphere that Matters

Habermas (1990, p. 57), among others, pointed out the seemingly inherent normative power in everything classical. Educated Europeans have been brought up in the belief that the world of classical antiquity constituted a high point of civilization: in the case of ancient Greece, a real democracy. It is important to remember, however, that quasi-democratic structures are quite common among so-called primitive or barbaric societies. The ting, for example, was both governing assembly and court of law in Germanic tribal societies, and the term is traceable in the denotations of parliaments of Nordic countries, for example, in Denmark (Folketing), Norway (Storting) or Iceland (Althing). It is also the root of the English word thing and German word Ding. Although the political circumstances
surrounding the ting were entirely different, the similarities should not be explained away. As was the case in classical antiquity, only the free gathered in the ting; the ting took place at a special location, the tingstead; the ting constituted a peaceful deliberation of equals among equals as the Thingfriede guaranteed that reason rather than armed force prevailed.

A modern observer would quickly point out that the democratic ideal was flawed because it did not include the unfree, such as peasants and slaves, children and women. But that is a revealing observation in itself. It reveals the modern assumption that the individual human being is the basic building block of society. It is by no means a necessary assumption because in contrast to animals living alone, a single individual normally has a tough time to fend for itself in nature. Slaves, children and women, an ancient Greek would have argued, do not count in their own right because their fate is bound up with the fate of the household, which constituted the smallest indivisible element.

What we have to realize, thus, is that the public sphere as a place for acclamation and a mechanism of control (of equals by equals) was democratic in its very nature. It is, however, not democratic in the modern sense of the word. The public sphere was not the place for everyone to gather, but the sphere for the ones that matter in their respective culture, civilization or society. The idea that everyone matters is very new. In the Athenian polis the free gathered in the agora because the man unburdened by work, the man liberated to lead the good and real life, represented what mattered in the polis. The ting was the heart of a culture described as military democracy and consequently only the warriors assembled; the man holding a spear mattered.

### Being and Representing

Members of twenty-first century societies have a tendency to implicitly assume that power and influence derive from positions one holds in organizations, more often than not temporary positions which denote representational power. It is important to realize, however, that the head of the household participating in debates in the agora did not represent his household, but himself—a point we return to later. In the early and primitive democracies, we have governance by assemblies where everyone counts for himself and makes himself count by being physically present. Imhof (2003) has pointed out that the origin of the public sphere, “die Urform der Öffentlichkeit” (p. 204), is the assembly. The oldest form of legitimation thus arises from saying something in the assembly and giving everyone the possibility to speak up against it. What is often overlooked, however, is that assemblies can be very diverse in character. Figure 4.1 illustrates the differences. On the far left side, Figure 4.1a represents a radical democratic type of assembly where everyone present matters and everyone who matters is equal. Note that the public sphere, the arena, is empty. Its boundaries are made up by the individuals who matter but no one actually takes the space in the center. What we

![Figure 4.1](Basic Types of Assembly as Public Spheres)
have here comes closest, we believe, to Habermas’s ideal of discourse as the ideal speech situation (Habermas 1997a, 1997b). The public sphere is not dominated by people, but by arguments thrown in the ring. Figure 4.1b looks similar but has larger-than-life individuals, not arguments, acting in the public sphere. If one speaks up against a proposition, one speaks up against the man. It is important to realize, however, that the individuals are in the arena because they dare to be there, not because they are entitled to be there.

Any individual on the boundary may step into the ring at any time. The difference becomes clear when we look at Figure 4.1c. This figure represents actual actors in the arena and potential actors drawing the boundaries of the arena, but we also have an audience. The audience belongs to the class that matters, otherwise it would not be there. But it does not belong to the class that actually or potentially acts in the arena. No matter what the reason is, there is only a limited pool of individuals who can afford to, are allowed to, or are educated enough to act in the arena. And there is no guarantee that the audience in the outer circle has the same criteria for what should be in the public sphere, for what is interesting, or for what concerns all, as the inner circle of potential or actual actors. In fact, it seems to be one of the recurring problems of every theory of Öffentlichkeit that congruence of the inner and outer circle, of audience, potential and actual actors, is very rare. The congruence, be it assumed or factual, is what is later referred to as public opinion (cf. Habermas, 1990, pp. 343–359; Noelle-Neumann, 2002), which is not equivalent to statistical representation of each individual member of the audience.

**Technical Limits of Co-Presence**

It is clear that having a class of actors distinguished from the audience creates a tendency for the actors to limit the access to the actor class by rigidly enforcing the entry criteria they themselves fulfil. It seems safe to assume, however, that apart from any ideological manipulation on behalf of one group, the underlying reason for moving from Figure 4.1a to Figure 4.1c and beyond, namely to representation, is the growing complexity of communities and the technical limit to actual physical co-presence of humans. That is particularly true when the humans are supposed to engage in meaningful debate: 50,000 people in a football-stadium are a mass, not an assembly. It is by no means a coincidence that the size of governing assemblies which allow every member to participate in a debate, such as our modern parliaments, is around 500 in maximum size. Data from the Interparliamentary Union shows, for example, that of 260 parliamentary bodies registered worldwide only 15 consist of more than 500 members; amongst them is the Ninth European Parliament, which has 736 members, and which is famous for regular absences (cf. the data collated by the Interparliamentary Union on www.ipu.org). Bodies divided into speakers and voters, such as the Athenian Courts which assembled up to 6,000 people but did not allow questions, only a yes or no vote, could be much larger.

**Athenian Democracy versus Roman Republic: Political versus Societal**

The term public is not Greek, of course, but Latin. As is commonly known, republic, as a political concept, derives from the term *res publica* which, in turn, denotes a public affair, something concerning everybody. A republic, as opposed to a monarchy, is defined by the fact that the people (*populi*) are the sovereign. As Cicero (106–43 BC), maybe the most eminent theorist of the Roman Republic, makes clear, *the people* does not simply mean a mass assembly, but a congregation of people who agree on a common law for a common purpose (*utilitatis communione sociatus*). Arendt (2010, p. 38) points out, however, that the word social, from which the term society derives, does not exist in the Greek language. What emerges with the Roman Republic, although it might have been in existence before, is something that was understood differently during the Athenian democracy.
The very elitist political–private divide was dissolved, it seems, by introducing a third element, namely society. Arendt (2010, p. 47) argues that the concept of society evolved as the necessities of daily life, the household affairs hitherto left in the dark as private, entered into the light of the public–political sphere. Figure 4.2 illustrates the difference. The duality of politics versus private had suddenly become a trinity.

