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Corporate Citizens of the Third Millennium

The current status of corporate communication research in France
The place of public relations and corporate citizenship therein

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Introduction

My thanks to EUPRERA for welcoming me to this congress. Personally, I am looking forward to this exchange with a great interest. An exchange sustained by our differences, given that I am neither a public relations professional nor a university public relations specialist. In France, students and teachers within this specialist field are often in private specialist schools, and not university. Therefore, I am speaking here from a particular point of view. In my association of communication researchers, I am in charge of international relations and am working with various European colleagues within a program of mapping of our research field and their characteristics in each Country. Also, I am very interested in your different organizations and various themes of discussion and I prepared for your congress an account within this framework. I shall deal with the following questions : How is communication science organized in France, What is the place of corporate communication ? What is written about corporate citizenship in our field ?

To answer these questions, I made use of two official bodies : the congresses of our society over the last thirty years and the opened access archives of the National Centre for Scientific Research. I shall describe the field of information and communication sciences from these corpuses. Then, I shall specify the themes of our researches within corporate communication. I identified at least fifteen relevant documents (articles, chapters of books, conference) given specifically related to your congress. This paper is a modest attempt to summarize the current situation in France. But - I hope – sufficient and relevant for our discussion.

The place of corporate communication in ICS (Information and communication sciences)

In France, the University considers information and communication as a whole : it is the same discipline. The reasons are not important here, simply because the choice has an influence on research. After 35 years, a bibliometric study shows that the discipline uses about 900 concepts. A great deal of them are associated with technology (data management, electronic information exchange), as much as semiotics (signs, symbols, logotypes...), political press or personal interaction, for example¹. The discipline gathers together the notions themselves (information and communication), interactions between individuals, group relations, media economy, uses of technology (by individuals and companies), information systems, media influence or media effects, media actors (journalists, public relation professionals, librarians, press agencies, internet providers...), the content analysis of the press². Our main site of open archives proposes studies about bibliometry, analysis of cinema, documentation, cultural industries, public space, information systems engineering³...

This site offers a subsection of articles called *Organization and Communication*, in which you can find themes such as : communication strategies, the state of information and communication in innovation, the governance of local communities, documentary spaces and decision, relationship in trade exchanges, semiotics in marketing, intranet and power relations, creating values in communities in action, emails and social bondings in companies, the concept of gender in corporate communications. This research integrates all levels of communication : between individuals, groups, institutions. The problems analysed concern often human resources, occasionally advertising and rarely public relations.

A master's paper about our congresses noted in 2002 the significance of themes like appropriation of ICT and political communication. Then Knowledge Society and semiology of

¹ Eric Boutin, Pei Liu, Stéphane Goria, Philippe Dumas, David Amos, « Les SIC à partir du thésaurus Rameau. Représentation ou interprétation ? », congrès SFSIC, 2008,

http://www.sfsic.org/congres_2008/spip.php?page=imprime&id_article=1

² National Council of Universities, section 71

³ <http://archivesic.ccsd.cnrs.fr/>

messages⁴. Corporate analysis is vast. In our first congress, they concerned data bases, economical intelligence, monitoring scientific or technological development, ergonomics in information systems, working from home. The data production companies were analysed: do they offer “added value” ? From 1990, the main question is impact of technologies on companies’ organizations. Advertising remains a constant theme. Internal and external communication is a secondary theme. But all sorts of organisation are monitored : private companies, but also the army, the educational system, hospitals, museums, libraries, the cinema industry, justice, and obviously press and media.

For domestic reasons (French decentralisation in the 1980’s), local communities communications was an subject of a particular attention. Territorial communication and territorial intelligence became a main theme, in connection with European politics in European regions. Research tends to follow social and political concerns. Therefore, the most recent congress papers published discuss crisis communications, the place of financial markets in cultural industries, regulation of health, cognitive capitalism, encouraging industrialization ideologies in training, corporate citizenship, etc.

We note an evolution in texts from recent congresses. At the very beginning, the organization was considered regarding its uses of technical or scientific information. The influence of information and communication technologies on organization grew, and after that, questions generated by globalization arose. And we note two main trends : on the one hand our attention focuses on all sorts of organizations : private companies, associations, administrations, NGO’s. On the other hand the historical boundary between information and communication often turns our researches on organization of work⁵.

