

Organizational Communication and Sustainability, studying European public campaigns

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify and reflect about the communicative processes adopted for the communication of Sustainability by European public organizations. The instrumental character that Organizational Communication usually presents is no longer sufficient to explain the several communication processes and their consequences in the organizational environment, especially when the subject to be communicated is Sustainability. More than just a management tool, Organizational Communication is a constituent element of organizations, by which we analyze the production and reproduction of the meanings, developed by continuous interaction between individuals. There are a few models used for the communication analysis, but here we highlight the PARC (Politically Attentive Relational Construction) elaborated by Deetz (2009). Through it we intend to analyze the sustainability campaigns of four European public organizations that constitute the case study of this article. We do not intend to analyze the efficiency of production, transmission and reception of messages. Our intention is to establish the concepts of production adopted and the inclusion levels of stakeholders in the process of communicative interaction. In general, the results indicate that there are other ways of communicating sustainability beyond the strategic perspective.

Keywords: organizational communication, sustainability and participatory democracy

Introduction

Until the 80s, the communication directed to society was basically oriented to the sale and considered the main character in the scene of organizational environment. Its whole effort was aimed at the quantitative immediate results and a very strong marketing function could be noticed. However in the last 20 years due to changes in organizations and in media a new way of processing information was created, in which the strategic nature tends to be even more stressed.

We believe that the valorization of a strategic character of Organizational Communication sometimes is unnecessary and restricts or inhibits, to some extent, the development of new perspectives that allow the analysis of production processes and attribution of meanings, as well as determining the actual level of stakeholder's participation in the communication process.

To communicate in this chaotic scenario in which we live requires more flexible and dynamic ways of understanding the communication phenomena, which occur in increasingly fast and complex environments. The traditional ways of thinking and use Organizational Communication - more focused on producing

competitive results from the biggest possible uniformity in the organization actions - has its own validity questioned.

That is why, in this article, we prefer to extend the vision of Organizational Communication beyond than strategy and build our research on recent analytical perspective of communication proposed by Deetz (2009), the Politically Attentive Relational Constructivism. There are two reasons for this choice: the innovative use of similar characteristics to constructivism and the concern to promote a politically responsible communication mainly based on participatory democracy. This last aspect is particularly important, since sustainability is the sub-theme and main subject of the messages analyzed in the case study.

We should also clarify that the choice for sustainability reporting is not unfounded. This decade, the issue of sustainability assumes a central role in the discussion around the development dimensions and the alternatives configured to articulate the relationships between global and local. The social sector is the one in which we highlight the major challenges of responses that enable an articulation of different interests. The democratic organization of local power is increasingly assuming a central place in an agenda that includes not only the necessary coordination between actors, but between policies.

Thinking the place of sustainability in times of change and its relation to public administration is important to understand its role in relation to Organizational Communication. In the process of recognition and use of sustainability as a resource for the performance of organizations, Organizational Communication is a great ally. That is because it takes a transversal constitution never seen before and allows more visibility, enhancing and extending the commitments made by organizations with the solution of environmental, social and economic problems, and also the implementation of projects and actions of corporate social responsibility.

The centrality that Organizational Communication takes for itself in the Sustainability movement is not characterized by the intensive use of communication tools or exacerbated by the effort of building a positive corporate reputation. It is important to notice that Organizational Communication is at the core of sustainability movement as an organizing and constituent element, which process occurs through complex symbolic interactions. In this article, we question *if the communicative processes adopted for the communication of sustainability by organizations are more participative?* Before attempting to answer this question, we think it is necessary to present a brief theoretical summary about sustainability.

Sustainability – concept´s evolution and models

The discussion about sustainability and its definition arose initially in the 80s and used to approach the planet's capacity to sustain the development taking into account "the maintenance of ecosystems,

biodiversity and the needs of current and future generations" (Barbieri, 2002, p. 17). The term opens many previous considerations, once there is no consensus on the sustainability definition, although some concepts are more acceptable than others, especially in academic area.

Sustainability is a broad concept with many meanings and synonyms: corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship or corporate philanthropy, social marketing, social activism and business. Diverse and numerous terms refer to the set of actions taken by companies related to society and that exceed the sphere of its immediate and direct economic activity.

The emergence and evolution of the concept are closely linked to numerous debates, conferences and international research groups performed promoted by the United Nations, European Union, Watch Institute¹ and other research institutes in the corporative context. These initiatives have always as aim to characterize and establish parameters for defining the term sustainability.

United Nations and European Union are in particular the major stimulators of the debate and responsible for the production of laws and recommendations about the topic. Although some of these references are not mandatory for international organizations and their ratifications by governments are often lengthy processes, they provide indications of the way to be pursued. Here are some examples, listed in chronological order:

- 1976 - Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises - Corporate Social Responsibility, published by the OECD and whose last update in 2000;
- 1987- Our Common Future, report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development;
- 1992 - UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and Agenda 21;
- 1998 - Tripartite Declaration, produced by ILO (International Labour Organization) on multinational enterprises and social policy;
- 1999 - Global Pact, announced at the United Nations World Economic Forum;
- 2000 - MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), elaborated by United Nations. Review of the Tripartite Declaration of Principles regarding Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, originally published by the ILO in 1977.
- 2001 - Green Paper - A European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility, published by the European Commission;
- 2002 - Complementation of the Green Paper, with the publication of the document "A Business Contribution to Sustainable Development." Later, in the same year, the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg / South Africa was promoted;

¹ Independent research organization, funded in 1974 and established in USA.

