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DOI

[10.2307/jj.11895525.11](https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11895525.11)

[10.1515/9789048560608-009](https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048560608-009)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Communication Research into the Digital Society

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wonneberger, A., Kroon, A., van den Heijkant, L., van Eck, C., & Jonkman, J. (2024). Contested Issues and Organisations: Media Debates about Sustainability and Diversity. In T. Araujo, & P. Neijens (Eds.), *Communication Research into the Digital Society: Fundamental Insights from the Amsterdam School of Communication Research* (pp. 139-154). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11895525.11>, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048560608-009>

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8. Contested Issues and Organisations: Media Debates about Sustainability and Diversity

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Abstract

Sustainability and diversity are two contested issues in contemporary societies that are often linked to organisations. This chapter outlines research by ASCoR's Corporate Communication group that assesses the causes, content, and consequences of media debates on sustainability and diversity. Organisations engage in these issue arenas in various roles: as employers having responsibilities toward internal stakeholders, as corporations seeking to respond to societal expectations to garner legitimacy, or as advocacy organisations entering public discourses with the aim of accelerating social change. Drawing on diverse methodological approaches with an emphasis on content-analytic techniques, the group's research contributes to communication theory and research on agenda setting, framing, climate change communication, and stereotype communication with relevant implications for communication practice.

Keywords: media debates, climate change, stereotypes, framing, agenda setting

Introduction

Responding to societal developments and expectations, organisations increasingly emphasise their environmental and social responsibilities. Engagement of organisations with environmental and social issues may

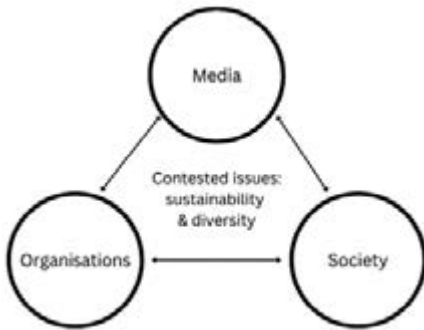
Wonneberger, A., Kroon, A., van den Heijkant, L., van Eck, C., & Jonkman, J. (2024). Contested issues and organisations: Media debates about sustainability and diversity. In T. Araujo & P. Neijens (Eds.), *Communication research into the digital society: Fundamental insights from the Amsterdam School of Communication Research* (pp. 139-154). Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048560592_ch08

positively affect organisational legitimacy and stakeholder relations and contribute to societal change (Stephan et al., 2016). Given the contested nature of such issues, organisational engagement can also trigger sharp criticism and controversy (Lock & Seele, 2017) and lead to organisational delegitimisation among stakeholders (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Public discourses that can be observed in various media channels form issue arenas in which organisations and stakeholders interact through issues communication (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Issues are contested if there are major disagreements among stakeholders concerning the nature or scope of the problem, responsibilities, and/or solutions. This may be reflected by polarisation around sustainability issues, scientific disagreement about sustainability solutions, or disagreement about the relevance of or solutions to diversity problems in society. Focusing on the role of organisations in such controversies, research by ASCoR's Corporate Communication group studies media debates about issues connected to sustainability and diversity. Following the issue-centred approach outlined in the previous chapter, this work contributes to unravelling the mediated interplay between organisations and their stakeholders in the context of sustainability and diversity issues (see Fig. 8.1) and to how these dynamics impact organisational legitimacy.

Stakeholders increasingly link environmental problems like climate change or plastic pollution to organisations, for instance, by holding corporations responsible for contributing to these problems or challenging them to contribute to sustainability transitions (Allen & Craig, 2016; Whelan et al., 2013). Such changes are often initiated or spurred by advocacy groups that contribute to multi-actor environmental and sustainability discourses in the news media and on social media platforms (Cox, 2010). In this context, research of the programme group assesses the roles and interplay of various organisations in sustainability issue arenas (Jacobs et al., 2021; Lock, Stachel, et al., 2020; Wonneberger & Vliegthart, 2021).

