Far-reaching changes in communication patterns in modern societies have created new structural transformations of the public sphere. Most visibly, the emergence of social media is constantly altering modes of opinion formation amongst the public (Rasmussen, 2009; Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, this volume). Less visible but hardly less significant is the emergence of professionalized, strategic communication. The phenomenon is ubiquitous and far from new, but it has seen an explosive growth all over the Western world. The present discussion is focused on the Nordic neo-corporatist model, with Norway as the prime example. A simple indicator of the increase in professional communication is the number of information officers in the Norwegian civil service, which has tripled since 1995. Similar growth has taken place in the private sector. At the same time, the number of journalists has been declining since 2010; therefore, the balance between journalism and strategic communication is being altered.

It is a common complaint that strategic communication is basically distorted by special interests, leading to manipulation of the public. This was forcefully expressed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he denounced the public relations (PR) industry along with the advertising business ([1962] 1989, p. 193ff). Habermas’ concerns have been repeated on a broad scale, ranging from academics (e.g. Allern, 2001; Callahan & Schnell, 2001; Davis, 2003) to official reports (Difi, 2011) to the hilarious comedy film *Wag the Dog* (Levinson, 1997). However, the opposite case can also be made: The enormous broadening of communication patterns in modern society, paired with the professional ethos of PR communicators (Grunig, 2011) have made citizens better informed and thus better able to make rational decisions on their own behalf. At the same time, professional communication must have strategic elements in order to reach its target groups. In this view, strategic communication contributes to broadening democracy.

Which of these descriptions is the most valid? Democracy is a many-splendored thing; therefore, the question must be narrowed down and contextualized. Moreover, effects on democracy can hardly be assessed on a purely empirical basis but require discussion of relevant institutions and mechanisms and their preconditions. This means on the one hand specifying relevant actor groups and how their interests are structured and on the other hand the normative regulations and the norm conflicts that they encounter. Only then is it possible to draw inferences about the effects on democracy.

The theory – or rather theories – of the public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas is the natural point of departure for this discussion. By its combination of empirical and normative analysis, Habermas’ theory of the public sphere is the most ambitious endeavor up to now. Since the original publication of *Structural Transformation,*
Habermas has rephrased and revised his theory in several steps. In the following, the main focus will be on Habermas’ normative conception of the public sphere but with explicit reference to empirical descriptions of the field of strategic communication (also discussed in Engelstad, 2015). Is the theory of communicative rationality sufficient, or should it be complemented by other conceptions? The analysis proceeds in three steps: (i) a brief discussion of the Habermasian theory of the public sphere and of communicative rationality, (ii) empirical examples based on interviews with PR consultants and some of their counterparts and (iii) reflections on professional ethics.

7.1 Dynamic Elements of Change

The growth in strategic communication is to a large extent created by the interaction between at least four salient groups: citizens as public, the news media, enterprises and bureaucracies and political actors. (i) **Citizens.** To a much greater extent than only a few decades ago, most people insist on being informed about issues concerning their daily lives, interests and rights. The extension of claims to information in the Norwegian Patient Rights Act provides an example. A contrast to the present situation is the quality of the information from governmental agencies in the mid-1980s about the effects of the Chernobyl incident. Flagrantly inadequate and even partly misleading, this mode of information is deemed unacceptable today (NOU 1986:24). (ii) **The media** have changed radically during the last decades (Eide 1984, 2002). Shortly after 1970, the Norwegian press loosened its ties to political parties and ideologies and redefined its mission as critical vis-à-vis powerful instances of all kinds. The result was greater independence and growth in investigative, even aggressive, journalism. (iii) **Large enterprises** encounter growing pressures regarding their contributions to corporate social responsibility and therefore their legitimacy (Ihlen, 2013; Barland, 2014). They need to explain and defend their dispositions and inform about future activities. In part, this is a reflection of the more critical press. Furthermore, many enterprises are spending significant resources on branding themselves as responsible social actors. The perceived need to improve the public image is copied from the private sector to the public sector (Wæraas, Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2011). (iv) **Political decision making** has become more complex due to technical issues, international trade cycles and transnational agreements and conventions (Østerud, Engelstad & Selle, 2003). This creates a need for popularization and simplification vis-à-vis the public. When political parties struggle over voter support, it is no longer sufficient that prominent politicians stage their own charisma to appeal to the public.

These groups have in common not only that their interaction contributes to the growth of professionalized communication but also that it is linked to a set of democratic justifications: Citizens demand information. The news media is critical to power holders. Large organizations in the private and public sectors increase their informa-
Politicians seek closer contact with their electorate to explain their policies. It is difficult to imagine pertinent improvements to democracy without such processes. More and better information also implies that communication has a strategic element. Yet, whether potentials for broadening democracy are fulfilled remains an open question. Strategic communication may undermine democratic deliberation in the public by the manipulation and distortion of facts. It follows that the net effects on the quality of democracy remain uncertain.