- 2006 - Implementation of "Partnership for Growth and Jobs: Making Europe a Pole of Excellence on Social Responsibility in Business", published by the European Commission.

These references with different backgrounds, approaches and application models share a common concern about the creation and development of progress areas in organizations perceived as socially responsible, even though they are inserted in different economic and social contexts.

The evolutionary line of the concept of sustainability began in 1972, when it was first expressed as ecological development by Ignacy Sachs, chief of staff of the Secretariat General of the United Nations by the time of preparation for the Stockholm Conference. According to him, eco-development would be "the socially desirable development, economically viable and environmentally prudent" (Sachs, 198, p. 113).

In 1987, when United Nations promoted the second framework meeting, the World Commission on Environment and Development produced the Brundtland Report, or *Our Common Future*, in which the concept of Sustainable Development was presented also strongly linked to environmental concerns.

Sustainable development is development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to also meet theirs. It contains two key concepts. The first is 'necessity', in particular the essential needs of the poorest, for whom should be given priority. The second is the idea of limitations imposed by technology and social organization of the environment to meet the present and future needs (WCED, 1987, p.54).

In the 90s, the term sustainable development has gained notoriety, instead of eco-development, although this is also still used. According to Neto and Froes (2001) was the emergence of social equity as a central issue. It entered the agenda, influenced by the notion that sustainable development required the harmonization of three elements: environmental protection, economic growth and social equity. Under this new model, a sustainable company is the one that operates in three dimensions: environmental protection, supporting and fostering economic development, whether local, regional or global, and encouragement and assurance of social equity. Therefore, companies must adopt and improve their management mechanisms.

In 2001, the European Commission aimed to discuss deeply the concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development in a European and international levels. For that, a series of internal conferences was organized, which resulted in the publication of the "Green Paper - Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility". In this paper, the possibilities of maximum exploration already acquired are listed and the development of innovative practices is encouraged.

The corporate social responsibility is essentially a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a fairer society and a cleaner environment. At a time when the EU seeks to identify their common values by adopting a Charter of Fundamental Rights, are increasingly numerous

European companies to recognize more and more clearly the social responsibility that they bear, considering it as part of their identity (European Commission 2001, p. 4).

Therefore, we must clarify that Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development and Sustainability are distinct concepts, although complementary in some very specific contexts. The most appropriate is to say that the concept of sustainability is the result of an evolutionary process that began with the term Corporate Social Responsibility.

Sustainability has a broader meaning, involving mainly economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects. It comprises a set of elements and features focused on the survival and well-being of society, organizations and informal groups seeking to preserve all the common goods. For an organization to be sustainable, it must be environmentally correct, economically viable, socially just and culturally accepted by its stakeholders. Sustainability constitutes itself by the implementation of actions and strategies for the company, organization, informal groups and to reduce environmental impacts, thereby contributing to social welfare.

Another distinguishing feature is the long-term vision, as the Sustainability adopts this perspective. The actions that characterize this type of management require some time before its execution is completed and results can be identified. Differently than philanthropy, for example, sustainable development programs include a joint action between state and private enterprise.

The classic definition of sustainability is the one published in the report *Our Common Future*, prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, which says: "Sustainable development is the one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (CMMAD, 1987, p. 213). Regarding conceptual terms, that will be the definition considered in this research.

For Buarque (1996), this formulation is a response to problems and social inequalities that compromise the satisfaction of the needs of a significant portion of world population. It is also a response to the process of environmental degradation, generated by the dominant style of economical growth, which tends to limit the opportunities of future generations.

Some models

Through the discussions produced by different world conferences, diverse approaches and application models have been developed. However, only five will be briefly detailed here so that later we can define the most appropriate form of understanding the theoretical frameworks mentioned in this article. They are: (1) Sullivan Global Principles, (2) Natural Step, (3) Agenda 21, (4) Sigma Project e (5) Triple Bottom Line.

The choice of these five models is purposeful, because our intention is to gather examples produced from United Nations meetings (Agenda 21) and samples prepared by international organizations or individual initiatives (Natural Step, Triple Bottom Line, Sigma Project and Global Sullivan Principles). It is important to note the existence of other models created by the United Nations, as the Millennium Development Goals, and still others produced by international organizations (Global Reporting Initiative and the OECD² Principles of Corporate Governance) and national, as the Social Ethos Report³, from Brazil. However, the five models chosen are usually cited in literature as a knowledge base and discussion for the development of others models.

The Global Sullivan Principles were created in 1977 from the joint efforts of Leon Sullivan and a group of multinational organizations. They also wished to promote ethical business operations throughout the world, particularly in countries under development. For a long period the principles had a greatly influence on business operations in South Africa, contributing even to the abolition of apartheid policy. There is a focus on the development and implementation of internal company policies regarding employees and the communities affected by businesses operations. Briefly, we can say that Sullivan's work are constitute by eight principles addressed to the protection of human rights, ensuring equal opportunities, recognizing freedom of association, providing educational opportunities, improving quality of life, creating healthy social and natural environments, fighting corruption and supporting and encouraging the adoption of principles by managers.

