7.   Organisations, Media, and Society

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Abstract

The dynamic interplay between organisations, media, and society is central to this chapter and highlights ASCoR's Corporate Communication group's issue-centred and society-focused approach to explore communication between organisations and their environment. Studying this interplay allows questions to be answered regarding organisations' role in our mediated society, how organisations shape and are shaped by public and media debates, and how societal issues have become inherently intertwined with organisational practices. To provide a broad overview of the studies conducted by ASCoR researchers on this specific topic, this chapter outlines three main topics: (1) organisations and news media, (2) mediatisation of organisations, and (3) organisational legitimacy.

Keywords: corporate communication, issue communication, news media, mediatisation of organisations, organisational legitimacy

Introduction

What role do organisations play in our mediated society? How do organisations shape and how are they shaped by public and media debates? These are key themes central to the research within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group. Through processes of mediatisation, media have become institutionalised in all layers of society, including the operations of all types of organisations (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014), ranging from governmental organisations to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and for-profit corporations. This development has largely shaped how organisations communicate with their stakeholders and take up their roles in society.

Over the last decades, the operating conditions for organisations have been decisively shaped by preferences and practices of the media. In this chapter, the term "media" primarily refers to news media, rather than social media, in order to grasp how organisations have, through processes of mediatisation, become more related to and intertwined with their environment and therewith the issues that play in society more broadly. Organisations today cannot ignore or avoid media logic to reach their stakeholders and adapt to their environment. With these changes, societal visibility of organisations and their activities have increased. Adherence to such media and public scrutiny is, for example, expressed through growing corporate communication, media relations, and public relations departments in organisations (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014).

Since organisations have become inherently intertwined with their mediatised surroundings, the role of communication has changed for organisations. Organisations now have to closely monitor the media, political, and public agendas in relation to their operations, and participate in issue arenas on societal topics relevant to them (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). The communicative interplay between organisations and their environment helps to shape, maintain, and renew their social licence to operate (SLO), which is broadly understood as a form of soft regulation of organisations and whether their actions are deemed acceptable in the eyes of relevant stakeholders in society. Organisational legitimacy has become a crucial element that is believed to be largely constructed by media. The important role that organisations play in society is therewith primarily negotiated and defined through mediated communication. Accordingly, the study of the dynamic interplay between organisations, media, and society is central to the research done within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group. We gather all communication by or about organisations under the umbrella term "corporate communication." Here the term "organisation" is understood broadly to contain for-profit corporations, governmental actors, nonprofit organisations or activist groups, and (news) media organisations. We rely on an issue-centred approach to empirically study the communicative interplay between organisations, media, and society, which allows us to capture organisations' role within the mediated society. In line with the perspective of issues arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), we understand this issue-centred approach as issues being central to organisational communication. Just like other actors, organisations can have a stake in an issue, which connects them to other involved actors. Media provide the primary platforms where organisations meet and engage with their environment to negotiate these issues, ranging from crises

restricted to specific organisations (e.g., legitimacy concerns, product recall, rumours) to largely societal issues (e.g., sustainability, diversity, polarisation, misinformation).

To understand the interplay between organisations, media, and society, research conducted in ASCoR's Corporate Communication group is addressed in this chapter. It is important to note that ASCoR primarily relies on an empirical-positivistic approach to study this interplay, rather than alternative perspectives of studying corporate communication (e.g., critical studies) that have also provided the substantial contribution to literature that our research has relied upon. As a first step, it is important to understand the role that news media plays in organisations' visibility. To elaborate on organisational visibility, we address research that has been conducted on the way that the news media have reported about organisations and, subsequently, what effects this media attention may have for these organisations. Thereby, we follow Verhoeven's (2016) literature review which identified several variables central in the study of corporate communication: message credibility, perceived trustworthiness, reputation, consumer confidence, and stock prices.

Secondly, we discuss research on the mediatisation of organisations to understand, on a deeper level, how media have become institutionalised in organisational processes and operations. "Mediatisation" was originally coined as a term to capture the impact of media on politics. It can be understood as a long-term, multi-phase process that ranges from media as an important source of information for political actors to more profound changes like "political actors being governed by media logic" (Strömbäck, 2008). The scope of the mediatisation concept soon expanded to organisations to capture "the significance of the media" and its intervention in organisational life (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2021, p. 168). Over the years, mediatisation has proven to be an applicable perspective to understand the institutionalisation of media in organisations' communicative processes and activities (e.g., Ihlen & Pallas, 2014). In the organisational context, the phenomenon of mediatisation helps us understand how media decisively shape the communicative environment of organisations and how other institutions such as organisations and their members adapt to the logic of the media.

