THE FORMATION OF DOMINANT VOICE IN ISSUE ARENAS

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Master's thesis
20.12.2011
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Title THE FORMATION OF DOMINANT VOICE IN ISSUE ARENAS	
Subject Organizational Communication and PR	Level Master's thesis
Month and year December 2011	Number of pages 92

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to map out required changes to current stakeholder thinking in public relations (PR) research and practice for a better suited model for PR professionals. The concept of issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009) was adopted for the future direction of stakeholder thinking. Further, a central aspect of PR management on issue arenas is the division of voice – or indirect power – of different players. It was suggested that gaining a dominant voice in an issue arena would facilitate the attainment of organizational goals. Meaning was considered cental in this process. This thesis, focused, on the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas.

Two research questions were selected. These were 1) What are the constituents of dominant voice in an issue arena? and 2) How is dominant voice formed in an inter-organizational context? Both research questions help defining central elements of and provide tools for future PR research and practice challenges by investigating new areas of research. The research method was a combination of multiple approaches. First, there are elements of a conceptual paper, as many features of the central concepts have not been defined earlier. One form of this was the creation of new theoretical model for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas. Second, a wide array of literature was used in a way that could loosely be defined as literature review. Finally, a practical case example was provided to test the theoretical model in a real-life setting by theoretical means.

Dominant voice was seen to consist of at least three factors. These were 1) one or few players lead the discussion on an issue, 2) other players refer to the dominant player(s), and 3) dominance is witnessed within managing meanings, not necessarily attributed to direct power. Moreover, two strategies were identified for the formation of dominant voice in an inter-organizational context. These were dominance through resources and dominance through recognition. Dominance through resources refers to the material resources through which an organization can provide value for other players on an issue arena, or the ownership of media space via more quantity and quality communications than other players can. Dominance through recognition refers to the charismatic character of one player who has gained the position granted by other players due to a recognition building trait or capacity to act. Finally, alliances were seen instrumental catalysts to both strategies. The findings of the present thesis suggest that the identification of relevant issues should precede the identification of stakeholders. Also, key to success in today's operating environment comes from giving key importance to the management of zones of meaning as a fundamental aspect of the PR practice.

Keywords Stakeholder theory, Issue arena, Dominant voice, Zones of meaning, Conceptual model
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1 Introduction

The direction in which society shapes to is not defined by a simple list of random occurrences. Rather, a great deal of negotiation, collaboration, and even coercion are used as tools to gain a more favorable future for a given issue. This conscious shaping of the future is carried on simultaneously by many players on different arenas around multiple issues. There is an endless selection of actors seeking information, providing information, and creating static as a bi-product of their existence. Thus, today's operating environment much resembles listening to a choir and trying to pinpoint an individual voice when there is a traffic construction just across the street. Ideal or not, this is the reality in which much of public relations (PR) work takes place today.

Public relations has a key role in securing success in such an environment. First, public relations insights facilitate identifying relevant players, arenas and issues to interact with (Vos & Schoemaker 2006). Second, through public relations, better relationships can be built to foster collaboration and balance differences between different parties to secure mutual long-term benefits (Grunig et al. 1992; Ledingham & Bruning 2000). Third, public relations brings about attention, a commodity of great value in the current operating environment (Davenport &

Beck 2001). Finally, there is an element of power linked with PR, as public relations covers the notion of co-creation of shared meanings or zones of meaning (Heath 2006) in the networks of players (Castells 2008; Rowley 1997). Due to these factors, public relations plays a significant role in trying to understand and influence what is happening in society today. It is, therefore, important to further the knowledge and build new tools to support this task.

Although PR has come a long way in its capacity to explain changes in the operating environment and provide a list of effective means to manage those changes, there is a definite lack of awareness, or at least a lag in re-shaping of models, in current public relations literature. More specifically, the problem comes about explaining the dynamics of the operating environment (Wu 2007). It is fair to argue that while current models do provide a rather wholesome and in-depth view of an organization and its operating environment, there is a limit to which this thinking can go as there are inherent flaws to these approaches. There are at least three examples of wrong assumptions. First, much theory is built around organization centeredness, when a more fruitful approach would see the organization as just one player among many (Fassin 2008; Fassin 2009). Second, although there are many scholars (e.g. Steurer 2006; Key 1999) who state that the operating environment is always dynamic; few models recognize this and most are built for rather static environments (e.g. stakeholder theory). Finally, research is often focused on either inter-organizational relationships or issues but almost never in a way that would cover both (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). These weaknesses threaten to harm the capacity of public relations to explain relevant factors in the social environment.

To arrive at a more fruitful starting point than what previous approaches could provide, this thesis acknowledges *issue arenas*, a novel concept by Luoma-aho & Vos (2009; 2010), as a more meaningful way of assessing public relations initiatives. The concept draws from many relevant theories and ties together loose ends. The basic premise behind the concept is simple: stakeholder interaction takes place in arenas where issues are discussed among many actors rather than in direct organization-to-stakeholder relationships as other approaches suggest. Moreover, focus should be put on all three variables stakes, holders, and issues simultaneously. Through this, an approach is formed that recognizes dynamic change in the operating environment, does not over-emphasize the role of the organization in the interaction, and is capable of combining both short- and long-term strategies. As such, the concept of issue

arenas can provide answers to many crucial unanswered questions and thus may spawn fresh ideas to the field of public relations.

One interesting aspect of studying issue arenas is power to influence. As issue arenas are places for stake exchange (Heath 2006), negotiation and enactment (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010), these arenas can have a great impact on decisions even on the societal level. It is suggested here that similar, in a sense, to human interaction in groups, also organizations form a set of dynamics (that can change over time) within an arena. Thus, some players may become more central in the interactions within an arena. This player or network of players may then influence the direction of the interaction or even decision-making in the arena. To say that in simple terms: they have a form of power. Naturally, one must remember that there is a variety of arenas out there, also ones where the dynamics do not lead to such special role for a given player. It is, however, important to recognize that this form of influence exists, as its effects may provide either new possibilities to attain organizational goals or to protect undesired changes within one's operating environment. The organizations who understand the laws of these dynamics succeed; and the ones who do not, fail. It is, thus, vital to understand the logistics of such dynamics.

The present thesis investigates the ways through which a *dominant voice* in issue arenas is formed. By dominant voice it is meant that one player becomes central enough to direct the creation of *zones of meaning*. What is of special interest here is not actual dominance that can be acquired through legal contracts or pre-set dynamics but rather focus on the interactions through which zones of meaning are created. Rather, an organization has a dominant voice when others refer to the organization and cannot think of excluding the organization when discussing the given issue. Thus, there can be a situation where a player has dominant voice over an issue arena but has no real power to directly influence decision making. An example of this would be the scientific community studying acceptable emission rates. As a group, they have a significant say on the zone of meaning as a power that directs the discussion about suitable emission rates, but no direct power over the matter. However, it is suggested here that a dominant voice can provide great advantage to an organization taking part in an issue arena.

The aim of this thesis is to better understand how dominant voice in issue arenas. There are two central questions addressed. What are the constituents of dominant voice in an issue arena? How is dominant voice formed in an inter-organizational context? To answer such questions, the present thesis combines

multiple sources. It provides elements of a conceptual paper and an illustrative case study. After discussing the literature an overview is presented clarifying the theoretical components on which issue arena theory may be based and a model is constructed to further explain dominant voice in issue arenas. Next, a case is discussed to illustrate the model. Finally, conclusions are built from these premises.

1.1. The framework for the present thesis

This thesis is constructed in the following way (Figure 1). First, selected pieces of literature are discussed. Then, the concepts of issue arenas and dominant voice are further investigated. Answers to research questions are provided by the means of literature review and case example. Finally, a conceptual model and suggestions for further research are given.
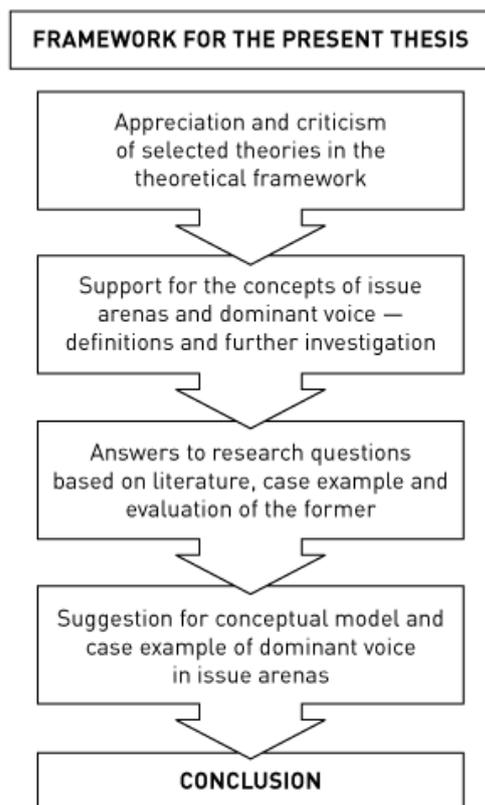

Figure 1. The framework of the thesis.

This framework will help the reader of this thesis to better understand how the research has been constructed and what the logic behind the findings is.

2 A Framework for Organizational Interaction

2.1. The Evolution of Stakeholder Thinking

As this thesis argues for the existence of issue arenas, a novel concept in literature, there is a need for clarification of the origin of the concept. One crucial pillar of the theory of issue arenas is stakeholder thinking. To be specific, it is argued here that issue arenas thinking is an evolved version of the previous stakeholder thinking, one better suited for today's operating environment. Thus, this chapter provides an overview of the evolution of stakeholder thinking leading to some basic premises of the theory of issue arenas.

The overview is built to support the aims of the present study. This means that the categorizations are simplifications and only draw on influences relevant to the present study. However, these categories describing the evolution of stakeholder thinking clarify the over-arching themes.

This thesis talks of stakeholder thinking instead of stakeholder theory. Following Freeman (1995, 35), it is suggested here that it is more fruitful to speak of

stakeholder thinking rather than one stakeholder theory, as there are multiple stakeholder theories and theories close to stakeholder theories.

Another remark concerns the terms *stakeholder* and *public*. A public is what Heath and Coombs (2006, 263) call "a group of people that share a view, pro or con, and have an interest in some problematic public policy matter". In this thesis, the term stakeholder is seen to cover the term public so that here the terms are synonymously used.

2.1.1. A Starting Point: Freeman's model

An organization is connected to multiple sources of influence, both internal and external. These influences can be denominated under the concept of *stakeholder*.

According to the original definition of Stanford Research Group (1963, internal memorandum quoted in Freeman 1984, 31) stakeholders are "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist". Building on this, Freeman (1984, 25) in his seminal work considers stakeholders to be "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objective". This definition of the concept has been central to many scholars and is still widely quoted in public relations literature (e.g. Rowley 1997; Wu 2007; Mitchell et al. 1997).

Illustrated in Figure 2, stakeholder relations can be mapped in the following way.

To further emphasize the importance of network thinking (although the first stakeholder models focused on dyadic relationships – see Rowley 1997) and contingencies, stakeholder thinking has been linked to the concept of legitimacy. Näsi (1995, 19) refers to stakeholders as actors practically 'holding stakes' that determine whether the operation of a firm is possible. Also the moral dimension of stakeholder thinking is often referred to (e.g. Caroll 1995), where one central aspect to the theory is to stress the social responsibility an organization carries with itself. It is to be noted that later these elements have been important in understanding what stakeholders are and how they can be categorized.

Another key element to early stakeholder thinking is that an organization and its stakeholders are in a two-way interaction and exchange of influence (Carroll in Näsi 1995, 22). According to this view, it is not just the organization's operations that have impact on stakeholders but rather that the stakeholders influence the actions, decisions, policies and practices of organizations (Carroll in Näsi 1995,

22; Freeman 1984). Moreover, unlike Clarkson (1995) proposes, stakeholders should not be defined as risk bearers that have some form of capital – financial or human – invested in the organization and that merely try to protect the well-being of this investment, since this would be too narrow a view (Rowley 1997). Rather it is suggested here, in spirit of Freeman (2004), that stakeholders are often allies and resources to the organization, as well.
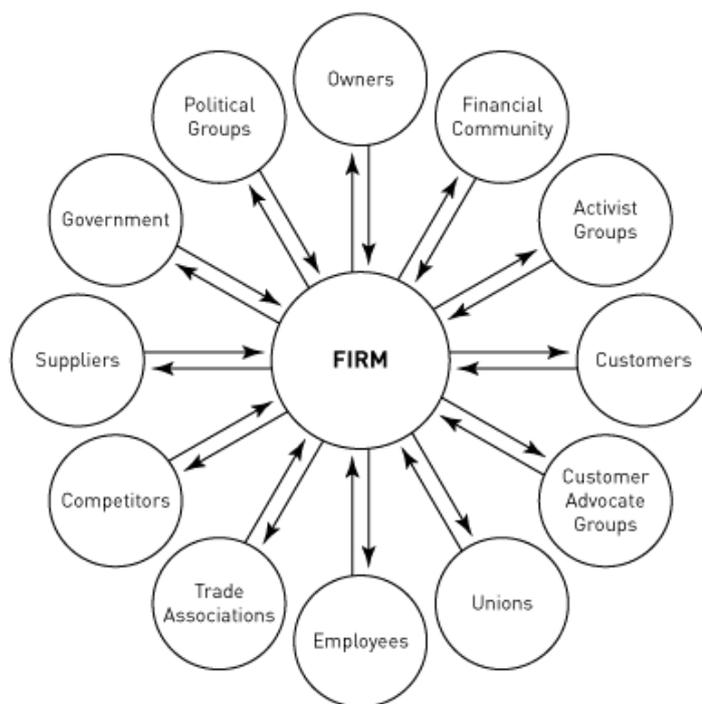
FIGURE 2: Illustration of stakeholder relations for a firm (Freeman 1984, 55).

Although stakeholder thinking is rather holistic in its approach, some specific features in Freeman's model can be identified. First, Freeman defines stakeholders to be connected with a firm's objectives. This partly positions the concept around managerial thinking (Donaldson & Preston 1995; Luoma-aho 2005, 110). The tight link to organizational objectives brings about a strategic spirit to managing stakeholder relations. That is to say, while considering more than shareholder interest, stakeholder thinking also provides a means to proactively secure organizational gains. Second, the definition sees organizations to be deeply embedded to their networks, both restraining and facilitating action. Thus, this calls for balancing between different stakeholder expectations and the

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company interest, requiring both the interpreting function and balancing function from management (Näsi 1995, 25). Thirdly, although Freeman and other scholars (e.g. Carroll 1989; Carroll 1993; Mitchell et al. 1997) speak of seeing the organization as a part of a larger context than active primary stakeholders, the model they propose has been criticized as too organization centered (Fassin 2008; Fassin 2009). Although there are supporters for this organization centeredness in the model, at least in other domains of research (e.g. Boesso 2009), as well. Finally, it is a matter of some debate whether this original approach covers sufficiently the essential elements to be able to answer to Brenner and Cochran (1991, 452) who call for a stakeholder theory that both describe and predict how organizations will operate under various conditions. In the point of view of the present thesis, it can be argued that many underlying principles behind stakeholder thinking are as timely as ever but in many ways this model perhaps provides few tools for in-depth understanding of the important aspects of context, time, and manner in which stakeholders behave.

