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Nothing Is As Practical As a Good Theory: What Communication Research Can Offer to the Practice of Political Communication

Wolfgang Donsbach[1] and Anne-Marie Brade[1]

Abstract

The demands brought on public relations (PR) by management can only be met by more evidence-based procedures. Of course, single and subjective experiences are also a form of "evidence" but they are of a different kind and of a different quality because they often are not measurable, not quantifiable, and not repeatable. Thus, they are nontheoretical in a sense as described above. This article takes a look at what communication research can offer to PR practice. Three main services are discussed: (1) modeling the field and its variables, (2) providing methods for the measurement of PR effectiveness, and (3) measuring PR effectiveness and its quality.

Keywords

public sphere, professionalism, journalistic norms

Practitioners and Researchers—A Difficult Relationship

Stereotypes usually have a long life. If you ask practitioners of public relations (PR) about communication researchers, many of them would see them as confined in their ivory tower, handling topics far remote from the practical world of political communication, making an inefficient use of the resources supplied and paid for by the public,

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that is, mainly the industry, and most of the time slow and behind the curve of modern communication practices. On the other side, the same practitioners would hold that PR *is* this practical world, works in a highly cost–benefit oriented manner, is quick in reacting to stakeholders' needs, and is always ahead of the curve. Meanwhile, communication researchers tend to regard practitioners as totally oblivious of theoretical bases and guided only by experience, which must inevitably lead them into wrong directions once in a while. But how much better would the performance of public political communication be, if PR practitioners of political institutions and researchers would overcome their prejudices and be open for the input from the other side.

"Nothing is as practical as a good theory" is a famous quote that can be traced back to several smart sources, from the psychologist Kurt Lewin to writer Bert Brecht to the sociologist René König. König is probably the most authentic source for what I want to refer to with this quote: that "theory" is no antagonism to practice but indeed its basis in that its content is proven intersubjective evidence. A lot of theories of social sciences that were constructed after single projects turned out to find a practical value in the end: may it be Comte and his way of trying to rearrange the circumstances of joint living in societies (cf. Comte 2008 reprint) or Parsons claiming that capitalistic economy and a normatively-based social order can well go hand in hand (cf. Parsons & Smelser 1956, 8ff.). As Streeck puts it, testimonies about the construction of the real world are also always assertions on the role of plan- and meaningful acting. This acting, if put in the context of social orders, is what we call politics (Streeck 2008, S.6). So there has always been a connection of social sciences and practical politics. Especially in Germany, social sciences have been adding to the development of democracy—or rather have been considered a necessary incitement for the democratization of the newly developing order. They had to meet many expectations, starting with the disposition of general knowledge about society to safekeeping a fallback into National Socialism or a slide into the then-dreaded Communism. Ironically, this ascribed task served a main topos of Marx's theory whereby people were finally able to comprehend their own acting in its relevance for the whole society (Reese-Schäfer 2005, 104ff.; Streeck 2008, 8ff.). Anyway, with economic growth and the evolvement of welfare, discussions about the implementation of a "modern capitalism" as advertised by Shonfield (1965) took off in the Western hemisphere, again hardly practicable without social sciences (Streeck 2008, 8ff.). Nevertheless, ever since the social sciences have come a long way further, and are still traveling in this process, from purely normative and/or subjective humanities to evidence-based research and theory. In this interrelation, "theory" is understood as a system of well-confirmed assertions about the relationship between variables.

Naturally there are reasons for this change that has taken place predominantly over the past 30 years. First, the social sciences have been confronted with an increasing number of social problems for which society and politics have expected hard evidence. Take, for instance, in the field of communication, the consequences of increasing media consumption for people's worldview, or violent media content for child

development. But also in other fields did rapid social change bring about the need for valid answers to serious questions such as the effects of increasing intercultural mobility or of sociodemographic change on the economy.