The initiative requires each company to report its progress annually. A letter signed by an official representative of the company must be submitted each year, describing the progress and the activities which will be used in the following year. In addition, an annual meeting is organized to facilitate dialogue between companies and organizations that support the Global Sullivan Principles. Many researchers consider this initiative as the embryo of the current sustainability reporting.

The Natural Step was developed in 1989 by Karl-Henrik Robert, who then led a team of scientists with the aim of developing a clearly articulated set of core principles of sustainability and science-based. The group drafted a consensus document outlining the basic knowledge about the biosphere functions and human interactions related to the sustainability of life in the planet. That is a scientific and systematic approach to organizational planning for sustainability. The Natural Step model offers a practical set of planning criteria that can be used to guide specific actions to achieve sustainability. It is fundamentally based on an integrated assessment of the situation as it is and in determining the future vision of success through backcasting as a methodology. Through it, the organizational plans of action must begin with the shared

² The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is an international association, founded in 1948, bringing together 31 countries that accept the principles of representative democracy and free market economy.

³ Built in 1998, it is a nonprofit Brazilian organization, which mission is to mobilize, encourage and help enterprises to manage their business in a socially responsible way.

understanding about what sustainability means. Normally, there is an awareness campaign, followed by the mapping of the bases for analysis of the actual reality experienced by the organization, creating a clear and compelling vision. Finally, there is the establishment of practical actions and management priorities.

In today's society nature is subject to systematically increasing its: concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust, concentrations of substances produced by society and degradation of physical means. And in this society, people are subjected to conditions that block the means necessary to achieve the realization of basic needs (Robert, 2003, p. 10).

Agenda 21 is a global action plan, ratified by 178 countries, bringing together the broadest set of assumptions and recommendations on how nations should act to change its vector of development in favor of sustainable models and begin their sustainability programs. It is a publication divided into four main sections: social and economic dimensions, conservation and management of resources for development, strengthening the role of major groups and means of implementation.

It addresses the pressing problems of today and aims also to prepare the world for the challenges of the next century. Reflects a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level with regard to development and environmental cooperation. Its successful implementation is the responsibility, first and foremost, governments. To realize it, are crucial strategies, plans, policies and national processes. International cooperation should support and supplement such national efforts. In this context, the UN system has a role to play (Agenda 21, 1992, p. 1).

Agenda 21 appeals to local authorities in each country to develop a consensual and consultative process with their populations, in the form of a local version of Agenda 21 for their communities - known as Local Agenda 21. Therefore, it promotes global thinking, stressing that it should be transformed into local action, hence its motto: think globally, act locally.

Continuing with the philosophy that the ties of relationship between international organizations and the private sector should be strengthened, a consortium formed between the BSI - British Standards Institution⁴, Forum for the Future⁵ and AccountAbility⁶ launched the Sigma Project in 2000.

The project aims to increase the ability of companies to achieve their business objectives by dealing dilemmas, threats and opportunities in the economic, social and environmental more effectively. The guidelines of Sigma Project offer viable and flexible solutions which can be implemented in a wide range of sectors, types of organization and functions. Those guidelines do not prescribe levels of performance, but help organizations to define their performance goals, consistent with the operating principles that have

⁴ One of the major organizations, which advocates the adoption of best management practices, risk reduction and implementation of international standards as a form of income distribution.

⁵ Institution founded in 1996 in the UK, developing actions to accelerate the transition to a sustainable way of life based on digital solutions. It works in partnership with over 150 organizations, governments and universities to disseminate and share the concept and practice of sustainable development.

⁶ An international organization dedicated to responsible practices development. Its mission is to promote accountability for sustainable development and to provide tools and standards based on their AA 1000.

been adopted, to measure their performance against these goals over time and to present results in relation to them - taking measures to deal with any situations in which the level or speed of improvement is insufficient for reaching the goals planned.

This last model is one of the most popular and has been subject to constant improvements since 1998, when it was first proposed. The Triple Bottom Line emphasizes two issues: the integration between the economic, social and environmental issues, and integration between short and long term views. On the first one, Elkington argues that the idea of economic sustainability as an isolated condition is not enough for the overall sustainability of a company. This reductionist view satisfies only the design of the shorter-term concept. A long-term vision requires an interconnected system of multiple resonances, confirming the complexity of its approach. Regarding the issue of views in the short and long term, the author believes that the greed for immediate profit is quite opposite to sustainability, which requires the company to meet the needs of current and future generations without loss of any kind.

Communicating Sustainability

In the current era of globalized information, communicating sustainability cannot represent a palliative for campaigns that aim to strengthen the organizational reputation, especially with the increase of criticism from society. Instead of it, sustainability should be a guide for any organization and become a way to the ethical, consistent, efficient and fair acting. By doing that, organizations can have their relationships potentialized and gain in image and reputation. Joining the movement of sustainability should be explicit in the communications policy of organizations and be reflected in their actions with all stakeholders.