2.1.2. Second Step: Introducing more external influences

Although Freeman's (1984) thinking does emphasize the social dimension of the connection between the organization and its stakeholders, it can be argued that there is a lack of embeddedness to the mixture of environmental forces that create the operating environment, although Freeman (2004, 229) claims this to have been considered already in the 1984 publication.

To tackle this issue, a number of models have been introduced to better describe what the operating environment of an organization is like. Caroll (1989; 1993) was the one of the first to more explicitly utilize the stakeholder approach to business and societal topics (Rowley 1997, 888). In his model, Carroll (1989; 1993) proposes two important evolutions to Freeman's (1984) model. One, stakeholders are set to their context by distinguishing the type of environment they belong to. Two, there is a continuum between stakeholders and environmental context. For example, a stakeholder group, such as employees can be further divided to different types of employees that are influenced by individual set of contextual influences. Thus, an organization should understand not just the stakeholders but their background, as well (Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 21). These two premises are important elements to other scholars' models, too.

Keuning (1993, 1, in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 21, Figure 3) follows Carroll in surrounding the organization with stakeholder in their environmental contexts, arriving at a model of a *field of forces* in which the organization functions. While Carroll (1993) distinguishes four types of environments (social, technological, economic, and political), Keuning (1993, 1, cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 21) recognizes more influences. Common to both approaches is that in their representation in the figures mistakenly give the impression that certain stakeholder groups would be more concerned with one environment/trend than other stakeholders. While this may be true in some cases, it is risky to interpret the figure in this manner. Rather, the environmental context should be read to form a platform on which managing stakeholder relations takes place.
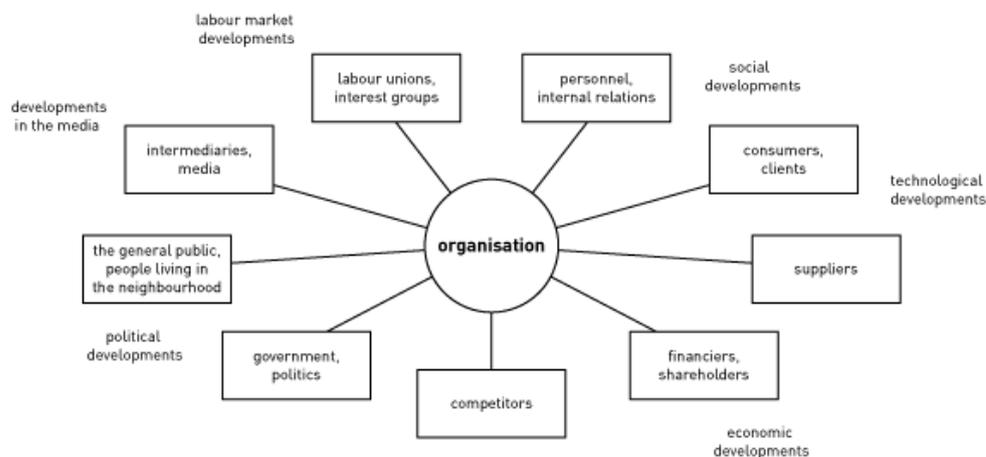
Figure 3. The field of forces in which an organization operates (Keuning 1991, 1, cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 21).

One key strength in the field of forces model is that it recognizes time, and thus better represents the dynamic nature of the operating environment. The term *trend* itself carries the notion of time. Another strength is that the field of forces model recognizes conflicting interests, although it is poorly represented in the figure. Vos and Schoemaker (2006, 94), remind us that a field of forces does not only apply on the organizational level but can be applied to individual issues, as well.

While the included elements have been important advances in understanding stakeholder relations and proven to be rather practical too, there are still

weaknesses to this level of evolution of stakeholder thinking. First, the models are still organization centered. Second, although the field of forces model recognizes time most models describe the operating environment rather static. Finally, stakeholder relations are, practically, seen as dyadic and a more network-oriented approach is not taken account.

2.1.3. Third Step: Adding complexity and positioning to stakeholder relations

While previous stakeholder models provide a general perspective to what and who stakeholders are and how they can be mapped, a more detailed look to what Freeman (1984) originally called "The Principle of Who or What Really Counts", and further reassessed by Mitchell et al. (1997), was lacking. The void of more in-depth analysis of stakeholders has been filled by many scholars. Special attention has been given towards specific classifications of stakeholders (e.g. Mitchell et al. 1997) and stakeholder positioning (e.g. Wu 2007) in the networks of relationships (Rowley 1997) to the organization. Other authors have been broadening stakeholder thinking by acknowledging unconscious influences in stakeholder relations (van Woerkum & Aarts 2008; Rowley & Moldoveanu 2003) and introducing non-human stakeholders (Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010).

Identifying stakeholders: who and what counts

Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997, 854) claim that previous stakeholder literature has been unable to reliably identify stakeholders from non-stakeholders. Another point of their criticism is that the question of stakeholder salience, or in other words, who has priority, has not been answered sufficiently. They call for further categorization of stakeholders as compared to, for example, Carroll's (1989) distinction of primary and secondary stakeholders. Rather, they propose that stakeholders to be categorized through the interplay of three attribute:

(1) stakeholder's power to influence the firm,

(2) the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm, and

(3) the urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the firm. (Mitchell et al 1997, 854).

The three categories of attributes are rather clearly defined, but they are further explained here. First, by power to influence the firm, it is meant that a stakeholder has some means of leverage on the organization. One important point here is that power is transitory, meaning it can be both gained and lost. Power can further be divided to coercive, utilitarian and normative power. Second, legitimacy means an organization's actions are seen to be desirable and appropriate in a given social context. Finally, urgency refers to both time-sensitivity of a matter and its importance to the stakeholder. (Mitchell et al. 1997, 854, 865-868.) These categories have been often cited by many scholars, yet they, also, have their critics, as they are seen not instrumental and appropriate enough (Wu 2007, 417). In light of this thesis, these categories, however, provide meaningful insight to how stakeholder thinking has evolved.

Figure 4 shows how stakeholders can be divided into nine groups, which represent the features of influence each stakeholder possess.
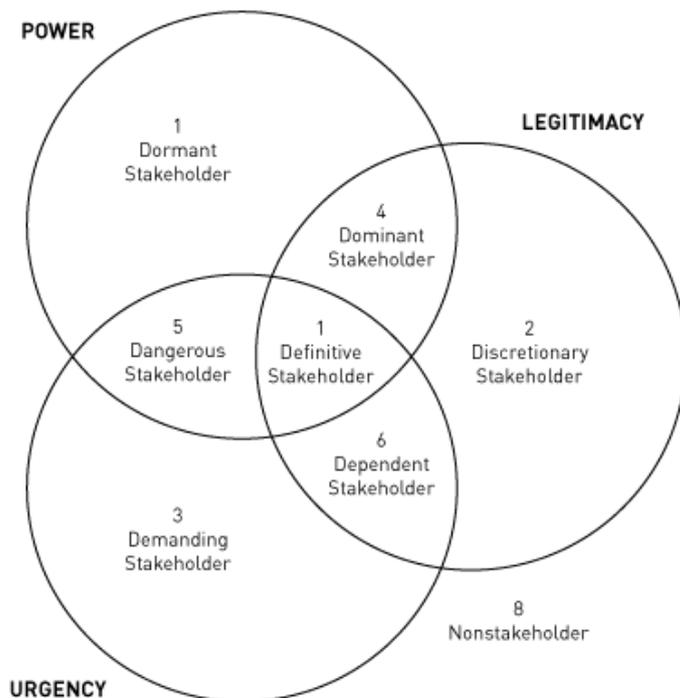

FIGURE 4. Stakeholder identification and salience model by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997, 874).

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In this typology, it is seen that a stakeholder's capacity to influence an organization comes from the interplay of three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. The more of these attributes a stakeholder possesses, the more definitive its position. To further characterize stakeholders, Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997, 868) propose three additional features that further define a stakeholder's capacity to influence. These are

(1) stakeholder attributes are variable, not steady state

(2) stakeholder attributes are socially constructed, not objective, reality

(3) consciousness and willful exercise may or may not be present (Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997, 868).

These additional features represent well the dynamic operating environment organizations face today. By the variability of stakeholder attributes, it is meant that, for example, a dormant stakeholder may become a definitive stakeholder as the environment or other features change. In other words, stakeholder classification is not static but rather an on-going process. Second, attributes given to stakeholders are socially constructed. This means that a great deal of interpretation of social dynamics is required in understanding stakeholder interaction. Third, many aspects of stakeholder relations may be due to unconscious processes (Woerkum & Aarts 2008). These features provide a worthwhile basis for future development of stakeholder thinking.

Positioning stakeholders

Wu (2007) seeks to develop stakeholder identification and positioning by identifying stakeholders through the operational function a stakeholder is connected to the organization. Building on a case study, three *types of stakes* are identified. These include

(1) product & revenue

(2) policy & regulation

(3) perception & reputation (Wu 2007, 421-422)

These categories of stakes mean that an organization should take into account to which of these categories the influence of a given stakeholder belongs to. However, it is not explained how each type of stakes actually affects the organizational response.

To further analyze the overall influence (i.e. stakeholder salience), Wu (2007, 423) distinguishes seven features that affect the reaction from an organization. These are

(1) stakeholders,

(2) direction of influence,

(3) power and strength of influence,

(4) affinity/vicinity with decision-making center,

(5) consistency and continuity of influence,

(6) extremity of the position, and

(7) visibility of the influence (Wu 2007, 423)

Especially important elements to this thesis here are visibility of the influence, affinity/vicinity with decision-making center and consistency and continuity of influence. These features will be given closer inspection later.

Identity and unconscious processes: less highlighted drivers of stakeholder behavior

Much of the stakeholder literature considers stakeholder interests is on the instrumental level (Rowley & Moldoveanu 2003) and focuses on visible, conscious actions and interactions (van Woerkum & Aarts 2008).

Although most policies are carried out in a transparent and clearly defined manner, there is a level on unconscious processes that shapes the actual actions and interactions between stakeholders and organizations. This view counters the traditional public relations approach where planning communication programs has been central, and proposes interaction as the basis for organizations to orientating to stakeholder relations. (van Woerkum & Aarts 2008, 196, 181.) It can be argued that this approach would better suit the evermore dynamic operating environment organizations face today. Also Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) call for the inclusion of other incentives than the rational interest-based view when analyzing stakeholder mobilization and action. They propose a model where two other factors, the dimension of identity and degree of overlap in networks of stakeholder, are taken into account. Thus, arriving to three factors which are

(1) interest-based mobilization

(2) identity-based mobilization

(3) degree of overlap across stakeholder groups affecting likelihood of mobilization (Rowley & Moldoveanu 2003)

Identity-based reasoning for mobilization means that stakeholder groups act to inherent motives rather than their self-benefit, including action that is detrimental to the subject in some way and fighting for lost causes. The degree of overlap across stakeholder groups refers to network ties between stakeholders where some groups share a common interest, identity or other factor resulting in taking action together. (Rowley & Moldoveanu 2003, 205). The key argument here is the notion that both a broader and a more in-depth perspective provides valuable contribution to the strategic management of stakeholder relations.

Moreover, van Woerkum and Aarts (2008, 185) state that it is the interaction between all the stakeholders, different in nature and therefore capacity, that creates much of the dynamics in the social environment. This notion not only stresses the meaning of linkages between stakeholders (networks) but, in addition, the significance of managing stakeholder relations as they are seen as crucial in the social environment.

Networks in stakeholder literature

Another set of criticism towards previous stakeholder thinking has been its negligence of ties between stakeholders, in edition, the significance of networks (Rowley 1997). This argument holds true especially in the case of the static stakeholder models (e.g. Freeman 1984, Vos 1992; Carroll 1993), where the center positioning of the focal organization may mistakenly lead to think that the organization would be the center of attention and have a dominant position in the relationship. However, already Freeman and Evan (1990, 354) pointed out that a given stakeholder environment consists of "a series of multilateral contracts among stakeholders". Following this, Rowley (1997, 898-890) stresses that stakeholder relationships occur in a network of influences, where especially (1) network density and (2) centrality of the organization in the network determine the suitable strategies for the organization. Moreover, Rowley (1997, 898-900) claims that as network density increases, the more power stakeholders have over the focal organization and that the more central the focal organization's position in the network, the less power the stakeholders have over the focal organization.

Building on these influencing factors Rowley posits four types of behaviors related to resisting stakeholder pressures (Figure 5).

		Centrality of the Focal Organization	
		High	Low
Density of the Stakeholder Network	High	Compromiser	Subordinate
	Low	Commander	Solitarian

FIGURE 5. Types of firm behaviors related to resisting stakeholder pressures according to Rowley (1997, 901).

The figure shows the set dynamic of each four types of behaviors of organizations under stakeholder pressure. This means that the organization should choose a position most suitable to its situation, preferably actively seeking successful positions.

A short introduction to actor-network theory of stakeholders

Lately, Luoma-aho & Paloviita (2010) have suggested utilizing actor-networking theory (ANT) in assessing stakeholder relations. They argue for two features in stakeholder thinking. First, they claim that the scope of research for stakeholders and stakeholders should be broadened to include non-human stakeholders, acknowledging more than just social ties as the field of study for stakeholder relations. Second, Luoma-aho and Paloviita (2010) suggest that stakeholder analysis should be focused on the stakes and the holders, rather than merely looking at the social networks between organizations and stakeholders. (See 2.3. for a closer inspection of ANT and its relationship with PR.)

2.1.4. Concluding remarks: towards issue arenas

Stakeholder thinking is timely for PR (Wu 2007; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). However, as Wu (2007) puts it, the dynamic nature of today's operating environment has not been fully addressed.

Stakeholder theory and stakeholder thinking have many benefits already in their current state-of-affairs. First, stakeholder thinking is concerned with the long-term social networks and relationships (Ledingham & Bruning 2000) which contributes to organizational reputation and brand (de Chernatony & Harris 2000) and, through reputation, legitimacy (Deephouse & Carter 2005). Second, the evolution of stakeholder thinking has led to the creation of many useful tools for both managing stakeholder relations but public relations in general. Finally, stakeholder thinking provides a wholesome foundation from which to study organizations, their operating environment, and players acting in the environment (Freeman 1984; Näsi 1995).

Likewise, current stakeholder thinking is insufficient in explaining what is actually of most importance in the operating environment and how organizations should go about any given situation they find themselves in. There are at least three sources of critique. First, stakeholder theory gives an unbalanced view of the role of the organization in its operating environment by positing it to have a central role (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010; Fassin 2008; Fassin 2009). Second, much of previous stakeholder literature suggests organizations have a great deal of control over communication, which is risky (Key 1999). Thirdly, although stakeholder theory is a social theory and thus recognizes change, the operating environment is commonly viewed as static (Key 1999), which is not in line with current understanding of operating environments (e.g. Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010). Fourthly, with special interest to the present thesis, stakeholders are actually heterogeneous in importance and their structure (Fassin 2008; Fassin 2009). Finally, Luoma-aho and Vos (2010, 317) question stakeholder theory's narrow focus on just stakes and their holders, whereas issues are not recognized sufficiently, as they are not as tightly linked to the organization. Here it is argued, in sync with Luoma-aho & Vos (2010, 317) that these elements of issues management and stakeholder theory should be combined to provide a more holistic view of what happens in the operating environment and which things to concentrate on.