1. The arena of the political was in itself a trinity: (a) the center of the state, represented by holding offices of state and political power on the one hand, (b) the public life (acclaiming and controlling office-holders) with political influence on the other (cf. Habermas, 2006, p. 417, for the differentiation), and (c) the audience, again acclaiming and controlling office-holders and candidates.
2. There was private life, in the circle of the family under the paterfamilias.
3. Finally, there was an intermediary societal sphere, which was neither purely political nor purely private, where one has to live and be seen as living as society demands: a sphere which was private, but not secret. It was here, suddenly, that the private affairs of political office-holders became important. It was here, also, that office-holders needed to discuss the common good, meaning the material, private welfare of everybody or a large number of people. And it was here as well, Arendt (2010, p. 53) argues, that the notion of the public household, or alternatively a national economy emerges.

The concept of the state constituting a kind of super-household that takes care of the individual households and the individuals is so self-evident to people in the twenty-first century that it is difficult to imagine its absence. But Arendt (2010, p. 38; p. 42) argues also that a public household was alien to the Hellenic mind: To the much simpler and less interrelated life in the polis, the necessities of life, at least in political theory, were considered private and separate, as shown in Figure 4.2. The ancient polis was not a public household and not even a society in today’s sense, as the Roman Republic began to be. The change was reflected in the topics deliberated in the public sphere and the arguments that could be successfully employed to gain access and garner public support: what we would call the public calculus. One needs to be aware that in the Athenian democracy, every private interest, be it commercial, artistic or otherwise, was banned from political deliberation: a fact that led Max Weber to dub the Athenian democracy a “pensionopolis” populated by “consumerist proletariat” (Weber, 1924, p. 147; see also Arendt, 2010, p. 46). If a citizen possessed land outside

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**Figure 4.2** The “Invention” of Society
the polis, he was not allowed to vote on whether or not the countryside outside the walls should be scorched in a burned earth policy. In the Roman Republic the separation was no longer absolute. Societal and private interests, the interests of the Patrician houses in particular, began to infringe on the political. Individual actors—the most prominent possibly being Julius Caesar, a PR case par excellence—portrayed their personal interests in the public sphere as political, societal, or socio-political, namely, as Rome’s interest, as res publica. Public office, for example, governorship of a foreign province, was shamelessly regarded as an opportunity to make a private fortune. But at the same time to rise to public office one had to spend a fortune on public projects such as panem et circenses, feeding and entertaining the masses, that is, doing good in a way that strongly foreshadowed the mores of modern corporate social responsibility. Conversely, society began to pervade private life to a degree that Romans found it necessary to retire to the country in order to “escape.”

From Feudalism to the Enlightenment: From Enforcing Society to Representing It

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the political order proposed by Cicero was not resurrected. The political order emerging in medieval Europe after the period referred to as the Dark Ages was by and large feudal in character. Scholars (e.g., Habermas, 1990, p. 60) generally agree that, although the categories privatus and publicus still existed due to the traditions of Roman Law, there was no such thing as a public sphere separate from offices of the state on the one hand and private life on the other hand. In the feudal state, private power, towards the familia or towards feudal vassals, was not exercised in contrast to the political power of office-holders but as a form of it. Both forms of power derived from one source, the rule of the land; both forms of power upheld, to put it simply, the God-given order of things. Arendt (2010, pp. 38–45) draws attention to two aspects here: the nature of political power on the one hand and the markedly spiritual character of the Middle Ages on the other.

What is Political Power?

The first point is that the feudal view of the paterfamilias, the head of the family, was to conceive of him as a little political ruler: a family monarch. Nothing, Arendt (2010, p. 38) argues, could be more contrary to the ancient conception of politics as the affairs of the polis. The head of the oikos was not a political but a private ruler—and as such his power was unbounded and unchallengeable. Unbounded and unchallengeable political power, in contrast, was alien to the ancient Athenian democracy. Not only, as Arendt argues, because the power of the tyrant was bounded by the united citizens but because unchecked political power constituted a contradiction in itself. Although the Greek polis seems far away, one needs to bear the distinction in mind. After all, the twenty-first century is a century of clashes between private and corporate interests, where the CEO considers himself the paterfamilias of his company (the word company derives itself from cum panis, that is sharing bread, a necessity of life, with each other).

The Worldly and the Spiritual

The second point of importance about feudal Europe is the role of the Christian church (Arendt, 2010, p. 44; pp. 65–70). After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the church provided the one and only public body to identify with. After the good life of the polis as a philosophical and the Roman Empire as a military project, the Catholic Church was the grand project of Western Europe. The duality of private versus public transformed itself, thus, to the duality of the worldly and the spiritual. Interestingly enough the metaphorical contrast of darkness and light remained and was embodied in architecture and art. Private life was a place of darkness and squalor, whereas the spiritual was one of
light and glory. St. Augustine, one of the eminent “doctors of the church” (Russell, 2006, p. 314) makes it clear in his text *City of God* by contrasting two cities. In one area the human being is base, weak and selfish, in the other he is lifted to a realm of the sublime, albeit a *post-mortem* one.

The Christian church transposed the human desire to distinguish itself in a grand and noble project, to be part of a grand project that would outlive itself, towards the contra-factual, towards the afterlife. The grand project of feudal Europe was in essence spiritual—and the only secular project that united Europe, the crusades, proves the point. It also becomes clear why the *states*, if the term is appropriate, expanded the realm of private rule until everyone was incorporated into the body politic, until no-one was a free man (free women being inconceivable at that time anyway) except the monarch who, in turn, was responsible to God. The development took centuries, of course, and it also took centuries until it was adequately reflected in theory.

