Guest editor's introduction : action and interaction in political communication

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Action and Interaction in Political Communication

As long as political institutions and political actors have existed, there has been political communication as a means and method to explain and to sell policy and to translate politics. Caesar stood in need of it as well as Frederik II, Robespierre as well as Disraeli; Lenin, Mussolini, de Gaulle and Willy Brandt – politicians of all times and opinions need political communication. But for a long time political communication has not been focussed as a field of scientific research neither by political science nor by communication science scholars. Meanwhile this period is over, and rich research literature can be found in this field, not only in the U.S. and in the U.K., but also in greater Europe and all other parts of the world.

Regarding Switzerland, we find four professorships and four centers of research focussing on political communication: Three of them are at the University of Zurich in the Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research, where are situated firstly the Division Media & Politics (Prof. Otfried Jarren), secondly the Division Public Sphere & Society (Prof. Kurt Imhof) thirdly the Division International and Comparative Media Research (Prof. Frank Esser); and the last is at the University of Berne in the Institute of Communication and Media Studies (Prof. Silke Adam). The scholars in Zurich are involved in the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) "Challenges to Democracy in the 21st century." And the institute in Berne is well situated in the capital of the Swiss Confederation, the center of national government, parliament and administration. Furthermore, there exists a division "Political Communication" (chair: Prof. Marlis Prinzing) in the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SACM).

A panel of this division in 2009 was the starting point for a special section in "Studies in Communication Sciences." In this special section we can present five articles. Four of them deal with subjects of Swiss politics, one with Austrian politics. It is a classical approach to focus on election campaigns. But it is a new approach to connect it with the theory

of communicative action by Juergen Habermas. In this context journalists have the function of being spokespersons of the voiceless mass, to be public agents or discourse advocates. Roland Burkart and Uta Russmann show that in the Austrian election campaign of 2008 journalists express more doubts about the arguments than the political actors, and that journalists of the yellow press generate doubts independently and expressly play communicator roles.

Parliamentary communication behaviour has often been focussed in political communication research. But for the first time we show a comparision of Swiss research results from 1988 with those of 2008. Stephanie Schwab, Patrick Donges and Otfried Jarren illustrate in their article that there is – compared with the earlier research of Ulrich Saxer – more professionalisation and more separation of the roles.

It is a classical subject to analyse the relationship between members of parliament and journalists. But it is new to ask about the relationship between public administrators and journalists. For the first time Marlis Prinzing and the author undertook exactly this, and their results demonstrate that there is a bigger distance between administration and journalists than between members of parliament and journalists. Michel Wenzler attracts notice to a different group: The lobby. He analyses the interaction between political actors, journalists, public relations specialists and lobbyists. He shows the difference of interactions in energy policy and culture policy: In the field of energy policy the interpenetration zone is more intense.

The last article leaves the national floor and focuses on the Swiss cantons. It is the first time that researchers analyse and compare the political communication of all 26 cantons. Sabrina Baumgartner and Patrick Donges show that cantons with strong direct democracy elements combine them with a more strongly developed organisation of government communication.

Roger Blum, Guest Editor of the Thematic Section
Prof. em. Universität Bern
mail@roger-blum.ch