Although the theory of issue arenas does not fully address how to (Luoma-aho & Vos 324-325), it does provide a good basis from which to operate other public relations tools. Moreover, this thesis recognizes issue arenas as the most suitable way of explaining and managing the operating environment. Thus this perspective is chosen here for further study (see Chapter 5).

Table 1 sums up the main strengths and weaknesses of previous stakeholder

thinking. This list is not meant to be considered a full account on the strengths and weakness, but merely to present the cornerstone differences that are central to issue arenas and this thesis.

Table 1. The strengths and weaknesses of previous stakeholder thinking in relation to issue arenas thinking.

Strength	Stakeholder theory provides a wholesome approach to identifying and managing important relationships	Freeman 1984; Näsi 1995
Strength	The focus of stakeholder thinking is on the long-term success	Ledingham & Bruning 2000
Weakness	Stakeholder theory gives an unbalanced view of the role of the organization in its operating environment by positing it to have a central role	Fassin 2008; Fassin 2009
Weakness	Stakeholder theory wrongly suggests organizations have a great deal of control over communication	Key 1999
Weakness	An organization's operating environment is viewed static which is not in line with current understanding	Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010
Weakness	Stakeholders are heterogenous in importance and structure, which is not presented in current models	Mitchell et al. 1997; Fassin 2008
Weakness	Stakeholder theory's focus is too narrow as it concentrates only on stakes and holders and not issues	Luoma-aho & Vos 2010

These strengths and weaknesses will be analyzed further in chapter 5, Issue arenas.

2.2. Issues Management

As this thesis argues for the existence of *issue arenas*, a novel concept in public relations literature, it is important to address theories that have contributed to the concept. According to Luoma-aho and Vos (2010), the theoretical background of issue arenas draws from many theories but on the forefront are stakeholder

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thinking and issues management. Therefore, issues and issues management are discussed here.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the concepts of an issue, issue life cycle, and issues management. Later, closer inspection is provided to how the selected concepts relate to issue arenas, and more widely to the heart of public relations.

When a matter of fact becomes an issue

A matter of fact, a value, a policy, all of these can become an issue but are not synonymous with the term issue. What is the defining factor is whether stakeholders attach significance to the matter at hand or not. This is well summarized by Crable and Vibbert (1985, 5) who state that "an issue is created when one or more human agents attaches significance to a situation or perceived 'problem'". Botan and Taylor (2004, 655) share this view and similarly stress the role of stakeholders in attaching meaning to issues. Moreover, an issue is a contestable fact, value, or policy that makes different players choose a side for debate. As such, an issue is highly subjective, and often differences are based on different evaluations or interpretations of the same facts (Heath & Coombs 2006, 263). These definitions emphasize the role of stakeholders attaching meaning to a matter, and doing so in such a manner that emotions play a key role in debates. Thus, issues evolve around facts and emotions.

Coming from a more instrumental direction, Mahon and Waddock (1992, 20) see issues to be the "spin" stakeholders use to place a favorable interpretation of reality in the public so that the specific stakeholder gains advantage. While this view may be too restricted in that it differentiates stakeholders and publics so that stakeholders influence the public, it does provide a useful approach to analyzing how contested issues are communicated and managed.

In addition to the above definitions, Dutton, Fahey, and Narayanan (1983, 307-308) further divide issues to two types from the organization's point of view. First, focused issues are attention organizing acts, where the realm of the issue is clearer and more focused. Second, issues explored are issues that call for acts of interpretations, where the organization analyzes different interpretations of an issue and then begins to form a standing on the matter.

An issue can come about from many directions and channels. Next, the concept

of *issues life cycle* is addressed which will shed light to how issues come to be and come to stagnate. A fully develop issue requires that large parts of the public are aware of it. Therefore, issues are often defined through this stage. In this, the media as the main source of mass communication has a significant role in the creation of an issue, as they both distribute and create meanings between publics.

The life of an issue: issue life cycle

Issues develop and stagnate. As Botan and Taylor (2004, 655) note, issues are not absent one moment and then develop to full-blown life in an instant. Rather, issues go through a fairly predictable development, a process of issue life cycle. An issue changes over time as an evolving issue also changes its own context, thus emerging and finally fading, leaving its impact on the social environment.

There are a number of models that describe the development of an issue from its emergence through its phases of blossoming in the center of attention to a hibernation. Femers, Klewes and Lintemeier (2000) distinguish four phases in the life cycle of issue. They list emergence, dissemination, establishment, and erosion as consisting elements of the life cycle. First, emergence happens when a "crystallization" of an issue occurs and a certain interpretation of a specific social reality comes out. Second, dissemination stands for protagonist starting to disseminate the issue. Third, establishment describes the state when a large part of society is aware of the issue. Finally, erosion means the phase when public interest in the issue stagnates. While this four-element model does provide a coherent view of how issues come to be and come to cease to be, it does not cover sufficiently the pre-stages on an issue. Comparatively, Crable and Vibbert (1985) list five stages of development that are

(1) potential

(2) imminent

(3) current

(4) critical

(5) dormant

Central to Crable and Vibbert's thinking is that these stages are defined by the role played by communication. The model is, also, essentially a humanistic approach that sees human will and decision-making as the driving forces in the

development of issues (Botan & Taylor 2004, 656). Another strength is the recognition of both potential issues and imminent issues; the model gives a worthwhile contribution to how PR professionals should pay attention to the pre-stages of issues management, which is ever harder but ever more important in the current operating environment.

Common to both the above mentioned models is that they present the life cycle of an issue to start from some form of emergence and end to the stagnation or erosion of attention to the matter. However, it is important to note that the life cycle does not go from birth to death to another birth of the same issue but rather the models describe the attention span of an issue. It is unlikely for the same issue to re-emerge, since the former debate on the matter has changed the context of the issue, but it is very possible that a prior topic re-surfaces, framed from a different perspective. As Mahon and Waddock (1992, 20) note, "if the objective conditions change, then new interpretations will be made, and as a consequence new issues will be developed and stakeholders (old and new) will alter their positions." Thus, an issue never dies, but it neither mirrors its history entirely.

Moreover, as Jacques (2002, 141) claims, two underlying principles common to all issue life cycle models can be identified. These are

(1) The sooner that organization starts to participate in the development of an issue, the greater the chance of positively influencing the outcome.

(2) The passing of time reduces management choices.

This finding, too, emphasizes early identification and active communication and action in securing advantage to the focal organization.

Attention is another central element to issue life cycles. Already Downs (1972, 39) noted that public perception usually does not reflect changes in real conditions but rather reflects a systematic cycle of heightening public interest and then increasing boredom with major issues. Although there are many types of publics, the above mentioned characteristics usually are accurate. However, it is important to note that not all issues go through the life cycle. Further, Downs (1972, 41) highlights different reasons why issues are likely to go through the cycle (issue-attention cycle in Downs' terms) in public policy matters and lose attention after a while.

(1) The majority of persons in society are not suffering from the problem nearly as much as some (numeric) minority. Therefore, most people do not

suffer directly enough   from such problems to keep their attention riveted on them.

(2) The sufferings caused by the problem are generated by social arrangements that provide significant benefits to a majority or a powerful minority of the population.

(3) The problem has no intrinsically interesting qualities. (Downs 1972, 41)

To sum, Downs sees that an issue goes through the cycle when it is relevant or interesting enough to catch the attention of the public but not personal enough for a critical mass of persons for the issue to continue to carry the public's attention. While Downs' list of characteristics of likely issues to go through the cycle is designed for large social problems, the principle may apply also to other issues relevant to organizations.

Issues management as strategic toolbox for organizations

One central starting point in PR literature is that issues can be managed. This is not to suggest that issues could be controlled (Heath 1997) but rather that organizations can actively take part in negotiations and debates shaping the direction an issue is heading to (Botan & Taylor 2004, 658) All of the work relating to this function can be denominated to the concept of issues management.

Issues management in organizations consists of monitoring issues (in all their stages of development), and applying this information to improve their operations, as well as, communicating in ways that build and strengthens relationships with stakeholders (Heath 1997). Or more accurately put, issues management calls for issue identification, analysis, change strategy options, action programming, and evaluation of results (Chase 1984, 56).

There are several ways to define what issues management is for. Being one of the first Chase (1982, 1-2) defined issues management to mean

"the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate, and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills toward the achievement of one objective"

While this definition is broad in its scope, there is a strong functionalist stigma to it that serves both as a strength and, essentially, a weakness (Botan & Taylor 2004, 654).

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An often used definition comes from Heath (1997, 9) who defined issues management to mean

> "the management of organizational and community resources through the public policy process to advance organizational interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with those stakeholders".

More recently, Heath (1998, 274) spoke of issues management in less defined terms to cover understanding key stakeholders and strategically adapting to the organization's public policy environment by the means of issues scanning, tracking, and monitoring. These definitions direct issues management to be mostly concerned with public policy, although issues management is something all types of organizations (profit, non-profit, governmental) need to be participate in (Heath 1997; Heath 2009). A more company-oriented look at issues management comes from Palese and Crane (2002, 284) who used a rather broad definition stating that issues management is "a leadership process that defines the strategic common ground between a company and its key audiences". This notion highlights the strategic relevance of issues management to both public relations and the functioning of organizations in general. Representing a broader definition to issues management, Wu (2007, 415) considers issues management to equal managing stakeholder relations.

In contrast to Heath's definition, Tucker, Broom, and Caywood (1993, 38) saw issues management to be

> "the management process whose goals is to help preserve markets, reduce risk, create opportunities and manage image as an organization asset for the benefit of both an organization and its primary shareholders".

While this definition lacks, as Heath (2009, 12) rightly notes, the words "to the mutual benefit of its key stakeholders and stakeseekers", it does provide a clear map of what dimensions issues management deals with. It is a multi-functional discipline (Heath 2009, 9) where the incentive is both to create opportunities and simultaneously manage risk. To achieve these goals, changes in the market (or more broadly put, the operating environment) must be monitored with special attention to image or reputation. Interaction with stakeholders is key as well.

All in all, there is no consensus of what the correct definition of issues management is. This has been the case throughout the history of issues management (Heath 1997, 5) and still is the case according to some (Jaques 2007, 148). This thesis, however, follows in broad terms the earlier mentioned Tucker, Broom, and Caywood definition, with the annex made by Heath (2009, 12). In a

sense this definition is somewhat contradictory to, for example, Heath and Coombs (2006) who see the realm of issues management to be "to help organizations to inform, persuade, collaboratively make decisions, and co-create meaning with publics" but in light of the present thesis the selected definition better covers research questions.

Managerial responses to issues

In practice, there needs to be a well formulated model to evaluate strategies how to manage different types of issues.

Jones and Chase (1979) distinguish three managerial responses to issues

(1) reactive: to oppose change and react to the initiatives of interest groups as well as elected and appointed officials

(2) adaptive: to anticipate change and offer accommodation before unacceptable changes are legislated or mandated

(3) dynamic: to anticipate and attempt to shape the direction of change by developing real solutions to real problems with real results

These three categories of responses create a broad spectrum of potential strategies. This model – in unison with later models – strongly advices to be active in managing issues. Later however, Crable and Vibbert (1985) have argued that even the dynamic approach is defensive in its nature and thus propose a fourth category: catalytic. For them, the catalytic approach means that organizations cannot let others define the interpretations of an issue before the organization goes on the issue arena, and rather organizations should seek to manage potential issues to immediate ones, taking an issue through its life cycle resolving in directions favorable to the focal organization. While this approach adds to the understanding that issues should be seen as much as opportunities as threats, Jacques (2002, 143) criticizes that it still presents the problem as a life cycle issue, focusing on timing, rather than the nature of the issue itself. Although timing is essential as an issue is ready for decision only a few times in its life cycle (Botan & Taylor 2004, 655), Jacques (2007; 2010) clarifies that issues management could better recognize the opportunities in issues and approach them with more than the life cycle in mind.

Bucholz, Evans, and Wagley (1989) later categorized four groups of managerial responses to reactive, accommodative, proactive and interactive as terms for the

strategies which are rather similar to the Jones and Chase's (1979) model. Jaques (2002, 143-144) notes, however, that only reactive and proactive seem to be used in practice even today.

2.2.1. Concluding remarks

As Taylor, Vasquez, and Doorley (2003) put it, at the heart of issues management is a belief that both stakeholders and the focal organization can engage each other with a prospect of change on one or both parties. It is the function of issues management that combines issues and relationships between stakeholders, thus arriving at an interesting cross-section of issues, stakes, and holders. Unlike Freeman (2004, 231) who sees issues as "simply the wrong unit of analysis" and focuses on stakeholder relations as "groups and individuals behave, not issues", this thesis sees an issue as the right unit of analysis, since there can be more than one relationship between an organization and its given stakeholder. These relationships are often linked to different issues, not just different levels of relationships. For example, an environmental organization can both criticize a company on one issue but also simultaneously be a co-creator on another issue/(relationship). It is, then, the issues that direct the relationships between these players. Further, Freeman (2004, 231) claims issues to "emerge through the behavior and interaction of stakeholders" and therefore seeing stakeholders as a more fundamental and useful unit of analysis. While there is some truth to Freeman's words, it is highly restrictive to issues – and the claim can be likewise turned around in favor of the use of issues. It is true that the behaviors and interactions of stakeholders do shape the environment an organization operates. It is also true that these changes do affect which issues gain more importance. But at the same token, the stakeholders and the focal organization interact around an issue. The relationships evolve around the development of that one or many issues. Thus, it is hard to distinguish whether the dog wags its tail or whether it is the other way around. However, as at least the general public is interested in issues, not the organizations the issues are linked with. This for one, if somewhat on a shaking foundation, argues for issues as the unit of analysis combined with the stakes and holders in the organizations operating environment. Luoma-aho and Vos (2009; 2010) share this view.

Two other aspects are of crucial importance to this thesis concerning issues management. First, as Heath and Coombs (2006, 261) point out, issues

management is about engaging in power politics. As this thesis studies the power-relations, or dominating the zones of meaning, in issue arenas, it is important to highlight the power aspect of issues management work. The nominal input of issues management to gaining dominance is in its capacity to monitor for weak signals which facilitate the proactive response of organizations to various situations – and thus provides means of gaining a dominant voice (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). Similarly, Botan and Taylor (2004, 658) remind that that smaller organizations struggle to get their voices heard due to inherent lack of financial resources, through issues management, however, the chances of equal positions with larger players increase. Secondly, issues management is highly concerned with the legitimacy of an organization. Some scholars claim it to be the most important aspect of issues management (e.g. Heath 2009, 9). This view is underlined by Roper and Toledano (2005) and Veil and Kent (2008) who strongly speak in favor of taking a long-term perspective to issues management, especially in light of organizational survival. In relation to this thesis, issues management and monitoring provide crucial tools for identifying and managing what Sethi (1979) referred to as a legitimacy gap, the divide between expected and actual action of an organization.

Table 2 summarizes the main elements of issues and issues management that are most relevant to issue arenas thinking and this thesis.

Table 2. A selection of main arguments relevant for issue arenas thinking.

