

## 2. Public discourse beyond national borders

This and the following chapter introduce the theoretical context for this study. They integrate several strands of research into one coherent argument, which is built in three steps:

I start by introducing the notions of public discourse and public sphere as the context of strategic communication efforts (2.1). Subsequently, I explore how these notions can be conceived of at the transnational level (2.2 and 2.3). This leads me to the interim conclusion that *HIPS constitute short-term fora that interconnect with and temporarily transnationalize national public spheres* (2.4).

In the subsequent chapter, I explore previous research on strategic communication beyond national borders – also known as public diplomacy – (3.1), on political summits (3.2), and on how public diplomacy is conducted at summits (3.3). This is to show that *from a strategic communication perspective, the transnationalizing potential of HIPS turns them into valuable resources for political actors' public diplomacy efforts*.

Looking into various factors influencing public diplomacy in that context, I finally argue that *actors' choice of communication strategies at HIPS depends on both structural/long-term and dynamic/short-term factors* (3.3.2). This is summarized in a conceptual model taking the place of what constitutes the hypotheses in other studies. The purpose of subsequent chapters is then to empirically test and revise this model.

Both chapters are tailored towards rooting all three theses in relevant research. They are hence written with argumentative intent and feature an appropriate selection of literature.

### 2.1 Public discourse and the notion of the public sphere

As mentioned above, in the eyes of some scholars, the work of global governance regimes, like the one around the issue of climate change, should be accompanied by public discourse across national borders. Only through such processes can decisions of global relevance be met with appropriate public scrutiny around the world and supranational institutions, such as the UNFCCC, obtain democrat-

ic legitimacy. In basic non-normative understanding, public discourse simply refers to

speakers' exchange of speech acts in front of an audience.

These speech acts relate to each other and are made with regard to issues of wider relevance, which are often of conflictual nature (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht, 2002, p. 9; Raupp, 2011, p. 101). This non-normative definition does not make any claims about a socially desirable quality of public discourse. Such normative proposals come from, e.g., Habermas (1981, pp. 25-44) or Peters (2007, pp. 62, 89-97), who view public discourse as a mode of attaining mutual understanding through rational exchange of arguments. For them, it is fundamentally different from, for example, targeted bargaining within negotiations and 'aesthetic expressions' in popular culture (Peters, 2007, p. 90) or strategic action shaped by "egocentric calculations of success" (Habermas, 1985, p. 286) taking the place of "acts of reaching understanding" (ibid.). Such normative conceptions are not in the focus of this study.

### The public sphere as locus of public discourse

Closely linked to the notion of public discourse is that of the 'public sphere'. While the former emphasizes processes of communication on particular issues, the latter denotes the totality of these processes as well as the non-physical space in which they occur. The concept constitutes a key category in communication studies, and an analysis of actors' efforts to 'engineer' public discourse is not complete without its consideration. While the term appears in a broad variety of research,<sup>2</sup> several proposals for how the public sphere could be theorized share a conceptual core. As emphasized by the spatial connotation of the term 'sphere', it is about a non-physical space for society's debating of issues – "a field of communication" (Peters, Sifft, Wimmel, Brüggemann, and Kleinen-von Königslow, 2005, p. 140), in which speakers' exchange becomes accessible to audiences and public opinion is formed (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 42).

Inherent in this broad understanding is the assumption that there are certain issues which hold relevance to more than a few individuals. These issues concern the way in which people live *together* and therefore relate to the making of collectively binding decisions, i.e. politics (Gerhards, 1998, p. 268; Peters, 2007, p. 56). However, the standard for what is relevant to a wider public is flexible. A

2 Overviews can be found in, for example, Wimmer, 2007 or, more concisely, Donges and Imhof, 2005; a compilation of key texts in public sphere theory is provided by Gripsrud, Moe, Molander, and Murdock, 2010.

publicly debated issue can be of rather private nature, as scandals surrounding politicians' private conduct remind us. Hence, what is public about public issues is not so much their inherently 'serious' nature, but rather the fact that public speakers attribute to them some political relevance and therefore introduce them into the public sphere (Brüggemann, 2008, p. 40).