The sustainability reporting should be a voluntary activity, although currently there is greater pressure from NGOs and society in general to communicate credible and relevant information. Besides that, there is the fact that financial markets require information about the public policies adopted, the environmental and social performance and the indices of social development.

This topic is still evolving and there is no globally accepted and standardized approach. Differently from the financial reporting and its annual accounts, for example, there is not a standard way to communicate sustainability. The diversity of stakeholders constitutes in itself an obstacle, since they all have specific information needs. It is organization's responsibility to find the balance between what stakeholders want to know and the practical, feasible and relevant information to be reported.

There is a major challenge to be faced. It is centered on the possibility to review the more traditional theories, which usually privilege to corporate governance, market choices and business decisions based on

strategic character that Organizational Communication can have. The globalization and all its consequences also require changes in the way of communicating.

Our new situation of pluralism and interdependence require a different response. Basically, our greatest hope lies in introducing broader social values in decision-making processes and routine business, rather than trying to direct them externally. This leads us to reflect on new forms of governance and communication (Deetz, 2009, p. 92).

Deetz's view is shared by other researchers in the field of Organizational Communication (Varey, 2002; Forester, 1999; Lewis, 2007; Lange, 2003; Kunsch, 2006, Marchiori, 2010). In general, they observe that Organizational Communication must demonstrate its ability to promote social cohesion around certain worldviews, more than meet the demands for mediation between individuals and organizations.

The challenge today is to reinvent the traditional Organizational Communication which has developed a strategic vision for decades into a new direction, "in which what is valued is the experience of diversity, differences and the ability to decide, inspired by the new principles of collaborative communication," as observed by Cardoso (2007).

However, we also should make a brief reflection on the intentions of messages about sustainability. The coherence between the organization's work and its communication policy should be well balanced. Otherwise, might be some criticism of greenwashing, here understood as "the misappropriation of the environmental value of companies, industries, governments or even non-governmental organizations in order to create a positive image, sell a product or a policy, or try the recovery position before the public, after being involved in a controversy" (Burton, 2000, p. 45).

The aspect of regulation that focuses on sustainability reporting is growing. In the implementation of their campaigns, organizations face great pressure, coming from various sources such as NGOs, restrictive laws, financial markets, and public bodies of regulation and citizens in general. The policy of Organizational Communication without the proper balance between the need to sell (for companies) or the provision of public services with high quality (in the case of public organizations) and the change of behavior towards sustainable development is bound to stakeholder's criticism. In particular, we have internet as one of the greatest tools for promoting boycotts and failure of organizations. A good example is the observatories blogs and media critics, such as Responsible Communication (France); CorpWatch Greenwash Awards (United States); Sustainable Propaganda (Brazil) and Sins of Greenwashing (United Kingdom). Given this situation, many organizations are opting to voluntarily develop their own legislation, based on surveys with stakeholder's opinions.

Another initiative that has become popular is the creation of manuals for sustainability reporting that seek to list criteria for classification and identification of good communication systems, performance assessments

and diagnostics to fix cultural problems within the organizational context. Still, some doubts arise from the good intentions of these manuals, because they intend to have the control over the production of meaning, the determination of the public and their freedom to interact and collaborate with the decision-making process and cultural change within the organization; which is recommended at all. A good example is the communication manual of WBCSD (World Business Council for Sustainable Development). It states:

The sustainability reporting occurs when a company uses different channels and languages - adapt them to their different audiences - to inform about their attitudes and practices in sustainability. The use of this dimension of communication to spread the sustainability aims to promote what the company has done, why, to who, where and how, with the objective of adding value to its brand image and generate empathy and strengthen its reputation (WBCSD, 2008, n.d).

There is no need to make a deep speech analysis in order to realize that the actions indicated in that manual aim the organizations *profit* in terms of adding value to its image and the strengthening its organizational reputation. Unfortunately we do not notice any reference to changes in the dominant meanings, nor the assurance that all relevant views are heard. The dismay is even greater if we consider the fact that the manual's author, in principle, is an organization that purports to be the "leading business advocate" in sustainability.

However, Organizational Communication can be used as a facilitator process that seeks to strengthen the reasons why we should build a sustainable society, focused on the active citizenship and on the change of individual and collective values. We believe that the set up of this new paradigm is realized effectively through the enlargement and democratization of power relations, participatory practices in policy discussions, sharing information and stimulating debates about the meaning of actions developed within the sustainability discourse. It can be possible through a new model of communication such as PARC, for

PARC - Politically Attentive Relational Construction
example.

The PARC perspective proposed by Deetz (2009) provides a comprehensive picture of several crucial aspects for a successful implementation and communication of sustainability. Among them, we can detach the conceptions about the meaning production and the level of participatory freedom attributed to stakeholders during the communication process.

The first concerns the focus given in the conception act of meaning. In order to organize the information, a classification for that was created by McClellan and Deetz (2009), which is: strategic communication, liberal democracy, management culture and participatory democracy.

As we have referenced here before, the approach to Organizational Communication as strategic is widely accepted and has become almost a standard when you wish to typify the Organizational Communication.

This view considers the meaning production is centered on the individual and it must always have a strategic control over the social actions. It will serve the purposes of persuasion. "The managerial communication and public relations thought this vision extremely useful and spent most of the time making strategies for the communication process to achieve influence and affect meaning constructions" (Varey, 2000, p. 127).

