Sustainability Communication as Critical Perspective in Media and Communication Studies—an Introduction

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Abstract

A new decade, the ‘roaring 20ies’, with a very visible and tangible climate crisis, is crying out for solutions on a global scale, currently exacerbated in a COVID-19-related economic, social and cultural crisis. Sustainability is the moral compass for individual, community as well as organizational and institutional action for a new, regenerative human-nature relationship. At the same time, the increase in communication about sustainability (public discourses), of sustainability (CSR, policies) and even for sustainability (NGOs, Fridays for Future) challenges media and communication studies dealing with the critical evaluation of the principle of growth as master frame in public discourses and the necessity to communicate inconvenient truths of de-growth and abandonment. This chapter introduces the main provocations and concepts
for sustainability communication in the future and, in doing so, further establishes sustainability communication as emerging field with rather unspecific boundaries.

1 Introduction

Nearly a decade ago, the editors first observed sustainability communication sneaking into the field of media and communication studies from various sides (Krainer and Weder 2011; Godemann and Michelsen 2011). Since then, sustainability communication has become established as a field of practice and, step by step, as an area of research, fed by theories and methods from various areas like Environmental Communication and Sustainability Studies (Godemann and Michelsen 2011), Strategic Communication and Marketing (Management Communication 2015; Newig et al. 2013; Allen 2016), Media Studies (de Witt 2011), Psychology (Kruse 2011) and Pedagogy (Burns 2015; Weder and Milstein 2020). The literature supports sustainability communication as interdisciplinary however determinable research area (Weder et al. 2019; Godemann and Michelsen 2011; Krainer and Weder 2011), showing that sustainability as normative framework as well as the concept of sustainable development in relation to a constantly changing climate and related challenges can only be reflected in relation to public discourses. Therefore, the contribution of media and communication studies to this research area as well as the discussion of practical implications and desiderata seems to be unquestionable.

2 Sustainability—More Than a Buzz Word in the ‘roaring 20ies’?

What a beautiful headline: “Communicating the Sustainable Development Goals—For Everyone!”1, a workshop offered to better communicate sustainability and the related 17 goals (adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, see UN 2020) to cope with a global crisis and its impacts. Similar to this,

1 This is the title the UN chose for their series of Round Tables Discussions held on April 21st, 2016 with the aim of inspiring new communication means and tools for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). See: https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/160421pm-sdgs-com.pdf, last accessed: 10.04.2020.
national and international consultants-of-all-kind’s advice is to tell the “sustainability story”, use “pics more than words” or integrated communication strategies to “associate your brand with sustainability”. While publicly communicating about climate change is hard (Schäfer and Bonfadelli 2017), communicating about sustainability seems to be even harder, thinking about the degree of complexity, about the contradictions between the short-term oriented media and sustainability as long-term development as well as reflecting on the high degree of morality of sustainability as concept and narrative of the future (Weder et al. 2020).

Definitions of sustainability mostly relate back to the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 43), which states that we have to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is introduced as concept to understand the processes of exploration, learning and shaping the future—which necessarily involves communication (Newig et al. 2013). Communication of and about as well as for sustainability are fairly new paradigms in communication studies, supported by the rather established fields of CSR communication (Diehl et al. 2017; Golob et al. 2013; Karmasin and Weder 2008), climate change communication (Brüggemann and Engesser 2017; Schäfer 2015; Newig 2011) or environmental, risk and science communication (Godemann and Michelsen 2011; Adomßent and Godemann 2011; Agyeman 2007; Allen 2016; Lindenfeld et al. 2014).