Proactive responses through monitoring of weak signals make gaining a dominant voice over an issue possible	Vos & Schoemaker 2006; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010
Also smaller organizations can get their voices heard through issues management	Botan & Taylor 2004
Issues management is crucial for maintaining an organization's legitimacy	Heath 1997; Roper & Toledano 2005
Focus should be as much on issues as on stakes and holders, as issues are the purpose behind stakeholder interaction, unlike Freeman (2004) proposes	Luoma-aho & Vos 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010

This table will be applied in later sections of this thesis.

2.3. Networks

This chapter discusses the growing influence of networks on organizations. First, the term network is defined and relevant features of networks for this thesis are addressed from a more general perspective. This part heavily relies on the thinking of Manuel Castells (1996; 2000; 2008) and his theorizing of a network society where networks are seen to be the driving force in society.

Later, special attention is given to actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 20005; Callon & Latour 1981), which is not directly linked to Castells' more general appreciation of networks but, rather, focuses on two essential features for this thesis: agency of a broad spectrum of players (also non-human and non-living) and negotiation of power relations between these players.

2.3.1. Networks: effects on organizations

There is a prevalence of networks in society bringing new organizational structure for all aspects of action (Castells 2000, 152). Thus, it is possible to speak of a network society (Castells 1996) that is characterized by networks as the units of power and action. Although this view has been rightly criticized for being perhaps too all-inclusive and all-embracing of the role of networks in society and organizational relations (van Dijk 1999), it does serve as a meaningful starting point for analysis of how things in today's society come to be and come to be decided. Therefore, fully acknowledging a certain fear of determinism, it is suggested here that networks are essential to the understanding of how the organizations' operating environment is constructed.

Castells (2000, 153) defines a network to be

> "an instrument of cooperation and competition with other networks and cooperation within the network, in which every node needs the other node for the function of the network."

Thus, networks are both the units that act and platforms on which the action takes place. As such, this definition is clear but adds little new content: networks are nothing new, which Castells well recognizes. However, especially through the development of communication technology, Castells (1996; 2000, 152) finds that

the nature of networks has changed. While networks have always been good at flexibly decentralizing action, they used to lack capacity to centralizing decision-making and allocating resources well. Through the introduction of new (communication) technology, the problems networks used to face, no longer exist. Looking at Castells' definition with this in mind, clarifies why networks carry so much more weight in today's society.

Networks are important, because as both actors and platforms for action, they direct the social environment. Castells (2008, 86) believes the also the public opinion moves according to networks in the public sphere, that is made up of turbulences of information and horizontal, autonomous networks of communication. This highlights the importance of all three: information, communication, and networks. Finally, networks matter because they have the potential to have influence excluding states, institutions and major organizations – as the network society emerges; the vertical society diminishes (Castells 2000, 156). Networks should, therefore, be given a central position when considering effective public relations, as well as, the survival of the focal organization.

Networks are adaptable and flexible what facilitates their capacity to organize resources and activity in the current social environment (Castells 2000, 153). Further, Castells (2008, 81) speaks of organizational capacity, referring to the ability to use networking in managing any organizational activity in whatever domain flexibly, interactively, and without borders in structuration. The better an organization recognizes and manages the possibilities and threats a given network presents, the more successful the organization.

One important element to networks is that they are all-around, affecting everyone (Castells 1996; 2000; 2008). While networks do possess both opportunities and threats for organizations, the option to consciously stay out of networks is not there. Castell (2008, 81) notes that although not everybody or everything is connected, they are at least affected by (or have the potential to become affected) by a global network. Yet, an organization may also consciously seek to participate in a network and be refused. Networks connect nodes that bring value or have the potential to be valuable according to the values programmed in the network. Consequently, networks also exclude anything or anyone that does not, as well as parties that disorganize the efficient processing of the network's programs. (Castells 2008, 81.) To conclude, possibilities to gain a favorable position always come with a price tag attached. While networks as platforms for both internal and external power relations do contain the element

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of authority or power, it is only achieved through the exchange of value. This value exchange can take place both in equal and unequal terms that is also due to the positions different players hold in the network.

Networks on the level of communication management

Whereas Castells' thinking provides a good macro-level analysis what is happening in society, other approaches to networks may better explain the relationship with the concept of networks and public relations or communication management.

The role of communications staff in networks is to be boundary spanners (Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 152). In this role, communications makes possible collaboration between different parties and thus the inclusion of new resources.

Different kinds of networks can be distinguished. Schuringa (1992, 143 cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 151) finds at least four categories of networks.

(1) *Issue networks* consist of organisations and groups that feel connected to a certain problem or subject in respect of which people wish to take action in the form of a once-only project.

(2) *Organisational networks* also consist of organisations and groups, but are focussed on a more permanent form of cooperation. An issue network can sometimes develop into an organizational network.

(3) *Social networks* consist of persons and groups forming a more informal circuit that has existed for a long time (for example, family relationships or parents of pupils of a school).

(4) *Support networks* consist of persons and informal groups and serve individual goals (for example, self-help groups or telephone rings).

To an organization, issue networks and organizational networks are, perhaps, the most essential. It is important to note the connection between issue networks and organizational networks. Unlike Freeman (2004), Schuringa correctly sees that issues are the initial driving motor behind organizational networks.

An important aspect of creating, managing, and participating in a network is negotiation. By negotiation it is meant that different actors try to reach an agreement (Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 158). This is ever more important because of

the increased mutual dependency in society (Castells 2000), and it also involves public relations professionals (Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 158).

Kaplan et al. (1991, 156) see that negotiators form a profile on their approach. According to them, negotiators vary on four dimension: interests, power, atmosphere, and flexibility. The interplay of these dimensions is shown in Figure 6 (cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 159).
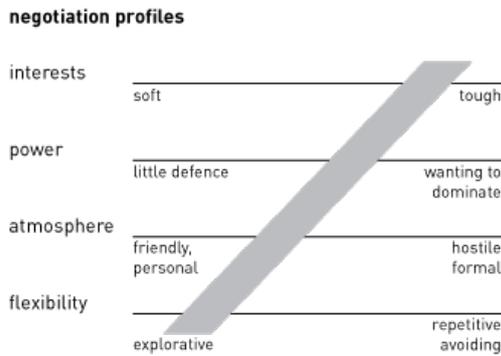

Figure 6. Negotiation profiles (Kaplan et al. 1991, 156 cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 159)

Again, also the strategies and tactics vary according to different actors and situations. Overlaet (1993, 10 cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 160) finds there to be a division of two types of negotiations. These are negotiations that are constructive and ones that are escalating (Figure 7).
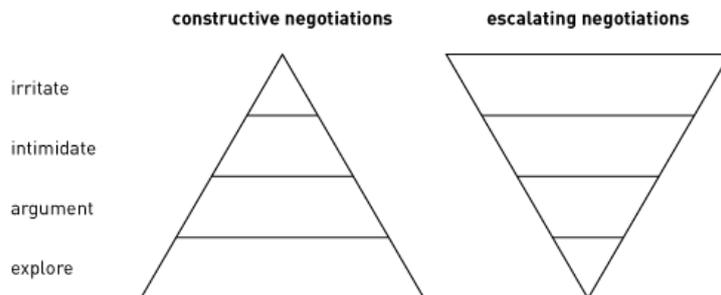

Figure 7. Constructive and escalating negotiations (Overlaet 1993, 10 cited in Vos & Schoemaker 2005, 160)

In Figure 7, it is shown that negotiations that are based on exploring or gathering information about the other actors and argumentation rather than intimidation or irritation, direct the negotiation to be more constructive. Conversely, when irritation and intimidation govern the direction of the interaction, the negotiation is more likely to escalate.

2.3.2. Actor-network theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) is a social theory that can be applied to practically all types of interaction, also those including non-human and non-living actors. A key feature of ANT is that rather than looking at actors with clear boundaries, the emphasis is on seeing the ways in which the "social", the "technical", and the "natural" are intermingled in a *seamless web* (Somerville 1999, 9, italics in original). To clarify that, the idea is that much of our actions and the results of those actions are due to many factors affecting them. These factors include just as well human or non-human influence. In this approach, it is assumed that no actor is passive, and conversely, all actors have some degree of agency (Latour 2005; Callon 1993 in Somerville 1999, 10). Further, the analysis of action is, then, characterized, as Wise (1997) sees it, not on the self-consciousness or "natural state", but rather on the actor's relations with other actors. No player can act in a vacuum, and so an actor-network is created around any attempt of action. As such, ANT represents a cross-section of general theorizing of networks and the power relations between actors trying to influence the actor-network.

Actor-network theory redefines the way to approach social interaction. According to Latour (2005, 5, italics in original), the term social "does not designate a thing among other things... but a *type of connection* between things that are not themselves social". This changes how we look at the elements in the study of the social. The effect of this is that the scope of what is perceived to be included in a social process expands. In ANT's case, also non-human and non-living elements are included in the analysis as these, too, affect many social processes (Latour 2005). One such example is the natural environment that both facilitates and restricts action, much like a human player would. While the broadening of scope in terms of what matters in the operating environment for an organization is a valuable contribution, some (e.g. Routledge 2008, 201) claim the weakness of ANT to be its insufficient capacity to differentiate an association

(social connection) and the ways of generating associations, especially the elements of interaction and relationships, through which such associations are made. This is partly due to that ANT seeks to stay away from general theoretical frameworks that provide clear and direct answers to a variety of situations but rather seeks to explain locally, contingently, and practically the character of the specific work under study (Somerville 1999).

Even with this criticism, of ANT not being able to answer how social connections are made, in mind, ANT offers an interesting addition to public relations research, as also the non-human and non-living actors should be considered stakeholders of an organization (Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010). This notion offers a good link for studying what is actually important for an organization in its operating environment, ANT contributing to both who are the actors (players) and how networks should be characterized.

According to ANT, networks have two important features. One, networks are contingent. This means that the networks are not determined, permanent, or universal (Somerville 1999, 9). In other words, networks are bound to change, with no final fixed network to to be achieved (Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010, 53). Again, also the character of one network is not directly to be copied from another, which stresses to the local interpretation of a network (Somerville 1999). Two, networks have emergent qualities, which means that new elements are continually introduced to the network, which again changes the relationships between actors in the network (Somerville 1999).

The two above mentioned characteristics of networks in light of ANT offer a good starting point for explaining how networks operate and what ANT's contribution to the study of power relations in those networks is. As Callon (1987, 93) states:

> "an actor-network is simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements and a network that is able to redefine and transform what it is made of".

This means that within an actor-network constant negotiation of the form, members and the dynamics between those members are discussed. This is called the process of *translation*. Callon and Latour (1981, 40) define translation to be

> "all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence thanks to which an actor or force takes or causes to be conferred on itself authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force. 'Our interests are the same', 'do what I want', 'you cannot succeed without going through me'."

To clarify this rather complex definition, it can be stated that translation is the process "where actors mobilize others into joining their networks" (Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010, 50). Somerville (1999, 9) finds that actors within networks will try to "redefine the meaning of other actors, speak on their behalf" and seek to get other actors into positions with them. When this strategy has been successful, it can be said that the focal organization has translated the other actors.

Put to organizational context, actor-networks are both platforms in which organizational positions are defined, as well as actors that seek to position well in relation to other actor-networks. Supporting Luoma-aho and Paloviita's notion (2010, 53) the translation process resembles much issues management and issue life cycle (see chapter 2.2.). In both the concepts of translation and issues management there is a subject which attracts actors that negotiate positions through the evolution of that subject.

This directs attention to by which means the evolution of issues/actor-networks takes place. In each of the definitions by Callon and Latour (1981), Somerville (1999), and Luoma-aho and Paloviita (2010), the translation process is seen to evolve around *meaning*. It seems that the entity that attracts the most supporters to its interpretation and definition of a matter should have a degree of dominance over matters. This dominance is, however, created with the permission of the other actors. Luoma-aho and Paloviita (2010, 53) see that actors have three possible strategies to gain this support from others. These are re-interpretation, re-presentation, and appropriation of others' interests to one's own. As these strategies strongly rest on communication, the importance of communication comes from shaping expectations and actions when roles are discussed (Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010, 53).

Another interesting element of ANT is that it does not differentiate macro-(institutions, large corporations) and micro-actors (individuals, a computer). ANT suggests that all actors are isomorphic (similar in processes and structures to other actors). Coming from this angle, it is not to say that all actors would be of the same size, just that there is no way to distinguish sizes in an actor-network since it is the consequence of a long struggle who becomes big and who remains small in the fight to dominate meaning. (Callon & Latour 1981, 280.) To be more specific, even big entities have a single or few employees, for example, working on an actor-network. This leaves us with an interesting insight; managing meaning is not dominated by the player's size. Hence, even smaller players can manage meaning in an actor-network with "bigger" players, although they do

not possess direct decision-making power as a national institution, for instance, would. However, in practical terms, the larger resources bigger players usually have, may have an impact on the possibility to manage the meaning in an actor-network, since, for instance, creating high quality communications materials often demands money. In this sense, size may matter, although the notion of equal size in an actor-network in its starting phase seems plausible.

2.3.3. Concluding remarks

This chapter has addressed networks mainly from two perspectives: on a general level relating to what the macro operating environment is like for organizations, and actor-networks, a more local perspective to networks. The first approach relied heavily on the thinking of Manuel Castells, while the latter based its assumptions on actor-network theory. Although there is no direct link between the two approaches, for this thesis there is a need for both approaches to explain well enough what an organization's social environment is like and what is happening in that environment. Castells' concepts on the network society provide the framework for today's public relations to better understand that no issue or group of actors are encapsulated but rather highly interconnected in many ways and for many aims. In addition, understanding Castells (as well as strategic management literature) means that one recognizes power to influence to be in networks – through them and within them. The problem with Castells' approach is, however, that it leaves many questions unanswered about how an individual network is constructed and how the dynamic relations are negotiated within it. To cover these issues, as well, ANT was selected as the framework from which to study actor-networks – or networks in a more local sense. The strengths of ANT is that it is capable of both considering a broad spectrum of influences within a network and recognize the shaping of relationships of different actors in a dynamic manner. These dimensions were seen to greatly add to the understanding of how public relations professionals can succeed better in recognizing relevant actors and their relationships.

Table 3 lists some key findings of Castells' concept of networks, as well as ANT's key features in relation to issue arenas thinking.

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Table 3. A summary of relevant findings of networks and actor-network theory.

Networks connect nodes that bring value or have potential to be valuable according to the values programmed in the network	Castells 2008
The public opinion moves according to the networks in the public sphere	Castells 2008
Networks matter because they have the potential to have influence excluding states, institutions and major organizations – thus diminishing the vertical society	Castells 2000
Actors within actor-networks will try to redefine the meaning of other actors, speak on their behalf and seek to get other actors into positions with them	Somerville 1999
The translation process in actor-networks is seen to evolve around meaning	Callon & Latour 1981; Somerville 1999; Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010
The translation process resembles much issues management and issue life cycle	Luoma-aho & Paloviita 2010

The selected findings will be further analyzed in chapter 5, Issue arenas.

2.4. Concluding remarks on how groups interact

This chapter has laid out a framework from which organizations and groups can be studied from a public relations point of view. The argument here is that theories relating to stakeholder thinking (SH theory in Figure 8), issues management, and networks should be integrated in their use. This is not to say that all of these approaches even could be integrated to one macro theory but rather that each of them contributes to the wholesome understanding of how groups interact.

Figure 8 describes the way groups interact in an over-simplified but wholesome manner. As the figure shows, each of the selected pieces of theory contributes to at least one part of the whole. An important note here is that there are other important theories that also answer many of the questions the selected ones do. However, for the scope of this research, the selected theories provide a meaningful basis.