A second reason for this epistemological change in the social sciences is the fact that good empirical research has indeed been able to prove its power. Theories just "worked," as in the natural sciences and in technology. Of course, they never have worked and will work with the same precision as in these disciplines but they are good enough to explain some considerable variance in human behaviors. Just think of the popular and frequently referred to game theory, a chapter of social sciences strongly linked with mathematics and economy, which aims at the explanation of decision making in a social context where the one party is always dependent on the other (for an overview cf. Aumann 2008; Myerson 1997), or of the maybe somewhat lesser known theory of cognitive dissonance, introduced by Festinger (1957) which describes the displeasing condition people are in when several cognitions like thoughts, feelings, intentions, and so forth clash with one another. Also well known and approved through intense research is the spiral of silence stating that the willingness of people to admit their opinions in public strongly depends on the percepted majority's opinion (cf. Fuchs 1992; Noelle-Neumann 1980), which since its development has been used on diverse parts of social life from issues of smoking (Shanahan et al. 2004) to the question of homosexuals in the military (Gonzenbach et al. 1999) to name just a view.

The most charming characteristic of those theories is that they can all be put onto the most different aspects of social life, from person-related facets to society-involving topics where they all can play a role in matters of political decision making. Thus, communication research as a part of the social sciences is today a discipline of evidence and explanation, able to predict concrete effects of specific causes—such as predicting the outcomes of PR measures.

But practitioners in the field of communication still have reservations toward the research in and about their area of practice. I can see mainly two reasons why this is the case: First, research is unfamiliar to many practitioners who have not studied this particular field themselves, and unfamiliarity makes things look more complicated than they are, not only since Shannon (1948). For practitioners, it is also more convenient to think in mono-causalities rather than multi-causality (as in the social sciences), because a higher grade of complexity makes decision making an even more tedious and challenging process. In the fast-moving daily business of practitioners, yes–no and respectively on–off answers are more economic and easier to handle. For the same reason, for them it is more reasonable to think in deterministic relationships rather than probabilistic ones (as again as in the social sciences). In addition, even good theories are often communicated in an incomprehensible academic manner instead of straight language.

A second reason for the reservations is anxiety. Empirical communication research has the ability to assess the practitioner's work (cf. e.g. Zerfaß 2005, S.191). This circumstance has the potential to lead to a certain discomfort with and suspicion toward

this research. Whereas there are no data on that question in particular, there is evidence that it is very hard to get the opinion of managers (unfortunately, there is no data on PR managers, but only managers in general) via surveys than of regular employees that might—the lack of time and the handling of sensible data put aside—indicate a certain mistrust (Baruch 1999, S.431). It is for this very same reasons that most journalists have reservations toward communication research, because it can measure the factors behind news decisions (including some not so flattering ones like economic interest or subjective beliefs) and the effects of the media on society (which also can include some less favorable ones). This assumption is being supported by the findings of a poll conducted with U.S. journalists in 2002 of which only a little more than a third said that conducting opinion polls was quite or extremely important to learn about citizens' priorities on issues (Weaver 2005, 5). Likewise, practitioners of PR also for many years have relied on intuitive decisions and claimed that the effects of these are not measurable, not accessible to systematic research.

But times are changing. There is pressure from two sides to incorporate research into the world of practice. On the one side and as shown above, the social sciences are offering more usable theories that cannot be forever neglected. On the other side, there is an increasing demand from management to assess the efficiency of PR measures. However, meanwhile even PR practitioners themselves regard the evaluation of their work as important. At least in Germany, 90 percent of PR professionals say that evaluating the results of PR is an important topic, although less than 50 percent of all communication projects are being evaluated eventually (*PR-Barometer* 2010). Organizational and in particular corporate communications have mutated from a playground for creativity to the culture of controlling where PR departments are treated like any other corporate branch. Part of this change can be explained by the fact that public images and *branding* have been recognized as important assets of organizations, be it in the private or the public sphere. Not only do these immaterial features contribute to the material value of organizations. The standing of an organization in public opinion and its relationship to media and journalists define to a large extent its degree of freedom in making decisions. Imagine a car maker today who does not prepare the construction of a new test circuit through communication with stakeholders in politics or environmental groups. Thirty years ago, the circuit was just built! What applies to car builders and other companies also goes for politics: The U.S. election campaigns are the best example of how PR takes up a major role in political processes. Campaigns and the communication of political decisions would not be possible without a good dosage of PR any more.