The core idea of sustainability, namely to achieve a balance of prosperity, planet and people, has established itself as the guideline for a sustainable future, showing and glowing as the “sunshine perspective” on sustainability. The sunshine perspective conceptualizes sustainability as alternative normative framework within our world of growth, capitalism and market orientation, trying to achieve a balance between social justice, economic profit and ecological interests (Elkington 1997). However, it is a story of progress, of technological innovation and of a renewable energy economy. Over the past decade, the range of groups and people who have adopted sustainability as this sunny, positive “common future” frame has become incredibly wide, ranging from universities, regional and local communities and cities, non-profit organizations, states and political parties, to predominantly industrial companies. Hereby, the framework of the United Nations, articulated in the 17 Sustainability Development Goals (UN 2020), is action-stimulating and action-guiding and framing for tools and strategies as mentioned above.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of a new decade, the potentially “roaring 20ies”, with weather extremes causing a climate emergency all over the world, a perspective on sustainability communication that goes beyond corporate sustainability
reports, political strategies as well as networks and organizations stepping up for a sustainable lifestyle has become necessary. Beside the “sunny” perspective on sustainability, beside the narrative of growth, there is a “rainy side” to sustainability as well, a narrative of environmental degradation and individual sacrifices. Here, sustainability is seen as the alternative to capitalism, meaning the turning away from a growth-oriented economic concept, leading to individual abandonment and abstention or even more comprehensively to a restriction of fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of the market. This perspective seems to be rather unappealing mainly on an individual level because it cuts down the narrative of individuality and personal freedom. By compiling *The Sustainability Communication Reader*, we have discovered a third, once again more positive narrative, appearing at the horizon of the field: A narrative of sustainability as revolution, as cultural change, of innovation and of doing things differently. It is a story of progress, that is only rarely told, again because of its complexity. It implies a deeper understanding of relinquishment, restoration and regenerative practices and new ecological identities (Weder and Milstein 2020; Milstein and Sotomayor 2020). This narrative has not been part of public discourses so far. Why is that?

3 Communication Barriers and Background Noise

Our world has been turned completely upside down. The digitally disrupted media ecosystem with a range of interconnected flows of mediated information seems to be dominated by political and commercial interests. Velocity and disinhibition of communication in the media are seen as the most prevalent barriers to critical, reflective public discourses. The abundance of information, the rise of the prosumer (by dismantling the division between producer and consumer) and ‘produser’ (by dismantling the division between producer and user, Bruns 2006) as well as the algorithmic production of content challenges the concept of general interest or common sense relating to moral frameworks for communication itself. Empirical studies like the Edelman trust barometer\(^2\) describe mediatisation as meta process (Krotz et al. 2017) which has shaken the foundations of trust and the hierarchies of information flows and knowledge in politics, media and even science. This makes trust and reliability an essential part of successful communication—especially when the message is not easy to convey (Karmasin 2020). Next to its complexity and being a blurry and wicked term (Herrick and Pratt 2013),

\(^2\)For further information see: https://www.edelma.com/trustbarometer, last accessed 10.02.2020.
the challenges of communicating sustainability from a publics’ perspective can be described as the following (Krainer at al. 2018; Karmasin 2020):

- you don’t get readers, views and likes with an inconvenient truth. The inconvenient truth about cost increases, redistribution and loss of welfare (at least according to the traditional operationalisations of “welfare”) and the need for a change of the “1-world-lifestyle” (consumption, mobility behaviour) is hard to communicate;
- you have to deal with the contradiction of “green advertisement”, which helps to ignore the truth, and the concept of sustainability, which basically means that we can’t afford our lifestyle;
- the economic interests of media corporations counteract the concept of sustainability;
- the short-term and news value orientation of the media antagonizes the long-term perspective of sustainable development;
- local, regional and national interests do not always match global phenomena and strategies;
- social media amplify those barriers and challenges.

However, despite the listed challenges, in the context of the SDGs as global framework for a sustainable and therefore positive future, there seems to be a common sense regarding the idea that synergies, technological and social innovations might benefit everybody and on related opportunities for present and future generations. But the story of sustainability as one of restraint, modesty and responsibility, with a call for revolution in the spirit of cultural change, also makes it clear that communicating the SDGs is communication in a disputed arena of conflicting interests, of antagonism and hegemonic voices occupying the narrative of sustainability as economic growth.

*The Sustainability Communication Reader* gathers perspectives on these challenges and conflicts and shows the dichotomy of communication that the public is confronted with today—a dichotomy between a (hyper)positive narrative of economic growth (sunshine perspective) on the one hand, and a narrative of inconvenient truths, of sustainability as abandonment and sacrifice (rainy side). The dichotomy is perpetuated with the divide between news reporting focusing on

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3 An Inconvenient Truth is a 2006 American academy award winning documentary directed by Davis Guggenheim about former United States Vice President Al Gore’s campaign to educate people about global warming, which has become a reference project for communicating about sustainable development.
ecological degradation and offering only a limited coverage of solutions, and if so, promoting techno-scientific rather than individual solutions on the one side; on the other side, there is the solution overload in strategic communication, the over-use of sustainability as “growth” and “gain”-frame.