Figure 8. How groups interact: modeling the interaction of key theories in this thesis.

"How groups interact"
→ A figure concluding how SH theory, issues, networks and actor-networks are connected
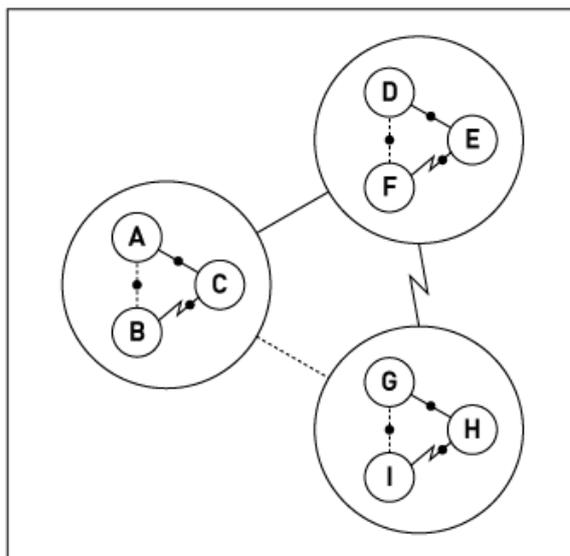
1. SH theory = Actors and their relationships
2. Issues = Purpose of interaction
3. Networks = Interconnectedness of actors and issues in society
4. Actor-networks = Dynamics within a network

How are the selected theories interrelated? First, stakeholder theory is concerned with the many actors and their stakes in the organization, putting most emphasis on the relationship between these players and the focal organization. Second, issues and issues management focuses on what the purpose of the interaction is. Here it is seen that issues spark interaction and may influence relationships. Third, networks as the term is understood here, addresses what is the nature of relationships and actions in a broader perspective. The emphasis, then, is on the interconnectedness of actors and issues in society. Finally, actor-network theory both expands the conceptual understanding of stakeholders, and more importantly, addresses the dynamics within a network.

3. Fields

This thesis scrutinizes how different actors form dynamic relationships between each other on issues that ignite and fuel the interaction. It is, therefore, important to discuss what this environment for the interaction is like and how it can be analyzed. Building on many domains of research, these environments in which actors interact may be called *arenas*.

There is a multitude of research of arenas from different approaches. Sadly, this variety of definitions and approaches leads to difficulty in synthesizing the concepts into a clear collection of theory. However, the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the concept of *field* is comprehensive and cohesive enough to provide fruitful. For these clear advantages, this chapter will focus on the Bourdieudian concepts, leaving many other important alternatives in the shade.

Although the concept of Bourdieu's field does provide many important insights to the concept of issue arena (see chapter 5), it is not meant to be suggested by this chapter that the criteria Bourdieu uses to frame his concept should be considered suitable for issue arenas without criticism. To clarify this: for Bourdieu a field is one of the central building blocks of his whole approach to

sociology and thus the concept inherently carries many unnecessary value choices through distinctions this thesis does not require to make. One example of this is Bourdieu's reliance on structures rather than interaction as the driving motor behind fields. However, in the scope of this thesis, many of these broader, yet indeed important, conceptual questions will not be considered. The concept of field and its merits are simply borrowed here to support the investigation of arenas in this thesis.

3.1. The concept of a field

The concept of field is an analytic concept that enables systematic investigation of any given social order (Dick 2008, 330). Most essentially, the focus in the study of fields is on the positions of the actors. As such, there are similarities with the concepts of network (Castells 1996; 2000; 2008) and actor-network theory (Callon & Latour 1981; Latour 2005), as also fields are connected to each other as networks and there are questions of dynamics considered as in ANT, although in a different manner (Dick 2008, 330). Yet, as a concept, a field is distinctive in its foundation in structure over interaction (Bottero & Crossley 2011, 100), for instance.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 97) define a field as a "network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions". By this it is meant that on a field, there is a set of individuals, groups or other types of players who occupy a certain position (e.g. statements) that then form a relation to other players with their positions. Dick (2008, 330) follows Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 97) in that, the understanding of these positions on the field is acquired through examining the players situation, form of power (or capital) and the type of relation to other players (domination, subordination, homology). To summarize, a field involves players with an agenda that are negotiated through power dynamics, where public relations can help (Ihlen 2009, 62).

A field has limits that may not be clearly visible. Ihlen (2009, 67) suggests that the limits of a field lie where its effects cease.

Meaning and symbolic power

Dick (2008, 329) explains two essential dimensions in Bourdieu's thinking: objective and subjective. For Bourdieu, social structure requires both. By objective structures, it is meant that social structure can be described and analyzed in terms of actual distribution of material resources, such as money and possessions. Of subjective structures, Bourdieu claims that systems of classification eventually become established which then helps individuals "make sense" of the distribution of goods in society. It is important to remember that these two dimensions are closely bound together. The effect of this finding is that sense making is a central element in directing the fields or even an outcome of the field. One could also claim that sense making is inherently the other side of the coin for meaning which has been named a central aspect of public relations (Heath 2006) and the present thesis. It is, then, important to understand how sense making is arrived at through objective and subjective structures.

Sense making in the fields in an ongoing and negotiated process and hence a field is analogous to a game (Dick 2008, 330). Following this game analogy, Dick (2008, 330) identifies as the task to

> "identify what is at stake in the field (i.e., the species of capital that have value); the extent to which people are invested in the game and why; and how it is that the game and the stakes involved have achieved the status of doxa (an acceptance that the world is as it is)" (Dick 2008, 330)

Again, there are clear similarities to public relations and managing stakeholder relations, with especial focus on the creation of meaning. It can be argued that public relations or likewise managing zones of meaning (Heath 2006; Ihlen 2009, 62) is both the process of dynamics in the field, as well as the "end goal" for players. However, as Ietcu-Fairclough (2008, 413) reminds, all participants must believe in the game and its value-metrics of what is at stake, for the game to be possible. When it comes to power and reproducing social order, it is most efficiently attained when people accept the meanings that are used to account for its essentially arbitrary nature in a way that it looks natural (Cresswell 1996).

Power and dominance has interesting qualities in fields. For one, Swedberg (2011, 74) notes that in the economic field huge firms usually are dominant but in a way that small firms find havens in their niches, whereas medium sized firms often have to do what the largest firms dictate. This could be interpreted as a sign that medium sized firms believe in the game so strongly and have created similar

structures to huge firms that they follow a similar value metrics as the largest firms do and thus are subordinated. On the other hand, small firms seek to change the rules of the value metrics, thus being "protected" from the influence of larger firms. Whether this line of thinking is suitable for other types of fields as well, is a matter of debate.

Although meaning can be determined as a key element in the concept of fields, Bourdieu (1991, 164) refers to symbolic power rather than meaning when considering the power dynamics of a field. For Bourdieu (1991, 164) symbolic power is "that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even they themselves exercise it", stressing also the unconscious dimension of influence. One central form of this influence for Bourdieu is distinction that is acquired through symbolic power (Bourdieu 1984, 66). When put to the context of this thesis, it is, however, to be noted that meaning and symbolic power can be used synonymously here.

Types of field and capital

There are a variety of different fields and different kinds of fields. Most notably, Bourdieu (1984; 1990; 1991) distinguishes the social field, the cultural field, the political field and the economic field. These fields in turn consist of fields that are simultaneously both independent of and subordinated by larger fields (somewhat similar to Castells' networks) in any given field having its own autonomy and logic but yet being influenced by the logic of broader fields (Dick 2008, 330). However, in consideration of the goals of this thesis, it is not important to go into detail how Bourdieu specifies these different fields, varying in type and broadness. Rather, it is important to understand these different fields act as forces that influence the whole of the network of fields.

Another key element in the study of fields is capital. Capital can be considered either concrete materialistic capital or, even more so, as a system of value specified by the use of the field. To put that in simpler terms, type of capital (economic, social, symbolic, political) can only be considered capital when there is a set of specific interest for that specific type of capital (Bourdieu 1990, 123-124). Moreover, when we consider that power is often derived from having in excess of capital, and power defines the relations in the field, capital is essential in gaining a favorable outcome on a field.

Pieces of critique

As noted earlier, Bourdieu stressed the importance of looking at structures rather than interaction (Bottero & Crossley 2011, 100). Bourdieu (1991, 167) strongly criticizes reducing relations of power to relations of communication as Bourdieu believes that relations of communication are always power relations and interaction should, thus, not be considered of most importance. As Bottero and Crossley (2011, 101) rightly note, this approach distinguishes a field as theoretical space of objective relations, from a social network that consists of actual relationships. Agreeably, this thesis considers the study of actual relationships to be central and a necessity as public relations is founded on the premise that the management of relationships (that form around issues) is the key to sustained success.

Another piece of criticism towards the Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields comes from the question how conscious are the acts on a field. Bourdieu (1990, 67) sees that "one does not embark on the game by a conscious act, one is born into the game, with the game". While this may be an accurate statement of some fields, it should be noted that conscious strategic acts that shape that field are possible to make when the player understands the rules of the field.

3.2. Concluding remarks

This chapter has studied how Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field can be used in the study of issue and arena driven public relations. Most essentially, Bourdieu's thinking provides a wholesome, yet slightly problematic, approach to the power struggles of players on many different types of arenas. Bourdieu has succeeded in combining both material forms of capital and symbolic forms of influence in a meaningful way. This thesis will build on the premise laid by Bourdieu that meaning as well as more visible forms of assets are exchanged, leading to changes both in meaning and visible form.

4. Power and meaning

This chapter investigates the functions of power and meaning in determining the direction to which issues on many levels of interaction evolve. When considering both the concepts of power and meaning, one can instantly see the profound impact both terms carry with them. Here, however, the goal, is to study, especially, the interplay of these concepts.

Moreover, the structure of this chapter follows the dyadic relationship of power and meaning in two parts. To begin with, the concept of power is studied on multiple levels of interaction starting from interpersonal relationships to inter-organizational relations and societal relations. The section for power in interpersonal relationships heavily relies on the work of French and Raven (1959) and later Raven (1965; 1999). While interpersonal relations are not within the focus of this thesis, there are two main reasons for including such an approach as the main theoretical framework for power. First, there is a clear vacuum of theories both coherent and detailed enough to fully understand power (and its relationship with meaning) (Oliver & Ebers 1998), in the form this thesis requires. Second, although somewhat applied, the model of French & Raven (1959) has clear implications for the organizational level, as well. For example, it can be argued that much of the interaction of a negotiation takes place on the interpersonal level, and that this process also has impact on the functions of an

organization. To conclude, this section should be regarded as a suggestion with examples of support in the literature rather than cohesive argument for the nature of power. Thus the approach is tailored for the purposes of this thesis only.

One important notification is that the type of power discussed here mainly refers to social power – rather than to, for example, physical, economic or legal power.

The basis for the study of meaning comes from two distinct sources. The foundation into the significance of meaning is built by the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Berger (1963). Later, to better connect the concepts of power and meaning, the concept of meaning power (Azad & Faraj 2008) is introduced.

4.1. Power

Power as a concept is a central element in almost everything we human beings do. Due to its centrality, the subject of power has attracted the interest of many scholars in the course of its academic history (Shapiro, Ingols & Blake-Beard 2011). For this reason there is also a variety of definitions, even in their contemporary form.

Citing Duffy (1986, 24), Shapiro, Ingols and Blake-Beard (2011, 714-715) find the following definitions of power.

> (1) Mills 1963, 23: "The ability to realize one's will, even against the resistance of others"

> (2) Etzioni 1970: "The capacity to overcome part or all of the resistance"

> (3) Bierstedt 1970, 24: "The ability to introduce force into a social situation"

> (4) Kanter 1977: "The potential to achieve goals

Further, Shapiro, Ingols and Blake-Beard (2011, 715) list the following defitions:

> (5) Cervero & Wilson 1994: "The capacity to act"; it exists in "all human interactions.... and defines what people are able to do in a particular situation (Cited in Hanscome 2000)

(6) Valley & Long-Lingo 2001, 2: "Power is situational, with each situation having 'radically different implications for the actions you can take'"

To sum just this limited array of definitions of power, there are, at least, two important aspects to consider. First, power is related to the capacity to act and influence others. Second, power is situational, depending on the circumstances and relationships in the given situation. These aspects highlight the importance of being an active player in any given operational environment: to gain power requires action, and to maintain power, action is still needed.

The bases for social power

Concentrating on a more specific type of power, social power, French and Raven (1959/2001) provide a widely referred and still very timely approach. They suggest that social power is based on five sources of influence, from which the actualized power of influencing is formed. These include

(1) Reward power

(2) Coercive power

(3) Legitimate power

(4) Referent power

(5) Expert power

Some further analysis of these bases of power is needed. Reward power refers to actor A's capacity to reward actor B for conforming with A's requests but is limited in range to only those regions where A can reward B. Coercive power refers to the expectation of A's punishment of B for nonconforming behavior. Here, is must be stressed that A must also introduce strong restraints for B so that B does not completely escape from A's range of coercive power (French & Raven 1959/2001, 66). Legitimate power builds on the norms a society holds, and is then related to values. Referent power refers to the draw of the identification with A by B. When A is a group B will have a feeling of membership of a desire to join. The concepts of "reference group" and "prestige suggestion" can be considered instances of referent power. Expert power comes to play when B perceives A to have superior knowledge in a given area.

Later, some additions have been made to the model. First Raven (1965) included

"informational power" as a form of expert power. Further expansions were made by Raven (1992) when personal reward and coercion, as well as, legitimacy of equity, reciprocity, and responsibility. Also the empirical research carried out around the theory provides interesting findings. One example of such a finding being that changed behavior resulting from information would be maintained without continued social dependence on the influencing agent (Raven 1999), what is something to remember when the concept of meaning is introduced.

One fundamental aspect is to be highlighted before closer inspection of the model. French and Raven (1959/2001, 61-62) stress that their model has been created for interactions between individuals, not social influence exerted on a group. Their focus is on the psychological change individuals experience when influenced with power. Thus, the change can be attributed to the level of generality where changes in behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs values, and all other aspects of the person's psychological field can be considered power when changed. Consequently, the model can only cautiously be applied to an organizational setting. This is the reason why, for instance, referent power between organizations is rather to be defined through identification of, say, business culture or business logic than the actual identity as an individual would feel I towards another individual. Similar alterations are needed to most of the other bases of power listed by French and Raven. However, many of the dimensions of the model can be applied from individuals to organizations, considering that organizations consist of individuals and often interact through individuals. Moreover, following Oliver and Ebers (1998) who found that there is little coherence in research on inter-organizational power-relations, these limitations to the French and Raven model can be better accepted.

To better understand the French and Raven (1959/2001) model, the focus needs to be on the psychological change that French and Raven see as the driving motor or definition of power. There can be debate over whether the actualizing force consists of values or meaning but, at least a change of behavior or attitudes calls for changes in how we perceive things. One such dimension of perception is the concept of meaning which shall be introduced in the next sub-chapter.

4.2. Meaning

Use of the concept of meaning is always tricky, since as a rather general term that is used widely in everyday settings, defining it would be hard. Here, meaning refers to sense-making and valuation of attributes in a variety of settings. However, more important than how we define meaning is what its effects are on individuals, organizations, and society at large. Hence, this sub-chapter first investigates how meaning is involved in building reality (and thus, action) relying heavily on Berger's (1963) and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal work.