Perhaps the most stringent and disillusioned theoretical conception is to be found in Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651). The famous title page displays the absolute monarch as consisting of hundreds of citizens bound together by social contract. The very same idea was summed up succinctly, although with a different theoretical foundation, by perhaps the most absolute European monarch, the French King Louis XIV (1638–1715), who insisted he had been appointed by God: *L’état, c’est moi*, he is alleged to have said.

**Herrschaftskommunikation and repräsentative Öffentlichkeit**

Subsequently, as Habermas also argues, it became increasingly necessary to establish a new basis of legitimacy. To be precise, it became necessary to communicate the old basis in a new way to plug the gap the argument of the God-given order of things used to fill. The basis of the old and new legitimation was *superiority*, in person, in heritage, in blood. In the old way, superiority was demonstrated when and if challenged: a simple peasant was no match for a highly trained professional warrior clad in chain mail or iron and living his life in accordance with a warrior code of courage and honor. In the new way it was represented *before* it was challenged and in order to avoid the challenge. The representation of the superiority of the ruling class *for* the public, not *in* the public, is what Habermas calls “repräsentative Öffentlichkeit” (representative public sphere) (cf. Habermas, 1990, pp. 58–67). A kind of representative public sphere already existed in medieval Europe. One just has to imagine the effects of a Catholic mass, held in mysterious incomprehensible Latin, in a cathedral incomparable to any other edifice, to understand that the church had practiced representation of power [*Herrschaftskommunikation*] par excellence.

But with the undermined credibility of the church, and a higher emphasis on the individual as opposed to God, worldly representation became more and more important. Worldly power representation in the *Renaissance* was different in character, with the educated *courtier* as the ideal. But the basic idea was the same: The ruling class demonstrated its superiority by modelling itself, and by being the ideal of the time; by distinguishing itself, in clothing, in habit, in language, and thus by illuminating itself in front of the amazed masses. The message communicated by the pomp and splendor of Renaissance rulers such as England’s Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) is clear: We are so far apart, peasant, burgher, craftsman, that it is inconceivable that you have the same rights and freedoms as we have.

As the states became more centralized, especially in Britain and France, so did representation (cf. Habermas 1990, 58 – 67). The aristocracy was now assembled at the royal court to add to the glamour and glory of the monarch. The Baroque era transferred the court festivities away from the people to pompous residences but that only added to the overawing effect. Refinements of court etiquette led to even more distinguished clothing and habit, but did not alter the general character of a representative public sphere enacted to dazzle the people: to exclude, not to include. There was no public control of what was going on behind the doors of the Vatican in Rome, the *palazzi* of the Medici in Italy or behind the doors of Versailles in Paris, and the respective power-holders would not have accepted the
concept. The papacy in the Middle Ages did not meddle in European affairs on behalf of a mandate by the people, but to represent God’s power on earth. Until the end of the ancien régimes the possession of a certain territory and the well-being of the people populating it were considered a private affair of the ruling family: politics was not a matter of society, but was secret and arcane.

The Duality of the Public Sphere Revisited—or the Pursuit of Private Affairs

While the citizens of the cities gained power during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, one might ask why the following centuries brought absolutism. Arendt (2010, pp. 81–89) argues that the rising merchant and commercial classes did not necessarily press for expansion of the public sphere but for expansion of the private sphere. The merchant and commercial class did not want to be included in the affairs of the state as much as it wanted to be excluded from interference: The citizens wanted a stable framework in order to concentrate on making money. Here, again, we have the basic duality of the public sphere as a place for acclamation on the one hand, and a mechanism of control on the other—but nested in the framework of a much more complex, multilayered and functionally differentiated society (as analyzed by Marx, Durkheim, Tönnies and Weber, for example and as cited in Imhof, 2003, pp. 196–197). Suddenly, society not only offered one playing field to distinguish oneself amongst equals, but many playing fields. One could rise in the world and distinguish oneself, at least in the eyes of one’s equals, as an artist, scholar, merchant, soldier, or even bureaucrat. The price, of course, was that one had to concentrate on one’s private affairs, or one’s private public sphere, so to speak. Note that nowadays, in the twenty-first century, a career in a global corporation is as complex, that is, as political, as a career in public office—a fact which links with the observation of Roman author Pliny the Younger (Arendt, 2010, p. 74) that to the slave the household of the paterfamilias is the same as the Republic for the citizen.

From the Enlightenment to Modernity: From Action to Behavior

If one describes the era from the Middle Ages onwards as the era of superiority of the person, the period thereafter can be described as the era of superiority of reason. The core idea of Enlightenment, as it was put forward most stringently and pointedly by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), is that humankind may not rely on tradition or scripture or the guidance of others but on the faculty of its own reasoning. Kant, of course, needs to be appreciated against the backdrop of the general intellectual climate and amidst other eminent political philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), John Locke (1632–1704), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859). What the ideals of the Enlightenment meant for the development of the concept of the public sphere in liberal democracies, and later in bourgeois society and social welfare mass democracy, is portrayed and analyzed by Habermas’s habilitation thesis covering Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit [Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere], hereafter Structural Transformation (Habermas 1962, 1989). It is not necessary to repeat the main arguments en bloc: Habermas’s reasoning is well-known, it is highly complex and detailed, and we refer to it repeatedly in the course of the article, particularly when it comes to Habermas’s critique of modern mass democracies. What is important, however, is to emphasize some subtle but important shifts that characterized the Age of Reason.

The Two Eyes of the Public: Society, the Intimate Sphere and its Counterpart Celebrity

We have traced the rise of society as a concept interrelated with but ultimately different from the political in its original sense in Habermas’s and especially Arendt’s works. The political, we observed,
was concerned with being a member of a state, with the higher functions of the human—whereas the lower functions of existence as a member of the species were hidden away in the private. Society, in contrast, meant that the hitherto private affairs of material welfare—of everything we refer to as social today—became a matter of public interest and public deliberation. The world of the political in the polis was maybe not as harsh as the world of the barbaric warrior, but competitive nevertheless. It was, as we would say in modern parlance, a world for adults. But at least it was well-defined and the individual (i.e., individual male) was permitted to take refuge in his private sphere.