Also, in modern mass societies, the accessibility of such debates can only be sustained with the help of technical means. This is the purpose of the mass media (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 10; Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 54; Kleinsteuber, 2000, p. 44), which through their bridging of distance, can "knit spatially dispersed interlocutors into a public" (Fraser, 2007, p. 10). Seen through the lens of public discourse, mass media provide the stage on which speakers can engage with each other. They turn discourse into *public* discourse and provide for the special quality of 'public-ness' that is not achievable otherwise (at least not on a wider scale). Due to this function, mass media are an integral feature of most parts of public sphere theory.

### Different theoretical conceptions of the public sphere

Beyond these two assumptions, conceptions of the public sphere vary. A dividing line runs between *analytical* models suggesting how the concept could be approached for empirical study and *normative* accounts prescribing how the public sphere should function and positing particular qualities, for example for public discourse (see above). Generally, the notion of the public sphere grew out of Enlightenment thinking and has carried normative connotations ever since, even in conceptions lacking explicit normative claims (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 32). Its career in academia is inseparably linked with the name of German theorist Jürgen Habermas, who developed its understanding as a space for citizens' debate on communal problems, traditionally at such physical locations as bourgeois 18<sup>th</sup>-century coffeehouses (Habermas, 1990, pp. 90-107). Key to the early Habermasian conception is a focus on individual citizens consciously engaging in a particular quality of public discourse (here, the term *does* carry normative meaning) and essentially advancing society's welfare (Donges and Imhof, 2005, p. 158). The exchange of well-reasoned arguments brings about well-reasoned public opinion as foundation for political decisions (Gerhards, 1998, p. 268). Although analytical and normative elements clearly confound in this direct democratic conception (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 32), Habermas's work has remained influential as normative guidepost and point of reference in subsequent theorizing.

Contrasting normative conceptions focusing on individual agency and discourse, models inspired by systems theory regard the public sphere as particular

environment within society, enabling its self-observation (Luhmann, 1990; Marcinkowski, 1993). Here, the public sphere should be seen less “within the context of the rise of the bourgeoisie than within that of the long-term changes in the general structure of society” (Gestrich, 2006, p. 428). Functional differentiation within society has brought about a set of subsystems running specialized internal discourses (*ibid.*); the function of the public sphere is to ‘mirror’ these systems and allow for the observation of their interaction. Observers may rely on the public sphere for identifying and possibly readjusting their position (Donges and Imhof, 2005, p. 156).

Gerhards and Neidhardt’s (1991) conception of the public sphere as an intermediary system borrows from discourse models inspired by Habermas and those based on systems theory. This becomes clear from the dual approach of modeling the public sphere as system located between the political and other societal systems and also as the locus of political processes:

“The public sphere is – on the occasion of elections, but also in between – a place of articulation for citizens’ and interest groups’ issues and opinions. It is a system contributing to the definition of the political system’s agenda. Issues are set and respective opinions formed, which then suggest a direction for the political processing of these issues” (p. 40, own translation).

According to this conception, the public sphere is the place where issues and opinions are taken up (*input*), aggregated and structured into public opinion (*throughput*), and the latter passed on to the political system (*output*) (p. 35). It is intrinsically tied to the political system, constituting the breeding ground for democratically desirable values like transparency, popular control, or legitimacy (p. 41). If the public sphere fails in carrying out these functions, social movements may form in response (p. 80; Neidhardt, 1994, p. 8).