Towards a “communicational approach” of organizations

A specific discipline always works in their internal coherence, their own point of view on their scientific field and their approach to it. What is the contribution of ICS (Information and Communication Sciences) to the analysis of corporate citizenship ?

ICS view

Analysis of organisations is not the same in ICS, management or sociology., even the analysis of internal or external communications or advertising⁶. Management and ICS describe both processes of reception and influence, but ICS are strongly influenced by phenomenology and semiotics, while management makes great use of social psychology. Furthermore ICS claim a critical approach⁷ while management wonders how motivational influences affect organizations in concrete terms : the criterion of a successful management study lies in its final efficiency and not its logical coherence. The view of management is then closer to immediate preoccupations of fieldwork. These two approaches refer to different bibliographical universes, even different philosophies, if we give to this term its complete sense. Because management theoreticians refer to utilitarianism, and for this philosophy the difference between truth and efficiency is insignificant. Therefore it is not particularly surprising if studies that lean on phenomenology are different.

The same analysis can be made using sociology of work. Sociology of work is particularly interested in communities ; ICS emphasize interaction. For example, an information system is seen as a system of representations, a system of rules, types of organisations, that actors may invest or not in⁸. No management innovation in a firm can escape from this reality: there is always a distance between manager’s intentions and the employee’s response. Any innovation, any managerial proposition has to meet individual or collective actors. These actors have mutual relations, who together build

⁴ Delphine Arru-Gaillard, *Organisation et identité d’une « entreprise » de recherche française en sciences de l’information et de la communication, Etude d’une pratique éditoriale : Les Actes des Congrès de la SFSIC 1978-2002*. Mémoire de DEA sous la direction de Yves Jeanneret, CELSA, 2004

Marie Despres-Lonnet, « Trente ans de recherches en sciences de l’information et de la communication », congrès SFSIC 2008, http://www.sfsic.org/congres_2008/spip.php?page=imprime&id_article=56

⁵ Our specialized network Org and Co gathers 200 researchers.

⁶ Didier Courbet, Comparaison épistémologique des recherches en SIC et sciences de gestion dans le domaine de la communication externe : divergences et terrain commun. », colloque *La communication d’entreprise : regards croisés sciences de gestion et sciences de l’information et de la communication*, Nice, 6-7 décembre 2001, disponible sur Archivesic, hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/06/25/.../sic_00001265.pdf

⁷ Christian Le Moenne, « Les sciences de l’information et de la communication et la crise de la critique : une opportunité de clarification épistémologique », Congrès SFSIC, 2008, www.sfsic.org/content/view/1253/187/

⁸ Brigitte Guyot et Michel Durampart, Interroger l’organisation à la lumière des systèmes d’information, Congrès de la SFSIC, 2008, http://www.sfsic.org/congres_2008/spip.php?article30

representations of what is asked, or suggest, or imposed. These shared representations may favour or counter the management's will. And they are bought from every meeting, even with only two individuals. This can be observed with the implementation of technologies and can be put forward for every other innovative situation, and every managerial situation.

A French group of researchers claims the expression "communicational approach of organisations" to describe their work and their particular point of view regarding organizations⁹. This approach is distinct of descriptive or prescriptive ones of professional ones. It monitors organisation through all sorts of communication facts. Therefore subjects include corporate communication, internal communication, marketing, information systems, normalization, information economy, new organisational forms, knowledge management, corporate ethics... A communication process is indeed interactions between individuals as well as collective interactive meanings production, knowledge mobilization, producing speeches. Our colleagues refer to the School of Montreal (Taylor), of Louvain (Gryspeert), or some American authors (Deetz).

An organization is not only a subject for studies, but also a precise level within society. And realities like regulation, agreements, subcontracting or interactions are as much in the field of communication studies as public relations.

From "corporate culture" to "corporate citizenship"

Communication is obviously strongly bound to corporate citizenship : a company behaves like a collective citizen when its objectives of fair trade or sustainable development are supported by interested, motivated, convinced employees. One could not speak of "corporate citizenship" if companies do not have a duet foundation : founded upon their economic and human nature ; in its productivity and its imaginary and mythical representation. Citizenship is an internal and progressively built reality. So, much research could be considered as preliminary, when it concerns symbolic foundation of organizations, referring to Cornelius Castoriadis (imaginary institution of society), to Winicott (games and reality), or Gérard Mendel (sociopsychanalysis)¹⁰.