In general, the chapters of *The Sustainability Communication Reader* do not only discuss those challenges from a media as well as organizational perspective; they bring in a new perspective on communities, cultural change, and ecocultural identity building processes. Much more, they show that sustainability communication in today’s public sphere needs a deeper reflection and critical, revolutionary communicators with a profound understanding of ethics. Ethics becomes relevant here for various reasons. First, because it has traditionally been made responsible for the analysis, criticism and reflection of ethical (moral) value concepts. Second, because its dialectical orientation is necessary for the understanding of (insoluble) contradictions. Third, because ethical approaches provide important guidance for the practical handling of such contradictions. Sustainability related issues show contradictions in our society and culture and comment on our social order. Reflexivity on those contradictions can be seen as the key to building a public discourse on sustainable development, which is represented in sustainability communication as research field and brought into full bloom from a media and communication perspective, which is shown by the chapters of the reader, introduced in the following:

### 4 The Chapters of the Reader

As explained above, *The Sustainability Communication Reader* takes an innovative approach to sustainability communication as inter- and transdisciplinary area of research and object of study and scientific reflections. Following the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, intended to transform the world as it is known, this reader will enable a multidisciplinary discussion of the role communication plays in realizing these goals.

By combining complementary theoretical approaches and concepts, the book offers various perspectives on conversations, communication practices and strategies, and related communicative situations on an individual, institutional, organizational as well as public level that contribute, enable (or hinder) sustainable development. However, in this book we do not limit ourselves to disciplines and the analysis of their potential in considering sustainability. Much more, we take a broader perspective and show all variations of *communication about, for*
and of sustainability as well as concepts and case studies, campaigns and examples of sustainable communication. Moreover, the book endeavours to introduce, promote and analyse innovative methods for sustainability communication. Overall, the chapters starts with a strong theoretical foundation and discuss various formats and dimensions of sustainability communication; the innovative character of the reader is that we present Sustainability Communication rather as emerging field with unspecific boundaries by developing a research agenda with topics, issues and heuristics for future research in parts 3 to 5.

Part I: The interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of the field is introduced, explained and discussed by Jasmin Godemann. The above introduced perspectives and narratives on sustainability communication are represented by Alison Anderson, focusing on environmental communication in the media on the one hand, and the emergence of sustainability as narrative of post-political communication by Philip Hammond on the other hand. This first part of the compendium is complemented by three chapters, strengthening the theoretical grounding of sustainability communication as demarcated research area and the mandatory provision of media and communication studies fuelling this area. Roy Bendor discusses the mediated meaning of sustainability as transition and/or transformation, followed by a theoretical conceptualization of transmedia storytelling and tracking of sustainability throughout various media channels by W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay. From there, Franzisca Weder’s chapter on sustainability as narrative of the future takes off, introducing sustainability as (hyper)positive master-frame used—and abused—in public communication.

Part II: As mentioned above, a focus of this reader is on different formats of sustainability communication and represented narratives. The first chapter of Part II, written by Helena Bilandzic and Anja Kalch, analyses the role of fictional narratives in sustainability communication. The authors present an overview of studies exploring narratives in fictional media, while in the following chapter, Jeffrey Barber focuses rather on methods and examples of those narratives. Barber’s narrative approach and the conceptualization of sustainability as narrative of transition, focusing on visual communication and films, is neatly complemented by a similar approach taken Joanna Nurmis, who places pictures and photographs at the centre of her analysis.

Next, Franz-Theo Gottwald and Franzisca Weder take a closer look at documentaries and sustainability as implicit morality presented in this specific medium and format. This part of the reader is complemented by a future oriented perspective on, firstly, social media’s role in framing the debate on sustainable
development as answer to climate change related problems by Nancy van Leuven, Thomasena Shaw and Lisa Bergson. Secondly, by the in-depth analysis of the potential and limitations of games and gamification as new instrument for communicating about and mainly for sustainability, written by Anneliese Fuchs, Christina Pichler-Koban, Arthur Pitman, Wilfried Elmenreich and Michael Jungmeier. And thirdly, Brigitte Huber and Ingrid Aichberger introduce sustainability as master-frame looks at traditional news media.