In the context of social issues, recent years have been marked by an intensified debate about the role of prejudices and stereotypes about minorities or marginalised groups (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2019; Eberl et al., 2018). In addition to entering the public debate about diversity issues, organisations face challenges with respect to diversity, inclusion, and equity as employers. Members of the programme group study, for instance, how media representations of social groups, such as older workers, relate to stereotypical beliefs about job candidates during the hiring process as well as employees in the workplace (e.g., Kroon et al., 2018; Kroon et al., 2021; van Selm & van den Heijkant, 2021).

Figure 8.1. Conceptualising Issue Arenas on Contested Issues



Empirical findings

The group's diverse methodological approach has enabled research on a broad spectrum of aspects related to sustainability and diversity discourses. ASCoR researchers have studied and categorised the *content* of frames, discourses, and portrayals in news coverage, on social media, and in organisational communications and investigated the *causes* of variation in this content utilising a mix of content- and network-analytic approaches (e.g., Hellsten et al., 2019; van den Heijkant et al., 2023a), with a specific focus on computational approaches (e.g., Kroon et al., 2020; van den Heijkant & Vliegthart, 2018). We have tracked the *consequences* of this content on behavioural and attitudinal outcomes and identified potential *cures* by employing survey and experimental designs (e.g., Kroon et al., 2022; Wonneberger et al., 2020).

Sustainability

Research on the content and the causes of sustainability discourses contributes to a better understanding of fragmentation and polarisation of societal discourses on sustainability issues that are shaped by competing interests and ontologies and the forming of coalitions and counter-coalitions. In this context, socio-semantic network analysis allows disentangling how organisations and stakeholders are positioned and connected. Focusing on animal welfare issues, our studies have revealed how citizens play a central role in sustainability discourses on Twitter by forming socially and semantically distinct yet prominent and central clusters (Hellsten et al.,

2019; Wonneberger et al., 2021). Taking a bridging function, private social media users are of key strategic importance for organisations, for instance, to enhance the success of nonprofit campaigns (Wonneberger et al., 2021), or for public organisations which often take peripheral positions in discussion networks (Hellsten et al., 2019; Roth & Hellsten, 2022).

Zooming in on the content of social media debates showed that citizens often amplify aspects of discourses or organisational frames that are closest to their daily life experiences as consumers (Jacobs et al., 2021). But processes contributing to polarisation have also been identified. In the case of Twitter networks around the publication of an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report engagement was specifically driven by a minority group of sceptical users (Roth & Hellsten, 2022).

In addition to mapping public discourses on sustainability issues, the group has studied related political and societal consequences. Studying the lawsuit of environmental organisation Urgenda against the Dutch state using time series analysis, we found that media attention for climate change litigation influenced political attention on this issue but also the media debate on climate policy and climate change in general (Wonneberger & Vliegthart, 2021). A qualitative document analysis has been used combined with interviews to study framing strategies of lobbyists in a law case on nuclear emission data in Switzerland. This study revealed that the dominant frames mobilised by lobbyists were able to influence public policies (Lock, Stachel, et al., 2020).

In addition, media effects on the general public have been studied. Linking quantitative content analysis to survey data revealed how different climate change audience segments respond differently to news coverage about a climate change summit (Wonneberger et al., 2020). An online experiment found that individual attitudes and preferences of consumers play a role in legitimacy and credibility perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) websites (Lock & Schulz-Knappe, 2018).

Potential *cures* identified by the group are oftentimes linked to shared underlying values. Taking a macro perspective, our research has identified distinct sustainability views for consumers, news media, and corporations which are, however, linked to similar values (Wonneberger et al., 2022). On the organisational level, a case study by Cornelissen et al. (2021) into the hybrid organisational identity of the Dutch social enterprise Fairphone showed that “rekeying”—which involves leaders transforming their previous understandings and framing of the organisational identity into a more dual interpretation—facilitated continuous adaptation. This enabled members within the organisation to improve their ability to integrate multiple

sustainability objectives (economic, social, environmental) and values, resulting in a shared hybrid organisational identity.

Diversity

In today's society, diversity and inclusion have become increasingly important issues that organisations are expected to actively address. Within the Corporate Communication group, a line of research focuses on the portrayal of social groups in social, organisational, and news content, and the consequences thereof for how these social groups are perceived by organisational stakeholders and for their chances in the labour market. Particular attention has been given to older workers and older job seekers—a group that often encounters rigid stereotypes that limit their inclusion in the labour market and the workplace.