The emerging modern society held together by the state as some kind of super household, in contrast, pervaded each and every aspect of life, from birth to death. The modern welfare society takes care of the individual, but it also keeps it in a state of dependent semi-childhood an ancient Greek presumably would have considered humiliating. One is expected to behave in society which is, as Arendt (2010) takes great care to prove, not at all the same as acting. French philosopher Rousseau, by rebelling against society’s all-pervasiveness, defined the intimate sphere as a kind of sanctum in which original humanity, original in the double sense of the word, was unspoiled by society (cf. Arendt, 2010, pp. 49–50; Habermas, 1990, pp. 238–247). Here, the individual was moved by deep emotions instead of enacting superficial sentiment. Here, the individual was a natural human being (exactly what the Greeks despised), not a conforming member of society.

In our modern understanding the word intimate seems to be defined in a similar, but nevertheless different, way. Although the intimate sphere is undoubtedly pervaded by society, it is a sphere that is granted as a refuge and protected from the public eye. For example, when British yellow press newspaper *News of the World*, in 2008, covered the story of Formula One functionary Max Mosley being whipped and tortured by prostitutes dressed in Nazi-like attire, the public’s interest was immense, its disgust genuine. But the courts ruled, under so-called “privacy law,” that the newspaper had no right to publish the story: Formula One is a private business and Max Mosley’s sexual preferences are intimate affairs as long as they do not have a bearing on his ability to represent it. Media observers consequently fear a Mosley effect, that is, media coverage of the rich and powerful being silenced.

It is by no means a coincidence, Arendt argues (2010, pp. 48–49), that Rousseau described the intimate sphere in contrast to society, not in contrast to politics. It is the public eye constituted from private people crammed together in society that is interested in Mr. Mosley’s sexual aberrations, not the political public eye whose ultimate institutions are court, jail, and police (in other countries that would have been different, of course). What fascinates private people is the fact that an individual dares to misbehave. What irritates and outrages is the fact that the individual, being rich and powerful, misbehaves in secret, whereas the ordinary citizen deems him or herself under constant surveillance by peers, neighbors, and colleagues. Misbehavior, thus, seems to be one of the few forms of acting in an all-pervading society: either misbehavior “enjoyed” by the individual in secret—or breaking the mold and doing what is necessary to get a tough job done (which might not be enjoyable but is gratifying, as taking over a job in the public eye lends “importance” to the individual). One only has to look at the typical ingredients of the Hollywood action movie to see that transgressing societal borders in the course of some higher purpose, action instead of behavior, is a basic building block of entertainment and fiction today.

The twentieth and early twenty-first century is marked by another phenomenon related to the intimate: the celebrity. It is clear that there always have been famous people, for example, war heroes, explorers, theater actors. But what is a relatively new phenomenon, probably going back to the star system of Hollywood and the early publicity activities of people such as P. T. Barnum (cf. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 28–30), is the short-lived fame routinely and professionally manufactured by media and publicity agents working hand in hand to satisfy each other’s needs. We define a celebrity as someone who is first and foremost famous for being famous. As such, a celebrity is much more, and also much less, than a prominent person. German chancellor Angela Merkel is a prominent person because of high public office, but she is not a celebrity. The interesting thing about celebrities such
as Paris Hilton is that in the ultimate stage of celebrity status the duality of the public sphere already encountered in antiquity is fused. The celebrity lives its whole life, it seems, in the glaring light of the public. But with the celebrity it becomes clearer than ever that the public sphere cannot be reduced to the political—it is societal. For what the societal and not political audience really is interested in is not the public performance, but the private, the intimate sphere. People want to know about the celebrity’s secrets. It is for the very reason that the celebrity is not really expected to do something that everything the celebrity does has the potential of being action. What the celebrity says or does, even if it is completely irrelevant to society by any other standards, is construed as a statement. That is particularly true for misbehavior, of course, which reinforces the notion that the celebrity—liberated of the pressure to earn a daily living, by the way—leads the true and free life of late modernity.

**People as Representatives of Organizations**

The celebrity, in a way, is the heir of the free of the polis. Because the celebrity is rich and famous, everything the celebrity does that is dictated by wanting; it is action, not necessary and expected behaviour. It is that very fact that, for instance, makes a testimonial by supermodel Heidi Klum valuable—even though everyone knows she is paid for it. The normal citizen, in contrast, is bound by societal expectations and the need to earn a living, in particular. The office-holder, the person who is in public life because of responsibility, is bound by something else. Chancellor Merkel is not a free agent but bound by the fact that she does not speak for herself but as a representative of her party, her government, and Germany—in short, she represents some kind of organization or institution. It is by no means a coincidence that modern sociology started to question the scope of “real” human action in society, and it seems safe to say that modern currents, such as systems theory in the Luhmann tradition (1987) or neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), portray the human as *behaving* rather than acting. But the “iron cage” hailed and lamented by Max Weber (e.g., 1920, p. 203) as limiting the selfish actions of individuals in the most rational type of government, the bureaucracy, was nested in a grand project, namely the nation-state. Late modern society does not seem to offer a grand project any more. The “war on terror” does not seem to inspire as much enthusiasm as the medieval crusades did.

**The Public Sphere and Organizations and Institutions**

Figure 4.3 displays the same basic layout as the Roman Republic but with crucial differences. One difference is the existence of organizations, as illustrated by the house-like squares on the border. Another difference is that full-blooded individuals, as illustrated by the figures, are far outnumbered

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**Figure 4.3** The Public Sphere

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by representatives, illustrated by squares. Both figures and squares constitute actors. Gerhards (1994) and Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990), for example, differentiate various types of speakers, namely representatives, advocates, experts, intellectuals and journalists as commentators (cf. Bentele, 2005, p. 709; Bentele, Liebert, & Seeling, 1997, pp. 225–226). In Figure 4.3a, representatives are displayed as being bound to and on the payroll of organizations professionally, whereas advocates articulate the more or less aggregated interests of certain groups in society, not always being bound to them. Media professionals, for example journalists, talk show hosts, and television presenters, are privileged because they have a guaranteed speaker role in the public—they are thus equipped with a mega-phone.

In modern societies there are very few individuals who act in public life representing only themselves. The place for the modern individual is in society, but by the aid of modern mass media everyone enjoys a reserved seat in the ranks of the audience of the public sphere. One also enjoys a privileged sphere that is defined as outside society’s demands and pressures, the intimate sphere. There are individuals, of course, who really act in the public sphere as full-blooded individuals.