We can say that liberal democracy is also based on a individual view, but has characteristics of reciprocity. This means there is a need to manage information and the involvement of stakeholders, event with the creation of specific programs for that. "The concepts of communication used by these programs preserve most of the features of the theories of meaning production considered expressionists - centered on the person, but differ in terms of the use of strategic control by having an emphasis on public forums such as meetings with communities and two-handed interaction" (Deetz, 2009). Good examples of this approach would be town hall meetings and court proceedings, in which leaders promote the expression of individual meaning to create democratic practices.

The third classification, culture management, is based on a meaning conception of relational-constructivist. The terminology seems confusing, but sums up the guiding principles of PARC, because communication is given as the main activity through which the collective meanings are created and maintained. The analysis of metaphors, symbols, myths, rituals, narratives and discourses are characteristic of the function attributed to communication in the production and reproduction of organizational cultures.

Participatory democracy is what Deetz (2009) considers "a response to increasing speed of change and the increasing presence of pluralism and interdependence theories of Organizational Communication, when the decision-making in contexts of diversity." The idea is that the interaction throws challenges to the existing positions, encouraging a review of what is considered an immutable truth within the organization. It is "a more collaborative communication, based more on conflict than on models of communication centered on the person or consensus-oriented" (Deetz & Radford: 2007, p. 32).

For Deetz the main objectives of Organizational Communication based on this fourth classification (which the author refers particularly as Politically Attentive Relational Construction) require a clear demonstration of political processes and a intensification of decisions taken openly. "It takes the concepts and practices of open conversation, deliberation, dialogue and collaboration. On both sides there is the requirement of communication concepts more sophisticated than the usual" (Deetz, 2010, p. 92).

The author follows noticing that the implementation of the PARC approach is undermined by hidden forms of strategic control, especially the distorted communication and discursive closure. Briefly, we can affirm that the first is a form of strategic interaction, different from persuasion and manipulation, in which strategic intention is hidden. "It becomes possible through the absence of analysis about systemic and

structural limits of reciprocity of interaction by interlocutors" (Forester, 1989, p. 22). The closure of discourse concerns the techniques used in conversation, seeking only to eliminate possible conflicts of meaning and contradictions, what results in difficulties to express challenging ideas to the existing meanings.

Table 1 – Classification of communication, regarding its meaning production

Meaning concept	Strategic control	Reciprocity
Centered in the person	<p><i>Strategic Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants are adversaries ▪ Their speeches come from a position or propose new forms of knowledge. ▪ Interactions are polarized in different positions and reduce the options available. ▪ Defining the problem is an individual act, done before participant´s meeting to discuss it. ▪ Final responsibility of decision is individual. ▪ Presence of distorted communication and discursive closures. 	<p><i>Liberal Democracy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants are seen as stakeholders who need to be managed. ▪ Speech acts are regarded as free, but often are distorted to suit particular interests. ▪ Interaction based on arguments and confrontation of opinions known. ▪ Defining the problem is a collective act, but manageable. ▪ Final responsibility of decision belongs to the organization, but it´s based in the individual opinion.
Relational-Constructivism	<p><i>Culture management</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants are manipulated. ▪ Speeches are constantly analyzed. ▪ Social interactions can create collective meanings. ▪ Problem definition hides the control. ▪ Final responsibility of decision is individual, but aims to change the dominant meanings. 	<p><i>Participatory Democracy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants solve problems together ▪ Speech acts are aimed at the target to be reached ▪ Interactions seek to identify collective and complex interests. ▪ Defining the problem is a collective achievement ▪ Final responsibility of decision is shared with all participants. ▪ Minimum level of distorted communication and discursive closures

Font: Adapted from Deetz & Radford (2009)

To complement the theoretical study done so far, we think it is relevant to differentiate the four designs that the author attributes to his bases of thought: open conversation, deliberation, dialogue and collaboration. The *open conversation* is marked by the invention of meaning through a dynamic interaction totally free, in which there is no control or direction, and the differences between interlocutor´s opinions challenge preconceptions. In *deliberation* there is a clear intention to use the reciprocal differences and different opinions to enrich and guide the decision-making process. It regards the rational use of discourse to reach an agreement among participants.

Since the theme of this article is the communication of sustainability by European public organizations, perhaps, the differences between *dialogue* and *collaboration* are the most interesting to analyze. It is because the first is clearly linked to the strategic character of Organizational Communication, and the second, to the participatory nature - the extremes of the approaches presented here.

Accordingly to the author´s view, *dialogue* operates as mode of participatory democracy, which focus lies in promoting understanding of the differences between people and their ways of acting socially. In this sense, the principle of reciprocity in dialogue is crucial: a scheme where the worlds of the parties are mutually respected. Deetz (2009) reinforces that by saying "dialogue is an intentional practice on the defense, but their focus is on understanding the other's perspective and not in the truth of the claim. (...) It is often very helpful to reduce tensions and create a sense of community, but has no decision-making model and rarely generates creative choices".