The demands brought to PR by management can only be met by more evidence-based procedures. Of course, single and subjective experiences are also a form of "evidence" but they are of a different kind and of a different quality because they often are not measurable, not quantifiable, and not repeatable. Thus, they are *non-theoretical* in the sense as described above and therefore do not qualify as perpetual solutions.

Challenges of Modern Political Communication

Alongside these professional needs, there is another aspect that makes the evaluation of PR projects highly significant: the challenges modern political communication has to face. Currently, three trends in political communication all of which are not necessarily advantageous for society as a whole can be observed: (1) deprofessionalization, (2) fragmentation, and (3) randomization.

The splendid miracle of modern communication, the Internet, undoubtedly also has some features that might be in the long run detrimental to the quality of public communication. There is today certainly more news than ever available but there is also more "news" that travel under this flag without having gone through the rigid procedures of verification applied by professional journalists. Bill Kovach, former director of the Nieman Program at Harvard University, says, "Each day that passes swells the number of people who join this tech-savvy generation accustomed to receiving and communicating what they want, when, where, how and from whom they want it" (Kovach 2006, 39). The consequence of more news from para- and nonjournalistic sources is the fact that the audience loses orientation and criteria to assess the degree of professionalism of these myriad of sources. That is why, political communication has to do a good job in releasing relevant and professional information to ensure that there is always a large proportion of high-quality news next to the deprofessionalized input. To meet the resulting need for top-quality PR instruments, dependable scientific evaluation methods become indispensable.

Fragmentation refers to the increasing ideological bias of sources and the selectivity of users. As Baum and Groehling (2008) inferred from their empirical study, "Regardless of their normative implications, our findings offer a striking validation for those who complain about one-sided coverage of politics in the so-called blogosphere" (p. 359). And Iyengar and Hahn (2009) find the equivalent on the users' side: "A further implication of voters' increased exposure to one-sided news coverage is an 'echo chamber' effect—the news serves to reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes" (p. 34). Thus, the old-fashioned cognitive dissonance theory mentioned earlier currently sees its revival through the modern communication patterns. This is what Bishop (2008) calls the "Big Sort" and we call the "Weimar 2.0-syndrome." The Weimar Republic in Germany, between 1918 and 1933, was characterized by thousands of newspapers of which most had a clear ideological tendency and a readership that only exposed itself to the messages that fitted their worldview. Thus, the German society became less and less capable of communicating among itself because the worldviews had almost no common grounds. Today we are again confronted with that problem and are dependent on a differentiated news coverage—and hence also competent, well-informed, and well-prepared PR professionals rising to the challenge.

Finally, *randomization* means the increasingly unpredictable effects of communication through random factors in the communication process. In almost all Western societies we do see a decreasing political interest and interest in "the news." The duty

to keep informed is on the decline, particularly among the younger generation. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 27 percent of the Americans aged eighteen to twenty-nine "got no news yesterday." In Germany, the percentage of young adults saying that "it is important for me to be always well informed about the events of the day, to be always up-to-date" has decreased between 2002 and 2008 from 45 to 37 percent (Pew Center for the People and the Press 2008).

This trend leads inevitably to a decreasing political knowledge. If knowledge and involvement are low, people tend to process information peripherally rather than centrally, meaning that peripheral cues decide about the acceptance of an argument or a communicator (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). These cues can be such peripheral factors as, Who has the nicer tie? Who talks longer in a talk show? Who gets more approval from the anchor or is more criticized? Who is said to win an election? The weights of the four main factors leading to political judgments—party identification, issues, candidate images, and moods—has shifted toward the latter. More and more ad hoc judgments based, often unconsciously, on these subtle cues—are pivotal in this process. The result is a "random partisanship" (Patterson). As a consequence, the voter more and more becomes a moving target for political communication—and thus the associated PR departments—because most of these cues cannot be planned, and are scarcely in the hands of the communicator.

