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Reflexivity on contradictions

How Journalists, PR and Marketing professionals, blogger and social media influencers describe their contribution to sustainable development

Problem and research question

What a nice title: Communicating the Sustainable Development Goals – For Everyone!¹ However, not only the United Nations offer tools, means and workshops like this to communicate sustainability and the related 17 “goals”. National and international consultants’ advice to tell the “sustainability story”, use “pics more than words” or other strategies to “associate your brand with sustainability”. Nevertheless, coming from a media and communication perspective, we seem to be just at the beginning of understanding the gravity of the challenge to communicate about social impact and the responsibility of organizations and sustainability as ‘moral compass’ for all the variations of CSR communication.

In our presentation, we put journalists, blogger, influencer, campaigners and communication strategists on the stage and discuss the potential as well as barriers of communicating (for) sustainability.

Theoretical and methodological approach

CSR and Sustainability communication require a transdisciplinary approach (Godeman & Michelsen, 2011), which implies critical methods (Downing et al., 1995) and future research methods like story tracking with narrative interviews (Brodschöll, 2003; Weder, 2017, Weder et al., 2019). To better understand the potential and barriers in communicating (for) sustainability, we can rely on, firstly, a longitudinal dataset of interviews with journalists, blogger and ‘strategic communication professionals’ (PR & Marketing people) in Central Europe (n = 25, 2009; n = 50 in 2017; n = 25 in 2020), and, secondly, a comparative dataset of interviews in New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, Fiji, China, Mexico and the United States (n = 50, 2020).

Findings

The interviewed communicators point out several barriers and conflicts like economic interests of a media corporation vs. the concept of sustainability or local, regional and national interest vs. a global phenomenon. Overall, their stories show that sustainability communication in today’s public sphere needs a deeper reflection and “critical journalistic character” with a deeper understanding of ethics. From an intercultural perspective, the challenges are similar, however the issues vary. While sustainability is a rather established and sometimes ‘over-’ and ‘abused’ term in Europe, ‘environmental care’ is the key concept in Oceania, and ‘social impact’ and ‘social sustainability’ in America and China. Overall, sustainability is perceived as intrinsic social value, as new story of transition and restoration, but as such “not made for public media”. However, more and more communicators realize that with their reporting on sustainability related issues and by offering reflexivity on existing paradoxes and contradictions they contribute to sustainable development as well.