On the other hand, we have *collaboration* which has the same aspect of sharing expectations of reciprocity among the interlocutors present in the dialogue. But in it we can identify the co-creative construction of shared decisions, instead of the pure understanding and acceptance of diversity. According to Lewis (2008), "a lot of work in organizational communication has its focus in collaboration because it shares the same expectations of reciprocity in dialogue, but has as its purpose mutual creative decisions." In collaboration, there is the clear intention to transform relevant opinions and desires in decision of mutual interest. Even before Deetz, some researchers have pointed collaboration as direction to the development of an innovative communication model (Gray, 1989; Varey, 2002; Lange, 2003; Cheney, 2002).

Case Study

In order to achieve the objective initially proposed in this article, which is to identify and reflect on the communicative processes adopted for the communication of sustainability by European public organizations, we choose to consider the PARC approach elaborated by Deetz (2009) and to develop a case study with a qualitative dimension. If we take into account the dialogic aspect of construction and interpretation of

reality, qualitative research is the appropriate methodology for collecting, processing and analyzing the data we had access.

Our sample consists of communication campaigns on sustainability, prepared by European public organizations from the following countries: Austria, France, Ireland and the United Kingdom. All data collected have their origin in the institutional websites of the organizations in charge of the campaigns and the manual *Communicating Sustainability*, prepared by UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) in 2005.

From the analysis of these campaigns, we can verify the applicability of PARC as a model of analysis in Organizational Communication and may reflect upon the several interactive processes involved in the communicative act of sustainability.

That 's the way to do it. Sustainably⁷

Prepared by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Environment in partnership with large shopping outlets, the Austrian campaign aimed to change consumer behavior through advertising, product promotion and eco-friendly product launches. For that, the ministry invested US\$240,000 and established four objectives: to encourage consumers to buy sustainable products; to use products and special offers to raise awareness of sustainability and give practical examples of sustainable development; to highlight good examples of local sustainable development initiatives and to give publicity to the partners (government and retailers) in the media.

Sustainable products are slowly emerging from niche to mainstream markets in the grocery, pharmaceutical and home improvement sectors

in Austria. This month-long campaign was developed to show how certain products in these ranges could fit a sustainable lifestyle. The campaign branding was carefully designed by an independent advertising agency. A clear brief was provided by the Ministry of the Environment, based on the campaign objectives and audience research.

The 'branded statement' needed to convey sustainability in a simple way, to be short and concise, to be adaptable for different advertising formats, to be easy to recognize – catchy but not annoying – and aid the



⁷ More information at www.nachhaltigewochen.at.

sale of products. To accomplish that 650,000 copies of a brochure were produced and distributed. Also 3,000 posters were placed at entrances in shopping centers and in public markets. Regarding digital means of communication, the organization created a website with complete information on the subject and where the composition of all eco-friendly products was listed. Some outdoor activities, with the presence of the minister, took place with a strong commercial appeal. Throughout the campaign there was a systematic evaluation about the levels of consumer awareness. These evaluations were based on the increase of product's sales, the coverage made by Austrian media, the involvement of NGOs and local associations, and the increasing interest from other retailers to enroll the campaign.

Overall, the campaign has achieved the expected results. Through the effective use of partnerships with commercial networks, disparate communications and the creation of an eco-friendly brand, the ministry got good media coverage (191 stories published) and the formation of 21 local initiatives with the same goal. The use of commercial space allowed a considerable economy in advertising expenses and the presence of a representative government in public activities gave credibility.

Possible analysis - This communication campaign has achieved some significant results, like the 13% increase in the number of women who remember seeing sustainable products at least once in the supermarket shelves and the 14% decrease in the number of Austrians who are unaware of the concept of sustainability. The promotion of the campaign through partnerships with supermarkets aimed to reach public interest in the place where buying decision is made. If we consider the approach proposed by Deetz (2009), we could classify this campaign as an example of culture management as we are talking about:

- changing meanings ("which are attributes of this new product that make me, consumer, change my buying decision?");
- interactions that create collective meanings ("as I don't want feel excluded, I must buy this eco-friendly product. Nowadays everyone is talking about sustainability and I should have an idea of what it is");
- unnoticeable control of participants, by directing the purchase decision of some products, for example.

Economies d'énergie. Faisons vite, ça chauffe⁸

In 2004, the Agency for Environment and Energy Management (ADEME) launched a three-year national campaign linking energy use and climate change. The campaign combined a high-profile advertising campaign to raise awareness with activities implemented by partners at a national and local level to encourage behavior change.

⁸ More information at www.faisonsvite.fr.

Objectives were defined through research indicating that 73% of the population was aware that changing lifestyles is important for climate change, but less than 10% were aware of the environmental impacts of their everyday energy use. The campaign therefore aimed to change public behavior to deliver energy savings and also to increase awareness amongst the public on the environmental cost of energy use and of over-consumption.

The campaign relied on two complementary communications methods: a national advertising campaign and a partnership platform. The first one was divided into three phases: (1) advertisements in regional newspapers with the question "Is it for today or tomorrow?", with no explanation, only to draw attention and increase curiosity about what would come after in the same newspapers; (2) short TV commercials with a very popular French song, in which some people are interviewed about individual actions that can help to save energy with the aim of showing that, in fact, people know how to do that, but they simply do not, (3) radio programs with simple and practical advices about small changes in lifestyle, which received more than a thousand calls per day from listeners.