**Part III:** After the foundations and theoretical perspectives as well as formats of Sustainability Communication, various disciplinary perspectives show the spectrum of media and communication studies contributing to sustainability communication as research area. Georgina Guillen, Philip Vergragt and Daniel Fischer bring in a constructive perspective on particular challenges and potentials of communicating sustainable consumption and the story of sustainability. Wiebke Finkler and Robert Aitken take the marketing perspective, supported by their expertise in science communication and asking the question of how to sell hope. This is complemented by a psychological perspective on understanding lay individuals’ mental models of sustainability, put up for discussion by Nathaniel Geiger and Janet K. Swim. Here the circle completes nicely to sustainability communication as interdisciplinary research field with media and communication studies at the core. Part III is, therefore, rounded up with Sigrid Kannengießer’s presentation of a broad literature review on reception as well as effects of sustainability related media content, with a specific focus on established media practices in sustainability communication and the identification of research gaps.

**Part IV** shows various issues, discourses and heuristics discussed in sustainability communication as research field. Whereas the earlier parts of the book are meant to inspire further theoretical conceptualizations and applications of concepts to sustainability communication as public phenomenon, this fourth part was primarily put together to inspire empirical research in the field. The examples that are given start with questioning conversation versus protection approaches to nature. Ryan Wallace discusses the implementation and the framing of “sustainable conservation” and investigates management strategies for protecting nature, which are communicatively constructed and implemented through mass media. Next to conservation and protection of land and nature, energy is one of the top issues in sustainability communication. Here, Richard Buttny gives an example of various narratives used and abused in the controversy on hydrofracking. Etsuko Kinefuchi presents lessons learnt from Japan when it comes to dealing with nuclear power and a crisis with sustainability as normative framework. After the two case-study-based chapters, Wim J.L. Elving adds the emphasis on energy as central topic
of sustainability communication, taking a rather more general perspective on the potential of strategic communication in stakeholder engagement processes with dialogue as core principle of communication for sustainability. In terms of specific stakeholder groups and their engagement for sustainability, Roberta Laurie, Katrina Atkinson, Jacqueline Ohm and Michaela Bishop discuss climate conversations as tool for dialogue and involvement processes of “the youth” as a stakeholder that has rarely been discussed as major group of interest in strategic sustainability communication.

Next to energy, health and food are main topics of sustainability communication, represented and framed as core topics in the SDGs. Here, Isabell Koinig and Sandra Diehl present wellbeing as theoretical concept influencing health communication under the sustainability framework.

Part V: Finally, the fifth and last part of The Sustainability Communication Reader, changes perspective and discusses communication about, of and for sustainability from an organizational point of view. Here, Non-Governmental and Non-Profit Organizations are introduced as main initiators of social and cultural change. Rudi Kurz takes a stance for the role of NGOs in implementing the SDGs—mainly in cases of emergency; whereas Laurens van der Steen and Pieter Maeseele go one step further and theoretically discuss fairness as possible alternative, replacement or poor substitute of sustainability with deliberative democracy concepts. From a political perspective, Anke Wonneberger takes on the concept of sustainability as diagnostic and prognostic frame in governmental and political communication for sustainable development. This is shown firstly within a local agenda, where Beatrice Dernbach uses a case study to discuss the barriers between the media and journalists in particular and political institutions. On a broader scale, the interdependencies between the media, the political and the economic system are shown with two chapters, bringing in an Asian, here Chinese, perspective and an Eastern European perspective. Marina A. Schmitz and Haden G. Cosman as well as Ana Adi and Thomas Stoeckle discuss sustainability as “western principle” of growth and the barriers to taking this principle on in countries with different principles of economic growth and business ethics in general and a deeper reciprocation between politics and the economic world, meaning China and East European Countries like Bulgaria and Romania.

The five main parts of The Sustainability Communication Reader are concluded with an outlook by the editorial team, presenting future directions for sustainability communication as field of research.

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Each text ends with a short catalogue of questions that students and young researchers who would like to devote themselves to sustainability communication can use as a stimulus for reflection. The questions should stimulate further research and thinking processes as well as initiate a broader—not only academic—discourse on communication about, of and for sustainability as well as principles of sustainable communication.

Happy reading!

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