COMMUNICATION AND CHANGE IN PLURALIST CONTEXTS

Research vision

Chair Group Strategic Communication, June 2017

Strategic communication

Strategic communication refers to people's efforts to address or engage audiences for the advancement of goals. It refers to the use and creation of venues, technologies, discourses and practices of interaction – and their intended and unintended consequences.

The Latin verb *communicare*, the origin of our noun communication, means 'to impart, share, or make common'. In our plural world, achieving such 'bringing together' of actors is no easy feat. At the same time, communication is of prime importance in meeting the challenges of our time. The globalization and horizontalization of society brings together and confronts scientists, citizens, consumers, governments, social movements and corporations in new ways, bringing up ever more urgent questions of legitimacy, credibility, transparency, accountability and risk. The Chair Group engages with key societal challenges in the WUR domains of food, health and the living environment: healthy lifestyles and livelihoods; sustainable food and food production; and sustainable co-evolution between societies and the living environment. This engagement demands that we engage with the pluralisms we are confronted when it comes to these challenges. This is what our research contributes to: we analyse how strategic communication, in contexts of pluralism, shapes understandings and processes around key societal issues of our time, and how it can contribute to innovation and change.

People communicate strategically in many different ways and contexts. Strategic communication involves, for example, the deliberate use of communicative strategies by organisations that wish to connect to certain audiences. But also the everyday communication strategies that citizens or consumers employ to achieve their own ends. Strategic communication also has a key role to play in shaping multi-stakeholder processes, involving actors like government agencies, industries, NGOs, farmers' organizations and local communities. These different manifestations of strategic communication form our units of analysis.

Practice

The strategic communication we study is part of everyday practices around these societal issues. It is through engagement with these practices that we seek to learn the role and potential of strategic communication in processes of innovation and change, such as the mobilization of actors around issues, the creation of meanings of in interaction, the development and resolution of public conflict, and behaviour change.

We study communication in action in real-life, as it happens, for example, in the interactions between organizations and consumers, patients, or citizens; in public debate; in networks and multi-stakeholder processes. Settings can be virtual, local, national, transnational or multi-level, and can include face-to-face as also mediated forms of communication, and the interplay between people and the environments that shape their behaviour. We maintain an international perspective, involving us in research around the globe. But in any setting, it is through engagement with situated

practices within settings that we seek to understand the role and potential of strategic communication in processes of innovation and change, such as the mobilization of actors around issues, the creation of meanings in interaction, the development and resolution of public conflict, and behaviour change. Our projects are therefore often centred on the challenges and initiatives of organizations and networks active in life science domains, such as health, international development or natural resource management. What unites the different projects is the ambition to bridge gaps by understanding differences and diversity in life science contexts.

Methods

In our research, method follows question, and accordingly we employ a range of methods such as discourse analysis, ethnography, survey research and experiments. We also take the starting point that different communication questions may require different disciplinary angles (such as communication science, discursive psychology, interpretive policy analysis, or social psychology). At the same time, we take the stance that questions around societal issues often demand disciplines coming together. We seek synergies between disciplines within our group, and in collaboration with others, where possible. Projects frequently involve beta-gamma collaboration, connecting staff of our chair group and life scientists.

Aims

On the basis of our approach, we reflect upon and rethink assumptions behind strategic communication both in practice and communication science. Building on our research, we aim to contribute to creative problem solving with regard societal issues in complex, dynamic multi-actor settings. We translate findings into concrete approaches and strategies for societal actors ranging from communication professionals to policymakers, corporations, and civil society actors.

With our practice-oriented approach to strategic communication, we engage with the dynamics and complexity of today's world. The horizontalization of society brings together and confronts scientists, citizens, consumers, governments, social movements and corporations in new ways, bringing up ever more urgent questions of legitimacy, credibility, transparency, accountability and risk.

Incorporation of feedback from our networks is integral to this. The group collaborates closely with practitioners to enhance analytic-interventionist knowledge. Building on our research, we aim to contribute to creative problem solving with regard to societal issues in complex, dynamic settings. The group collaborates closely with practitioners in areas to enhance analytic-interventionist knowledge. We translate findings into concrete approaches and strategies for societal actors ranging from communication practitioners to professionals in different life science domains (such as health and environment), policymakers, corporations and civil society organizations.