All the more is it important to capture the success and influence of the means of political PR to be able to antagonize these trends. Therefore, let us have a look at what communication research can offer to PR practice. I see mainly three services: (1) modeling the field and its variables, (2) providing methods for the measurement of PR effectiveness, and (3) measuring PR effectiveness and its quality. In these considerations, we keep mostly to the field of media relations, which is one of the most important components of PR (cf. Adams 1995, 8f.) and also the one area best explored by communication science.

Modeling the Field and Its Variables

In the sciences, "models" are deliberate simplifications of complex fields with many dimensions and variables. They serve a heuristic value and have not the epistemological status of evidence sui generis, but help to identify these dimensions and variables and to stimulate hypotheses about causal relationships among them. Thus, models map a field and help the researchers as well as the practitioners to find orientation in it. The former get ideas what to investigate and the latter see their position in an environment of different roles and expectations.

These models reflect the different theoretical perspectives their authors have on the respective field. For instance, the system-theoretical model by Herger (2004) constructs "public relations" as one branch of corporate communication next to "market communication," where the task of PR is the communication with specific target groups and society as a whole in order to build up interaction and trust.

The "market model" by Russ-Mohl and coauthors (2007) takes a different approach by focusing specifically on the relationship between PR experts and journalists. They

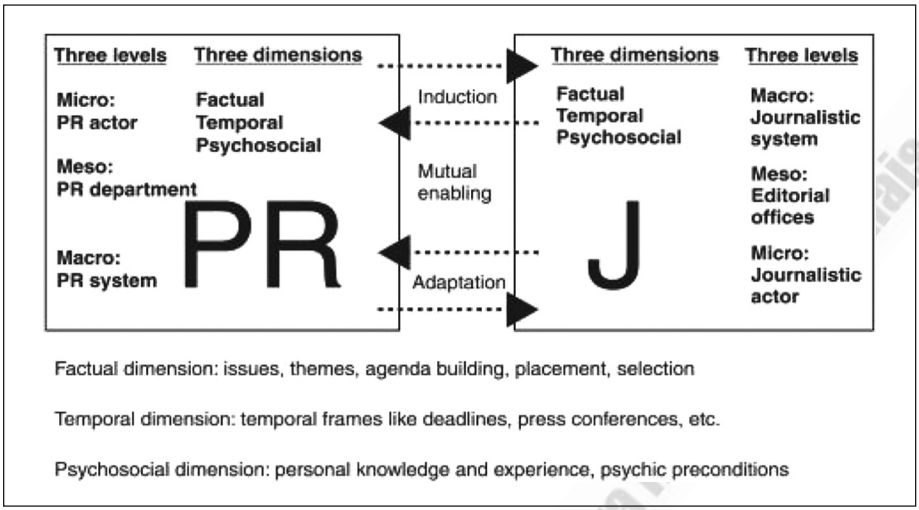

Figure 1. Intereffication model of PR
Source: Wehmeier (2008).

conceive of this relationship as a marketplace where PR offers the economic basis for media companies and topical information while journalism offers public attention. The gains of each side on this marketplace then depend on the value of their respective products in a certain situation.

The most refined model of PR is the "Intereffication Model" by Bentele and coauthors. The model focuses on the interconnectedness of PR and journalism and their mutual influence, mutual orientation, and mutual dependence. Thus, it yet again highlights the importance of media relations in the broad field of PR in general. The word *intereffication* (derived from the Latin word *efficare* = to make possible) insinuates that neither PR nor journalism would be able to function properly without the existence of the other. The model uses the constructs "adaptation" and "induction." Adaptations are activities and routines of one side conducted in order to be successful on the other side. Inductions are "intended and directed communicative stimuli which result in observable resonances in the respective other system" (Bentele et al. 1997, 241). For instance, PR practitioners adapt to journalists' news values and writing styles and, if they are successful with it, their messages resonate in the media as "inductions" (see also Wehmeier 2008). Figure 1 shows the logic of this model in greater detail.