One type is the larger-than-life celebrity who is not only interested in upholding celebrity status but displays some social agenda, such as George Clooney. Another type is the eminent intellectual, who is “free-floating” (Mannheim, 1929), and who gains access to the public sphere by virtue of fielding outstanding arguments: people like Jürgen Habermas, Peter Sloterdijk, or Gertrud Höhler. The expert is another type similar but not equivalent to the intellectual, as he/she is bound to the system, which gives him/her expert status. A third type, finally, is the individual gaining access by taking the short-cut through a media organization, as portrayed by the sluice in the house at 6 o’clock position in Figure 4.3a. Here we have the 15-minutes-of-fame-people fed to the public by shows such as Germany’s Next Top Model and Deutschland sucht den Superstar or its equivalents around the world.

All actors pursue strategies and strategic communication, of course. As Neidhardt (1994, p. 18) points out, however, there are two stages in public rhetoric: The first is the thematization stage and the second is the persuasion stage. First, actors have to gain access to the public sphere. Only when their topic is debated, they can convince people that their point of view on the topic is right. It is by no means a detail that society and the sphere of potential actors, that is, public life, is not separated by a line as is the case in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. Modern society is open in a way that with enough pressure or good arguments any group may gain access to the outer circle of public life and may even dispatch a person, after a while turning into a representative, to the inner circle. That is the fact Habermas admitted to having underrated in the 1990 foreword to Structural Transformation (1990, p. 15; pp. 31–33). It is also worth noting that the inner circle is constituted, as was the case in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, by potential actors on the boundaries. In modern societies the warrior with a spear is not the only type of potential actor. In fact, most of the boundary is constituted by abstract concepts, as represented by the black dots: the accepted routines, customs and traditions of the sociopolitical life—in effect, the rules, resources and modalities Giddens (1986) points to in his Theory of Structuration. Some arguments are protected and, if the need arises, even enforced by watch-dog organizations, such as the one represented by the top square.

In the ancient and primitive systems, the routines, customs and traditions rested in the heads of the potential actors. The real difference, again, lies in the fact that modern society is infinitely more complex and much more constituted by organizations and institutions. Figure 4.3a displays organizations on the surface as houses, be it a private company such as BMW, a private media organization such as CNN, a public broadcaster such as the BBC, a non–governmental organization such as Greenpeace, or a public organization such as the courts, the police, or jails. That is the way the normal citizen views everyday life. But if we imagine for a moment that we could draw a map of relevant interactions, relations and connections—relevant with a view to a certain aspect such as finance, legality, welfare—we would see a diagram like Figure 4.3b, although much more complex and confusing. We would see systems in which different houses had different functions, some crucial and irreplaceable, some redundant. We would also see some persons in the private realm connected
to almost every aspect of this or that system. Again the system is not visible in itself, unlike the institutions the systems guarantee. The financial system, for example, consists of a lot of banks and a few state-owned or -controlled organizations. Individually, the banks are redundant but if a lot of large banks fail at the same time, the whole system is in danger, as we have experienced lately. The institution the financial system establishes, and which we everyday experience, is money. The media are, in fact, another system. What we experience as manifestation of the media system, and the journalistic sub-system, is news.

**The Public Sphere as a Supra-Institution**

Figure 4.3c answers the question what the public sphere really is and what it always has been, we believe: a kind of a supra-institution. The supra-institution emerges and is sustained by a lot of individuals, organizations, institutions interacting in a certain way, pursuing certain strategies, with certain arguments. The interactions are depicted as sub-surface because the actors concerned do not necessarily intend to sustain the public sphere but, as Systems Theory makes us aware, by pursuing certain strategies with certain arguments they effectually do sustain it. Conversely, other actors who try to uphold the public sphere as a normative ideal actually undermine and weaken the supra-institution.

The public sphere is not simply another institution or sub-system of society on a par with others, because it is concerned with not only a single matter, such as finance, legality, or welfare—it is concerned with all. We link up here with Luhmann’s (1990, p. 181; cf. also Marcinkowski, 1993, p. 118; Gerhards, 1994, p. 87; Imhof, 2003, p. 202) representation of the public sphere as a mirror that helps society to observe itself. This comparison has one advantage and one disadvantage, however. The advantage is that the idea of a mirror conveys that the public sphere is not identical to society but offers a reflection of it. What we have described as representatives, thus, are reflections of groups of interest in society. The disadvantage is the implicit assumption that there is a causal congruence between what is going on in the shadows of society and what is going on in the brightly lit public sphere. We believe that a perfect and perfectly clean public sphere, to return to our earlier metaphor, does indeed reflect or illuminate the concerns of the people and groups in society in a kind of isomorphic way. But that is a normative ideal. Neither the cleanliness of the mirror nor the mirror itself is guaranteed by any single institution or establishment.

**The Mass Media Beyond Modernity**

We have not yet treated the one phenomenon which perhaps is most important: mass media (for the concept of media society cf. Jarren & Donges, 2006). But we have good reason for postponing the discussion. Although the rise of mass media over the course of centuries has been of fundamental importance for almost every change in society since the invention of the printing press, the concepts of mass media, society and public sphere have in some way gone hand in hand. The public sphere as we have portrayed it was a sphere in the center of one particular society. The framework for the modern mass media, radio and television, moreover, was the nation state: a state whose institutions constituted both the core and the boundary of the society in question.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, nation states, mass media and the public sphere have seemed to go their separate ways. The European Union, as has been repeatedly emphasized, is a supra-national state with many functions a state has, but there is no corresponding supra-national public sphere at its center, no corresponding European society (cf. Brüggemann, Hepp, Kleinen-von Königslöw & Wessler, 2009; Imhof, 2003, p. 206). The majority of European citizens, we dare say, perceive Brussels as an elitist circle populated by a bureaucratic aristocracy. Despite millions and millions spent on communication, politics in the European Union has not much in common with the affairs of the Greek polis deliberated upon in the agora, and much more in common with the
behind-closed-doors machinations of the *Ancien Régime* (cf. Sloterdijk, 2009). But that is not only the fault of the Brussels élite, of course: it is at the same time the fault of the people.