How to be a corporate citizen ?

The injunction of being a « corporate citizen » or constructing ethical charts could be another manner of living what is known as "corporate culture"¹¹. There are real similarities between the objectives of both. Both consider the enterprise as a human entity, with its own story and way of life, as well as its relationships with partners or customers. A collective body has to explain clearly this identity to improve it, and to show its best side outside. The problem is not this idea, but the functionalist model which progressively dominated and made it ineffective, particularly in France¹². From a functionalist perspective, a culture aims at integration, models individuals, searches for social stability. The will to manipulate is obvious : an integrating session is a selecting process for docile workers, signs of identification are signs of submission. The concept became in the manager's hands an ideology, ideology imposed by executive managers. The concepts and the practices linked were quickly rejected. For a researcher in communication science, it is completely logical : if someone is trying to manipulate you, you "feel" it through all the non verbal signs exchanged, even furtive signs. And this immediately generates suspicion, creating the opposite effect.

We could then question the concepts of corporate citizenship, sustainable development, ethical charts, codes of conduct : they could be affected (even succumb) to the same fate. What are the characteristics of this new concept, is it already a simple tool for management, can we already anticipate its rejection ?

We can consider the question from another point of view : what are the differences between corporate culture and corporate citizenship ? Both want to promote a positive picture of the company,

⁹ Jean-Luc Bouillon, Synvie Bourdin et Catherine Loneux, « Approches communicationnelles des organisations : interroger l'organisation par la communication », *Sciences de la société*, n° 74, 2008. Et des mêmes auteurs « De la communication organisationnelle aux approches communicationnelles des organisations : glissement paradigmatique et migrations conceptuelles », *Communication et organisation*, n° 31, 2007.

¹⁰ For example Alain van Cuyck, « L'instance institutionnelle comme fondement anthropologique, sociale et communicationnel de la culture organisationnelle », congrès SFSIC, 2008, lien congrès

¹¹ Bernard Massiera, *Culture d'entreprise, l'échec d'un concept*, Revue Étude de communication, 2006.

¹² The reference to Philippe D'Iribarne is not quoted in the article, but we can obviously think to « The logical of honour », *La logique de l'honneur*, Seuil, 1989.

but imply involvement of consumers themselves. The speeches about corporate citizenship reveal their distance from reality, but they add to governance and information technologies. Next, this concept is often applied in a dynamic manner. Difficulties and counter-examples are numerous, but employees and the general public are often motivated. The main obstacle could be economical logic, because their inversion implies heavy reorganisations for companies and consumers alike.

Companies in search of meaning ?

Do consumers really expect ethics, what exactly is the degree of pressure on companies ? In 2003, a barometer evaluated 60 different (public and private) firms and their ethical picture in the eyes of the general public¹³.

- Firstly, the impulse is old, since the first ethical charts were written in the 1960's.
- Secondly, the ethical requirement is issued from a large proportion of population. It is not a requirement from the most cultured part of society. All social classes are convinced that we simply finished a cycle in our way of life.
- Thirdly, the requirement is not limited to a few economical or geographical areas. A multi-national company could not afford to act in this manner in its headquarters and another in its branches worldwide. If companies are international, consumer associations too.
- Fourthly, the requirement addresses to all aspects of society: respect for nature, human resources administration, sponsoring... A demonstration of universal open-mindedness is required.
- Lastly, and this is important to our discipline, the media play a public prosecutor's role.

It does not mean that customers or public opinion confound companies with charitable organisations: the first responsibility of a company is to gain customer's respect. And it does not mean that customers are always coherent : economy of energy and recycling, for example, are considered as less important criterions of citizenship.

The first ethical charts were written in the sixties and organized relations between the companies and their branches, particularly in areas of different trade practices. They had –and have – a key role with relationships with subcontractors. They are tools to stabilize and consolidate relations, reduce uncertainty, accelerate decisions. They were – and are – intended to address the largest public possible. And they are at the same time relative : are they really efficient on frauds, are they scrupulously put into practice in all the countries ? Obviously not.

