Networks of coproduction. How journalists and NGOs interact during UN climate change conferences

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Based on research jointly conducted with Julia Lück and Antal Wozniak

Paris, July 6, 2015
Research Project “Sustainable Media Events”

production processes

UN climate change conferences

government & NGO PR ↔ journalists

Interviews, observations

discursive effects

media debates

content analysis (frames, stories and images)
HIPS: High-level international political summits as staged media events

Event organizers
- Media strategy
- Global reach

Media
- Non-routine
- Media coverage of civil society actions

Civil society
- Symbolic charge as globally significant step
Journalism – NGO relations

• NGOs struggle to achieve publicity competing against government & business
• NGOs adapt to dominant news norms rather than challenging them (publicity stunts, photo-ops etc.)
• NGOs partly circumvent traditional media through digital channels

(Powers 2015)
Coproduction

• Journalism and NGO public relations mutually enable each other (Intereffication Model, Bentele & Nothaft 2008)
• (Some) journalists and PR professionals temporarily suspend their antagonistic roles
• Non-routine circumstances at the COPs contribute to „camp feeling“ and close interaction (Adolphsen & Lück 2012)
Explaining coproduction: heuristic model

**Professional orientation**
- type of media outlet
  - national outlet
  - transnational outlet
  - business media
- journalistic beat
  - (political) news journalist
  - environmental journalist

**NGO orientation**
- influencing policy/lobbying
- mobilizing support

**Preconditions**
- cognitive
  - perception of own profession’s role
  - perception of other profession’s role
  - expectations of collaboration
  - notion of target audience
- social
  - professional networks
  - media use

**Manifestations**
- behavioral patterns
  - frequency and intimacy of contact
  - actual collaboration
  - presentation strategies and choices
- consonance of interpretations on...
  - relevance of event or issue
  - main story/message
  - perceived level of conflict or agreement
  - issue frames
  - most striking/effective images
Method

- Case studies at the COPs in Cancún (2010), Doha (2012) and Warsaw (2013)

- 105 semi-structured interviews
  - 51 with journalists from national and transnational media
    - most important countries from major continents
    - COP host countries
    - Transnationally recognized key media sources (Reuters, AP, Guardian, CNN, NYT)
  - 28 with public relations professionals from transnational NGOs
  - 26 with national delegations (BRA, DEU, IND, RSA, USA, CHN and host country)
Journalistic beat and ENGO contact

Environmental journalists vs Political or business news

- Close ENGO contacts
- Less or no ENGO contact
4 networks of coproduction at the COPs
Network 1: Transnational media and global ENGOs

- Environmental reporters from transnational media and global ENGO PR specialists focusing on policy and lobbying
- Long-lasting relationships and direct, personal contact
- Similarities in interpretation of the COP between the two groups

- “In some other countries they allow non-profits or students to be part of their delegation and [they] can go inside the closed rooms. A lot of the NGOs, because they work in different countries are very plugged into what ... - you know, say, the Ethiopian delegation is doing a hearing or the Bangladesh delegation, and so we rely a lot on them to tell us, you know, the things that we can’t get into.” (transnational journalist 2)
- “I think for the media, more than just giving them a press release that you want to get covered, it is really that long-term relationship-building with them that matters. You know, that credibility is a big factor.” (ENGO 1)
4 networks of coproduction at the COPs
Network 2: National media and national ENGO branches

- Environmental and political reporters from national media and representatives from local and national ENGO member organizations
- NGOs as information brokers who explain the domestic relevance of COP decisions to journalists to reach broad national audiences
- More formal interaction through press conferences and press releases
- Differences and similarities in interpreting the COP

"On the one hand, you want to have as much public attention as possible to ensure that there is a lot of pressure to get the most ambitious outcomes, that governments really feel that the public is supportive of strong climate action and all these sorts of things." (ENGO 6)
4 networks of coproduction at the COPs
Network 3: International news agencies and ENGOs

- **Political reporters** from news agencies and **global as well as national ENGO communicators**
- NGO positions used to **counter-balance** delegations and industry in wire reports
- More **formal interaction**
- **Less overt** manifestations of **coproduction**, but news agencies do value NGO as sources for images and statements
Network 4: Business media and global ENGOs

- Environmental reporters for business media and global ENGO communicators
- More specialized target audience
- Close and trustful relationship
- NGOs provide expertise with a spin
- Mostly similarities in interpretation
Journalists with little NGO connections

• **Diverse group** with different audiences and role perceptions
• **Focused on** first-hand information from **delegations**
• **Greater suspicion** toward NGO spin

• “To be frank, I don’t find the NGOs that helpful at these meetings. [...] Frankly, they come here to see each other and to try and get quoted in newspapers. It’s the delegates even more than their press people that I find most useful. [The delegation press officer from the home country] will sometimes talk with a small group of reporters on background, about what’s really going on.” (news journalist 3)
• Many journalists and ENGO communicators belong to the same „interpretive community“ (see Brüggemann & Engesser 2014)

• Journalists‘ professional contact with ENGOs varies with their respective audience orientation and role understanding
  – Transnational environmental journalists: long-term trustful relationships, informal contact
  – National journalists: more formal, short-term contact
  – News agency reporters: situational contact
  – Business reporters: trustful relationship with individual NGO specialists
Conclusion (2)

• ENGOs: strategic orientations determine mode of coproduction:
  – Mobilizing strategy: aimed at setting the media agenda and providing media imagery
  – Lobbying strategy: expert communication toward specialized journalists and national delegations

• Next steps:
  – Bringing delegations into the picture
  – Survey among all journalists and PR specialists at COP 21 in Paris
Thank you for your attention!

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