In research focusing on the content of diversity issues and the portrayal of social groups, manual content analyses revealed that older workers are typically portrayed in the news media in line with salient societal stereotypes. This portrayal includes both positive and negative elements: it emphasises warmth stereotypes by portraying older workers as trustworthy, while downplaying competence by depicting them as less adaptable and (technologically) capable (Kroon et al., 2018). These persistent mixed beliefs about older workers being warm but not competent are also reflected in organisational communication, particularly in job advertisements and recruitment practices (van Selm & van den Heijkant, 2021). In addition to studying the portrayal of older workers, the group has examined media portrayals of ethnic minorities. A large-scale automated content analysis of more than 3 million news articles revealed that Dutch news media tend to implicitly associate ethnic out-groups with low-status and high-threat stereotypes, especially, when compared to ethnic in-groups (Kroon et al., 2020; Kroon et al., 2021; Kroon & van der Meer, 2023).

Maintaining the content focus, additional research delved deeper into social policy debates in the Netherlands that pertain to older workers—focusing on the issues of employability (e.g., Kroon, van Selm, et al., 2017) and pension reform (e.g., van den Heijkant et al., 2023a). Focusing on how policy reforms are framed in the media showed that news media often problematise such issues and victimise older workers (Kroon, van Selm, et al., 2017). This tendency to emphasise problems rather than solutions when it comes to policy reforms is also evident in how news and social media frame the issue of raising the retirement age (van den Heijkant et al., 2023a).

To explore causes of variation in this framing, subsequent studies examined the social policy issues comparatively across different European countries, newspapers, and time periods. The findings indicate that frames and portrayals regarding the policy reform and the issue of older workers' employability are driven by differences in quoted sources, political orientation of news outlets, time frames, and political climate. For example, conservative news outlets are less likely to endorse measures that prolong active working lives beyond the formal retirement ages (Kroon, Vliegthart, et al., 2017). This alignment of coverage with a newspaper's ideological orientation is also demonstrated in a study of the European news media's framing of the issue of pension reform, where left-leaning newspapers emphasised frames of inequality and negative consequences for citizens more than right-leaning newspapers (van den Heijkant et al., 2022).

Media portrayals and frames are not without consequences, as demonstrated by the group's research on the attitudinal and societal implications of media portrayals of issues related to the employability of older workers and the framing of retirement policies. Drawing on online experiments, this work showed that when the media present mixed stereotypes of older workers that positively emphasise warmth qualities but negatively emphasise competence qualities, this can activate implicit stereotypes and ultimately negatively influence the willingness to hire older workers (Kroon et al., 2016). Another study found that the news frames of pension reform (i.e., responsibility and justice frames) influenced how citizens perceived and responded to the proposed reform, suggesting an important role for news framing in shaping public opinion and informing the policymaking process (van den Heijkant et al., 2023b). Additional experimental research has provided evidence of how different forms of linguistic bias influence the creation and maintenance of social stereotypes in organisations (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2020; Burgers & Beukeboom, 2020).

Finally, to identify potential cures, several ways to counteract the harmful consequences of stereotypical media content were explored. We investigated raising awareness of implicit prejudice as a means to reducing self-selection of biased content. This approach is particularly effective for individuals with strong implicit but weak explicit biases—as these individuals are more receptive to such a strategy (Kroon et al., 2022). Another approach that has been studied to reduce age bias in organisations is *perspective-taking*, in which individual organisational actors actively consider the mental state of individuals who belong to the stereotypical group. A study by van Selm and van den Heijkant (2022) suggests that considering realistic facts about older workers, such as their low absenteeism and high levels of organisational

citizenship, can reduce age bias when evaluating candidates' resumes in hiring processes.

Contributions to theory and practice

Jointly, this research provides rich insights linked to various communication theories. It shows, for instance, how agenda-setting processes are triggered by media coverage about climate advocacy or labour policies, how sustainability and diversity issues linked to organisations are framed on different media platforms, how communication can create and maintain social categories and stereotypes, and how stereotypes about minorities are presented in the media and with what effects.