We must then distinguish trademark communications and institutional communications. The second is more often responsible and coherent. On the contrary advertising plays with motivations. For example, a friendly atmosphere may be staged, an advertisement may insist on the values of solidarity if the argument is commercially efficient for public opinion ((Mc Donald's, Segafredo), but can change their arguments tomorrow. Institutional communication may show a certain honesty, searching for values to give meaning to their activity, and will be systematically analysed and criticized by consumer associations and trade unions.

Some characteristics of a publically oriented

Since 2002, French companies (or quoted on the stock exchange in France) owe numerous explanations about their impact on environment. Their sustainable development report is published on the Web. These reports are for the largest public possible, but if the obligation is new, the preoccupation is old. The obligation simply provides an important and consistent source of material for researcher's analysis.

Corporate citizenship as an official line

Traditionally, the company's responsibility is explained as being economical, social and environmental responsibility. It integrates human resources management, women's rights, environmental protection, sustainable development, fair trade, economic solidarity. All these aspects are developed in compulsory reports, as in all sorts of charts.

¹³ Debos, F. « L'impact de la dimension éthique dans la stratégie de communication de l'entreprise : la nécessité d'une communication responsable. » *Communication et organisation*, n° 26, 2005.

The compulsory reports may be analysed from different points of view. In communication science, some people use analysis from Palo Alto : how to characterize the “contents” and the “relation” in these reports ? Does the “message” find an answer ? Does it find only a “reception”¹⁴ ? The reports show informations about companies (contents) and assert their leadership (relationship), both constructing the message. This may be understood in ethical terms : reports begin with assertion of principles then present actions. The principles show the company as a community with a relational posture (effort and self-satisfaction), attempting the right answer from its public: a greatest esteem. In short, to claim responsibility and value is clearly a form of advertising. But are the effects obtained the required ones ?

We can observe corporate citizenship from another angle : the writing of charts, discussion within the company, which provoke a collective debate¹⁵. These debates do not follow the usual paths (especially unions). For example the French “charte de la diversité” (diversity chart) which was signed in 2004 by 35 executive managers and obtained 2000 signatures, was mainly developed by the French Association for Private Companies (Association française des entreprises privées). This chart focuses on the integration in the companies of young people whose parents were not French nationals (Northern or South Africa). The writing, performed only within the association, could be representative of the evolution of social relations in companies. This cooptation-built committee could be considered as in opposition with ethics. Indeed, a chart defines goals, registers common preoccupations. This writing process could be seen as a deterioration of the internal dialog. But at the same time, other circumstances appear, the internal public space is changing.

A third aspect of corporate citizenship is spontaneously invested by communication researchers when they analyse charts : their influence, their normative strength. A Chart promises, and that is a particular communication act, a distinctive speech act. It is like a promise and, as every promise, fragile and unpredictable, according to Paul Ricoeur’s words. Its actors (the corporate “we”) make promises towards persons addressed (State, employees, customers, media) and must act in coherence with the speeches made. They are anyway strictly watched by the persons addressed.

A territorial citizenship

Corporate citizenship is an action, an action in a particular Country or, more precisely, in a territory, in a pre-defined context. What is the best level to assume the confrontation between principles and action ? European regions are a very interesting one for an important reason¹⁶: they are not mini-states and have an international dimension. In Europe, regions are heterogeneous. Some may coincide with a little state, some have extensive prerogatives (Germany), others real autonomy (Italy, Spain). But all correspond to a geographic and economic reality and have a positive representation.

These regions are sometimes formed between two or three Countries, for example the Jura Mountains, the Latin arch, areas along the Mediterranean sea, and so on. The cross-border areas are often the best examples of what make up Europe, because the actors share Universities, Associations, Research Centres and often the same language (as German between Alsace and Germany, Spanish between Spain and the French Basque region, Italian in the Alps...). The efforts in the field of territorial intelligence may be excellent for sustainable development policies, carried by populations and public opinion.

Actions at a local level do not exclude the National one, in Europe like in other Countries, as we can see in Tunisia or Mexico. Mexicans make a great effort to coordinate innovation in Companies, Universities and Associations¹⁷ and the Gafsa University created an observatory of innovation. From this point of view, innovation and technologies are seen as a base for sustainable development politics, a way out of industrial economies.