Providing Methods for Measuring PR-Effectiveness

A second offer of communication research is to supply concepts for measuring the effectiveness of PR measures. Donsbach and Meissner (2004) created a model where they have distinguished between the "resonance effect" and the "determination effect." Both measure the relative impact of PR on media content but from different perspectives. The resonance effect indicates the proportion of PR measures (e.g., press

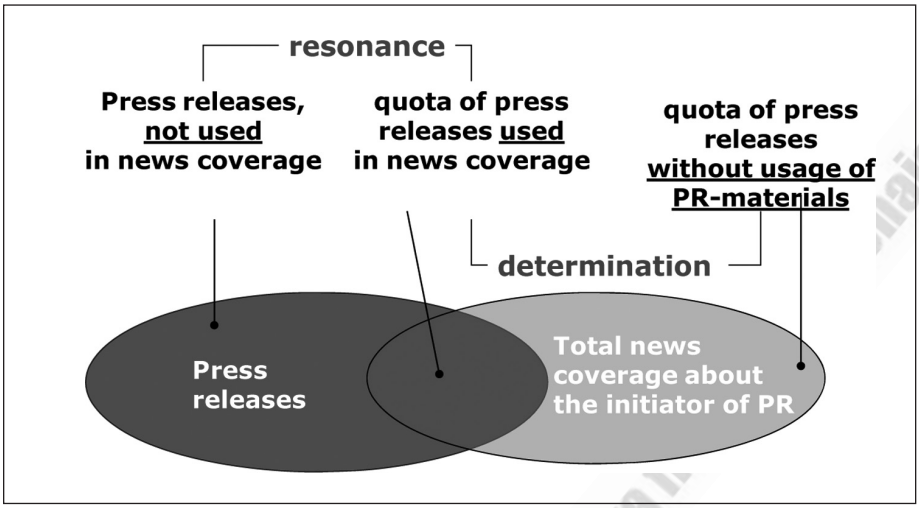

Figure 2. Resonance and determination coefficients
Source: Donsbach and Meissner (2004).

releases) that have any effect on media content. The determination effect, on the other side, indicates what proportion of the total coverage of an actor can be traced back to its own PR. Thus, the former indicator measures mere effectiveness while the latter also measures the quality and independence of journalism. The prerequisite for such assessments is, of course, quantitative content analyses of both PR measures and media content (Figure 2).

Another construct aiming at a different kind of effects is the "reputation index" developed by Fombrun (1996). In this concept, reputation is defined as "the net perceptions of a company's ability to meet the expectations of all its stakeholders" (Fombrun and Gardberg 2000, 13). A company's or any other organization's reputation is built on its scores on six dimensions each measuring different aspects of its reputation: emotional appeal, products and services, vision and leadership, workplace environment, financial performance, and social responsibility. Representative samples of all stakeholders indicate the performance of the organization on each dimension by means of some twenty statements. The scores are then transferred into a *Reputation Quotient*, a service mark owned by Harris International. A similar model is the "balanced score card" approach by Zerfaß (2004) that distinguishes for each of its five dimensions between factors of success, value drivers, performance figures, and programs. In a similar way, Hon and Grunig measure the relation of an organization and its publics on six dimensions: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationships, and communal relationships. A list of items relating to each of the dimensions is given to the respondents, who have to express their level of consent with each item. For example, for communal relationships they have to evaluate the item "This

organization is very concerned about the welfare of people like me." Taking all answers into consideration, the quality of the organization–public relationship can be rated (Hon and Grunig 1999). Besides these concepts for modeling PR effectiveness, communication research has developed concrete tools or methods to actually assess effects. Among them are input–output analyses of PR activities, comparative input–output analyses for different activities, journalism and news selection research, and time series analyses.