Sustainability

While active and passive stakeholders had been discerned conceptually in research on issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), the automated approach proposed by Hellsten et al. (2019) allows the empirical mapping of issue arenas as communication networks in which passive stakeholders get involved by active stakeholders. Integrating semantic and relational research traditions, this reveals how issue arenas are co-constituted by actors, their references to hashtags, other actors, and retweets (Wonneberger et al., 2021). Discerning structural and semantic positions in communication networks furthermore allows the identification of sub-discourses and opposing poles in discourses (Roth & Hellsten, 2022). Mapping issue arenas is of practical value for various social actors. Journalists who render complex controversies visible, benefit from advanced research on visualising mediated issues communication. This may indirectly contribute to opinion formation and decision-making by citizens and political actors. Moreover, these insights help organisations to anticipate issues and crisis communication focused on mitigating potential adverse effects and maintaining legitimacy (Strauß & Jonkman, 2017).

Sustainability research of the group has shown how news media take a moderating role in various strategic communication efforts. Studying climate change litigation as a public campaigning tool of climate activists, for instance, has revealed that media attention for a climate lawsuit against the Dutch government has influenced the political agenda. The identified bottom-up agenda-setting effects furthermore add to the literature on climate change-related agenda-setting effects. Moreover, this research

has been acknowledged for confirming the thus far merely conceptualised indirect effects of climate change litigation beyond the direct effects of court rulings (IPCC, 2022; see Setzer & Vanhala, 2019). In addition, Lock, Stachel, et al. (2020) have developed a public affairs-specific integrated process model of framing. This model assigns a central role to news media for framing processes of lobbying activities by describing that frames displayed in the news in addition to strategic considerations influence lobbying organisations in taking over frames introduced by other actors (Lock, Stachel, et al., 2020).

This in addition to other studies have emphasised the importance of adequately identifying strategic target audiences and understanding how these might respond to different framing strategies. As several studies have highlighted the key role of the general public in disseminating organisational campaigning or framing efforts, it is important for organisations to better understand everyday life considerations of citizens related to an issue (Araujo & Kollat, 2018; Jacobs et al., 2021; Wonneberger et al., 2021). Segmenting audiences with respect to beliefs and attitudes about an issue is a useful approach to developing more clearly targeted communication strategies. While previous research had repeatedly identified distinct climate change audiences and linked these to different information needs (e.g., Metag et al., 2017), our research was the first to show segment-specific media effects in the context of climate change (Wonneberger et al., 2020).

Diversity

The line of research on diversity and inclusion has made significant theoretical contributions. Members of the group have developed the social categories and stereotype communication (SCSC) model (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2019). This communication-scientific theory explains the communicative and linguistic processes through which stereotypes are shared. The model proposes that stereotypes are built around three core cognitive variables: (1) perceived category entitativity (the degree to which a specific social category is seen as a unified group), (2) stereotype content (content of the specific cognitive perceptions people have of a social category) and (3) perceived category essentialism (the degree to which specific characteristics are perceived as inherent to its members and stable across time and social contexts). The SCSC model proposes that different forms of communicative bias contribute to the communication and maintenance of social stereotypes, related to (1) content and form of category labels, and

(2) which information is shared about social-category members in which ways. This model has helped to study the creation and maintenance of social stereotypes in organisations (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2020; Burgers & Beukeboom, 2020).

Expanding upon the content of stereotypes, the group has used the stereotype content model (SCM), which suggests that cognitive perceptions of social groups vary based on two dimensions: Competence (affecting perceived status) and warmth (affecting perceived threat) (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2008; Cuddy et al., 2009). This idea is supported by numerous psychological studies using experimental designs. The group's research extends the SCM to organisational, news, and social media and shows that diverse social groups are portrayed differently on these dimensions. This research finds that stereotypical media representations are often ambivalent, comprising a mix of positive and negative evaluations (Kroon et al., 2018). Moreover, implicit stereotypical beliefs have an impact on the type of content that individual audience members self-select, and news media can reinforce these beliefs (Kroon et al., 2021; Kroon et al., 2022). Our research highlights the crucial role of news media in shaping and reflecting stereotypical beliefs of various social groups, suggesting that media portrayals matter for the image problem of social groups, which can have tangible consequences, such as affecting the likelihood of hiring or promoting members of particular demographic groups (Kroon et al., 2016).