Three themes

In our research, we address communication within three themes, distinguishable for the nature of the communication processes we seek to understand and contribute to, the societal issues we address, and the aspirations we have with our research.

Theme 1: Communication, organization and change
Challenge: When it comes to solving life science problems we are used to consider change as an organized activity of choosing a set of instruments – rules, subsidies, communication – in order to reach a specific effect that is defined beforehand. However, change normally does not take place in

such a linear means-end way. Instead, most changes in society are the result of the interplay between events, practices and interactions of actors involved. Through the construction of meaning in interaction, communication plays a decisive role in this process by connecting, partially connecting or disconnecting people. These numerous interactions create a certain order, which in turn influences the interactions, thereby organising and re-organising social networks in society.

What we do: We study the interplay between the construction of meaning in interaction in situated practices- including discourses, conversations, stories, dialogues and frames - and the social networks that emerge out of these interactions. We study how people and organizations come together, organize and re-organise themselves, and engage in collective process by means of their interactions. This involves the analysis of communication between different actors engaging with societal issues from different perspectives and interests, in networks, partnerships and multi-stakeholder processes in life science domains. Examples of topics we study from this perspective are the circulation and shaping of meaning in the development and implementation of standards in natural resource management, and the development of trust and connection in interaction for systemic change in water governance and climate change policy.

What we aspire: Studying change from this perspective enriches our understanding of the way communication contributes to differentiated and collective understandings of societal issues and solutions in life science domains, and how communication can be improved in order to advance inclusive and constructive interaction on such issues.

Leading staff members: Dr. Severine van Bommel, Dr. Jasper de Vries

Recent publications:

de Vries, J. R.; van Bommel, Severine; Blackmore, C. and Asano, Y. (2017). 'Where There Is No History: How to Create Trust and Connection in Learning for Transformation in Water Governance'. *Water*, 9(2) p. 130.

van Bommel, S., Turnhout, E., Wiersum, F. Zeiss, R. and Cook, W. (under review). 'Traveling standards: friction and alignment in Forest Stewardship Council certification'. *Agriculture and Human Values*

Example projects:

Gender inclusion in climate change adaption policies and implications for adoption of climate smart agricultural practices in Uganda. Taking an interpretative approach to narrative policy analysis, this study unfolds different understandings of gender issues in climate change adaptation policies in agriculture in Uganda and Tanzania. Narratives are taken as a central object of study, giving special attention to how they construct policy, identity and agency in a variety of contexts

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes: Third party auditing and information, between global forestry standards and local forestry management. This project researches the process of auditing in forestry in a grounded manner, examining the interactions between auditors and forest managers. The project zooms in on how current forest management auditing practices performed in the field, how auditors and audits perform enact international forest management standards, and how auditing information constructed, and with what effects in and on the auditing process.

Theme 2: Communication and behaviour change

Challenge: Many societal issues in life science domains are related to human behaviour. Unhealthy and risky behaviours contribute to major health problems such as chronic diseases (e.g., obesity, diabetes) or infectious diseases (e.g., antimicrobial resistance). Or they fail to engage in pro-environmental behaviours posing a burden on climate and nature. Communication can be strategically used to foster individual and collective change in risk perceptions, opinions, motivations, and behaviours in order to address major societal issues in the domain of the life sciences.

What we do: Our chair group develops, evaluates and implements strategic communications to foster change in life sciences domains, such as health, nutrition, environmental behaviour, technological innovations, under conditions of uncertainty and risks. Central to our research is improving the fundamental understanding of the origins of perceptions and behaviours in relation to life science topics, and how these (psychological and communicative) insights can be strategically used to create change. Different stages of behaviour change are acknowledged in our work: 1) formation of attitudes and risk perceptions, 2) motivation, planning and goal setting, and 3) self-regulation, habit formation, and behavioural maintenance. We study change at an individual level (e.g. interpersonal communication through health care providers) as well as at the more collective level (e.g., contextual interventions addressing food environments), including diverse populations (e.g., children, low income, chronically ill patients). At both levels we are interested in interactions between context (e.g., work, health care, education), technology and behaviour (e.g., communication through virtual agents; serious games, location-based communication technology, nudging).