Besides this normative macro function, Gerhard and Neidhardt’s design entails a view of the public sphere as network of fora. This notion goes back to Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) analysis of “particular public arenas in which social problems are framed and grow” (p. 58) and has been published as ‘arena model’ (Neidhardt, 1994; Ferree et al., 2002) – yet without the normative connotation built into the conception as intermediary system. The model serves as conceptual cornerstone in this study, as it allows for insightful theorizing of the transnationalizing effects of summits. I hence pursue a theoretical path in this study that is neither embedded in normative conceptions of public discourse in the tradition of Habermas nor fully in line with perspectives stemming from systems theory. It is a positive, analytical perspective on the public sphere as “specific configuration of social communication” (Schäfer, Ivanova, and Schmidt, 2011, p. 134, own translation) that borrows from both theoretical

strands. Furthermore, it does neither reduce the public sphere to a mere *collective* of speakers and audiences taking part in public discourse, nor does it only stand for the *state* of being public, or visible within a communicative space (Brüggemann, 2008, pp. 41-42).

### 2.1.1 *Modeling the public sphere as network of fora*

Essentially, Ferree et al.'s (2002) arena model rests on a definition of the public sphere as a

network constituted by public fora and the communicative flows within and between them.

Such fora may differ in popular reach, topical scope, fixation of roles, or incorporation of distribution means (i.e., media). Through their linkages, they form a web of “interconnected arenas of public communication” (Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg, 2009, p. 694), whose totality represents the public sphere. Conceptual tension may be found between the view of ‘the’ public sphere as a unitary, integrated space of communication and the notion of a more fragmented, networked environment featuring more central and more peripheral components (Brüggemann, 2008, p. 44; Latzer and Saurwein, 2006, p. 11). However, in a theoretical ideal, which was also laid out in later writings by Habermas (1992, p. 436), communication flows within this complex network are constantly synthesized and filtered, amplified and reacted to, supplemented and countered, so that, ultimately, *one* more or less integrated web of communication emerges: *the* public sphere. It materialized through an “interlocking of multiple networks and spaces” (Couldry and Dreher, 2007, p. 80).

Up to this point, the terms ‘forum’ and ‘arena’ have been used synonymously. In more precise understanding, though, ‘forum’ is more encompassing. According to Ferree et al. (2002, pp. 9-13), the forum is the core unit within the public sphere. It features three distinct parts: (1) the actual ‘*arena*’ (sometimes also called ‘front stage’ in this research), (2) the ‘*backstage*’, and (3) the ‘*gallery*’. The following clarifies all three components of this stadium metaphor:

#### Arena/front-stage

The arena provides both individual and collective actors with a platform for voicing issues and opinions and introducing them into public discourse. In exchanging such speech acts, speakers may assume different roles, such as repre-

senting particular groups, providing specialist knowledge, or interpreting moral aspects (Peters, 2007, pp. 75-85). Some speakers may be professional spokespeople routinely participating in public discourse; others may only do so sporadically without special resources.

Depending on the nature of the forum, another role can also be found in the arena: that of mediators. Fora can be of various sizes and emerge on different levels – be it a quick chat among strangers at the supermarket check-out or nationwide public discourse sustained by mass media (see below). In some fora, the exchange of speech acts is not possible without technical means, i.e. media. In such cases, journalists are also present in the arena, observing speakers' contributions and making selections for what should be reported (see the concepts of *gatekeeping* and *agenda-setting*). At the same time, journalists may also provide context to and evaluation of speaker's positions (see, e.g., *framing*) and turn into speakers themselves. They do not only provide the stage, but may also climb it themselves (Pfetsch, 2008, p. 22). Which of the two roles is more dominant in journalistic routines depends on such factors as the type of media outlet or the national journalism culture (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Ferree et al. (2002) emphasize that arenas – especially those of comprehensive reach sustained by mass media – should not be imagined as stable, even, and well-lit turf. Instead, the terrain is full of obstacles whose “contours [...] can change suddenly [...] because of events that lay beyond the control of the players; and players can themselves sometimes change the contours through actions” (p. 62). These specific constellations of circumstances and contexts, which may bring about communicative advantages for some speakers and difficulties for others, are called ‘discursive opportunity structures’. Speakers are advised to scrutinize the arena for such situations and adapt their contributions accordingly. “The activities and choices of the players, if they are to be successful, require that they be able to read this playing field and make their choices with an awareness of the opportunities and constraints that it provides” (p. 82). I return to this idea at a later point in this study, when discussing the short-term dynamics at the Cancún summit and their impact on actors' summit communication (see 3.3.2).