Input–output analyses compare the quantity and quality of the influx of messages by a certain actor with the output by a news medium. This can be assessed at different stages of the communication process, for example, the input and output of a news agency or of a newspaper. *Comparative input–output analyses* compare the efficiency of several different PR tools such as press conferences versus press releases or interviews.

A vast body of communication research has investigated *journalists' attitudes and professional behaviors*. The results have amounted in theories of news decisions that allow predictions about the handling of news, including news provided by PR. These studies often apply surveys, quantitative content analyses, participatory observation, and sometimes field or laboratory experiments to draw conclusions. Finally, in *time series analyses*, one combines statistically the frequency of PR activities with the frequency and/or quality of an organization's coverage by one or several news media.

Measuring PR Effectiveness and Its Quality

All these methods have, of course, not much value without their application for assessing concrete PR effectiveness. There are already a lot of studies that have successfully measured the latter. All of them serve different purposes and can offer findings for scientists as well as for practitioners. But whereas practitioners are rather interested in engineering effectiveness, social sciences need a normative orientation. The normative orientation in our discipline can be defined as finding the gaps between the norm and the reality of social communication. We do this, for instance, when measuring the degree of autonomy of the media system—not least toward PR. In an ideal democratic society, the media system should cover reality as independently as possible from influences that are driving toward the representation of particular interests as of political parties. Ironically, the interests of normative communication research and PR practitioners are somewhat opposed in this respect.

An example for a typical input–output analysis that tries to uncover some of the norm–reality gap (Donsbach and Wenzel 2002) is the investigation of all 486 press releases by the parties in the Saxon state parliament over a period of five months and the coverage of the parties by all six dailies published in Saxony, which resulted in 823 news items. Following the model described in the previous chapter, the authors then calculated what percentage of the press releases had at least some visibility in press coverage. Only 28 percent of the press releases resonated in the news media, which

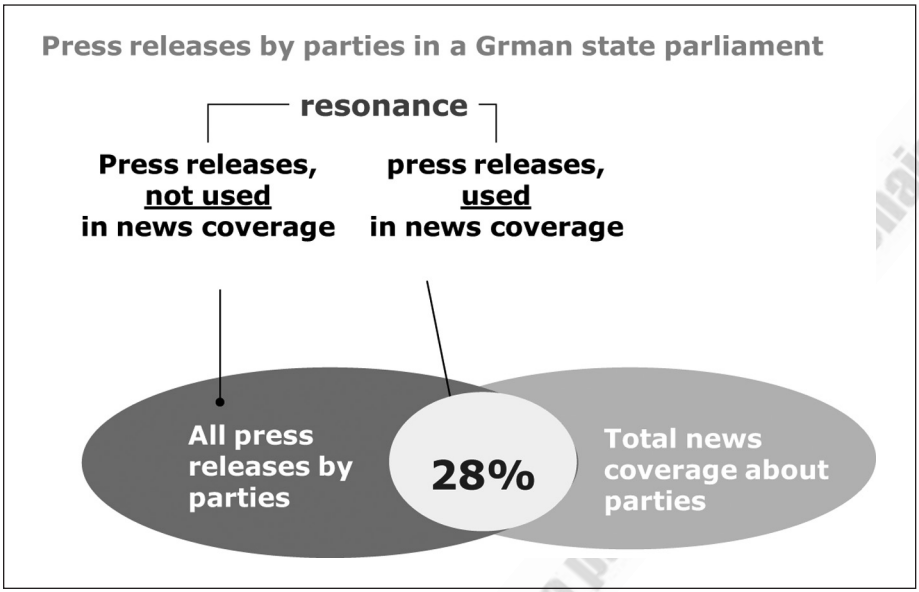

Figure 3. Resonance of political press releases in the news media

means that the majority ended up in the electronic trashcan of the editors (Donsbach and Wenzel 2002; see Figure 3).