Finally, to understand how the communicative interplay with media and society shapes organisations, we address organisational legitimacy. Legitimacy is a crucial, yet vulnerable resource for organisations. As legitimacy refers to a stakeholders' perceived congruence of an organisation with societal norms, focusing on the role of the media in the reflection

and co-construction of organisational legitimacy is paramount (Dekker et al., 2021; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Recent transformations in the media landscape have made the case for a communication perspective on legitimacy even stronger, as social evaluations of organisations are currently more visible, fragmented, and have the potential to amplify quickly (Etter et al., 2019; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). We understand legitimacy as a fluid concept: Legitimacy is not given by default, is subject to repeated change, and needs to be constantly renewed. Not only does organisational legitimacy needs to be adapted to current changes in societal norms, it also needs to consider conflict management, critical risk, and the crisis issues constantly confront organisations' place within society. Hence, the communicative construction of organisational legitimacy has become a central topic for both corporate communication practitioners and scholars (Marschlich, 2022).

In the next section, we address research conducted within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group by addressing the three topics above by first discussing methods and findings, followed by contributions to theory and practice, and a future research agenda.

Empirical findings

As a start to this chapter, we outline the methodological approaches applied in ASCoR's Corporate Communication group. Alongside the discussion of the variety of methods, the unique insights regarding the interplay between organisations, media, and society that have been brought forward by the group are summarised. To structure the methods and findings section, the three topics introduced above are discussed separately.

News media and organisations

Various studies conducted by ASCoR's Corporate Communication group have investigated the interdependencies between organisations and news media on the micro level (i.e., the individual level) (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017) as well as the meso (i.e., organisational level) and macro levels (i.e., societal level) (e.g., Kroon & van der Meer, 2021; Schafraad et al., 2016; Strauß & Vliegenthart, 2017). In a study that combined survey with content analysis, Jacobs and Wonneberger (2017) found that media orientation of communication professionals of organisations—i.e., how important they believe it is for their organisation to attract media attention and

how this influences strategic decision-making—depends more on their organisation's perceived visibility in the media rather than its actual media visibility.

Several content analyses of news media coverage of organisations conducted by ASCoR's Corporate Communication group focus on actual visibility of organisations (or actors) in news media and their predictability and show that the sheer number of news factors such as conflict and eliteness present predict prominence and size of the news report (Boukes et al., 2022). In a similar way, Jonkman et al. (2020) found that corporate characteristics, such as company size and ownership structure, predict organisations' visibility in news reports.

Other studies focused on the first-level agenda-building role of organisations' press releases; these studies found a significant impact of press releases on the topics of business news in both broadsheet and tabloid news outlets (Kroon & van der Meer, 2021), where press releases containing multiple news factors draw most news media attention (Schafraad et al., 2016). Online news outlets, which rely on the 24/7 news cycle and need to be "first with the news," especially depend on these press releases, whereas the press releases' impact on traditional media, such as newspapers and television news, is weaker (Boumans et al., 2018).

After passing the gatekeepers of the news agenda (i.e., visibility), organisations have less influence on the content and tone of news coverage. Studies based on manual as well as automated content analysis of both organisations' press releases and news media content demonstrate that, in the news-gathering phase, news media rely much less on such forms of information subsidies provided by organisations through press releases: The more news factors present in press releases, the more original work journalists put into the news report (Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020) and affective attribute salience (i.e., sentiment) in press releases only have a small effect on the news agenda (Kroon & van der Meer, 2021).

Moreover, using a computational framing approach combined with time series analysis, Strauß and Vliegenthart (2017) found that, in the context of the banking crisis, there is a reversed agenda-building effect with news media frames influencing corporate communication frames rather than news media following corporate communication. In another study, Strauß et al. (2016) found that neither positive nor negative emotions in newspaper coverage consistently affect the values of stocks listed on the Amsterdam Exchange index (AEX), but, instead, that media coverage itself was likelier to be influenced by the fluctuations on the stock market.