The partnership platform brought together 135 partners - including NGOs, associations, institutes and companies (partners ranged from companies to local authorities and NGOs, in sectors as diverse as transport and entertainment). Two good examples of initiatives from these partners are Extinction Planet, campaign produced by WWF and the distribution of 300,000 CLIMact⁹ in front of the doors of cinemas during the premiere of the film *The Day After Tomorrow*. Within a year, more than 2,000 activities were held, with 80% being carried out by the partners of the French agency.

Possible analysis - The French agency has teamed two important factors for creating empathy in his public interest. The first was the use of testimonies from ordinary people, who spoke about changes already made in their lifestyles. In this case, the idea was to raise the question "if they have changed and are happy, why I do not change too?". The second factor was the celebrity power. The main character of commercials was a popular singer, whose song became a jingle to the campaign. This strategic choice stimulated the thought "I like her and she is a success, so if I do what she says, I will have success too".



⁹ A simple card device used to show personal energy consumption and environmental impact with specific energy saving solutions.

Thus specific audiences were reached: the average citizen and the one more ambitious, connected to images of success. Moreover, the campaign has prioritized some of the more traditional media (TV and radio) and hit the audience with little access to digital media. Surveys conducted after the campaign showed that there was an increase in the level of awareness and knowledge on sustainability, even though behavior has slightly changed. Here we may have an example of liberal democracy. Some of its characteristics are:

- speech distorted to serve interests (does the singer really know what sustainability is? Does she have a good attitude at it? The testimonies gathered in the streets were edited?)
- interaction based on a comparison of known opinions. It means that individuals have the freedom to give their opinion when interviewed on the street. However, it is confronted by the viewer that, in most cases, does not agree with the respondent;
- definition of the problem is manageable (in one hand the agency maintains in its speech the collective character of the problem – we´ll have serious problems, unless we start saving energy – in the other, the organization did not do any research to determine if society considers it the most important problem to be solved).

ThinkSustainable¹⁰


The main objective of this campaign, developed by DEFRA (Department of Environment and Rural Affairs) in the UK, was to integrate the concept of sustainability in the daily work of 8,000 employees of the department. To achieve this main goal, around US\$123,000 were spent to create an internal communication campaign that continues until now. One of the particular objectives is to show to DEFRA´s employees that sustainability and its implications are not a burden.


DEFRA is the government organization responsible for the promotion and comprehension of sustainability across United Kingdom. In 2005, British government launched a strategic plan, entitled Securing the Future, directed to all citizens. Before starting an external communication campaign, DEFRA considered appropriate to put it in practice among its employees. By doing that, the organization would be capable of observing results and making any necessary changes. A research was conducted through interviews and focus groups involving over 100 people from the staff. It showed that 80% of them understand what sustainability is, however a rate lower than 50% was really committed to integrating the concept into their daily work. Another interesting result was the difficulty found on communicating the issue to people who are not related to DEFRA.


¹⁰ More information at www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/think.

DEFRA's team responsible for the campaign's design formed partnerships with private companies in order to produce fun and interactive tools which would translate the principles of sustainability among internal public. The result was the creation of three tools: (1) a film that shows successful practices in the UK, (2) an online game that uses the fishing industry as an example, and (3) The Stretching Web, an interactive tool that based on the management policies adopted, evaluates and shows the social, economical and environmental impact generated.

There are three components:

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Stretching the web
 • **create yours** an interactive policy tool, **stretching the web**
- 

The Bigger Picture
 • **watch** a film, **the bigger picture**
- 

stockwatch
 • **click2play** a game, **stockwatch**

Possible analysis - We cannot deny that internal communication of organizations has as much importance as external, since employees, managers, shareholders, etc. can multiply values and organizational visions. Through interactive media, the campaign ought to bring the several consequences of a policy on sustainable management into the staff's work. From observation of results obtained, DEFRA was able to change some aspects of the campaign before conducting it outside of the organization. We could consider this initiative as a case of strategic communication, because:

- the problem to be faced was defined before any kind of research with internal public;
- the presence of distorted communication and discursive closure, since there are relations of power and authority (the department directors imposes the use of new communication tools on employees), pressures of schedule and specific technologies of mediation;
- the ultimate responsibility for decision is individual, because it belongs only to DEFRA the duty of deciding the use of interactive media with external public;

- there is no interaction for the construction of a collective meaning. Instead of it, DEFRA standardized and distributed the meaning of sustainability to employees;
- the organization acquired information from its staff and used it to make a significant improvement in the campaign's strategy; although there is no guarantee that its adequacy in a internal level will be repeated in a external one.

Sustainable Development in Schools¹¹

Education for Sustainability was the theme of this campaign, developed by COMHAR / ENFO in partnership with ECO-UNESCO. Its budget was US\$34,000. The objectives meant to identify the awareness level of sustainability among students and teachers and also the tools already used in this context. Besides that, the project intended to develop new ways to integrate the concept in the context of Irish formal education and to implement and evaluate workshops in schools across the country.