¹⁴ SCHOTT, A. La communication institutionnelle d’entreprises cotées à l’heure de la responsabilité sociale. Congrès SFSIC, 2008.

¹⁵ HUET, R., LONEUX, C. Les nouvelles questions économiques et sociales à l’épreuve de l’analyse communicationnelle. Congrès SFSIC, 2008.

¹⁶ Dumas, P. “Is Region the most Appropriate Space to Think Sustainable Development ? A framework for research and implementation”. *Proceedings of Alba Julia conference, congrès Caenti*, Alba Julia, Roumanie, 2007.

¹⁷ Yann Bertacchini, Marisela Rodriguez-Salvador, Wahida Souan, « From territorial intelligence to competitive and sustainable system », Territorial intelligence and governance, Second international annual conference of territorial intelligence, Huelva, Spain, 24-27 October 2007.

The will to participate in sustainable development changes our outlook on developing countries¹⁸. Could Southern Countries avoid the industrial development phase ? How to organize production so that the future of our planet may be protected ? The analysis of integration of ICT in differently developed Countries (for example Algeria or Burkina Faso) is very instructive. The economical wage is obvious for little enterprises who are computerizing their accounts, work with partners and reduce their operating costs. It is particularly true in Algeria. But how can African Countries resolve this difficulty : produce with costs linked to the third world with norms of the first one ?

But the technological effort is restrained by several deficiencies. For example, the weakness – sometimes the lack – of national statistics for economical information, legislative gaps, hesitations of the banks, substantial illiteracy, corruption, the absence of projected management. All this handicaps exchanges. In these cases, how to monitor technological development, invest, know a market, innovate, respect governance rules or protect environment?

A corporate citizen could be seen as a preoccupation for rich countries only, a luxury for the Western world companies, sometimes their branches. We can also underline the enforcement of real new types of exchange, like between Western firms and the smallest karite producers in Burkina Faso. It means that "citizenship" in a Western company may be assessed by the exchanged conditions instituted. But which of them and how many of them have an interest in fair trade relations ? The important imbalance between structurally unequal partners is obviously one of the first limits to a citizens will. We can list many others.

The limits of a citizens will

Communication and its practitioners are called upon to strengthen sustainable development projects (defined as a sort of development that does not compromise others generation's ability to satisfy their own needs). As professionals of public opinion, they have to demonstrate their abilities to convince. But sustainable development or corporate citizenship are not objectives : they are tools under the company's orders. Practitioners are best placed to estimate the degree of cynicism and hypocrisy of their task¹⁹...The ambiguousness is the same for the NGO²⁰.

The way forward from principles to real acts

The difficulty of transforming principles into acts is in organizations, but also within consumers responsibility. The will may be there, as demonstrated via the current fashion of ethics courses in business schools. A minimum of coherence is claimed, for example towards banks.²¹ A French study compared the exhibited principles and their concrete acts : what they finance, who they finance, which Companies, with which social policies ? Their degree of risk management, how they assume it. Social and environmental responsibility appears more as a way, an interminable negotiation between firms and consumers, more and more trained consumers, more and more demanding consumers. It is possible, because the evaluation process exists : dashboards, partners involved in the chosen governance, norms observance.

The difficulty is also on the consumer's side. We can take a symmetrical case : a Company claiming to be very sincere in its will for sustainable development, trying to urge its employees to change their transport habits, and giving them theatre sessions with a company called the "Théâtre éco-citoyen" (eco-citizen theatre)²². The theatre is inspired by the model created by Bertold Brecht and Augusto Boal perspective : the audience has to become an actor, may play a part in action, modify the scenario, the theatrical representation is a tool to understand social life and incite to act. The ambiguousness of real behaviour appears immediately. The most motivated people play the game, but the least motivated send back the decision (to the others, the law, a better information...).

¹⁸ Guyot, B. Incidence des technologies sur l'évolution des PME du sud. Colloque de Biskra sur le développement des PME, 2007.

¹⁹ C. Pascual, Développement durable : les SIC pertinentes et sous-estimées. Congrès 2008.

²⁰ Vincent Meyer, Interventions sociales, communication et médias, L'Harmattan, 2004.