Because the authors in the content analysis had coded several features of the press releases, they were able to positively relate their characteristics such as the quality of the writing style, the topic and news factors such as conflict, negativity, and personalization to PR effectiveness. Given that kind of data, political communicators are able to offer press releases to the media that have a higher chance of making it into the news. That on its part increases the informational range of political communication and thereby adds to the functioning of democracy. However, one might argue that a release of information that only aims at publication might lead to a decrease of news quality by counting too much on negatively connoted news values like conflict and personalization. Therefore PR practice should always find a balance in the applied utilization of evaluation results and the moral desirability of those implementations, especially when it comes to politics.

Another study by Donsbach and Meissner (2004) went a step further, because based on the methodological design of the study, the authors were able to calculate the respective resonance coefficient of press releases from different segments of society on top of the regular input–output numbers. For the latter, they found a similar coefficient for the resonance of PR input in the German news agency, *dpa*, as in the study mentioned above. Of all press releases sent to the wire service, only 22 percent made it into its news service. In the analysis of the society segments, the authors found that

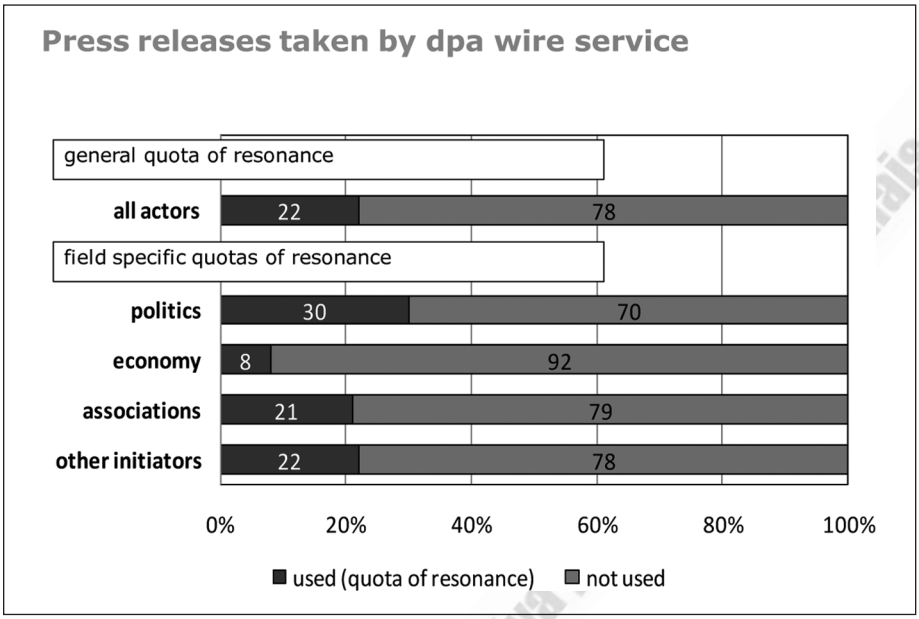

Figure 4. PR efficiency of different sources

political parties had the highest coefficient (30 percent) and businesses the lowest (8 percent; see Donsbach and Meissner 2004) (Figure 4). At least those numbers show that political information is still regarded newsworthy. And by providing that kind of detailed findings, PR evaluation takes a step to make the news flow more transparent than it has been before.

Another approach was used by Müller, who compared the effectiveness of different PR tools used by the mayor of a big city in Germany. By involving different types of PR into one study, the author is able to offer a broader view over the benefits each PR instrument has to offer. Studies like that are especially valuable for PR practitioners who have to consider how to use their resources in the most economic way. However, the results of this particular study showed that press conferences had a much higher impact on the media system than press releases issued by the major's office (Müller 2005).