Mediatisation of organisations

The research programme of ASCoR's Corporate Communication group has shown the theoretical and empirical relevance of the concept of mediatisation (i.e., the institutionalisation of media with society over time) to study the relationship between the organisation and their environment. The mediatisation of organisations is studied on two distinctive levels, namely: (1) how organisations are monitored and covered by the media and (2) how organisations and their member adapt to media logic. First, the way organisations are evaluated by society is increasingly constructed in the media and how organisations adapt to media is crucial for them to reach their stakeholders. The media's monitoring and portrayal of organisations has changed over the last decades. Through media logic, organisations are increasingly scrutinised by news media and their coverage increasingly follows a media logic (for example, a focus on news values such as negativity, conflicts, sensationalism) to gain a larger audience. On this level, content analyses provide a particular valuable instrument to understand organisational visibility and how organisations are framed by news media. Research over time especially allows for exploring how media coverage of organisations has changed against the backdrop of long-term mediatisation processes.

Empirical research has shown how the media visibility of organisations changed and they became more media oriented. First, as addressed above, the communicative agendas of organisations and the news are found to be intertwined in an intimate relation of reciprocal influence (Kroon & van der Meer, 2021) and the media agenda can shape organisations' evaluative features such as their stock market ratings (van der Meer & Vliegenthart, 2018). More related to the processes of mediatisation over time, the way that media cover organisation-related issues is found to change with time regarding certain issues. For example, in the case of aviation accidents, media tend to follow their own logic rather than real-world data, since relative media attention for these negative events went up over time (and increasingly contained mediatisation facets related to elements such as conflict framing, sensationalism of news, and human interest framing) while the total number of aviation incidents declined (van der Meer et al., 2019; van der Meer et al., 2022). This mediatised coverage can have effects on the organisational level (i.e., decreasing air travel) and societal level (more deadly road accidents as result of irrational risk avoiding travel behaviour). Moreover, also under specific organisational circumstances, media are found to play a central and decisive role. For example, the majority of external

organisational crisis situations can be understood as mediatised situations due to the central and leading role of news media in the communicative interplay between organisations and their environment at these critical times (van der Meer, 2016; van der Meer et al., 2014). News media's central role during crises becomes evident from being the main source for, and influencer of, public crisis framing (van der Meer, 2018) and having the potential to have a soothing effect on public panic and speculation (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013) or ease the crisis atmosphere (Gerken & van der Meer, 2019).

Second, next to these macro- and meso-level changes of mediatisation, Nölleke et al. (2021) discern micro-level (individual) adaptation. Here, qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (survey) research among communication professionals provide insights into their organisations' and their own media orientation (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). Inspired by Kohring and colleagues' (2013) conceptualisation of mental mediatisation, media orientation can be considered as mediatisation manifested at the individual level within organisations. In other words, the extent to which communication professionals are oriented towards media relations and logic can be an indication of the institutionalisation of media with organisations. This concept has been used to describe media-related attitudes of organisational members concerning the media's impact on and its importance for their organisation (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019, p. 921; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). A qualitative interview study resulted in a conceptualisation consisting of three interacting dimensions: the perceived function of media coverage for the organisation (attention seeking), the perceived relevance of specific medium types for the organisation and its decision-making processes (strategic impact), and the evaluation of media coverage about the organisation and the media environment (media hostility) (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019, p. 927). It can be used to assess changes over time in organisational members' media-related attitudes, which are expected to play a role in the formation of the organisation's strategic communication policies. Furthermore, in today's mediatised society, we see how communication professionals can feel particularly high pressure from news media (van der Meer et al., 2017).

Organisational legitimacy

When it comes to social evaluations of organisations, reputation has traditionally been the core target of communication efforts by practitioners and studied as a key outcome variable in academic research (Jacobs &

Liebrecht, 2023). While reputation is competitive and performance-oriented, legitimacy stresses perceived congruence with societal norms or with other, similar types of organisations (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Corporate communication's recent shift towards a more societal and issue-based orientation has likewise shifted the attention to organisations' legitimacy and its interrelations with strategic communication and media (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). A lack of legitimacy is troublesome for an organisation's position in society and negatively affects its chances for long-term survival (Waeraas, 2020).