To comprehend how we come to understand how we operate in the world, we first must ask what is the key ingredient in shaping our understanding. Berger (1963, 117) states that "society predefines for us the fundamental symbolic apparatus with which we grasp the world, order our experience and interpret our own existence". Later, very similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1966, 13) simply express that reality is of social construction. What this means is, as Heide (2009, 46) rightly notes, things in society are not what they seem because reality formed of many layers of meaning. In other words, to understand how the modern society works requires focusing on multiple levels of meaning (Heide 2009, 51).

The basic premise behind Berger (1963) and Berger and Luckmann (1966) is mainly two-fold. First, reality is, in a large part, negotiated by people. Thus, people participate in the production of their own perceived reality (Heide 2009, 51). This means that the perception of reality is intertwined with meanings (or interpretations) about the state of matters. However, this is not to say that all of reality is socially constructed, only a significant part of it – there is both the objective reality and subjective reality in play (Berger & Luckmann 1967, 154). Second, the negotiation process is both an on-going and dynamic process as it is about habitual action and institutions maintaining a static state of affairs (Hirsch & Boal 2000, 156). To be more specific, all human action is subjected to be habituated where things become taken for granted without much debate, while at the same time, even the habituated processes are subject to change – underlining the dynamic nature of the on-going process.

As already mentioned, human action is directed toward habituation. Habits, in turn, have an important role in shaping how we conceive our reality. Berger (1963 cited in Heide 2009, 48-49) finds habits to form of three dimensions. First,

externalization refers to habits spread by language and discourse. Second, objectivation means that social institutions appear to be objective things "out there". Finally, internalization happens when a person internalizes how the social world is built and functions through socialization. Together, these dimensions explain how meanings are first negotiated but then a shared understanding emerges. This shared understanding is then institutionalized and externalized. (Berger 1963 cited in Heide 2009, 48-49.)

Berger (1963) distinguishes four motifs through which different levels of meaning can be analyzed. First, debunking motif refers to seeing through the facades of social structures. This requires looking past generally accepted answers and having a critical mind to interpretations of authorities. Second, respectability motif includes all that outside what the middle class consider respectable. Third, the relativization motif suggests giving more weight to not understanding the world as something natural or given. The idea here is that a more comprehensive understanding of a matter can be reached by using different meaning systems in addition to the most "natural" one. Finally, cosmopolitan motif refers to being interested in other cultures to gain a broader understanding of possible human meaning structures. Together, these motifs underline of critical thinking in understanding how meanings shape society, as well as, the operating environment of organizations in it. (Berger 1963.)

Although Berger and Luckmann (1966) mostly directed their work to understand social interaction and the sociology of knowledge, their model can be applied to an organizational setting, as well. For instance, Storr (2010) considers the construction of the market to be socially constructed. Likewise, Koppl (2010) studies the implications of social construction of reality to the concept of expertise. Both of these studies directly provide important vision for how the general concept of Berger and Luckmann (1966) can be applied to a variety of settings.

The process of social construction of meaning has many direct implications for public relations, especially when we consider PR in Heath's (2006) terms as management of zones of meaning, too. First, as Berger and Luckmann (1966, 183) note, socialization (or, negotiating reality) always takes place in a the context of a specific social structure. Likewise, to understand how meanings are formed and managed, public relations should understand the context (or, social structures) of the operating environment. Second, legitimation as a process where meaning is objectified to a 'second-order' state, meaning that it is considered an

institutionalized reality. Then the function of legitimation is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible interpretations of matters at hand. (Berger & Luckmann 1966, 110.) This means that organizational legitimacy is acquired when an individual can rely on his interpretation to be supported by a generally accepted interpretation. Finally, as Heide (2009, 45) claims, there is a communicative focus to the construction of reality as a social process. Consequently, for an organization, this calls for the management of meanings communicated with stakeholders. To conclude, the lesson in understanding the relationship with meaning and public relations is that many levels of meaning are intrinsically attached to most of public relations work which calls for required attention to the matter.

4.3. Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined how power and meaning are two intertwined concepts. First, power as a concept was discussed. Then, the French and Raven (1959) model for social power between individuals was introduced as an example of how power as a concept can be approached. It was proposed that even though the French and Raven model has been designed for interaction between individuals it possesses implications for organizations too. This extension to the model was made since, as Oliver and Ebers (1998) find, there is little coherence in approaches, theories and results of models for inter-organizational power-relations and that research in that is more focused on driving forces behind inter-organizational networking than its results. While there may be some exceptions to the rule, this arrangement seemed to be feasible in the scope of this thesis. The second main dimension of this chapter was meaning and what its involvement in shaping our reality is. This half relied heavily on the thinking of Berger (1963) and Berger and Luckmann (1966). It was proposed that much of our capacity to understand what is real is attributed by the social relations in our society. To conclude, it is important to investigate how these two concepts intertwine and how they can be understood in those terms.

To bring the concepts of power and meaning together, Azad and Faraj (2008) suggest that the notion of *meaning power* should be investigated. Meaning power

can be defined as "the ability to direct the construction of organizational realities (Jasperson et al. 2002 cited in Azad & Faraj 2008) or simply as "power which manages to impose meanings" (Bourdieu & Passerson 1990). It is just this power in meaning that Hardy (1996) sees central to the creation of certain outcomes for organizations. Further, Azad and Faraj (2008, 2) see meaning power to aim to "manage a specific *definition of the situation* and render it dominant among the stakeholders though the ensuing situated practices may involve the enactment of multiple definitions of the situation". When speaking of meaning power, the focus, then, is who has the ability to define a situation among a group of stakeholders.

While the concept of meaning power fits perfectly the scope of this thesis, it is to be remembered that meaning power as a concept has been used to mean different things in different domains of research, applied to intra-organizational phenomena rather than external cases. In addition, the concept has gained limited empirical attention. However, this thesis finds that meaning power (or, dominant voice) has implications for organizations on intra- and extra-organizational interactions and thus is used here as a key example of how meanings and power are intertwined, despite the vulnerability of this argument to criticism.

Similarly, it is important to note that not all power in inter-organizational relations come from meanings. Rather, organizations face a multitude of dependencies of resources of various sorts (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003). Although the power in managing meanings has been rare compared to that of resource dependency and thus provides a more intriguing approach to forming a dominant voice in issue arenas, this thesis holds that also the resources available to the organization are of crucial importance in the process. In the overall picture of what matters dominance-wise, this cannot be stressed enough.

5. Issue Arenas

This chapter further investigates the notion of *issue arenas* and its potential in PR theory. An outline of the theory is given here, mostly following Luoma-aho and Vos (2009; 2010). Within the present thesis, this chapter continues the line of thinking where chapter 2 ended – acknowledging issue arenas as one potential step in the evolution of stakeholder thinking that is more suitable for today's operating environment. Following this, the concept of dominant voice is given consideration in terms of the definition of the term, as well as, effects on organizations.

Issue arenas are spaces where stakeholder interaction takes place. Similarly to the economic market arena that is formed around suppliers and providers, issue arenas are formed around ideas and topics of discussion (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 319). To be more specific, Luoma-aho and Vos (2009, 120) consider a typical issue arena to form around a topic, incident or a shared interest. The effect of issue arenas is that they form the platform for most interactions between organizations and stakeholders. Consequently, an issue arena can be regarded as the platform for stake exchange or creating zones of meaning (Heath 2006), or negotiation and enactment (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010).

Seeing issues as the driving force behind stakeholder interaction is the key distinction between issue arenas to prior stakeholder thinking. According to Luoma-aho and Vos (2010, 324) identifying issues should precede identifying stakeholders, as stakeholders can best be found and positioned once their relationship to an issue is determined. This is not to undermine the importance of more relationship-based approaches (e.g. Ledingham & Bruning 2000, Grunig et al. 1992), but it does position those actions to later phases in the management of stakeholder relations. To conclude, the effects of prioritizing issues rather than direct organization to stakeholder relations are twofold. First, issue identification postpones the identification process of stakeholders, and second, positions them in accordance to positions on different issues rather than one-dimensional relationships. To be more specific, the operating environment of organizations may be defined by emerging issues rather than networks of relationships among different players.

There are multiple types of issue arenas. At least the distinction between physical and virtual arenas can be made (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). An example of a physical arena would be a seminar in which representatives of organizations meet face-to-face, but the term also relates to printed newspapers in which views of various actors can be found – in the terms of Luoma-aho and Vos (2009), although the latter could also be considered a mediated environment. Then again, virtual arenas refer to the multitude of electronic surfaces such as social media platforms and discussion forums on the Internet. An issue can, thus, be discussed on multiple platforms where the issue at hand is the same but the roles and dynamics of participants differ. It is then the function of the PR practitioners to identify the right arenas of participation in addition to identifying the right issues to focus on (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010).

The theoretical background of the concept draws from many relevant theories from different domains of research (with similar approaches in other domains of research, see Hagman & Peclard 2010). The most central approaches being that of stakeholder theory and issues management. This brings about an important change in the approach to understand the relationships between the focal organization and its stakeholders – also coming from the terms themselves. Luoma-aho and Vos (2010, 317) note that stakes always refer to some form of investment and a relationship to the focal organization, whereas issues are more common ground and less strongly related to the organization itself. When we consider that stakes cannot be separated from their holder but that issues affect

and are affected by many players, of which the organization is just one parties, the type of relationship under investigation changes dramatically (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 317). The effect of this change in focus and type of relationship means that the focal organization can take a variety of roles of participation in issue arenas since their relationship with the different stakeholders have not been assigned and cemented in the beginning stages of interaction – very different from a direct organization to stakeholder setting.

As noted, the focal organization, as well as, different stakeholders can take multiple roles of participation in issue arenas. Luoma-aho and Vos (2009; 2010, 319) consider issue arenas to be like stages of a play where there are two main forms of existence: being 'on the stage' or 'in the audience' referring to the continuum of passive monitoring to being an active leader of discussion. The dynamics of change may force the players on the arena to reconsider their positions. Thus an organization can first concentrate on monitoring the discussion but when conditions change, take a more proactive role in the discussion. It is the task of PR practitioners to first identify which issue arenas are of most importance for participation and then adjust the mode of operating of the organization according to the organizational goals (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 319).

The possibility of various roles also indicates various strategies to attain organizational goals. First, however, it is important to look at the reasoning behind why there are issue arenas and why is the concept needed so badly in the organizational communication and public relations literature.

The reason why prior stakeholder theories often fail to provide meaningful answers to practitioners working in today's operating environment is the changed capacity for stakeholders to organize their communication. Luoma-aho and Vos (2010, 315-316) suggest that with the adaption of new communications technologies interaction with and among stakeholders has grown outside the organization's control. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) note, stakeholders can reach a wider public easier than before thanks to the growing number of new and social media tools. With the increased possibility to communicate past the organization, the focus of stakeholders is drawn to the issues arenas that have most value to the stakeholders, and not so much to organizations. However, the increased freedom in communication also brings about possibilities to organizations and individual stakeholders alike, as both actors can operate as mediators for information which enhances their image as an important player in the arena (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 316). Also the organization can initiate the

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creation of an arena or at least provide a platform for it (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) which means that the organization has a better chance than before to actively take part in the making of its own operating environment. On the contrary however, hidden attempts to manage the issue arena may be risky due to the increased openness of communication and expectations of stakeholders (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 322).

Moreover, with the increased number of potential arenas to participate in, the scope of arenas organizations must be aware of has gone up, too. However, an important note Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) make is that the arenas are often linked with either different types of arenas of the same issue or neighboring topics. The stream of linkages means that the capacity to influence one issue arena may be compromised by the effects of other issue arenas where the organization does not possess as strong a position.

Since an issue often attracts conflicting views on the matter, the issue arenas are characterized by a dynamic nature. This means that the direction of the arena is negotiated by the different players that together form the dynamics of the arena. These dynamics are always prone to change as the context and environment of the arena are dynamic and new actors may assign themselves to the discussion. This again, raises the question of strategy and PR's function in facilitating the strategy.

As issue arenas are formed around communication the management of zones of meaning becomes central. Stakeholder expectations formed in the many issue arenas guide how the organization is perceived (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 322). As Heath (2006) puts it: there is a battle between co-creation of meaning and manipulation through propaganda in the arenas, but considering the current operating environment, ways of control should be counseled against (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 322). However, PR can facilitate cooperation and co-creation of social meanings (Heath 2006) which in turn may help the organization at least to better understand their operating environment or even to change it.

Because there are often many issues with conflicting interests in the issue arena, there is a need for more than one strategy. Rather, the organization should find a continuum of strategies between advocacy to collaboration and mutual gains. (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 323.) Likewise, Flynn (2006) suggests that a balancing act is often needed between the various stakeholder positions and that win-win or direct win-lose situations may not be possible to attain. To tackle this problem,

Luoma-aho and Vos (2010, 323) wisely suggest that the positioning of an organization on an issue arena would imitate that of a commercial company positioning itself on the economic market arena. Such an approach would mean to be as agile as possible to find the most valuable positions and strategies for them. Still, as a conclusion it must be stated that while sometimes there is a need for a balancing act whether due to lack of resources or polarity in views, the goal for the organization should be to seek to direct the important issue arenas or parts of them by gaining the respect of other players, in order to actualize organizational goals. Thus, a passive role cannot be supported for the most important issue arenas an organization participates in. Finally, the complexity of strategy formation increases with the notion that an organization can have different relationships on different issue arenas. This means that an energy company can be simultaneously working together with an NGO on one issue arena and be in conflict in another. Thus, to conclude, the balancing act between different interests is difficult and requires an active role from the organization.

5.1. The formation of dominant voice in issue arenas

As noted, there is a division of voice in an arena that determines the roles of organizations in a given situation (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 315). This may or may not be affected by the quantity of messages produced by a player but rather refers to the degree in which the actor is heard, or its messages given value, by the other players. Although in many instances the goal (and only viable strategy) is to co-create shared meanings (Heath 2006), some actors in an issue arena may gain a more dominant position in which they can lead the direction of an issue arena (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009) (in some instances this position is not attainable). This position relates to having *dominant voice*.

Dominant voice is a novel concept and does not have a definitive definition in literature, although Luoma-aho and Vos (2009; 2010) refer to the concept either directly or indirectly as one central aspect of issue arenas. In this thesis, dominant voice is defined by the following attributes

    (1) one or few players lead the discussion on an issue

    (2) other players refer to the dominant player(s)

(3) dominance is witnessed within managing meanings, not necessarily attributed to direct power

Of the three markers of defining dominant voice here, the following explanations can be given. First, dominant voice should be understood in terms of the division of voices on an issue arena where in the multitude of voices some are heard with more prestige than others. In addition, the division of voice can be attributed to the level other players let the focal player speak for other players or define 'what is important' (in terms of ANT, this would be called 'translation'). Second, dominant voice is defined by the level of how others perceive the centrality of the focal player for the discussion. This factor could be verbalized as the question 'who cannot be excluded from the discussion?'. Moreover, the act of referral may work to build the dominant voice in two ways: by acknowledging the centrality of one player by another and by the social proof gained from this act. Thirdly, dominant voice operates at the level of meanings, and thus is linked with only indirect power. The reasoning behind this is clear. A player can, still, dominate an issue arena when its position in cemented in direct power (such as legislative power or power invested in legal contracts, for instance) even though it does poorly in managing meanings in the given arena. But when it comes to free issue arenas or working on the level of meanings, communication has a central role. The importance of managing meanings rather than directly managing players is believed here to become evident in those situations. To conclude, the formation of dominant voice in layman's terms equates to a great extent the formation of dominant roles in group behavior of human beings. The more society (and issue arenas in it) relies on communication, the more indirect power gaining a dominant voice has to offer.

