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549

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International Organizations

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The term international organizations (IOs) most frequently refers to international governmental organizations. In contrast to other organizations whose activities also may transcend national borders (nongovernmental organizations or multinational corporations), IOs are founded by a multilateral governmental act (Rittberger & Zangl, 2006, p. 8).

Typical examples of this type of IO are the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, but also many less well-known entities such as the International Coffee Organization. These IOs differ in their membership (global as in the UN system or regional as in the European Union), their focus on a specific sector, and the degree to which national governments have delegated sovereignty thus creating supranational as opposed to intergovernmental organizations. The European Commission and the UN Security Council, respectively, are typical examples of both kinds of organizations. Intergovernmental organizations are sometimes viewed as arenas of the power play of national actors but they are also actors in their own right (Rittberger & Zangl, 2006, pp. 3–13).

The idea of IOs as arenas and as actors implies different roles in communication: An actor has agency, pursues public relations strategies to reach organizational goals, and communicates with different publics. An arena provides the set-up for political communication. Its features have an influence on which actors are able to raise their voices, how they can do so, and how close they are to the wider audience. IOs, in this latter understanding, moderate communications and set the stage. They do not necessarily act as prominent speakers in their own right.

The role of IOs in the field of political communication is largely unexplored territory. Current handbooks of political communication as well as public relations lack entries on IOs. This reflects a lack of recognition for the transnational aspects of political communication and the role international organizations play in the increasingly global network of political communications. The communication of public organizations at the national level still deserves further attention (Graber, 2003) and this applies even more strongly to the transnational level. There are some case studies on the more



prominent international organizations, mostly on the UN and EU institutions, but there is no coherent and integrated field of research dealing with the role of IOs in communication. Therefore it is necessary to define the place of international organizations in communication research and to discuss in what way their communication activities are distinct from those of other organizations.

Locating international organizations in communication research

So far, research on international organizations has mainly come from the field of international relations (IR) in political science. IR is concerned with international organizations as part of global governance. IOs are actors and arenas of international policy-making, and much discussion revolves around their legitimacy, which is seen as being in crisis. Indications of this legitimacy crisis are waning levels of public trust and support, as shown in the results of referenda on EU treaties and growing public protests against institutions like the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, or the G8 (the group of the eight most important economies).

There is not much research on international organizations from a communications perspective. This has to do with the fact that they are located at the intersection of three subfields of communication research that do not communicate particularly well: (1) IOs are part of *organizational communication* and public relations (PR) research as they are organizations with internal and external communication functions; (2) they are part of *political communication* research as they are inherently political organizations, even if many international organizations deal with seemingly technical matters; and (3) they are part of *international (or transnational) communication* as they deal with matters that cross national borders. This has led to research being scattered across different research areas.

The absence of a more coherent body of research from a communication perspective is all the more remarkable since the legitimacy deficit so vividly discussed in political science is linked to a deficit in communication (Meyer, 1999). A lack of support and trust can—among other factors—be related to the failure of strategic communication efforts, and this failure can partly be attributed to the lack of a transnational public sphere, a communicative network connecting populations with the organizations that govern a substantive part of their everyday life. An IO may *foster* the emergence of a transnational public sphere by trying to actively spark and engage in political debates across borders, but it cannot *construct* a public sphere from above. A transnational public sphere evolves as the result of an increasing connectedness and mutual opening up of national public spheres.

International organizations and political communication

Two conceptual questions must be tackled in order to identify the specific challenges for the communication efforts of IOs: In what way are international organizations different

**Table 1** Major challenges for organizational communication in different environments

<i>Level/Type</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>
National	<i>National companies</i> Efficiency and efficacy Internal and external publics	<i>Government agencies</i> Efficiency and efficacy Internal and external publics Public service (transparency, accountability, responsiveness) Limited agency (rules, resources)
Transnational	<i>Multinational corporations</i> Efficiency and efficacy Internal and external publics Cross-cultural, multi-level communications	<i>International organizations</i> Efficiency and efficacy Internal and external publics Public service (transparency, accountability, responsiveness) Limited agency (rules, resources) Cross-cultural, multi-level communications

from other kinds of organizations? Are these differences likely to matter for communication?

All organizations have some things in common with regard to communication. They communicate with publics and stakeholders that are situated both externally and within the organization. Furthermore, all organizations strive for efficient and effective communication aiming at achieving their goals with the least investment of scarce resources and the greatest effect. IOs are different from other kinds of organizations in that they are (a) public and (b) situated at the transnational level. These characteristics have repercussions for communication, as shown in Table 1.

Limited agency

Firstly, public bodies are more constrained communicators than private entities, leading to limited agency as communicators (see the different models by Graber, 2003, p. 8). IOs' communications are confronted with higher normative expectations, governed by stricter rules on how and what they can communicate, and they often have fewer financial and human resources to achieve their communicative goals. Beyond strategically pursuing PR efforts, public bodies have to grant access to certain documents depending on the transparency rules that apply to them. While the EU does have a comparatively robust transparency regime, other IOs do not feature a general citizen's right of access to documents. Rules for access to information and PR activities are intrinsically linked: Brüggemann (2010, p. 7) argues that both components are expressions of the information policy of a public body defined as the set of political decisions that determines the organization's communication goals, rules, and activities.