Media coverage plays a constitutive role in organisational legitimacy by presenting legitimacy perceptions held by stakeholder groups and by simultaneously co-constructing these perceptions by "providing the battleground" to discuss organisations' congruence with societal norms (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2022). A recent empirical account of media legitimacy can be found in the work of Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2022), who conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of newspaper coverage in the United Arab Emirates to assess news media framing of corporate diplomacy—i.e., organisations' communicative engage aimed at influencing sociopolitical trends in order to gain legitimacy—by multinational companies. Their analysis revealed that two out of three identified media frames focused on legitimacy elements related to the distribution of organisational benefits. Moral media legitimacy refers to media coverage that portrays the benefits of corporate diplomacy as distributed among communities or society at large or as congruent with societal norms and values, whereas "pragmatic media legitimacy occurs when news coverage emphasises the benefits of corporate diplomacy-related activities for individual actors and even groups within society at large" (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2022, p. 5). In sum, Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2022) lay out an empirical, content-analytical approach to media legitimacy which can be adopted in similar types of studies.

Besides this empirical account, a substantial amount of communication-scientific work on media legitimacy has a normative and/or conceptual orientation (e.g., Waeraas, 2020). This emphasises the importance of conducting further empirical work on this topic (see also Marschlich, 2022, p. 14). For that reason, much empirical work in the field of media legitimacy is currently ongoing. Current empirical projects in ASCoR's Corporate Communication group aim to analyse mediated organisational legitimacy constructions from various methodological angles. For instance, questions we aim to answer relate to the different types of legitimacy frames that are used in news media to cover public sector organisations, how news organisations

retain their legitimacy in the light of societal challenges in the digital age, and how issue communication strategies affect corporate reputation and/ or legitimacy.

Contributions to theory and practice

Based on the summary of the findings above, below we outline ASCoR's Corporate Communication group's contributions to the field. Again, we rely on the three topics to organise the contributions.

Media and organisations

The studies conducted within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group on the coverage of corporations in the news have enriched various theoretical frameworks, such as agenda-setting theory (e.g., Kroon & van der Meer, 2021; Strauß & Vliegenthart, 2017) and news values theory (e.g., Boukes et al., 2022; Schafraad et al., 2016). Furthermore, other studies in this domain have demonstrated the *direct* impact and relevance of this media coverage for the involved corporations. For instance, several studies demonstrated how both newspaper coverage (van der Meer & Vliegenthart, 2018) and press agency tweets (Strauß et al., 2018), impacted corporation's stock prices. In particular, media that are constantly updated (e.g., social media) can be particularly impactful in this regard. This demonstrates that new media may be more impactful for the fast-paced work of traders than traditional newspaper coverage, which by definition is always delayed. Future research on this topic can thus further investigate how media coverage of organisations in traditional (mass) media may have differential societal effects compared to media coverage in social media.

While many studies within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group on the connection between media and organisations focus on societal-level effects, it is also important to zoom in on individual effects (e.g., by combining content-analytic and survey data). For instance, Jonkman et al. (2020) demonstrated how particularly negatively valanced news can damage the reputation of organisations, but only for some news consumers. After all, they found a buffering effect through which people with initially positive attitudes about a corporation were less influenced by negative news. Altogether, this underlines the need for future research to also pay attention to characteristics of individual consumers and social groups and when assessing the impact of media coverage of organisations.

Mediatisation

The work on mediatisation by ASCoR's Corporate Communication group has provided a theoretical fundament for understanding how organisations' operating conditions, but also their public legitimacy, are largely constructed within the media debate. Through processes of mediatisation, organisational issues are shaped and given meaning through communication on platforms provided by the media. The centrality of media for organisations' interaction with their surroundings highlight how organisations cannot avoid aligning their communication according to the rules of the media. Organisations have to embrace the media logic and are often forced to adopt to changes in the media landscape. For example, new developments like the rise of (fear for) misinformation (van der Meer & Jin, 2020), increased polarisation of the public debate (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021), and the increasing powerful role of Big Tech companies in our information environment (Schwinges et al., 2022) are challenges of the media landscape that cannot be ignored by organisations. Overall, the research on mediatisation highlight how we cannot understand organisations' functions within society without taking the role of the media into account.

Legitimacy

In their reflection on organisations' legitimacy, van der Meer and Jonkman (2021) argue that corporations should also reflect on their SLO, which can be seen as the ways in which an organisation's social environment perceives and evaluates how the organisation deals with sociopolitical issues. Van der Meer and Jonkman (2021) state that both mediatisation and politicisation (i.e., the fact that organisations are asked more often to take an explicit position on sociopolitical issues) of corporations' environments push organisations towards the renewal of their SLO. Their work recognises the key role that legitimacy considerations do and should play in corporate communication efforts. Analyses of the content and effects of media legitimacy strategies can inform legitimacy-building and strategic communication efforts by organisations (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2022). The research projects currently being carried out will also contribute to a growing set of insights related to media legitimacy as an empirical phenomenon. The often-used definition of legitimacy as a multidimensional construct evaluated by diverse audiences (Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2022) provides a solid basis for further empirical explorations.