The group's empirical studies confirm and add to classical communication science theories, especially the theoretical underpinnings of framing. It sheds light on the relevance of framing theory in understanding social policy discussions surrounding employability and pension reform. A notable contribution is the tendency of social and news media to problematise such pressing social issues rather than propose solutions. By comparing media coverage in different European countries, our research makes a valuable contribution to understanding how contextual factors (such as the political orientation, time frames, and political climate of the news media) influence the framing of critical policy issues. By ultimately demonstrating the powerful influence of framing in shaping public opinion in this context, we add an essential piece to the puzzle of how social attitudes and policy discussions are shaped by the media and influence the potential (or lack thereof) for policy reform. The evidence from these contributions has been presented in several initiatives and discussions with governmental actors (e.g., the Netherlands Authority for the Financial Markets and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment) and organisational actors (e.g., AWWN, the largest employers' association).

Next steps

In this final section, we discuss how our ongoing and future research responds to societal developments with respect to sustainability and diversity. In doing so, ASCoR's Corporate Communication group will continue to engage in theory development and communication practice in these areas.

Sustainability

Debates about climate change have shifted from the existence and anthropogenic causes of climate change to proportionate climate solutions, for example, in related to the energy transition. Our sustainability research focus has shifted along toward understanding how organisations, the media, and stakeholders communicate in polarised issue arenas about climate solutions and sustainability transitions. Relying on communication science theory (Lock, Wonneberger, et al., 2020), such as agenda and frame building and setting, we continue to investigate the dynamics of communication processes on the macro level by analysing media discourses with mixed methods (e.g., Wonneberger et al., 2023). We are particularly interested in the mediated, issue-based interplay between corporations, environmental NGOs, political actors, scientists, and citizens and how this interplay may impact the legitimacy of involved organisations (Jonkman & Verhoeven, 2021). For example, we compare polarised media discourses across countries and investigate the agenda- and frame-building effects within polarised issue networks in the context of sustainable energy solutions. A new line of research focuses on interpersonal communication dynamics to understand how conversations between individuals with opposing views may result in starker climate change polarisation.

Understanding the drivers of climate change contestation and polarisation provides fertile ground for developing climate narratives to depolarise the debate. Hence, our future research aims at developing and testing such narratives for different messengers (communication professionals, climate scientists), target groups (Dutch citizens) (Jonkman et al., 2023), and about different messages (e.g., climate science) (van Eck, 2023). As psychological research increasingly points to the important role of values and emotions in how people shape their climate change risk perceptions (van Eck et al., 2020), we are particularly driven to test value-based and affective narratives.

Corporate Communication is well represented in the Environmental Communication Lab (EcoLab) of ASCoR, where new ideas for research are jointly developed. One of the goals is to put environmental and climate change

communication science on the agenda of policymakers and practitioners. Members of the group are actively seeking involvement in new governmental initiatives where Dutch climate policy or communication campaigns are being developed. We further seek to bridge science and practice by regularly providing workshops to various audiences, ranging from climate scientists to communication professionals and the general public.

Diversity

Our group will continue to study how stereotypes and biases are constructed, reinforced, and potentially transformed. For instance, based on the SCSC model (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2019), organisational actors can become (more) aware of the linguistic means by which stereotypical views are formed, allowing them to develop interventions that can help change or prevent the formation of undesirable biases in an organisational context. Future research will focus on uncovering further mechanisms of linguistic bias and on studying linguistic bias in real-life settings.

For example, we will develop evidence-based tools to help employers recognise and mitigate biases in the hiring process and workplace. A new line of research will examine organisations' strategic communication on LGBTQ-related issues and related consequences for perceptions of authenticity and legitimacy. Furthermore, as digital technologies continue to expand, employers and recruiters have capitalised on these trends by using the fine-grained targeting settings of social media platforms to reach their desired audiences for job openings. Our research will evolve with these digital technologies, in particular, to examine concerns that the increased use of automated recruitment tools may be causing the delivery of job advertisements to be skewed across age groups, such that older individuals are disproportionately less likely to be targeted by employers, and, as a result, less likely to be exposed to job advertisements.

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