²¹ PASCUAL, C. Banques : communication, développement durable et bouleversements organisationnels. Journées Sup de Co, Montpellier, 2008.

²² Debos, F., Lacroix, C., Cyrulnik, N., Cadel, F. L'appropriation de la notion de développement durable par l'intégration du théâtre forum écocitoyen dans la politique de communication interne d'une organisation. Dans *Interagir et transmettre, informer et communiquer : quelles valeurs, quelle valorisation ?* Colloque international franco-tunisien, 2008.

As you know now, ICS monitor all levels of communication. We simply present difficulties between individuals or groups, we shall now see the contribution of our sciences to economical sectors or economical organisation.

The structure of economies may be in contradiction with corporate citizenship

Sustainable development tries to reconcile ecology, economy and social development as well as universal wealth and preserving natural resources. It is an excellent theory, but is it possible ? We can take the example of the “tourism industry” as an economical sector²³. The greatest will in the world clashes with structural difficulties. In particular stock exchange indicators for sustainable development require precise information about Companies’ results. The setting up of the required dashboards, governance and norms observance is easier in the North than in the South. The rules of tourism (interpreting customer’s will) are to provide the attempted picture of a Country, even a caricatured one. Marketing budgets are non-existent in the South. Therefore tourism is organized from the Northern Countries to visit the southern countries, and 30% only is spent in the visited Country. The so named “fair tourism” remains a marginal phenomenon and the effort of Western tourism companies focuses on rare environmental rules, like building ecological new hotels(Accor) or training employees for economies of energy (Scandic). Western companies may make an effort towards sustainable development, but have no interest in practicing fair exchanges. There is no harmony in the different social and ecological obligations for a company. Then companies chose in the range of values they display.

A real “Corporate citizenship” with all its dimensions (to respect employees, subcontractors and customers, to be conscious of the environment, to promote sustainable development, all this in a global context of inequality) could question more than moral convictions. The notion of a « service economy », which indicates practices articulating economical and sustainable development, lay out this problem²⁴. This perspective drives to substitute services to products and renting instead of buying. The shock with industrial logic, obliging a customer to buy, and to buy groups of products or services (often including non-wanted options) is frontal, and the achievement difficult, but we note the emergence of health nets, firms which borrow car tyres or open software, etc.

Conclusion

I have tried to give you a representative picture of our work, but my presentation was linear and does not show our differences. I would like, as a conclusion, to present one of our most living cleavages before the question : is a corporate citizenship credible ? I shall use two main references : the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the French economist François Perroux. In Habermas’ thought, no organisation can fully reach an ethical behaviour, it will always have other ultimate objectives, and these objectives are not in the line with particular ethics. Social or ecological progress will arise from a educated and trained civil society, structured in a democratic public space. Organisations will always defend themselves. Our look at them and their ethical claims is of course suspicious. François Perroux considers that economy and ethics are not opposites. Human violence and the natural human brutality find most probably in the economic world and its structures one of their best opportunity to express themselves. It is particularly true for contemporary capitalism, theorized by econometrical and positivist schools of thought, asserting an absolute auto-regulation that excludes ethical questions. For this school, ethics cannot be something other than cynical practices usable for management. But this predominance is recent and most economical schools integrate ethics in their field of thought and citizenship is not unfamiliar to organisations. They may be something else than a manipulation serving a marketing policy implemented by cynics or unconscious manipulated naïves.

Our first question was: “Is a corporate citizenship credible ?” we can add another one : “Will this expression and these politics persist or will they expire ?” They could certainly expire if, as in all human acts, poor faith and cynicism will exhaust till run out honest actors. And it will certainly happen. The most important is not their duration. What is going on is the possibility quoted by François Perroux : maintaining honesty in all sorts of life situations. And when the “corporate citizen” fashion is over, the deep signification it expresses will find other ways to express themselves.

²³ Debos, F. L’approche et l’intégration du développement durable au sein des stratégies de croissance globale des entreprises : le cas du secteur du tourisme.

²⁴ ZACKLAD, M. L’économie de fonctionnalité encadrée dans la socio-économie des transactions coopératives : dynamique servicielle et fidélisation soutenable. ASIC, 2007.