The normative challenge

The communications of public entities are expected to be in line with the overall public service mission of the organization. Communication is supposed to enhance



the transparency of the organization concerned, so that its leadership can be held accountable. A public body is expected to be responsive to its constituency. Its PR is expected to follow the paradigm of two-way symmetrical communication rather than promotionalism. Higher normative expectations of public organizations do not automatically translate into the appropriate communication activities: whether they actually pursue dialogue or propaganda is a question for empirical research.

The cross-cultural challenge

Cultural differences are seen as the central challenge to international PR. Its strategies have to navigate between globally uniform approaches developed at the headquarters of the respective organization and fully individualized PR developed in and adapted to specific cultural contexts (Botan, 1992; Ingenhoff & Ruehl, 2013). Both strategies have weaknesses. While a standardized approach is not adapted to the needs of specific audiences, fully diversified approaches risk departing from the overall communication goals pursued by an organization. Only a few international organizations have the resources to develop fully individualized communication approaches in different countries.

The multilevel challenge

International organizations communicate in a multilevel environment. They address stakeholders at the transnational level (other transnational actors such as NGOs or lobbyists from multinational corporations), at the national level (government actors), and below the national level (different kinds of local publics). Again, this calls for a certain degree of adaptation that poses a challenge for maintaining a coherent and integrated public image and depends on resources that are hardly available to many IOs.

Taking together the two challenges of communicating within different cultural contexts and on different levels, communications of IOs could be analyzed by drawing on a matrix structure that identifies different communication activities on the vertical scale (directed toward the transnational, national, or local level) and the horizontal scale (adapted to different cultural contexts or countries) (Valentini, 2008, p. 115).

In sum, the specific character of IOs makes successful communication as envisaged by the organization more difficult and less likely to occur. This is well reflected in the results of empirical research on the communication activities of IOs.

Empirical research on the communications of IOs

The most intensively researched IOs are the more prominent EU and UN institutions. Already in 1946, Benjamin Cohen, Assistant Secretary General of the UN, wrote that his organization could not fulfill its brief unless “the peoples of the world were fully informed of its aims and activities” (1946, 145). Fifty years later, Gramberger and Lehmann (1995) claimed in one of the few studies that compare the communications of different IOs that the EU and the UN both suffer from a structural neglect of PR, a



systematic underestimation of public opinion, and a failure to reach out to the general public. Their findings sum up other research about different EU and UN institutions well: IOs' missions and claims with respect to communication are ambitious but their means, in terms of budget, professional communication workforce, and institutional set-up, prevent effective communication. Studies conclude that the direct PR outreach of the European Commission, one of the best-resourced IOs, is often limited to those already in the know (Brüggemann, 2010).

At the same time, there is a long-term trend among different IOs toward a greater emphasis on proactive and professional communication that eschews the arcane sphere of technocratic politics. The history of the EU's information policy is particularly well documented (e.g., Spanier, 2012; Valentini & Nesti, 2010). Most studies focus on the European Commission, but some also cover the communications of the Council of the European Union (in which the EU member states' governments coordinate policy) and the European Parliament. The more recent studies also document how the communications of the European Commission have been constantly reformed to achieve higher levels of professionalism, for example at the spokespersons service (SPP) in Brussels (Spanier, 2012), and toward developing a broader set of digital and audiovisual communication tools, such as EUtube and the offering of images and films on EU issues by satellite (see the contributions in Valentini & Nesti, 2010). In spite of the development of a multitude of PR instruments, however, there is a deepening knowledge gap: The transnational expert sphere or elite public in Brussels is awash with information but is disconnected from the broader public on the national level. Thus, the communication deficit in the EU applies to the general public rather than the expert sphere in Brussels (Spanier, 2012, p. 95).

With respect to the UN, there is a similar development toward a growing relevance of communication: Information campaigns have even become part of its peacekeeping missions and it has developed some new ways of attracting the attention of the wider public, for example by using celebrities as goodwill ambassadors. Some critical assessments of UN communications characterize them as propaganda—a critique that is also sometimes made of EU communications.

An example of research that sees IOs as arenas and moderators rather than speakers in political communication is Adolphsen (2012). He analyzes the UN climate summits as occasions for NGOs, national governments, and journalists to coproduce the topics and content of media coverage on this policy event. Yet by setting up the infrastructure for the meetings, the secretariat of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) influences political communication at the summit. For example, by providing bloggers with a separate working space it also provides them with recognition as a legitimate voice.

IOs' influence on transnational communication should therefore not be underestimated. They may be comparatively weak as speakers that formulate effective political messages but they are influential in shaping the arenas for political communication on the transnational level. This role deserves further empirical analysis. Also, future research should pursue a more rigid comparative approach toward the study of IOs which would allow findings to be put into perspective and explain the differences between the communications of various international organizations.



SEE ALSO: Communication Theory; Globalization; International Relations; Propaganda

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