7.2 Habermas on the Public Sphere

The crucial idea in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is the conception of the public sphere as a social field in its own right and not only as an appendix to politics. The public sphere is ascribed a double meaning, as a meeting place for enlightened discussion among citizens and as a channel for opinions and interest articulation vis-à-vis the government. Conversation unrestricted by convention and censorship pointed towards social arrangements based in reason and common interests. After the early enlightenment stage, the public sphere underwent drastic changes from the mid-nineteenth century, according to Habermas. The press became commercialized in a strong sense. Distinctions cherished by early liberal thinking between private and public and between economy and politics became blurred. At the same time, corporatist relationships emerged based on cooperation between interest organizations, along with increased state governance of the economy. The result was characterized by Habermas as a ref feudalization of the public sphere, whereby free deliberation between citizens was replaced by bargaining and alliances among the top leadership in the core social sectors.

During the 1970s, Habermas made a decisive break with the early Frankfurt School, replacing their historical–critical approach with an explicit normative theory founded on basic social community anchored in communication (Introduction, this volume). In the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, p. 99), Habermas set up three criteria for communication to be rational: actors should be able to justify that their utterances (a) live up to claims of truth, (b) are set forth with a sincere intention and (c) are compatible with general norms. These theoretical claims led to a partial revision of the theory of the public sphere based on normative structures of everyday patterns of communication and the requirements they demand of the participants.

A decade later, in *Between Facts and Norms* ([1992] 1994), Habermas’ new conception was applied to a broad reinterpretation of political institutions in modern society. The increasing complexity and therefore the fragmentation of the public sphere as a ‘very complex network stretching out to a large number of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arenas’ was acknowledged (Habermas, 1996, p. 373). In a modern society, the mass media does not constitute a
threat to a well-functioning public sphere but rather constitutes a precondition for its functionality. However, the broader the public of the mass media, the more abstract it is (ibid.). What counts is what everyone is able to recognize and identify with.

In the 2000s, Habermas returned anew to the role of the mass media in the public sphere, arguing for the direct relevance of the three claims of communicative rationality against possible objections that his theory is too general for practical application in a modern democratic society (Habermas 2006, 2009). As a point of departure, he used empirical studies confirming that the standards of communicative rationality are effective in interaction at the group level and argued that they may be applied as a critical standard to the public sphere, even if there is a great distance between small groups and the macro structures of the public sphere.

Whereas commercialized mass media was regarded as a problem in Structural Transformation, Habermas now explicitly underlined its central position in a modern democracy. Does this simply mean that he had given up his earlier critical perspective? The answer is not obvious. His former criticism of modern media focused mainly on the pressures from external interests on the press, in combination with the dependence on advertising: The ‘transformation of the public sphere into a medium of advertising was met halfway by the commercialization of the press’ (1989, p. 189). Thirty years later, he acknowledges that the media can be more autonomous in regard to external pressures. Relatively recent changes in the Norwegian press, referred to above, are a good example. However, commercialization has an additional dimension. The need to secure income by selling newspapers to the public influences the way that news is selected and shaped. This aspect, however, remains in the background.

The media is also a significant power holder. In line with standard media research, Habermas points to three forms of media power – influence over the agenda, selection of subjects and the angle of presentation. Even if the media is necessarily exerting power, he assumes that power is neutralized if two conditions are fulfilled: ‘... journalists operate within the guidelines of the public task of a “free” press and of an “independent”’ media system, as laid down by the constitution’ (2009, p. 169), while at the same time citizens have the possibility of participating in the public formation of opinion (2009, p. 171). As long as the media has editorial independence from owner interests, like all others its power will be mitigated by the rules of the game of the public sphere.

These underlying ‘rules of the game’ are shaped by the three criteria of communicative rationality. Utterances in the public sphere are exposed to criticism from different parties and are judged against general norms of objectivity in public debate. Thanks to the ‘force (Kraft) of the better argument’, the public sphere has a purifying effect on the argumentation. Even if lobbyists, spokespersons, advocates and experts have strategic interests in the public sphere, strategic communication from powerful actors is bound to be measured up against norms of communication (Habermas 2009, p. 161). ‘And once the established rules constitute the right game – one that promises the generation of considered public opinions – then even the powerful actors will
only contribute to the mobilization of relevant issues, facts, and arguments’ (Habermas 2006, p. 420).

Even though Habermas has developed a more realistic image of political and communicative processes than that in *Structural Transformation*, his new conception invites discussion. The most important to be treated here is the applicability of the norms of communicative action to fields where strategic communication is dominant. With Habermas’ turn to the theory of communicative rationality, several of the constituent traits of the modern media were relegated to the background. Interpretation in the light of institutional theory pointing to the multiplicity of regulations and roles would have made them more visible. The media consists of necessarily commercial actors whether or not they are independent of the economic interests of their owners, something that systematically guides conceptions of ‘news’. The professional journalistic gaze is used to prioritize information that is selective, simplified and saleable.