Looking at that data and the findings from several other studies, we see no reason to worry—that is, from a scientific point of view. In most cases investigated, the far majority of coverage about a political, economic, or other social actor does not originate in this actor's own PR. Take, for instance, the coverage of the political parties in the Saxon parliament mentioned above: when we switch the perspective from the resonance to the *determination coefficient* and look at the proportion of the overall coverage that can be traced back to the parties' PR, only 25 percent of all articles show such a relationship. In other words, almost three of four articles have their origin in other sources or activities, in most cases probably the journalists' own research (Donsbach

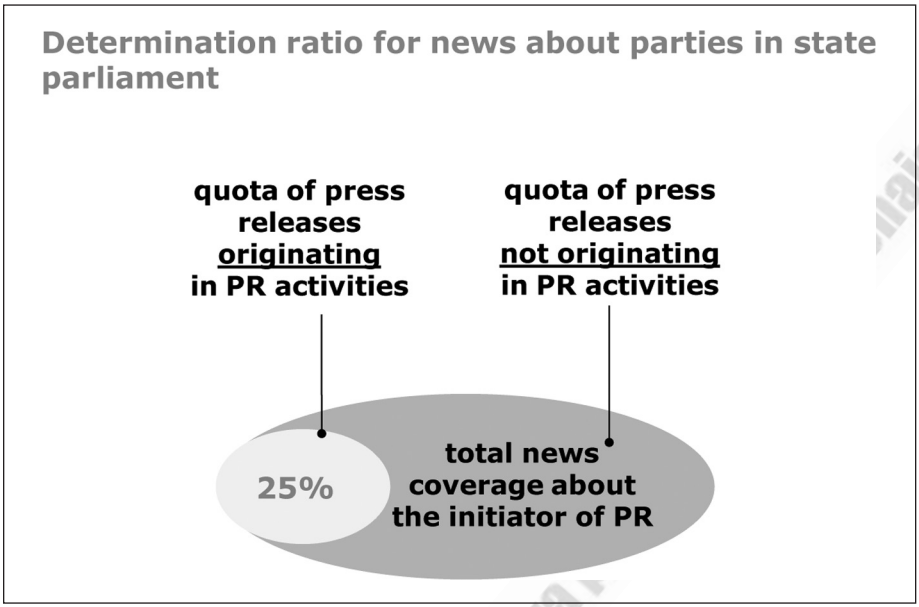

Figure 5. No reason to worry

and Wenzel 2002; Figure 5). For the coverage of the mayor of a big German city, the determination coefficient is a bit higher (37 percent) but still offers no reason to worry. In the realm of local politics there are just fewer channels through which reporters can gain information about the head of the city.

From the PR practitioners' point of view, however, the very same data might be a little discouraging as they show all too clearly how difficult influencing the media really is and how only the smallest part of the undertaken efforts results in actual news coverage. Anyway, such research can still help to find out which PR instruments work best and why and how it is capable of controlling PR effectiveness over a longer period of time.

Conclusions

Reality shows that there is a major need for the assistance of communication research in the field of PR. It can not only offer helpful instruments for practitioners to make the effects of their projects and efforts more traceable but, on a higher social level, it can also serve as a safeguard for the functioning of democracy by uncovering the risky trends in political communication: deprofessionalization applies to almost every citizen, fragmentation more to the politically interested ones, and randomization to the politically disinterested audience. What do these trends mean for professional political communication? Does it become easier for political communicators to get their points

across and reach their target audiences? That is questionable. In the flood of claims and assertions, news and propaganda, and neutral and biased communication, the citizens need orientation. They will, it is hoped, not take chances and rely on sources who address them directly or via social media platforms without the checks for relevance and validity that only professional mediators can provide. Therefore, serious and relevant political communication by political parties, interest groups, or social movements strongly depends on these "intermediates" qualified by professional procedures and values and legitimized by social acceptance and credibility. Without these intermediates who sort the chaff from the wheat in public communication, relevant political messages will drown in the flood of this new cacophony. In addition, there is always going to be a great need for scientific studies and opinion polls to assist PR practitioners in the "design" of their releases and instruments and the intermediates in their choices of newsworthy information. This way, all sides gain a benefit from each other and thereby contribute to the well-being of society in general.

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