The role of the mass media in integrating modern society, and especially in integrating the modern welfare state mass democracies, scarcely needs mentioning. The earlier mass newspapers, and, later, radio and television, once and for all masked the problem we discussed earlier as technical limits of co-presence. Mass media did not solve the participation problem of the audience–candidate divide, to be sure, but watching the news on television certainly gave the feeling of being part of a society with a center, a society in which people acted and things went right or went wrong; or one that pursued a grand project, be it to fight communism, terrorism or global warming. We believe, therefore, that the development of non-national, non-society-oriented mass media, such as satellite television, the internet, and corporate media, goes hand in hand with *individualization*, a sense of decoupling from society at large—and from big politics at the center of that one society, in particular. Individualization, however, does not necessarily mean retreating towards the intimate sphere and the family circle, which is what happened, for example, in Germany in the era of the *Biedermeier* (a period of political withdrawal in Germany, in arts, architecture, and culture, equivalent to the British *Regency* and the French *Empire*). Individualization as it plays out in the early twenty-first century seems to make good use of the technical possibility to connect to, access, and act in spheres all over the world. We shall return to this point later.

### A Model of the Mid-Modern and Late-Modern Public Sphere

Our review of the history of Western European civilization as it relates to the concept of the public sphere has revealed that it is interrelated with other concepts and is entangled with ideas that are at the very core of our civilizations, societies or political systems today. What we wish to do now is to integrate the ideas discussed thus far. We present two models of society with their respective public spheres: first, a model of a modern society with a center, and second, a model of a late modern society that is characterized by the fact that it no longer has a center.

#### The Mid-Modern Public Sphere: A Society of Organizations

Figure 4.4 shows our model of the modern society, which was valid until the turn from the twentieth to the twenty first century. As has been repeatedly emphasized, the dominant feature of this model is that it is characteristic of a society of organizations, that is, organizations, not people, are the principal actors. The power-plays of organizations are central in such a society. Consider that the recent trend in public relations towards personalization revolved around giving a face to the company, and not returning to the human as agent of action in the style of the entrepreneurial personality (cf. Eisenegger & Wehmeier, 2009). Transparency means throwing a light on what is going on behind the fences and walls and in the executive suites of corporations (cf. Szyszka, 2009, for the concept of *functional transparency*).

#### The Mass Media Arena, Assembly and Encounter

**Levels of the Public Sphere**

Maybe the most obvious difference from the earlier illustrations lies in the fact that the experience of modern society is mass mediated in many instances; that is, it is constituted by mass media signified by the antennae connecting to private homes. As we said earlier, the technical problem of limited co-presence is brushed aside once and for all. Everyone can be audience without leaving home: The public sphere is *ubiquitous*. It happens somewhere but it can be experienced, as a media surrogate, everywhere. In comparison, society is also drawn in a lighter grey, symbolizing that liberal society
is much more tolerant on the one hand, much better illuminated on the other; that is, the light of society illuminates the homes of the individual families. Homosexuality, which was considered a threat to the established order of things in medieval Europe, is accepted as perfectly fine private behavior in a liberal society; a father beating up his children is not a private affair any more, despite the closed doors of the family home. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the two eyes of the public, that is, society’s eye demanding conformity and the state’s political eye demanding legality, pierce the closed doors.

As sociologists Gerhards and Neidhardt (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990; Gerhards, 1994) have pointed out, the ubiquity of the public sphere leads to three levels of experiencing society: the encounter level, the assembly level and the mass media (arena) level. The experience of modern society, thus, is by no means exclusively mass-mediated. That is a fact too often ignored by theorists prematurely postulating that nothing happens if it does not happen in the media. For instance, if television reports people demonstrating in the streets, the individual may leave her house and go and have a look. The individual then experiences society and its public sphere on the encounter level, as it does when it engages in a conversation about politics au trottoir (Luhmann, 1986, p. 75). If the individual decides to take part in the demonstration it experiences society and its public sphere on the assembly level, the outer circle: Here we have the sphere covered by the Situational Theory of Publics (cf. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 147–161), and by Hauser’s concept of the rhetorical public sphere (Hauser, 1998). The individual gains access to the arena of society, the inner circle, when it is invited to an established political talk show or when it is singled out to say something on television on the spot of the demonstration. A politician speaking in the parliament, the Bundestag, is not automatically public. In the model illustrated in Figure 4.4, the speech takes place in one of the white houses; it becomes public, however, by media attention covering it or, the more frequent case, by the politician making a statement in the public arena.

The arena proper, thus, is no longer only a structure but appears as a kind of force field constituted by media coverage. The capacity of the arena does not constitute a problem in itself any more, as it is
mass-mediated: One can receive information about the events in the arena everywhere. The limiting factor is the interest of the people, a condition that has been described as *attention economy* (Franck, 1998). That is particularly the case because information about events in the public sphere is now in competition with other mass media content, namely fiction and entertainment (*Be Happy!* on the one side, and advertising and marketing (*Buy!*) on the other. Here is the well-known diagnosis of the Frankfurt school’s left-wing intellectuals Horkheimer and Adorno that the common people are misled, confused and distracted from proper political participation by the culture industry (cf. Imhof, 2003, pp. 198–199; Müller-Doohm, 2000). Habermas (1990, pp. 225–342, para 16–23) goes even further and complains that the inner circle is taken over by representatives of private interests (represented by dark squares). In 2006, almost 40 years after the first edition of *Structural Transformation*, Habermas’s rendering is less categorical, but nevertheless emphasizes inequality and power structures:

> Given the high level of organization and material resources, representatives of functional systems and special interest groups enjoy somewhat privileged access to the media, too. They are in a position to use professional techniques to transform social power into political muscle. Public interest groups and advocates tend likewise to employ corporate communications management methods. It follows that compared with politicians and lobbyists, the actors of civil society are in the weakest position.