Communication in the public sphere differs markedly from an ideal speech situation. Relevant roles are embedded in strategy and power. Rhetorical techniques are unavoidable for arguments to be accepted; they must be presented in a way that makes them recognizable and understandable for a large and heterogeneous public. Professionalized roles with their specific norms and strategies have developed alongside professional communication, both in independent agencies and in communication departments, and they obviously are not independent of employers. It follows that not only have journalists and communicators opposite interests, but their role relations imply that conflict is institutionalized.

When Habermas denounces this as a serious problem, a core assumption is that his three criteria based on communicative rationality may be generalized and transferred into an institutionalized arena such as the public sphere. But this is in no way a given. In this connection, a serious question is raised regarding Habermas’ criterion of truthfulness. Intuitively, truthfulness implies enlightenment regarding all relevant aspects of a given issue. But in cases where strategic considerations become decisive, specific role demands become dominant for politicians and professional communicators, just as they do for journalists. An ideal norm of truthfulness becomes impractical if it cannot grasp these features. This spills over on claims on truth. If truth is conceived as more than a collection of isolated facts, it demands interpretation, and thus the space for negotiation is opened.

### 7.3 Empirical Specification

The differentiation of what was once conceived as one original public sphere into a mosaic of sub-institutions pointed out by Habermas (1996) and by many of his critics (e.g. Negt & Kluge, 1993 [1972]; Fraser, 1992) means that the relevant set of actor groups is widened. Communication flows in many directions, not only from citizens
Citizens: Flows of Communication

to political authorities but between state agencies, interest groups, large economic enterprises and the public. Therefore, communication flows become impure, simultaneously embracing a multiplicity of topics and actor groups.

In the following, ambiguities in professional communication are described via excerpts from a set of in-depth interviews with Norwegian top-level professional communicators in the private and public sectors, as well as with high-level civil servants. In addition to their present professional position, the majority of the interviewees have had long experience in various positions in the public sphere as journalists or in related occupations. The interviews were conducted in 2012–2013 in cooperation with Trygve Gulbrandsen and Ingvil Eriksen (see also Engelstad, 2015). The informants are identified by the letters A to N and their organizations by double letters (AA, etc.). The exposition follows the four groups distinguished above, with a main focus on strategic communication in lobbying and political marketing.

7.4 Citizens: Flows of Communication

In a modern society with a comprehensive welfare state and increasing citizen rights, political governance presupposes active participation of citizens when policies are implemented. Local and national governments are dependent on private actors presenting information they control, in order to set up political regulation. A simple example is setting limitations on \( \text{CO}_2 \) emissions, whereby the government has to rely on information from relevant enterprises in order to have a realistic picture of what the problem looks like (Skodvin & Gullberg, 2011). A former communication director in the civil service follows up: ‘The presence of communication officers in government is a clear advantage. External focus is strengthened and citizens understand more.’ Citizens for their part have become much more vociferous in their demands for information from government and enterprises ranging from tax authorities and transportation services to social security and health care (Andreassen & Skjøld Johansen, 2003). Increasing demand for information also raises expectations concerning the quality of the information presented to the public.

Likewise, private sector enterprises are dependent on the exchange of information with citizens. One field in which the demand for information has increased significantly is crisis handling; this is particularly true vis-à-vis the public as customers and consumers. All organizations are faced with crises from time to time – enterprises and hospitals and political parties. In large enterprises, it has become commonplace that crises must be handled professionally, as outcomes are always unpredictable. This also opens power struggles between the media and communicators regarding how the problem is to be defined.

An often cited concern in early Habermas is that modern communication patterns reduce the public to passive consumers (1989, p. 159ff). These examples point
in a different direction. Increased communication makes it possible for users to be active and to demand more and better information. Another contrast to the early bourgeois public sphere is that its emphasis on open conversation had as its counterpart a closed and autocratic state administration. In modern society, this is replaced by active information provided to citizens by the state or by enterprises.

Even if this means that democracy is widened, the picture remains somewhat ambiguous. Organizations have an interest in defending their reputations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The professionalization of communication also means the professionalization of biased and misleading information. Struggles over definitions of situation, what is ‘really going on’, will never cease, even when confronted with the norms of objectivity underlined by the later Habermas.

7.5 Ambiguities of Media Pressure

‘I believe the single factor for us politicians that has changed most during the years I have been active in politics is the relationship to the media,’ former prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik (2002) observed early in the 2000s. With the transformation of the press from its predominant party affiliation to a position as critic of social and political power holders in society (Eide, 1984, 2002), investigative journalism became dominant. This creates a pressure on both enterprises and civil service – both targets of investigating journalism – and increased consciousness about the need to professionalize information functions. At the same time, professional culture gives journalists a basis for hunting in bands. The head of the communication department in a directorate puts it like this:

When you stand in the middle of the storm you have to be alert all the time. You have to be good at giving good advice. ... You have no idea what this is about before you have experienced 60 journalists on the phone before nine o’clock (F).