Next steps

The large body of varied work conducted within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group on the relation between organisations, media, and society has revealed how media play an important part in the ways in which perceptions and behaviours of organisations are shaped. News media can place organisations (and topics relevant to them) on the public, media, or political agendas, and, in these ways, affect the public's view on these organisations. The group's research on mediatisation shows how media are thus crucial in shaping perceptions by and of organisations. Through mediatisation and politicisation, organisations are required to participate more often in issue arenas on societal topics, even when organisations themselves would not necessarily want to engage in these issue arenas. In this way, we see a societal focus that requires that organisations do not solely focus on shareholder value, but—instead—also explicitly indicate how they operate for the benefit in society. In case organisations fail to do so, their legitimacy and their SLO may be put up for discussion in (social) media.

Future ASCoR research on these themes will focus on a variety of topics. First and foremost, the current lines of research will be continued and future work will further uncover when, how, and for whom media coverage of issue arenas impact perceptions of organisations. In addition, future work will further specify how mediatisation processes impact the operation of organisations and indicate how legitimacy framing is crucial for organisations' SLO.

Next to these developments, through an issue-centred approach, future work within the group will focus on the ways in which current societal trends impact organisational communication. In particular, this work will address the current epistemic crisis of trust, in which societal trust in organisations, politics, and institutions is declining (Edelman, 2023). In relation to this trend, future work addresses polarisation, in that organisations are asked to provide their perspectives on polarised sociopolitical issues (e.g., Eisele et al., 2022).

Decreasing societal and institutional trust provide new challenges to communication between organisations and their environment. With the aim to build and maintain relationships, organisational communication must become more concerned with establishing trust and meeting societal expectations. Accordingly, an information climate characterised by high levels of distrust adds an extra layer to corporate communication. Especially when this coincides with higher levels of (perceived) polarisation among different groups in society, this asks for new research to understand the

challenges for organisations' interplay with their society that come with these trends. Such research can demonstrate how individual, organisational, and societal factors impact organisational communication on these issues and subsequent stakeholder perceptions (e.g., Burgers et al., 2023). Accordingly, future research will keep focusing on a related trend, namely the role of mis- and disinformation in issue arenas affecting organisations (e.g., Jin et al., 2020).

In addition, the ways in which changes in the media ecosystem affect organisations will be essential to consider when moving forward. Important trends we observe include the rise of new genres like political satire, which blends aspects of news, opinion, and entertainment (Brugman et al., 2021, 2022) and impacts audience perceptions on organisations and industries (Möller & Boukes, 2022). A second important trend is how fast developments with artificial intelligence (AI) and other technological innovations, including society's risk perceptions related to AI (Araujo et al., 2020), will change or challenge the ways both the media and organisations operate in the coming years. Such research will not only focus on how media shape perceptions of organisations' adoption of new technologies (e.g., Droog et al., 2020; Shaikh & Moran, 2022), but also how these technologies themselves impact the current media landscape and the behaviour by news media and organisations. In addition, future work will strive to further develop and refine important communication-scientific theories (e.g., agenda-setting theory, framing theory, news values theory) and to develop new (computational) methods (e.g., data donation) to further the study of organisations, media, and society (e.g., Araujo et al., 2022; Kroon et al., 2022).

A final important goal of ASCoR's Corporate Communication group is to not only strive towards academic impact, but also towards societal impact by making sure that results from our papers find their way to relevant (organisational) stakeholders. The group, for instance, also writes books aimed at professional audiences (e.g., Dekker et al., 2021), blog posts (e.g., Boukes, 2021), and columns (e.g., Burgers, 2023) about corporate communication research for general audiences. In addition, within ASCoR's Corporate Communication group opportunities are created to share research insights with professionals, such as the CSC Webinars and the CSC Insights Whitepaper Series developed through the Logeion Chair. The group strives to continue and expand these activities in the future.

Taken together, this work will not only advance our knowledge of communication-scientific theory in relation to organisations, but—hopefully—also provide organisations with important theory- and evidence-based insights to navigate today's complex and dynamic media landscape.

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