What we aspire: To improve insight into effective communication strategies that successfully create change while avoiding defensive reactions. These insights aim to extend and improve our toolbox for creating changes for successfully dealing with problems in food, health and the living environment, ultimately contributing to a better quality of life.

Leading staff members: Prof. dr. Emely de Vet, dr. Marijn Poortvliet

Recent publications:

Poortvliet, P. M., Duineveld, M., & Purnhagen, K. (2016). 'Performativity in Action: How Risk Communication Interacts in Risk Regulation'. *Eur. J. Risk Reg.*, *7*, 213.

Raghoebar, S., van Kleef, E., & de Vet, E. (2017). 'Self-Crafting Vegetable Snacks: Testing the IKEA-Effect in Children'. *British Food Journal*, *119* (6), 1301-1312.

Example projects:

How to navigate a temping food environment: from explicit directions to hidden cues. This NWO VIDI project seeks to get a better understanding of how food environments lead to overeating and overweight. More specifically, the project investigates how socials norms about food and eating are implicitly communicated through artefacts and spatial arrangements in the food environment. Lab and field experiments combined with innovative technologies for observation in naturalistic settings investigate 1) the hypothesis that implicit normative cues influence eating over and above salience and effort, 2) the psychological processes driving these effects, and 3) when and for whom communications via implicit normative cues are advantageous compared to more traditional normative messages.

SURE-farm. This Horizon2020 project aims to understand farmers' risk behaviour and risk management decisions, and to develop and test risk management strategies and decision support tools that farmers can use to cope with increasing economic, environmental and social uncertainties and risks. More specifically, it aims to: (1) understand and elicit farmers' risk perceptions and preferences; (2) understand farmers' adaptive behaviour, learning capacity and preferred improvements of current risk management tools; (3) design and analyse improved strategies to deal with extreme weather, with particular emphasis on weather index-based insurances and approaches based on remote sensing and (4) co-create improved risk management tools and map related institutional challenges. This is a collaborative project shared by COM, PAP, BEC and the plant sciences department.

Theme 3: Communication, contestation and cooperation

Challenge: Contemporary societies are increasingly pluralistic, in the sense that organisations in the private and public sector and in civil society have to communicate with a wide range of different audiences with diverse, often contradictory professional and cultural backgrounds, identities, values and worldviews. Political, moral and epistemic authority have become increasingly contested, not in the least because Internet and smartphones facilitate easy and fast communication and organization around themes, viewpoints and interests. This plurality fundamentally affects how societies engage with questions around food, health or the environment.

What we do: We study the way conflicts get to be articulated, contestation around issues and conditions for this contestation, and the way pluralism shapes the nature of cooperation. More concretely, one key area of study is the contribution of communication in the role of science in attempts to improve the quality of life. Focusing on what we call 'expertise in action' we study the changing role of experts and expertise, not only looking at preconceived communication efforts but also examine how scientific expertise is treated and contested '*in the wild*', that is, in people's everyday interactions. Another concrete area of study is the increasing role of civil society advocacy in international development, articulating conflict, while also contesting and seeking cooperation. Here, our research focuses on questions of inclusiveness and effectiveness.

What we aspire: Our research helps to develop a reflexive understanding of societal conflicts and cooperation around food, health and the living environment. We contribute to practical improvements to conflict management, space for contestation, development of mutual understandings and cooperation, and the empowerment of citizens and practitioners.

Leading staff members: Prof. Dr. Hedwig te Molder, Dr. Margit van Wessel

Recent publications:

Mogendorff, K., te Molder, H., van Woerkum, C., & Gremmen, B. (2016). 'Turning Experts into Self-Reflexive Speakers: The Problematization of Technical-Scientific Expertise Relative to Alternative Forms of Expertise'. *Science communication*, *38*(1), 26-50.

Arensman, B., van Wessel, M., & Hilhorst, D. (2017). 'Does Local Ownership Bring About Effectiveness? The Case of a Transnational Advocacy Network'. *Third World Quarterly*, *38*(6), 1310-1326.

Example projects:

Talk in Action! Towards a constructive dialogue between stakeholders on livestock-related zoonoses Livestock related zoonoses are high on research and policy agendas and recurrently involve public debate in the context of intensive farming. Government policies on zoonotic health risks fail to deploy an inclusive approach in which not only biomedical risks or economic considerations are taken into account but also stakeholders' social-moral concerns. An interaction-analytic approach allows us to understand how these considerations are put to use in real-life stakeholder interactions, and for which interactional goals (e.g. blame; undermining expertise; building empathy). We analyze public and stakeholder meetings using Conversation Analysis. On the basis of these insights, we develop a training module for health and environmental professionals (RIVM and GGD).