Media and communication officers remain in a constant competitive relationship despite and because of their common professional background. In many ways, the two groups have similar frames of understanding and use the same techniques of presentation – selective exposition, positive and negative loading and struggling over the agenda. Among journalists, the competitive relationship leads to considerable scepticism vis-à-vis communication officers, illustrated by a survey by the Oslo chapter of the Norwegian Communication Association (2010). According to the survey, 69 per cent of journalists expressed low trust in communication officers in the private sector. The figure was slightly higher as regards the public sector (Opinion/Nordstat, 2010).

To some extent, this may be compensated by a mode of checks and balances between the media and powerful organizations. At the same time, the relationship between the media and the communicators is messy; common interests are also
present, further elaborated below. Many communication officers are former journalists; they know each other, can use the other party for their own purposes and know the limitations of their counterpart. Even if their roles are different, the head of communication department E wants to maintain a trusting relationship with journalists, like most people in similar positions. Therefore, a special mix of trust and distrust emerges. Asked about how confidence is built, he replies:

By consistently acting fairly, telling what you can, and saying why you can’t tell, and not being too pedantic about how journalists are expected to work. (E)

Institutionalizing checks and balances, which at the outset is problematic, becomes even more difficult if the division between the two roles becomes vague and difficult to grasp.

### 7.6 Lobbying: Tactics, Rhetoric, Reputation

Large organizations in many ways behave as political actors. They have an interest in influencing the environment within which they operate. A characteristic trait in the Norwegian neo-corporatist system is that business and interest organizations exert influence by participating in public fact-finding missions and advisory committees. At the same time, the significance of lobbying has increased considerably during the last decades. Most descriptions of lobbyism have focused on direct contacts with decision makers (Gulbrandsen et al., 2002; Gullberg & Helland, 2003). However, the effects of such contacts also depend on the argumentation and debates going on in parallel in the media. To achieve strategic influence, enterprises and organizations must behave and be perceived not only as strategic; they must be seen as responsible and legitimate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Merkelsen 2013). Their presence in the media and in public debate confirms organizations as serious, as it does when they act according to self-interest. Lobbying is most efficient when it occurs in interplay with the media. Media coverage affects general perceptions of what is important and relevant and of which problems require a solution.

The DD Association is a large professional organization with strong interests in political decisions within its field. Asked whether she is involved in lobbying politicians, the head of the communication department replies:

No, not as much as people assume. We don’t have much contact with Parliament but mostly with ministries and directorates. (D)

This does not mean that targeting political decision makers is of little relevance. Contact with ministries and directorates is mostly about minor issues and details, problems that can be solved backstage. When larger issues are on the agenda, they
are lifted up to the political level and channelled through the media. This challenge D, a former journalist, knows how to tackle.

My strength is mostly on the tactical level. We work together on the basis of common experiences, and I come in with knowledge of how media are working. And of course, about openness – how far you can go. (D)

The rhetorical quality of messages, how they are shaped and emitted, must of course be credible. However, for a large organization such as the DD Association tactical aspects are at least as important. In order to function in the public sphere, the message must be presented at the right time and place. What garners the most attention? Should the chairperson of the association appear on television, or will sending other representatives, such as shop stewards at a lower level, have a better effect?

The Head of Communication E is operating in a broader field, but he makes a similar point: ‘We are doing a lot of lobbying vis-à-vis politicians, ministries, or the Financial Supervisory Authority,’ but indirect strategies are often more efficient than direct contact with decision makers, even if the former does not preclude the latter. It is important to be present in as many channels as possible and exploit the possibilities for alliances inside and outside the communication industry. ‘We try to engage large customers, offshore companies, etc. If you don’t have any friends it’s difficult to achieve influence’, E says, and alliances may well include the opposition parties in parliament (see also Gullberg & Helland, 2003).

Equally important is to exploit the professional fellowship with journalists and to understand what they want in order to convince.

We go out to scold the authorities in newspapers DN and Finansavisen ... We are working continuously with journalists in order to try to convince them about the effects of irrational regulations. (E)

Communicators and journalists also have common interests in what is interesting news to the media. What is described here need not be seen as manipulation; the strategy is fully compatible with openness about the desirability of change in policy frameworks. ‘It’s important to make our PR instruments visible, that’s the challenge in the struggle for better [political] regulations’ (E). Results are not achieved in secret but by placing information where it is most efficient. Here, another aspect of the ambiguous interplay between communication officers and the media comes to the fore.

7.7 Civil Service and Politics: Information, Initiative, Reputation

In his observations on the pressures from the media on politics, former Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik added that the flow used to run not only from media to politics
but also the other way. But ‘as the press hardly reports any more from Parliamentary debates, requirements of active “sales work” have increased enormously, in order to reach out with political standpoints’ (Bondevik, 2002).

