Dancers in the dark: The myth of rationality in public relations

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Abstract

This article takes a critical look at the communication management approach of public relations by using the balanced scorecard, and how it has been adapted in public relations, as an example. By using neo-institutionalism, the article clarifies the idea that the pursuit of rationality, regulation, measurement, and control, of and in, organizations can be characterized as myth to achieve social legitimacy. It further contends that, within a complex and dynamic public sphere, such attempts at quantifying such largely qualitative areas as public relations can be counterproductive.

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1. Introduction

Kaplan and Norton (1992) introduce the balanced scorecard (BSC) by stating: “What you measure is what you get” (p. 71). Their statement expresses trust in the explanatory power of quantitative data. Indeed the advantages of quantitative data cannot be dismissed: such data can show a high degree of representativeness and provide organizations with a basis for making strategic decisions. The use of BSC in public relations illustrates the increase of strategic management and controlling, and their quantitative control systems in the field of communication. However, as Porter (1995) usefully cautions, “Mathematical and quantitative reasoning . . . provide no panacea” (p. 5).

Following Porter’s caution, this article examines balanced scorecard systems and their adaptations in the field of public relations. It will argue that public relations research is inadequately embedded in societal metatheories and briefly introduce neo-institutionalism as such a framework. Then, based on the example of the balanced scorecard, it will attempt to integrate public relations praxis and theory within that framework. Finally, the closing section will address research perspectives, roles, and self-images of public relations scholars. The article has three main aims: to clarify that management practices such as the use of balanced scorecards can in terms of neo-institutionalism be described as rational myth; to show that the very existence of balanced scorecards in public relations gives legitimacy to companies and public relations departments; and to point out that the belief in quantified data as a better basis for public relations strategies risks disregarding the complex structure of the public sphere.

2. Public relations methodology: the missing link to sociological theory

Even though there are some exceptions that use sociological theories to explain public relations phenomena (e.g., Ronneberger & Rühl, 1992) public relations research mainly aims at analyzing organizational communication pro-
cesses. The analyses of Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) and Vasquez and Taylor (2001) demonstrate that linkages to sociological theory building are rare and as a result, the discipline is criticized for its intellectual isolation (McKie, 2001). Communication management, as a synonym for public relations, ties in with control and rationality. Functionalist and positivist conceptions assume that public relations deals with planned, controlled, and mostly, proactive designed communication. From this point of view the focus becomes the search for more efficient communication strategies for organizations (Everett, 2001; Mohr, 1997). The typical public relations planning process displays basic insights into the mainstream research understanding by making the picture of governance, control, and process optimization obvious: actual states will be estimated, SWOT analyses conducted, strategies, tactics, and budgets planned, evaluated, and, based on the evaluation, new strategies decided. Such strategic processes give the impression of decisions based rationally on facts and figures akin to an elementary first order cybernetic conception such as the thermostat (Leipziger, 2003; Long & Hazleton, 1987).

All things considered, what emerges is a picture of the social engineer who plans, controls, measures and readjusts, and in so doing pursues the “engineering of consent” (Bernays, 1947). This methodology of scientific management (Taylor, 1993) resembles the normative praxeological optimization predominantly used in business administration (Raffée, 1995). In this tradition, cultural and social aspects of rationality within organizations were rarely analyzed because it was the task of management theorists to seek out and codify social universal principles in organizational processes (Dobbin, 1994). However, epistemologies that use a mixture of natural science and business administration methodology fail to describe and analyze social processes properly (Lieberson & Lynn, 2002). Therefore, the analysis of public relations as a social process should be broader than analysis which uses approaches based on the strategic management methodology which aims for the exploitation of success positions only.

3. Organizational (ir)rationality and neo-institutionalism

In contrast to the functionalist view, organizational analyses point to the constraints of rationality and plannable decision-making: lack of incompleteness, costly or unavailable information, divergences of interests, and oppositional potential, and shortage of (e.g., Lindblom, 1959; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985). As Selznick puts it, organizational members “live with . . . bounded rationality, and they cope with uncertainty by relying on routines, which may become rituals” (Selznick, 1996, p. 274). Organization studies offer some evidence that organizations are able to survive even though they can act irrationally and permanently fail (Meyer & Zucker, 1989). This shows “that organizational decision makers just pretend to make rational decisions and sometimes even cherish the illusion as if they would do so” (Schimank, 2003, p. 267). Decision makers have to make decisions in turbulent environments; organizations exist in environments that have lots of different publics. The question is how stability in turbulent environments occurs.

One possible answer is provided by the approach of neo-institutionalism (e.g., Scott, 2001, pp. 28–45) which explains how societal expectations frame and constrain action. If there is a high level of isomorphism between societal claims, organizational action, and communication, then organizations will gain legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

Organizations do not just develop formal rational structures in order to deal efficiently with problems. They also do so to achieve legitimacy through symbolic interaction and the legitimate organization is judged by its organizational publics to be “just and worthy of support” (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Organizations depend on societal expectations. In contrast to the Luhmann (2000) assumption, organizations are not only bound to expectations of one functional social system but are part of different functional social systems (Kneer, 2001). Consequently, organizations must deal with different societal expectations. For example, an economic organization has to rely on profit and money to survive, but it also has to refer to political standards of ecological protection and to standards of communicative negotiation with stakeholders. In this respect, legitimacy has many faces and, therefore, because it is given by different publics, it cannot be controlled by organizations.

Bearing this idea in mind, Reich (1998) argues that corporations are social creations. In his opinion the very existence of corporations is dependent on the willingness of social groups and actors to allow them to exist and to operate legitimately within society. For instance, it is mainly for this reason that larger corporations have begun to report their environmental behavior: organizations have to act, or at least appear to act, to match with societal expectations (O’Donovan, 2002). Corporations can only continue making money if their structure and actions appear legitimate in the eyes of the public.

For this reason, formal organization structures express myths which are institutionalized within their societal environment and which help them to survive. Meyer and Rowan (1977) point out: “Organizations that incorporate societally
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