> *Habermas, 2006, p. 419*

**Three Types of Organization**

Figure 4.4 depicts three kinds of houses representing organizations, namely, white, light grey and dark grey. The dark grey houses are organizations that are private, not necessarily in ownership, but in interest. The light grey houses are organizations that are public, again not necessarily in ownership, but in interest, such as public broadcasters. The white houses are state-governed organizations (öffentlichke QKÖpperschaften), such as ministries, authorities, regulation boards, and the police. For the purpose of understanding strategic communication, the exact sociological criteria are not of great importance. What is important is the perception. A light grey house is a house that is perceived as pursuing some higher objective although it is not bound to the common good, but to a certain good for a certain group of people. It is by virtue of this perception that houses conquer a position in the inner circle of society, whereas houses pursuing purely private aims, for example profit maximization for shareholders, are kept out. They are represented nevertheless by certain powers in political parties, and other interests such as trade associations. In post-war Germany, from 1950 to 1990, for example, the inner circle of society was comparatively stable: A couple of corporatist actors, parties, associations and very large companies *did* politics. However, as the empty spot indicates, sometimes houses that do not fulfil the criteria any more are torn down. That is what has happened, to a degree, to the trade unions in Germany. Others may take their place at some point. The Green Party, for example, gained an established position in the inner circle of society during the 1980s in Germany.

**The Power Plays of the Houses**

The public sphere emerges out of the power plays in the same way as the public sphere of the ting or the polis emerged from people gathering at a special place. The power plays are not visible to the ordinary citizens in everyday life. Nevertheless, it is important not to confuse the power plays of organizations with the systemic relations depicted in Figures 4.3b and 4.3c. Systemic relations can only be grasped on the macro level by a hypothetical outside observer. The antagonism of individual banks, for example, can be *functional* (*eufunctional*) or *dysfunctional* for the financial system regardless
of what CEOs of banks, experts or politicians believe or what is said or done. The competitions, antagonisms and coalitions existing in society are played out by organizations acting. Thus, the public sphere is established, maintained and to a degree controlled by organizations; organizations, like people, that first and foremost pursue the aim of surviving themselves, but also organizations, which, unlike people, do not have private lives to retire to. No matter what they do, organizations will not pack up by themselves and say, “Well, we’re not needed any more.” They will find reasons why they are needed, that is, legitimate themselves, and only if threatened with extinction will they find new areas in which to busy themselves. What they do to survive is public action at first, but the action also affects the structure of society and the public sphere, in particular. Structure and action are two sides of one coin, in the very same way as Giddens’s Theory of Structuration (1986) describes it.

The Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Century Arena: A Society of Communications

Figure 4.3 still describes, we believe, a variety of public phenomena, but it does not describe the public sphere of late modern society in the twenty-first century as we experience it today, at least not fully and satisfactorily (one has to be aware that when Habermas wrote Structural Transformation he had no personal experience of television, cf. 1990, p. 29). The picture painted in Figure 4.3 seems old-fashioned because it is static. The core of the model is that organizations occupied a certain position in twentieth century society, and it was that very position that guaranteed the right to dispatch representatives to the arena. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, we believe, the rather established system, described as corporatist, gradually changed. The change was driven by numerous factors, but apart from a general maturation of society it is impossible to single out reasons. The most important technical step was the spread of the internet.

One social driver of change, we believe, was a clear though one-sided development, namely, the rise of public relations, as Habermas pointed out in 1962 (Habermas, 1990, pp. 289–292). What differentiates Figure 4.4 from Figure 4.3, thus, is the fact that organizations not only started to act in the public sphere to further their interests, for example by press and media work, but also by contributing to their own public spheres by publishing themselves. The antennae on organizations in Figure 4.4 illustrate the public activities of organizations. The lighted circles symbolize that organizations, through public relations, illuminate their own activities. What gradually emerged during the last decades of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century by the intermeshing of organizational public activity is a public sphere of communications that takes place on a shiny, well-lit stratum above society. The metaphors of the polis resurface here. Again we have a sphere of real necessities, which is considered a darker place below the lighted public sphere; and the individual, it seems, still wants to be lifted out of the squalor of everyday life.

The well-lit world constituted by organizations putting themselves in a good light is the sphere constructivist communication theorists such as Merten (2008) refer to when postulating that the twenty-first century citizen lives, at least to a degree, in a fictitious world. Taken at face value, the world the individual experiences is, indeed, fictitious, brave and new. It is a world where insurance companies are partners, soap brands are friends, and science-fiction series, talk shows and reality TV provide role models for adolescents in para social interaction. But it is entirely misleading to construe the individual as living only in this sphere, as being caught up in an artificial world. The individual is quite used to the brave new world and, contrary to theoretical expectation, by and large acts quite competently in it. One reason for this is, of course, that the normal individual experiences the everyday discrepancies not only between the inside and outside of the organization it works in, as it did in the mid twentieth century, but also the discrepancies between the communication sphere and the social sphere. It is by no means a coincidence that the old twentieth century society shines through the fabric of the emergent twenty-first century sphere on the left-hand side of Figure 4.5. No matter
how much you are involved in the blogosphere, occasionally you go to a pub, your bicycle is stolen, or your neighbors talk behind your back.

The dominant characteristic of the twenty first century public sphere, thus, is not that it is virtual, because with the upper and lower sphere co-existing it is not. The dominant characteristic is that the communication sphere, to a degree, collapses structural constraints, such as time, distance, technical limitations, and physical handicaps of the person, to mention a few. The public sphere is no longer a place of gathering as the tingstead. Neither is it a force field of media attention constituted by a limited amount of actors. It is a network of points of interest. Something, for example a brand, the swine-flu, a politician, or any other topic, is in the public sphere because communicators, who are points in the network of communications, communicate about it. The illustration on the right-hand side of Figure 4.5 illustrates that communication involves a dual relation: someone you communicate with (black lines), to whom you push your communication towards or who pulls communication from you; and something you communicate about (grey lines), an object of reference. What we see, consequently, is a network of communicators talking about an object of reference with each other. It is here that the perspective expounded by Peters (2007, p. 329; Peters & Wessler, 2006; see also Brüggemann et al., 2009, p. 394) begins to be the only one that makes sense: namely, that public spheres are spheres of communication characterized by a high density of communication and, furthermore, defined by the density within the sphere as being higher than the density towards the outside of the sphere.

**Normative and Epistemological Aspects**

We have come a long way from Athenian democracy to the globalized, late modern society of today. As we have announced from the very beginning, the models presented have been rather descriptive. In conclusion we want to touch upon normative aspects that have a bearing on strategic communication.