Changes in the direction of sales work are also noticeable in the civil service. Section leader M, from a ministry with high media exposure, points out that communication is easily perverted by goal displacement:

The message from the top is that the more media exposure, the better. The communication department is working closely with the politicians, and they expect things to happen quickly. Large fact-finding missions suffer... they become fictitious processes; the main thing is to build argumentation that is ideologically acceptable. (M)

Increased communication influences not only regular working processes but also the tasks themselves, what may be termed issue displacement. Issues that are easily presented to the public are prioritized, whereas difficult and complex matters with low public appeal are pushed into the background. Policy information potentially becomes policy development (Difi, 2011).

Paradoxically, the civil service is adopting communication techniques from the private sector, even though the public sector is not exposed to market competition (Wæraas et al., 2011). With intensified communication flows from the ministry, politics to an increasing extent includes building the image of political personalities. When the minister has a main focus on public visibility, the distinction between professional tasks and politics is weakened, M points out. However, the Secretary General of the NN ministry is less reserved. Making the minister visible in the public realm serves as a sign that the ministry achieves its goals (N). As such, it may be seen as a democratic quality. But with increasing focus on personalities in politics, the divisions between civil service and politics also become more unclear; an unintended consequence is that borders between political roles in ministries and parties become more diffuse. Therefore, ministerial communication departments are drawn into power struggles in party politics, M maintains.

7.8 Politics for Sale?

Lobby activities that originated in the private sector have recently had contagious effects on the public sector. There is no trace of federalism in Norwegian constitutional practice; counties and municipalities are subordinate to the state. Nevertheless, the last years have seen several striking examples of local politicians seeking assistance from communication agencies to strengthen their position in political planning processes at the national level. Transportation policy is a field where national and regional interests are prone to collide. In a well-organized stunt which engaged the national press as willing observers, 50 mayors in Eastern Norway together boarded
the train to Oslo to focus attention on their demand for double track railways in their region (Aftenposten 15.10.2012). Likewise, by engaging a prominent communication agency the small municipality of Vik achieved a privileged position in the National Transportation Plan when it was adopted by parliament (NRK Brennpunkt 3.9.2013).

Political initiatives via communication agencies may also originate in the population and among social movements. The agency HH Communication regards this as one of its tasks, among other things, to organize communicative ‘events’, which are quite similar to social movement demonstrations. Communication is not limited to the identification of target groups but engages persons and groups who are committed and have direct interests in a given political issue. The head of HH agency explains:

What we do now is to create a method to map people’s commitment and underlying driving forces. We try to draw a link back to the customers we are working for, and find the point that triggers commitment. ... The conception must be robust and be adaptable to different arenas, whether digital, or TV or press, or open meetings. (H)

Drawing a parallel between a communication agency and a social movement may seem strange. However, HH Agency has engaged in demonstrations that just as well could be adopted by ‘progressive’ action groups. One example is the building of a group of stakeholders to lobby for expensive measures of freeway security; another is the establishment of a broad alliance aiming at reductions in energy consumption in the office buildings of large enterprises. Both issues could have been launched by idealists; here, it happened on a commercial basis. The examples pinpoint the ambiguity of professional communication, even if the pecuniary aspect is quite modest. H underlines that the agency is playing with open cards, that the commercial profit is very modest and that above all the success of such actions is dependent on trust among participants as well as from outside observers.

This is not about cheating, but that one has an issue which is important, and that one wishes to present to politicians – then it becomes a matter of getting access, not of packaging the message. Politicians have their own communication officers, and they know this just as well as external actors. (H)

It is easy to draw a line here to Structural Transformation (1989, p. 181ff) and point out that even political activism has become a commodity in the market. Yet, the examples cited may signify both negative and positive consequences for democracy. At the same time, they demonstrate that professional communication potentially reaches all groups and all levels in political processes.
7.9 A Model of Contradictory Relations

The examples in the foregoing sections amply demonstrate that strategic communication in the public sphere, despite a high degree of rationality in many respects, is imbued with ambiguities and lack of transparency. This is not because actors do not live up to their professional obligations but on the contrary because they do. That is not necessarily an argument against the theory of communicative rationality but an argument for introducing complementary perspectives. One alternative to be explored below is the conception of contradictory relations in communication.

There is a long tradition for understanding professional communication as adversarial activity (Barney & Black 1994), justified by the conception of modern capitalist society as an adversarial society and a liberal interpretation of the freedom of expression. The point was clearly stated by one of the informants, the head of the communication department in a large enterprise.

We make continuous tactical evaluations. This is parallel to what lawyers do in the courtroom: emphasize what is to our advantage. (E)

In courts, contradictory viewpoints and conflicting definitions of situations constitute a salient part of the roles as prosecutor and defence attorney. At best, what emerges from this exchange are assumptions, facts, fragments of truth. Truth in the extensive sense of full coverage of a given issue is out of reach. In the courtroom, the prosecutor and the defence attorney have a disinterested aspiration to win the case, but they also have a professional self-interest in the result. This may seem cynical, but admittedly it is the best that can be achieved.