Seeking to obtain a dominant voice differs from strategies to control the communication on an issue arena in many ways. First, a dominant voice is always granted by the other players and cannot thus be controlled in the free-will valuing operating environment most organizations face today. Second, since the position for a dominant voice is granted, an organization must first give (share value) to gain its position – in a process that cannot be pre-arranged by the focal organization. Finally, the ever growing change and complexity of the operating environment calls for establishing dialogue (Grunig et al. 1992) and co-creating meanings (Heath 2006) since straight-forward advocacy would turn against the focal organization in the long run (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). The operating environment of today requires the organization to seek for mutually benefitting

relationships as that is the only sustainable way of acquiring and maintaining a position with dominant voice.

Luoma-aho & Vos (2010, 323) claim negotiation of intentions to be equally important next to negotiating meanings. They follow Grunig (2006) in saying that organizations should be willing to also discuss changing the way the organization behaves and not just use PR as a buffer to defend the status quo. Moreover, it could be stated that communicating intentions is similar to communicating meanings. This is due to the fact that shared meaning is reachable only in part as reality is enacted and changing (Jaatinen & Lavikka 2008 cited in Luoma-aho & Vos 2010) and thus includes intentions as an integral part of the meaning creation process.

Overall, there seem to be multiple strategies for attaining a dominant voice. First, Luoma-aho & Vos (2010, 324) claim that starting a new issue arena or otherwise being first to act on the topic, facilitates the attainment of dominant voice. This strategy relies on the notion that takes on issues tend to institutionalize (Berger & Luckmann 1966) which then gives the first player a chance to cement the original meaning-base to be used long-term. However, the issue arenas are also bound to change, which makes this strategy only available for new issue arenas. Moreover, being first as a strategy fits well the definition of recognition, as proposed later. Second, as Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) note, much of the organization's mobility and ability to act is depended on resources. This means that those organizations with an abundance of resources can "buy the atmosphere" by creating perpetual communication messages and practices with good quality. Thirdly, since dominant voice is something granted and something that acts mostly on the level of meaning, smaller players, too, may gain a dominant position through recognition. The recognition can be attributed to, for instance, knowledge (scientists), excellence (a minor company with breakthrough technology), spirit (demonstrators of a given issue) or other merit of similar kind. Finally, in the networked society of today, coalitions are of great significance in attaining a dominant voice (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010, 321-322). Coalitions, then, can work in two ways. They are as significant in creating a larger sum of resources and they are attracting social attention that often leads to recognition. To conclude, the research on the concept is little so there can be more ways to attain a dominant voice. However, together these above mentioned options create the strategic arsenal for organizations.

5.2 Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined how organizational communication and PR may approach the challenges posed by today's operating environment through the concept of issue arenas. It has been argued here that issues, not stakes or holders direct the interaction with and among stakeholders, something that calls for identification of relevant issues before identifying relevant stakeholders (Luoma-aho & Vos 2009; 2010). Moreover, it was argued that an organization may attain a position of dominant voice on an issue arena. To achieve this position, several possible strategies were mentioned as options. A theoretical model of these strategies is presented later in this thesis (see chapter 7).

As a conclusion to this chapter, three figures are presented to further clarify the concept of issue arenas. These figures follow the thinking of Luoma-aho and Vos (2009; 2010) but have been created for this thesis.
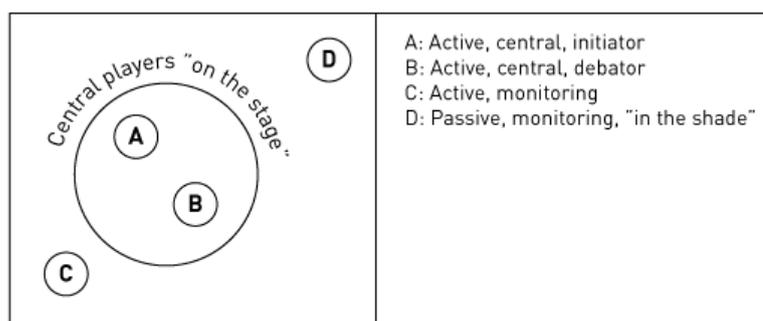

Figure 9. One issue arena consists of many players with different roles, the more central the role, the more chance of attaining dominant voice.
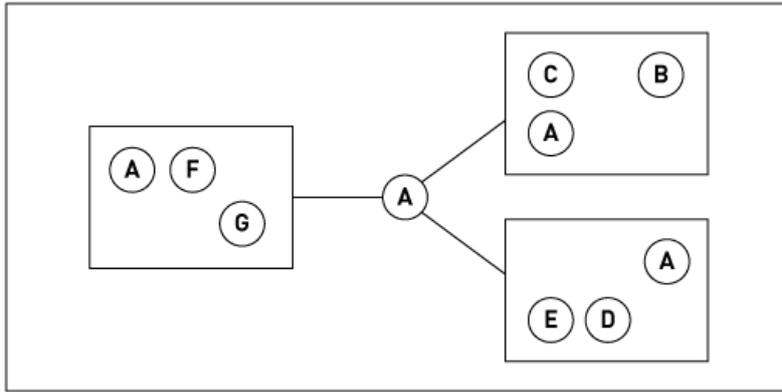
Figure 10. One organization has interests in many issue arenas simultaneously.
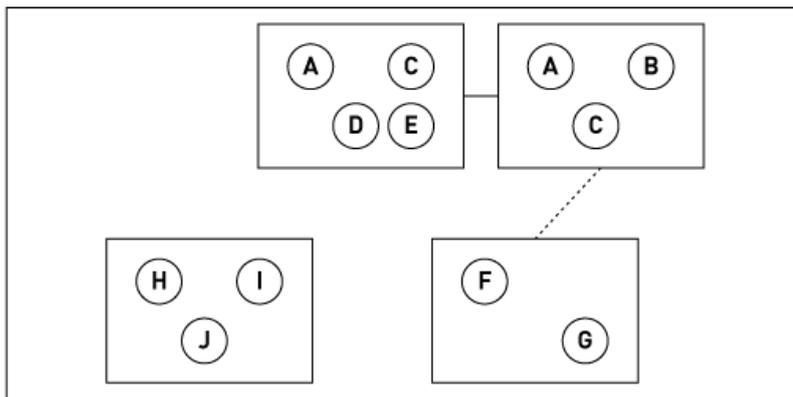

Figure 11. Issue arenas can either be linked to neighboring issue arenas or be more or less isolated.

With these figures, it is suggested that issue arenas thinking provides a wholesome and an easily approachable format for organizations to consider their PR practices.

6. Methodology

This chapter will outline the framework of thesis, its research questions and used methodology. Moreover, the validity and reliability are considered. Finally, a closer inspection is given to the strengths and weaknesses of the method choices.

This thesis seeks to lay a foundation for better approaches to current stakeholder thinking. The concept of issue arena is given special attention as one such potential model. Further, the division of voice on an issue arena and the formation of dominant voice among the different players is the scope of this thesis.

The research questions of this thesis are

RQ1: What are the constituents of dominant voice in an issue arena?
RQ2: How is dominant voice formed in an inter-organizational context?

Multiple approaches to answer these research questions are used. First, a thorough literature review from a wide spectrum of sources is selected to provide a wholesome approach which integrates many fields of study. Unlike Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara (2006, 112) suggest, here the literature review aims to not just serve as a background feature or basis from which the actual study can begin

but rather to be used as one central instrument in building the theoretical concept for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas. Daymon and Holloway (2011, 39) stress the importance of literature reviews in attaching the research problem to earlier research and its background.

The second method of the thesis is that of conceptual framework building. One central product of this thesis is a coherent novel conceptual framework for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas. Although this is not a research method of its own, theory formation should be based on empirical data, and is thus, related to the method selection of a study. However, to speak of theory formation is not the same as to talk of conceptualizing a framework or a model. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2006, 134-136.) Further, conceptual models are useful for three purposes

(1) to discern the totality of the subject under study

(2) to determine the relationships between different units of study

(3) to form conclusions also of those pieces of the whole that are yet to be empirically reached (loosely translated by the author, Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2006, 137)

As this thesis builds on the creation of a new conceptual model, these arguments for conceptual models are of is great significance. To further illustrate the thinking behind the approach to the conceptual model and its close ties to empirical experiences of PR researchers and professionals the following illustration is used.

The link between theory and practice serves as a bridge to the third research method, as well. To draw a line to unite the model for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas with practical reference to PR professionals, the case study of Brent Spar is used, implemented as desk research based on a literature study.

Case study as an approach is often used when the phenomenon under study is difficult to investigate outside its natural setting or when research variables are difficult to quantify. As such the nature of a case study is descriptive or exploratory, building on field-based construction and analysis of case studies. (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2005, 114.) However, as a concept case studies has great variance in its definition – VanWynsberghe & Khan (2008, 81) have found more than 25 definitions with great differences. Unlike most case study models (that fit the general requirements of a qualitative approach), the case study method in this

thesis is to be considered only loosely to that category. The purpose of the case study here is to provide an example of the explanatory power of the conceptual model proposed in this thesis. The level of analysis is only on a conceptual level and cannot be strictly considered to have included all the criteria of a well-argued case study with in-depth analysis.

Validity and reliabity

The validity of a research method refers to the capacity of the instrument of study to capture exactly what has been meant to be studied. The challenge with the validity of research when a model is used is that the model may not be in sync with real life circumstances, thus providing false results. Reliabity, then, refers to the capacity of a research to be repeated with similar results produced with each round of testing. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2006, 216-217.)

Altough the concepts of validity and reliability originate from the quantitative research approaches, it can be applied to other approaches, as well. However, there are seeming problems with the adaptation of the concepts to especially case studies as they can arguably be considered a one time occurrence in an idiosyncratic setting. This challenge calls for other than traditional means of reviewing the validity and reliability of a study, mostly critical verbalized thinking in the case of this thesis. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2006, 217-218.)

One way to improve the validity and reliability of a study is triangulation that can be loosely termed as the combination of approaches to arrive at a more wholesome scope of research. The combination can be of multiple methods, multiple researchers, multiple research data, or multiple approaches of theory (Denzin 1970 in Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2006, 218.) In this thesis, the triangulation is formed by the use of multiple approaches of theory to provide a wholesome model for future research.

Evaluation of the research methodology

With the goals of this thesis, forming a coherent research method is difficult. This means that with the scope of the research and form of the end product (conceptual model and test of the model through a case example), there are no systematized ways of carrying out such a study. In addition, the sheer number of different theoretical approaches sourced in this thesis means that clashes in

forming a coherent argument will occur. To put it simply, there are multiple weaknesses in the structure of the study. First, there is no systematized way of analyzing the information or testing for the conceptual model. A lot of the results of this thesis are subject to the unconscious manipulation of the researcher. Second, the inclusion of various different (even from different domains of research) theories means that problems with adaptations of the theories will be present. One example of such a problem comes from the use of French and Raven's (1959) model for power between individuals and proposing many of the features of the model to be applied to an organizational setting. Such stretching of theoretical models leads to worsened validity of the research. Finally, a conceptual framework is tested through a case study example that does not cover all the aspects of the model. This means that there is a deficit in the coverage of the model in an empirical setting. To conclude, the multi-faceted approach used in this thesis to provide an innovative model may hamper the validity and reliability of the study.

With arguable weaknesses, there is valid reasoning for the choices made in this thesis. First, although there is no systematic way of analyzing the multiple facets of approaches used in this thesis (there are no such available), the level of analysis on a conceptual level. This provides room for differences in detail. Moreover, when moving on a conceptual level, the building blocks of are of easily detectable size and, therefore, easily comprehended or challenged. Second, with clear weaknesses of mixing various theories and approaches together, it is also a key strength of the thesis. With multiple, synergistic, approaches applied, the case for the conceptual model in strengthened, as more scholars have come to similar conclusions in various fields of study. Finally, the case study example provided in this thesis is not meant to be an all-inclusive account of empirical testing for the model. Rather, the model has been created to be enhanced and to truly be empirically tested by further studies. To sum, there are evident arguments for the choices made in the selection of methodology in this thesis.

7. Suggestion of conceptual model for future research

This chapter presents a new conceptual model for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas. The model is to be considered a simplification of the complex processes involved in the creation of a dominant voice. In addition, this model is backed by a multitude of theoretical approaches (many of which have been profoundly tested in empirical settings) but IN itself the model lacks empirical testing. It is, therefore, suggested that the axioms presented in table X will be further studied and verified by empirical testing.

The chapter is divided to two parts. First, a list of central sources to the thinking behind the model is given. Second, the model is provided, and briefly explained and discussed.

7.1. Constituents of dominant voice

Table 4 sums up the basis for the model for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas. Although the model presented in the next section is new, there are multiple sources underlining similar factors as table 4 illustrates.

Only the most essential factors have been included in the table, and thus it works as a mere summary of the whole of the theoretical basis for these arguments. The table is constructed so that broader notions and mentioned first, followed by a more detailed approach.

Table 4. A list of central sources to the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas -model.

Source	Theory/concept	Effect/meaning
Luoma-aho & Vos (2009;2010)	Dominant voice	Some players on an issue arena may gain a more dominant position in which they can lead the direction of an issue arena.
Pfeffer & Salancik (2003)	Resource depence theory	An organization's capacity to act is defined by the available resources.
Castells (2008)	Value in networks	Networks connect nodes that bring value or have potential to be valuable according to the values programmed in the network.
Botan & Taylor (2004)	Issues management	Also smaller organizations can get their voices heard through issues management.
Callon & Latour (1981); Somerville (1999)	Actor-network theory / translation	The translation (= arrangement of roles) process is seen to evolve around meaning.
Luoma-aho & Paloviita (2010)	Actor-network theory / issues management	The translation process resembles much issues management and issue life cycle.
Luoma-aho & Vos (2010)	Dominant voice in issue arenas	Being first facilitates the attainment of dominant

		voice.
Luoma-aho & Vos (2010)	Coalitions in issue arenas	Organizations and stakeholders can optimize their chances of success by forming alliances with other players.

The table maps the theory base of dominant voice in issue arenas. However, as the domain of issue arena research advances, new and more detailed constituents are likely to be found.