Four primary schools and four secondary schools in Dublin were chosen as a starting place for research in order to establish teacher's needs. Then, it was discovered that materials to be produced for future use in classrooms should: (1) be easy to manipulate, (2) be identified and created from a real link between sustainability concept and its practice, (3) provide solutions to everyday problems like the reduction of water and energy consumption.

Two key features of the project were the priority to the establishment of current disciplinary boundaries and their possible links with sustainability and the fact that all the decisions made (the inclusion of the subject as a discipline in several educational levels, for example) were decentralized and based on the opinion of nearly 90% of teachers from all schools.

¹¹ More information at www.ecounesco.ie/partners.aspx.

In primary education, the workshops had as their main themes the health, social and personal rehabilitation. The activities were run by a facilitator who bears no relations to public schools, who used a large variety of methods of non-formal education. More than 70% of students were involved in it. In secondary schools, workshops were more related to science and geography. Techniques such as brainstorming and group discussion for the establishment of links between environmental, social and economic sustainability were adopted. All workshops results were systematically assessed through questionnaires and face to face interviews.

Possible analysis – Changes are neither easy nor quick. In particular, public schools are heavy and resistant organizations in changing process. However, aware that "the effects of technological interventions add to man's nature, the biosphere as a whole to the objects that we are responsible" (Almeida, 2006: 129), there seems no alternative but to carry the scientific issues and controversies that surround daily life into the classroom. Unless it is done, educators will keep teaching to students disinteresting topics that are unrelated to the real world – what would contribute to the "miseducation" that endangers the possibility of our survival or any kind of development in our society.

Specifically in this campaign, students enjoyed to be encouraged to think in a new perspective. Most part of them liked to answer the questions proposed because they did not require only one perfect answer. Students had freedom to express their opinions no matter how different they were. Another interesting point is that education for sustainability is an overarching topic and prepares future generations to deal with worse problems than those already faced. Therefore we believe this can be a case of participatory democracy, since the nature of collaboration is evident. We also would like to highlight:

- The definition of the problem was collective and decision-making was creative and reciprocal;
- Teachers, students, facilitators and government representatives try to solve the problems of sustainability education together;
- The interactions between teachers and students intended to identify mutual necessities and the best solutions to satisfy it;
- The absence of discursive closures;
- All relevant opinions were considered;
- The ultimate responsibility of decision (such as the inclusion of a new discipline in the system or the development of new teaching materials) was shared.

Conclusion

The meaning production for the sustainability concept is a process strongly characterized by the strategic character which permeates the organizational culture of institutions presented in our case study. Although there are some initiatives guided by participatory democracy in terms of communication and by a higher level of stakeholders participation (Irish case), we can note that most part of organizations still follow the traditional standards for the use of organizational communication as a necessary tool to transform sustainability into a competitive advantage. The presence of discursive closures and distorted communication are indicators that the meaning production of sustainability is also marked by relations of power and authority as is seen in the case of DEFRA, in which there is pressure on the internal audience for its engagement in a process initially imposed by the organization.

We should observe that, in our study case, the stakeholders involved in the communication of sustainability are from diverse origins and have different levels of participation. In metaphorical terms we could say that local consumers, NGOs, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers, students and public employees are actors of a movie whose script is pre-established. In search of a legitimate discourse on sustainability, organizations regulate the level of participation of these actors and, in certain contexts, also manipulate the production of meaning without any regard to the cultural and educational diversity of the public.

Nowadays there is a growing consensus of opinion that we are facing an unprecedented scenario, distinguished by a high degree of mobility and diversity. This situation requires a new way of thinking about Organizational Communication and how useful it can be to the spread of the concept of sustainability. One of the challenges is how to communicate sustainability through creative and innovative solutions, based on different stakeholder's opinions. The incorporation of values and practices to a new form of management with those characteristics isn't simple, because not all audiences have the same level of education and culture. Every process of change involves resistance, transformation and learning.

We believe there is a process of evolution regarding the communication of sustainability by organizations. In this process, the strategic character of communication policies can be minimized and a more participatory approach can be developed. Deetz is one of the researchers who has already identified this change and has proposed a less distorted communication in which the ultimate responsibility of decisions is collective. His proposal suggests a positive development of communication campaigns about sustainability without compromising the effectiveness of it.

From the case study presented, we conclude this new "model of classification" suggested by Deetz is valid and allows a deeper interpretation on the meaning production process and on the levels of stakeholders participation. A detailed reading of the communication processes described here allows us to identify whether the production of meaning is individual-centered or constructivist-relational, if stakeholders are handled or participate spontaneously in the process, if speeches are distorted or free acts and, especially, if

interactions produce collective meanings or are polarized to prevent conflict. However, we also believe it is necessary to have a case study with a more representative quantity to check any failure PARC may have.

There is no doubt that organizations have been forced to rethink their communication with different stakeholders. Understanding the characteristics of this new environment we live in is crucial. If the environment where people and organizations work today is fundamentally different, communicative responses to certain situations must also be updated. In the words of Deetz (2009), "routine theories based on common sense, developed in another era to meet different needs, are an obstacle to creative and sustainable decisions." We believe it is urgent to evolve into an Organizational Communication marked by participatory democracy and collective interactions, what will allow the correct comprehension of sustainability and its practice.

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