Likewise, in the public sphere communication from important social actors purposely is one-sided, as when describing actual facts. The task of critical media is to test the credibility in the flow of information and argumentation from powerful social actors. But one-sidedness is equally true for the media and their mode of operation, as it is for lawyers. The understanding of the news value of an issue in the media and the way they angle conflict and select elements that turn the issue in a given direction is no less coloured by self-interest (Bjurstrøm, 2013). In addition to their professional drive, the media investigates in order to sell newspapers and if possible to increase their market share of readers, listeners and viewers.

Communicators, however, must balance truthfulness with the interests of the employers they represent. Referring to Frank Deaver (1990), Barney & Black (1994) distinguish four levels of truth/untruth below the normative adherence to truthfulness: (i) truth telling as a matter of convenience, (ii) persuading by selective information, (iii) non-truth without intent to deceive and (iv) intentional deception. Deception may be white lies justified by an acceptable purpose or blatant lies.
In Deaver’s model, the parameters of public relations ethics lies [sic] below the first group of fact
tellers but somewhere along the continuum that accepts selective, persuasive techniques, but
would require extraordinary justification for using outright deceit (Barney & Black, 1994, p. 245).

The difficult balance between truthfulness and employer interests has been debated
for a long time in PR literature. A classical contribution is Grunig’s conception of PR,
when at its best, as two-way symmetrical communication between enterprises and
their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), even if this ideal is difficult to realize in practice.
Pietzka (2011) argues for a dialogical conception of PR as an alternative to a domi-
nant practice of advocacy, whereas Ihlen & Haugen (2009) raise a general critique of
the parallel between communicators and lawyers. With a broader theoretical bent,
Leeper (1996) points to a parallel between Grunig’s conception and Habermas’ theory
of discourse ethics. Jensen (2001) and Meisenbach (2006) turn Habermasian discurs-
ive ethics into a normative framework for PR. Finally, a related approach springs out
of corporate social responsibility (Ihlen, Bartlett & May, 2011). Common to these con-
tributions is that they take a general viewpoint. Deviances from norms are not denied
but without confronting the ambiguities and actual norm conflicts that unavoidably
emerge in the practice of PR. Below, challenges to a dialogical model created by con-
flicting interests will be illustrated by a few cases.

7.10 The Problematic Openness

If opposite strategic interest is a source of conflict between journalists and communi-
ciators, it also stretches into their different understanding of truthfulness and truth.
Both groups hold openness and transparency as basic values in their professional
activity, and there is no reason to doubt their sincerity. ‘The presence of communi-
cation officers in the public sector represents a step forward’ says former communi-
cation director C; ‘external responsibility is increased, and citizens’ understanding
is improved.’ Openness also serves employer interests and may even yield strategic
advantages. In the words of communication director E,

If a journalist catches me lying, I’m finished; my main asset is trust. [...] We do not operate under-
cover, as the RR Association often does. We go out in the press and make it clear that we’re taking
a fight. (E)

Nevertheless, ambiguity is close at hand. Given the unavoidable limits to liberty of
expression, openness can never be absolute. The communications director of the
large AA municipality puts it this way:

Openness is our mantra. [...] One does not have to tell everything, but we must not disguise the
facts. (A)
Even if limitations on openness need not imply ethical problems or conflicts between the media and communications departments, these statements invite reflection. In the two following cases, conflict comes out neatly. The first has to do with the CEO of a financial enterprise who was publicly suspected of irregularities. Openness was then no more the guideline of the communication department.

The CEO was made inaccessible; it would have been unwise to be open then. We went in with anti-tank defence, and closed all openings. No, no openness in that situation. But as an organization the main rule is that openness is important to us. (E)

Does this describe the distortion of truthfulness to the point of concealing the truth or just a well-founded attempt at shielding the CEO from being the victim of the predatory press? Here, the roles of defendant and attorney become obvious. Journalists and communicators are prone to interpret the situation very differently and act on that basis, with the possible consequence that the facts of the matter will not be disclosed to the public.

An even stronger norm conflict is the following: A company with international branches was accused of price cooperation. However, the formal sanctions vary considerably across countries. This situation put the communication department in a painful position:

In Norway the right strategy would have been simply to pledge guilty. But the implication of this strategy would have been being put in jail in the United States, penalties of many millions, and embargo on doing business in the US. (B)

Here is a normative conflict of a different kind, one concerning whether Norwegian or American legislation should have priority, given the obligations and burdens on the involved parties in the two countries. The communication department in this case chose silence. Their choice may seem obvious given the extremity of the possible reactions. Regarded from the side of the media, this would in most cases be interpreted as pure opportunism and be reported even if the practical consequences might seriously hit innocent people connected to the enterprise.