A lot of theoretical effort has been spent, it seems, on arguing why and how the court of public opinion is capable of passing judgment, and declaring a matter legitimate or not; or why and when public deliberation can be expected to be rational, fair or good. It appears to us, however, that the
theoretical discussion about what constitutes a clean public sphere, and by whose interests the public discourse is muddied (Habermas, 2006, p. 416), undermined, bought, colonized or refeudalized, is not only age-old, but theoretical and practical at the same time. The purely theoretical search for a neat formula by which to decide what belongs to a clean, unspoiled, genuinely democratic public sphere, is futile. Strategic communication in the public sphere always means arguing that your interest is also in the interest of the public, of society in general, in some way or another. And it is the number 1 counterstrategy to generously declare your opponents’ interest legitimate, yes—but legitimate only as a private affair. That is the reason, incidentally, why public relations suffers from such a bad reputation (for this argument see Nothhaft, 2010, pp. 202–204): If the proponent succeeds in gaining access to the public arena, it is because the issue at hand is accepted as a genuine political question, worthy of public attention. If the proponent fails, however, his interest is refused as “attention-seeking,” as “populism,” as “mere public relations.” Public relations’ bad image, thus, is at least partly due to the fact that successful public relations does not appear to be public relations. What we need to understand, thus, is the dynamic calculus by which selection and deselection of matters as worthy of public deliberation, as worthy of public support, works in reality in the here and now.

**Epistemological Assumptions: a Reconstructive Approach**

Apart from the normative ideal that the matters deliberated in the public sphere should be worthy of public deliberation, there is another normative ideal, which is, we believe, much simpler and more straightforward; namely, the principle that what is said in the public sphere should be true. We have already alluded to the temptation to employ constructivist theory to construe the twenty-first century public sphere as a purely and exclusively virtual public sphere that has severed every link with societal reality—reality being a questionable concept in the constructivist framework anyway. We believe that that is misleading: The public sphere does not exist without a society around and underneath it. Synchronically, here and now, people believe what they see on television or read in the newspaper because it is in the media. But when one looks at trust in media diachronically, over time, actors and representatives in the public sphere need to connect to what is going on in society, otherwise trust in the media erodes fairly quickly, as was the case in the former GDR where few people believed in the official version of events. Whether connecting means reflecting (causal congruence), reconstructing or constructing is an epistemological question. Our position, expounded by Bentele (2008a, 2008b), quite clearly is that connecting means re-constructing. A true statement reconstructs in the light of the public sphere what is going on in the semi-darkness of society. A politician who says “what the people think” does not necessarily mirror what is out there in society. As it is, the facts out there are, indeed, a questionable concept. The politician offers a version of his own, of course. But it is not a version that she makes up as she wishes but a version that makes sense, and one that does not contradict what the audience factually experiences every day. If you tell everybody that socialism is a blessing when the shelves in the shop are empty, people will not believe it after a while but will begin to believe you are a liar or crazy—in any case, unfit to govern. In other words, there is a corridor that limits your maneuverable space when trying to make sense out of reality (Bentele 2008a, p. 158).

The audience grants that actors in the public may have a different perspective, that they may select other things as important and that they construct a different sense out of the situation, but perspective, selection and construction have limits beyond which the communicator discredits her or himself (Bentele, 2008a, pp. 152–158). That is particularly true, of course, when other communicators appear who deliberately discredit the actor in question by pointing out, for example, errors, contradictions, and discrepancies. Figure 4.5 depicts, thus, that the virtual public sphere is virtual with a twist. The twist is that structural properties, the fact that one actor represents a multinational company and another a small antidiscrimination office, no longer carries any privilege. When an
organizational representative claims something, for example, she cannot rely on being the only one who has access to the organization’s private and secret interior, that is, the inner courtyard of the house. Another actor, maybe from within the same house, may raise an antenna at any time and claim the opposite, for example, type a critical blog entry. As such, on even ground, strategic communication has indeed returned to equals meeting equals to determine who is best.

We conclude by pointing out one consequence of our two-layered model: As communication becomes increasingly self-referential in fragmented, self-contained publics, it appears necessary to dedicate more and more research towards \textit{transfer processes} between the upper stratum and the lower, that is, answering \textit{how}, \textit{when} and \textit{why} public communication leads to public action, to political measures, to societal change. When something was publicly discussed in the early and mid twentieth century, we argue, the debate would lead to consequences vaguely mirroring the deliberation. In the 1970s and 1980s, every Monday the powerful in Germany trembled: What would \textit{Der Spiegel}, the investigative news magazine, uncover? Arguably, that is no longer the case. Trends, media hypes, and scandals come and go from time to time with unpredictable overreactions as consequences, frequently without any “real” consequences at all. The twenty-first century appears to be characterized by a lot of communication but the relation between public communication and public action seems to grow more and more significant. Researchers in public relations and strategic communications are the one group of scholars, it seems, who can come to grips with this phenomenon.

Notes

1 This chapter appeared as an article in \textit{International Journal of Strategic Communication}, 4(2), 93–116. 2010. It is reprinted with the permission of the publisher.
2 The fulcrum of the court case in Britain, astoundingly, was the question whether the ”orgy” was a ”Nazi orgy.” Daily Mail columnist Stephen Glover recounts the judge’s argumentation:

Though German had been spoken during the orgy, and though uniforms had been worn and there had been play-acting which seemed to evoke concentration camps, the judge did not accept that it had been an Nazi affair. He concluded that if it had been he would have found in the newspaper’s favour since Mr. Mosley was a public figure and “the people of all races and religions” with whom he had to deal might have been shocked.” But as, in his view, it was not a Nazi orgy, he believed that Mr Mosley was entitled to his privacy.

Glover continues, quite reasonably:

Mr. Justice Eady’s distinction between Nazi and non-Nazi orgies is obviously crackers.


3 Weber’s original expression is “stahlhartes Gehäuse,” literally “shell as hard as steel,” but translated by Talcott Parsons as “iron cage.” Weber himself refers to the concept in various texts but the one quoted is perhaps the most famous and influential.

References