7.2. How is dominant voice formed?

It is with the backing of the theories and concepts mentioned in the previous section included with other less central sources, that a new model for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas can be summoned. This model is presented in figure 12.
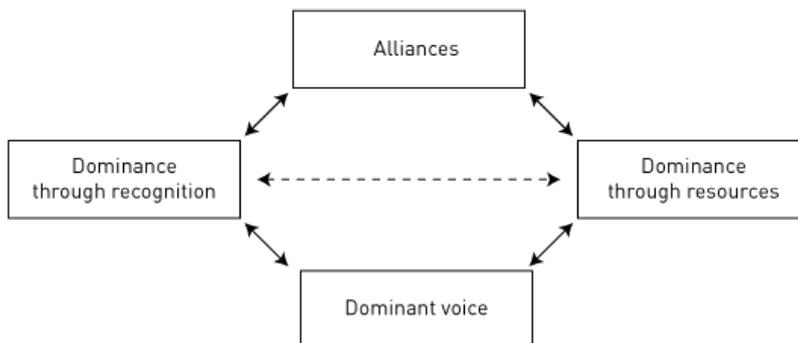

Figure 12. The model for the formation of dominant voice in issue arenas

The model works on two dyadic levels, with two-way relationships. First, dominant voice is seen to come from two distinct sources: dominance through resources and dominance through recognition. Dominance through resources refers to the capacity of an actor on the issue arena to act in overwhelming levels

of quantity and quality of operations. To put it simply, one actor can have the resources to buy the discussion to a more favorable finish. This includes providing calculable value for other actors in material means for conforming, as well as, dominating the media space with more messages than other actors. Dominance through recognition, on the other hand, relies on the charismatic traits of knowledge, excellence and spirit. Rather than seeking dominance through a large amount of resources, an actor can aim for success on a winning perception by other actors. This dimension of dominance is based more on the meanings of being right and having prestige among the other actors than the material funds to own a topic. Moreover, this distinction between the two main strategies of attaining dominant voice does not mean that it would not be beneficial for an organization to have both dominance through resources and dominance through recognition – on the contrary, it is supposed here that most of often this is the case of truly successful actors on an issue arena. Finally, alliances with other players can provide both more resources, as well as, bring about more recognition through social proof. To conclude, dominant voice is seen to form around interplay of strong organizational activity (dominance through resources) and strong organizational character (dominance through recognition) with the support of other players (alliances).

As such, the model focuses on the starting positions of organizations rather than tactics of practical PR functions. It is suggested here that most strategies and tactics will fall under the selected categories of positions. In other words, dominant voice is formed through these positions but these positions are acquired through PR strategies and tactics. An example of this is framing, which is a probable tactic especially for dominance through recognition. However, the positions laid out here will be the directing principles of such strategic and tactical choices.

8. Case study: Brent Spar -oil rig

This chapter re-contextualizes a classic organizational communication and PR case study, the incident with Shell's Brent Spar -oilrig. The case example has not been selected for the purposes of bringing any new knowledge of what happened, on the contrary, it is better that the case is well-known in itself so that new insight can be brought up from the case. Moreover, Brent Spar has been selected for this thesis as it provides a text book example of how Greenpeace was able to gain such a dominant voice in the issue that it was able to change the policies of energy companies (and neighboring businesses) by managing the zones of meaning skilfully.

To address the case from the perspective of issue arenas and dominant voice formation is new. However, it is to be remembered that at the time of the issue many contemporary communication technologies were not yet in use which means that the operating environment for Shell, Greenpeace and other organizations was predominantly different than today. This is a weakness for the selection of the study since the formation of the issue arena will be different according to the operating environment. On the other hand, as noted, the case presents a well established account on the power of managing meanings.

Next, the overview of the case is presented through mainly Bakir (2005). Then, a

closer look is given to what other researchers have found important in explaining the case. Finally, the case is recontextualized to see what new insight the theories of issue arenas and dominant voice provide.

Overview

As the case is well known and many focus-shifting details would be detrimental to the aim of this study, there is a limited description of the events. For more a detailed account, see Jordan (2001).

Royal Dutch Shell's oil rig in the Northern Sea, Brent Spar, was set to be disposed of in the wake of 1995. Earlier, Shell had run an extensive survey of what the most holistically sound way of disposal would be, finding that the rig should be sunk in the deep waters of the sea (Bakir 2005). As of that time the issue was hardly known publicly, and was rather given the blessing of key governmental authorities. Local environmental groups also supported the solution chosen. The company had initiated a dialogue with these stakeholder groups. This phase could be called a pre-issue stage as the situation was not yet given emotional meaning (Chase 1982).

The issue came to be after Greenpeace set to make the Brent Spar an example of lack of respect for the environment of energy companies. Initially the issue had not received media attention. On April 30, 1995, a group of demonstrators of Greenpeace occupied the oil rig and started a seven week campaign of attacking the morals of Shell's operations and insisting that Brent Spar be disposed to parts on land and recycled. When the company used water cannons to get the activists away from the oilrig, the videotape became a news hype. This started a series of events that came to shape not only the policies of companies but also addressed the question of business operations on a more general level (Kruse 2001).

The effects of Greenpeace's campaign were multiple, and initially all in favor of Greenpeace's cause. First, Brent Spar was taken to land in Norway, where it was taken to parts piece by piece. Second, there was strong support of the demonstrators across Europe (with exceptions like France – see Kruse 2001), especially in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK which escalated to fire bomb attacks on Shell's petrol stations, as well as, a buying boycott. Third, many governments and political figure heads did not condemn the illegal actions of Greenpeace but rather voiced their support for banning deep sea disposal of oil rigs and other Greenpeace agenda. Fourthly, Greenpeace initially received many

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donations to support its cause. Finally, Shell's reputation was badly damaged with operating losses for the boycotts resulting in a change of policy on many levels of its organization. (Bakir 2005.) These elements come to show that the change in policies and politics was dramatic, ensuring an almost complete victory for Greenpeace in a managerial sense.

Given more context, Greenpeace's achievements gain even more interest. First, in a multitude of studies conducted after the height of the incident revealed that the deep sea disposal of Brent Spar was indeed the best option in a holistic assessment. As the on-land disposal suggested by Greenpeace (and later undertaken by Shell) was found to be either insignificantly more environmentally friendly or even riskier. Second, Greenpeace was shown to having used disinformation, based on measurement mistakes or alledgedly on purpose. At a later stage this caused the NGO loss of members. Third, many European countries (such Denmark) had first agreed with the deep sea disposal plan prior to the occupation of Brent Spar by Greenpeace but were quick to jump on the bandwagon with Greenpeace, demanding an end to deep sea disposals of oil rigs. Fourthly, so strong the pressure from stakeholders and so little inclined to change the Shell management that the German section of Shell under pressure from customer boycotts publicly distanced itself from the actions of Shell UK. Finally, Esso, a joint owner of the Brent Spar, was not attacked by Greenpeace and was not included in the boycott against Shell's products. (Bakir 2005) To conclude, it is evident that Greenpeace was able to achieve its goals not by traditional means of facts or having many resources. Rather, even though somewhat questionably, Greenpeace changed the meanings attached to the issue to serve its purposes (Kruse 2001, 453), gaining a dominant position in the media debate.

Approaches to Brent Spar

Kruse (2001) investigates the differences in German and French newspapers of the Brent Spar incident. The findings strongly suggest that German newspapers had more culturally invested (Germany's eco-friendly readership) in the case and were strongly in favor of Greenpeace – portraying the battle as that of David and Goliath. In addition, the positions for different meanings were laid in humanizing Greenpeace and dehumanizing Shell (Kruse 2001, 445). At the same time, the French press reported the case with more neutrality. Instead of accusing

Shell, Shell was portrayed as the victim of Greenpeace. Here, the meaning-base was different which changed how Shell or Greenpeace were attributed by the press. It can be argued that the attributes, especially those emotionally laden, worked to change the meanings through which the case was considered, thus creating a situation where factual information was inferior to the emotionally attractive alternatives.

Livesey (2001) studies the importance of language in determining changes in policies. In sync with Kruse (2001), Livesey (2001) promotes the conception that Shell relied too much on facts and neglected to consider the context of the issue. As a result of this, Shell was forced to change its policies after the meaning-base (laid through language, especially in the media) had changed the environment and lead to social pressure on Shell.

Bakir (2005, 683) distinguishes three risk messages that were critical to Greenpeace's success. These included depicting the Brent Spar as toxic (which later turned out to have been a measurement mistake), portraying Shell as a reckless polluting giant – as larger size calls for more responsibility – (although Shell had made many preparations before deciding in favor of deep sea disposal), and campaigning for the sanctity of the deep ocean (the wider paradigm of the pollution of the sea). With these spearheads, Greenpeace is seen by Bakir (2005) to have won over the battle for meaning and context which facilitated its victory.

Conclusion: The dominant voice of Greenpeace

In terms of an issue arena, the case illustrates how issues form the basis of stakeholder interaction. While the present case does involve a lot of stakeholder-to-organization communication or that through the media, it does highlight the importance of monitoring for potentially relevant issues. It came even to be that the incapability of Shell to understand the context of the issue (for example, many political actors turned their back to Shell after the public began to favor Greenpeace) to be able to survive within the complex networks of stakeholder interests. Had Shell monitored for all the relevant variables, namely, issues, stakes, and holders, their reaction to the public debate may not have been so late or ill-advised. The company had initiated a dialogue with local NGO and government actors, but had not considered the global arena and open media debate that brought in other actors like Greenpeace.

Looking at the results of the incident, it is clear that Greenpeace attained a

dominant voice position on the arena. Even though it did not have any legal nor otherwise direct power nor large amounts of resources, Greenpeace was able to dramatically change both policies and future expectations of similar cases. This was predominantly done on the level of meaning, when the pictures of huge water cannons on the few activists on the oil rig symbolized an uneven battle.

There are many reasons for Greenpeace's success that fit the presented model of dominant voice formation. First, Greenpeace was first on the issue or rather it created the issue arena around the issue by initiating open and global mediated communication on a topic that had only been negotiated directly with local organizations. This gave it a substantial head start in the shaping of the meaning-base around the issue. Second, Greenpeace did not rely on hierarchical positions but rather communicated on the level of meaning (even though the measurement results later proved to be mistaken) changing the context of the issue and how it should be perceived as an emotional appeal rather than addressing only factual information. Finally, Greenpeace attracted alliances with many political stakeholders as well as Shell's customer base. As the most prominent player it was able to get into a position where other players trusted Greenpeace to speak on their behalf. At the same time, the Shell top management did not realize the changed context of meaning behind the issue soon enough and was forceless in trying to cope on the level of standard operating procedures. The position of Shell was to be an active player with increasingly limited power in the matter, whereas Esso remained in the audience with no active role in the matter. To conclude, the attainment of a dominant voice is often defined by many contributing factors.

9. Results and conclusion

This chapter will provide answers to the presented research questions of this thesis and discuss the meaning and potential of these findings for PR research and practice.

In this thesis, two research questions were assigned to be investigated. These were,

RQ1: What are the constituents of dominant voice in an issue arena?
RQ2: How is dominant voice formed in an inter-organizational context?

The answers to these research questions come from the combination of a literature review, practical case study example, and new conceptualizations proposed here. The constituents of a dominant voice in an issue arena were found to be a mixture of at least three factors. These were

(1) one or few players lead the discussion on an issue

(2) other players refer to the dominant player(s)

(3) dominance is witnessed within managing meanings, not necessarily attributed to direct power

Dominant voice can, then, be further explained as the central position of an organization for an issue. The above mentioned three factors may all be present

or just one or two factors can be enough to adhere the dominant position. Also other factors, not included here, could be potentially important constituents of dominant voice. In addition, dominant voice is not a position with clear boundaries but is rather a concept that is relative to the positions of other players, forming a continuum from inferior voice to dominant voice. As such, the concept is both hard to define, yet, easily comprehendible.

The constituents and strategies of attaining dominant voice draw from many different but complementary theories and concepts. These are listed in more detail in table 4.

There were two main strategies (with one supporting strategy) identified for the formation of dominant voice in an inter-organizational context. These were dominance through resources and dominance through recognition, with alliances working as a catalyst for both potential strategies. Dominance through resources was seen to build upon the material resource-base to either provide value for other players on an issue arena or the flooding of media space with better quality and more quantity than other players. Dominance through recognition, on the other hand, referred to the charismatic character of the player which concentrates more on the perception and meaning-base of the player than size or resources. Also knowledge, skill, or other similar recognition building trait or capacity would fit this definition. In addition, simply being first on the issue may suffice. Alliances, then, were simply defined as either a basis for more resources or as a charismatic trait through social proof in numbers. To conclude, there seems to be a connection between the two strategies but they form distinct approaches to gaining dominant voice.

The present thesis and the arguments presented here have also many weaknesses. First, should be underlined that the concept of dominant voice has not been empirically tested. Second, the concept draws from many theoretical models that do have clear synergy together but that, also, could be considered to be tied together by an arbitrary rope. To it simply, there are reasons to suspect that the interplay of various concepts proposed here does not function as well in the real world as it does on the paper. Finally, cultural differences have not been taken into account. It can be argued that in places where the development of communication technology is lagging, the basis for the model proposed here would be shattered. Whether that is the case, is to be studied further. However, the arguments presented here do seem to be supported by many scholars in different domains of study which defends the choices made in this thesis. To

conclude, notwithstanding the apparent weaknesses of the study, there seems to be a cemented basis for the arguments made in the thesis.

This thesis has tried to form a clear argument for a change in PR research and practice. First, the shortcomings of current stakeholder and other PR theories were addressed. It was noted that current theories cannot answer the questions today's operating environment organizations. This thesis has tried to underline the reasons why current stakeholder thinking is out dated, mostly focusing on the role of the organization in stakeholder interaction and the flexibility of organizations in current models. The basis for this has been static relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. However, a constant need for more dynamic models has been present in stakeholder thinking since its formulation. Moreover, it can be argued that the focus of communications management should, first, be on the relevant issues and only then on the relevant relationships found through issues. This calls for a change in how PR theorists and practitioners order their work on many levels. On the other hand, the determinants of quality PR are still the same, only the environment and tools have changed. Although the concept of issue arenas has not yet been empirically tested, the empirical case studies of today's operating environment do describe a change towards issues over more static relationships. To conclude, the change is on the where, when and with what strategies PR is to be carried out, and not so much of changing the actual public relations itself.

The change towards issues as the driving force behind stakeholder interaction does, however, provide new ways of striving for the attainment of organizational goals. The more dynamic the operating environment and the less static the relationships, the more opportunities the smaller organizations (thus far unable to break the rules of hierarchical institutions) have in getting their voice heard. This thesis has proposed that with the constant change in the operating environment with more virtual and arbitrary relationships to issues and players than ever, more emphasis is given on the meanings communicated, as meaning becomes the only solid base or context on which players can build their cases. To put it simply, everything else changes so quickly and people have less capacity to understand the growing number of details that decisions are made according to the meaning of actions, rather than understanding the action itself. To sum, whatever the reason for the effect of meaning in decision-making, understanding the importance of the concept seems to be instrumental to success in today's operating environment.

Suggestions for further research

The following themes or study questions are presented for future study.

(1) the empirical testing of the formation of dominant voice model

(2) the interconnectedness of dominance through resources and dominance through recognition

(3) the types of operating environments (in multiple cultures) the model can be applied to

(4) the closer inspection of how dominance through resources or dominance through recognition is formed

(5) the added value of issue arenas/dominant voice thinking compared to prior communication management approaches

This thesis has investigated ways through which a dominant voice can be acquired in issue arenas but the real challenge for PR professionals lies in the wider concept of managing zones of meaning. Although acquiring a dominant voice may provide more capacity to direct the zone of meaning to favorable direction, the management of the zones of meaning is similarly important for success in situations where dominant voice cannot be acquired.

Understanding the dynamics of meaning is critical to organizations in the current operating environment. The organizations who understand these dynamics of meaning succeed; and the ones who do not, fail.

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