Who Framed Chicken Little? Media power, framing and contestation about the production of food of animal origin. This research project takes newspaper coverage of chicken meat production in the United Kingdom as a case study to analyze the media's role in the long-term shift of public discourses about mass animal production, specifically addressing the question of how media power and contestation are exercised in and through the framing of chicken meat production.

Collaboration and funding

Communication, as an integral part of change and innovation processes in pluralist contexts, can only be studied and advanced in close collaboration between research disciplines and between research and practice. This is reflected in the funding we receive, e.g., from ministries, national research organizations (i.e., NWO, ZonMW), or EU (Horizon2020). Collaboration is a hallmark of our research, and it takes place in various forms.

The Chair Group of is part of the Section Communication, Philosophy and Technology – Centre for Integrative Development (CPT-CID), which also includes the Chairs Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI), and Philosophy (PHI). This Section aims to develop a better understanding of the relations between the life sciences and societal change, has developed a common identity and vision. Our common identity is defined by two features. First, we share an orientation towards improving the quality of life, through enhancing the interaction between the life sciences and society. Thus, part of our research is interdisciplinary and action oriented. Second, we connect social sciences and humanities through a shared interest in societal 'meaning making'. We study how problems, solutions and future orientations are constructed in pluralist societies, and how competing meanings, values and views of reality are made to count in societal decision-making and change. In this endeavour, the group focusses on understanding meaning making through the lens of inter-human communication and behaviour change, while the Knowledge, Technology and Innovation group adds an analysis of how knowledge and discourse arises from the interactions between the social and the bio-material world. The Philosophy group adds critical and normative reflection on how to deal with values in a pluralist society, emphasizing the importance of ambivalence and collectivity.

The groups in CPT-CID collaborate in several joint research projects, and take joint initiatives in response to external calls. A prime example of collaboration is the current research programme *Responsible life-science innovations for development in the digital age: EVOCA*. This is a collaborative interdisciplinary project of Wageningen University and seven partner institutions, in which KTI and COM have leading roles. It focusses on knowledge sharing platforms (known as Environmental Virtual Observatories, EVOs) and their potential to transform the development landscape in five case study areas in rural Africa. Central research question is: How can life-science knowledge, digital technologies and responsible innovation concepts be leveraged to address the pressing development challenges in crop, water, health and wildlife management? Other projects bring together scholars from COM and Philosophy. An example is our research on the Legitimacy of nudging in public health.

In line with our vision, we also collaborate as COM with life science chair groups within WUR. The abovementioned EVOCA programme integrates the chair group's and life science groups' expertise, research agendas and approaches. Also, funded by the Edema-Steernberg foundation, we have collaborative PhD projects with the department of human nutrition on spatial memory for foods and behaviour change and on negotiation of healthy eating in low SES families. Another example can be found in the *SURE-farm* project in which we collaborate with plant scientists as well as in the collaboration in the AGORA academic public health workplace. Our research is also embedded in WUR through our involvement with WASS, the Wageningen School of Social Sciences. Staff contributes to WASS education from their specific expertise and all core staff are WASS fellows. PhD researchers are also embedded in WASS.

Many of the group's projects are embedded in international research networks. Recent and current examples include CCAFS (CGIAR Research Programme on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security) Humidtropics (the CGIAR programme on integrated agricultural innovation systems in the tropical Americas, Africa and Asia); CADWAGO (international consortium on climate change adaptation and water governance); JPI DEDIPAC (Determinants of Diet and Physical Activity); the Interpretive Policy Analysis network whose 2014 conference we hosted; and invited visiting scholar/professorships at UC Santa Barbara, University of Vienna and Rutgers; and the international conference on nudging organized by different members of the chair groups COM and PHI of the section in 2017.

Finally, our research mostly takes its shape, and is executed, in interaction with practitioners such as policymakers, health organizations and forestry organizations. This collaboration integrates practitioners' questions, understandings and expertise, and seeks to contribute to the achievement of objectives of practitioners. This applies to projects in all three themes.