7.11 A Farewell to Normative Theory?

Cynical as they may seem, citing such examples does not signify a farewell to normative considerations and normative theory. Actors in the court are subject to the specific ethics of their profession. The same is true for communicators and journalists. In practice, norms vary both in their subject matter and in preciseness, but there is no reason to assume that they are void. What is at stake is not so much whether professional ethics in communication can be justified along the same lines as those
of lawyers in a court case (Ihlen & Haugen, 2009) but that the contradictory model reflects actual practices stabilized by institutional regulations.

Surprisingly, Habermas does not mention professional ethics in his discussion of modern media (2006, 2009). Instead, he goes directly to the theory of communicative rationality for a normative framework. Likewise, Leeper (1996) and Meisenbach (2006) operationalize discourse ethics directly into ethical codes of conduct. But this theory is too general to be of relevance to professional actors in the public sphere. Both in terms of scope and normative content, salient differences exist between general ethical theories and professional ethics. In their ethical considerations, actors refer to norms and practices established in their professions. Professionals may even be expected to perform actions that otherwise are forbidden, such as performing surgery on other people (Barney & Black, 1994; Grimén, 2006).

This is not to discard the value of the theory of communicative rationality but rather to locate it more precisely in the landscape of institutional structures, supported by reflections on professional ethics. A felicitous example of such a constellation is the direct inspiration of Habermas’ theory in relation to the amendment to the Norwegian Constitution of Article 100 on freedom of expression (NOU 1999: 27; Kalleberg, 2014). In that case, the theory and its application are on the same level of generality, at a distance from the specific workings of professions and social institutions. At the same time, the general theory is at odds with institutional structures where actors are guided by specific roles, and filling these roles implies very specific and limited obligations. Professional ethics consist of institutionalized norms reflecting the commitments of professionals to their clients and dynamic processes of interpretation linked to these arrangements.

In this context, the theory of communicative rationality serves better as a metatheory. Without confounding the theories of Habermas and John Rawls (Pedersen, 2012), a parallel may be drawn to the two-step procedure where Rawls (1970) distinguishes between a basic principle of equal liberty and a secondary principle of difference. In that case, informed by its principles, actors come together and discuss what a professional code of ethics should look like. Here, general rules for deliberation apply, such as (i) norms of free speech and open discussion, virtually without limits; (ii) participants have a good society as a common goal and (iii) actors do not represent specific interests but deliberate about the social good based on general conceptions. In the case of professional ethics in the public sphere, they have to consider general values of openness and truthfulness. Then they must balance these with the legitimate interests of clients, be they linked to social rights, privacy or special goals and strategies. For instance, the value of openness stands in contrast to the protection of anonymous sources in the media and to business strategies of enterprises. How limited can information become without being unacceptably distorted? How are the interests of third parties balanced against the interests of clients or the public? Out of such deliberations, professional codes of conduct are institutionalized.
Core Elements in Professional Ethics

Professions, as discussed here, are conceived more broadly than the ‘old’ professions of medicine or law, informed by broad academic traditions. But they are more restricted than occupational groups in general; they must employ specific knowledge and be organized in some sort of common association able to express professional standards recognized by a large majority of practitioners (Grimen, 2006). A common characteristic of professions is that they have a principal–agent structure (Arrow, 1985; Petersen, 1993). Professionals are the agents of their clients or principals; even though they are supposed to be the servants of their clients, their special body of knowledge enables them to know what is in the ‘best interests’ of their principals.

If professional ethics are well-developed, they are institutionalized with four formal elements: (i) general statements of the value of the profession, (ii) a specified code of conduct, (iii) one or more bodies of control and (iv) a system of sanctions. As institutions also have informal, cultural components, the formal elements must be complemented by normative reflection. A code of conduct is necessarily formulated in general terms and must be interpreted with considerable discretion. Moreover, the values of the profession involve obligations to third parties and to society at large. This means that professions potentially must handle norm conflicts in the relationship between their principals and society at large.

Given that the professions differ in their objectives and in their obligations, their professional ethics are differently specified. In the case of journalists and communication consultants, both are strategic in the sense that they aim at formulating messages in order to achieve maximal effects, in the former case by presenting ‘news’ of a broad appeal and in the latter by shaping formulations that explain their intentions and actions and further their best interests. In the news media, as a general rule, the formalization of professional ethics is elaborate, and in the Nordic region this is especially so (Engelstad, Larsen & Rogstad, this volume). In Denmark, media ethics are anchored in legislation, whereas in Norway they are handled by an umbrella organization comprising the national associations of journalists, of editors and of media enterprises (Norsk presseforbund). Both the code of conduct (Vær varsom-plakaten) and the sanction system (Pressens faglige utvalg) are administered by the umbrella organization, something that guarantees compliance by all actors and legitimacy in the public. The code of conduct is quite precise in its orientation to third parties, that is, people who are interviewed or mentioned in news stories, while questions about the social relevance of news production remain unspecific.

A few peculiarities should be noted here. The news media does not have a clearly specified principal; the principal could be said to be society at large, readers/viewers or the newspaper/media company. This equivocality yields a high degree of professional autonomy, allowing the profession to a large extent to define its own premises. Accordingly, tensions between the principal and society become vague; after all, which are the relevant instances and considerations to be taken into account?
account? This is relevant for the selection of and angling of news; issue displacement often occurs as a by-product, as a move from a given political problem to the actors’ ability to cope with the ‘media logic’. Moreover, the strong position of the code of conduct invites the unintended consequence of making journalists ‘work strictly by the book’, whereby the space for ethical reflection is unintentionally overshadowed by formal rules.

Take then the case of communicators. The question arises whether they should be regarded as a profession (Gulbrandsen & Eriksen, 2014), despite broad attempts at professionalization, mainly in the US (Grunig, 2011; Pietzca & L’Etang, 2001). On the Norwegian scene, they fulfil the criteria mentioned above, even though the group is still at a relatively low level of institutionalization. The authority of professional associations of communication is moderate, and even if codes of conduct do exist, they are quite unspecific, while systems of control and sanctions are virtually absent. However, this does not preclude relatively intense normative discussion in the profession, as indicated above. But irrespective of whether the contributions side with the adversarial model or a dialogue model, they are limited to the organizational level; they are directed to the enterprise and not the profession. In contrast to the situation in the media, there is no instance that can bind the profession as a whole, whether by an overarching professional organization or by legislation. Even if codes of conduct reflect good, albeit vague, intentions (for Norwegian codes of conduct, see: KOMM, 2016; Kommunikasjonsforeningen, 2016), ethical reflection in the profession remains individualized. At the same time, the presence of principals, be they employers or customers, is constant. This makes it difficult to avoid the fact that the tension between powerful principals and society is tilted to the advantage of the principal.

Therefore, the relationship between the media and professional communication is not only dominated by diverging interests but also by significant differences when it comes to professional ethics. The media has a strong formalized apparatus but relatively weak traditions in relation to ethical reflection. A glance at the field of communication gives the opposite impression of weak institutionalization but quite creative informal debates on ethical challenges to the profession. Conflicts between the two groups are not mitigated by these differences.

### 7.13 Coda

Even if Habermas has changed his interpretation of the public sphere in modern society, his main focus still remains on the transformation from the original bourgeois public sphere to the mediatized version of the late twentieth century. But starting in the 2000s, a new institutional change is taking place; new modes of communication in the public sphere engender less transparency, contain more normative conflicts and make ideal speech situations a distant goal. This institutional transformation
calls for a broadening of normative perspectives; even if they are improved, key issues will remain unsolved. Nevertheless, they are the best option available.

Pointing to the limitations of Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality does not denounce its significance. On the contrary, it represents a salient step in the establishment of language and speech acts as constitutive to social theory in a line from Wittgenstein to Searle to Habermas. Yet, the theory may be overburdened, as Habermas is guilty of doing when he applies it directly to the public sphere. This move rests on an under-specification of the public sphere, in tandem with a sort of implicit general equilibrium model. Given that the public sphere is constituted of a network of institutions with different modes of functioning and patterns of change, they also embrace specific roles and considerations that may be at odds with the theory of communicative rationality. Due to external shocks, technological change, globalization and endogenous factors such as cultural changes, the ‘rules of the game’ as Habermas calls them are always in a state of disequilibrium. Consequently, the specific norm sets connected to the different parts of the public sphere are in flux.

This may be taken as an argument against the linkage of normative and positive theory in the work of Habermas or even as an argument that he denies the significance of social conflict. None of these are suggested in the present exposition. There are certainly good reasons for exploring the dynamics of the public sphere without reference to normative theory, but that is no argument against connecting the two types of arguments. Concerning the question of conflict, the issue is easily misspecified. Habermas of course does not deny the ubiquitous presence of social conflict, but he abstains from formulating a theory of conflict. A misguided implication might be that he then should give up his basically consensual idea of communicative rationality. The alternative explored here is that in highly differentiated societies these basic norms must be complemented by specific norm sets springing out of the special place and functioning of the various social sectors. Political issues are not brought to rest by the force of the better argument. Even if social analysis is rightly informed by normative considerations, conflicting norms are just as unavoidable as conflicts of interests.

Finally, this leads to the question raised in the introduction: Is the growth in strategic communication a threat, or does it after all point towards a widening of democracy? The answer remains partly open, as before: It depends. The present discussion has brought up discomforting examples and indicated that existing rules of the game of the public sphere are insufficiently specified to give a definite answer. It has also indicated that the challenge does not lie primarily in strategic communication but in the triangle of interplay between communication strategies, political ambitions and media activism. At the same time, it is difficult to conceive improvements in the functioning of democracy without increased communication and expansion of the public sphere. This is one of the challenges to democracy and what it is about.
References