## Backstage

As laid out earlier, processes of strategic communication entail both a concealed and a public part. Behind the scenes, communication *strategies* are crafted but commonly hidden from audiences' or other players' view. In the front-stage phase, these strategies are then carried out in the form of visible communication *activities*. The internal, strategic work takes place backstage, at an “organized production center” (p. 13), accommodating speakers' reading of the communica-

tive terrain and the development of appropriate public discourse contributions. Here, speakers prepare before entering the arena and utilize dedicated resources put in place by actors for enhancing the effectiveness of their speech acts.

The lack of such infrastructure may constitute serious disadvantages in public discourse and the contest for audience approval (Feree et al., 2002, p. 13). Several accounts suggest a growing significance of the backstage for actors' public communication. Facilitated by such macro trends as the dissolution of overarching social institutions and milieus (*secularization, individualization, fragmentation*) and an increasing infiltration of media logic and scrutiny in many spheres of society (*mediatization*), actors are confronted with growing complexity when designing and implementing strategic communication programs (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Kriesi, 2004). Navigating an actor through the intricacies of contemporary communication environments is the task of public relations (PR) professionals. Such holistic, strategic understanding of PR is put forward by Grunig and Hunt (1984), who see the field as "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (p. 6). Other definitions emphasize more selected aspects of PR, such as the running of press relations or the support of firms' marketing programs (e.g., Bentele, Liebert & Seeling, 1997; Szyska, 2009), or focus on specific concepts, like image or legitimacy (e.g., Merten, 1992; Raupp, 2011). However, such narrow definitions stay behind the more encompassing conception of PR as 'running the backstage' and reading – as well as responding to – the complexities of the arena's communicative terrain.

Despite its lack of an established corpus of professional knowledge, a widely shared ethos, or fixed training paths, the PR sector has undergone professionalization in recent years (Hahn, Mok, Roessler, Schmid, and Schwendeman, 2008, p. 337; Raupp, 2011, p. 102), visible for example in the launch of training institutions or an ongoing restructuring of the field into more refined functions, like graphic design creation, event management, or executive counsel. Already Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) identified "a whole sector of the economy that produces an ever-changing set of collective definitions of what we should be paying attention to and why" (p. 69) and that employs "operatives who specialize [...] in particular arena-based activities" (p. 68). Actors' backstage areas, to be found in corporate communications units, PR agencies etc., may feature a variety of structures and processes aimed at shaping their respective presentation in the arena.

## Gallery

On the gallery, a third role in the public sphere can be found: the audience. Audiences follow the mediated or unmediated exchange between speakers and, through their virtual or physical attendance, turn such discourse into *public* dis-

course. The presence of an audience is a constitutive attribute of the public sphere – without observers, public-ness is nonexistent (Donges and Imhof, 2005, p. 155). Audiences remain mostly passive and abstract; they do not constitute an organized grouping, but heterogeneous, unspecialized aggregates (ibid.) without the capacity to act collectively (Feree et al., 2005, p. 13). In the case of public discourse via the mass media, individual audience members may take part through the occasional letter to the editor or ‘vox pop’ interview on the street (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 65), but other than that, audiences can only speak through particular collective actors, such as trade unions or pressure groups that assume speaking roles in the public sphere.

Despite its diffuse nature, the audience constitutes a key entity in public discourse. Its possible attention is taken into account when public speakers exchange speech acts (p. 44). Speakers’ assumptions about audiences’ likely expectations and reactions alter the character of discourse. The flashing of the ‘on air’ sign in a TV talk show may turn guests into enemies, although they are actually bound in friendship. The condition of public-ness instigates the addressing of a (virtual) audience and reinforces actors’ interests and professional roles (Donges and Imhof, 2005, p. 154).

As suggested by the conception of the public sphere as intermediary system, (assumed) audience attention also plays a role in political decision-making. Demands that are expressed in front of a gallery full of political constituents are more likely to attain political outcomes than more quietly expressed claims. Public discourse is a source of orientation and persuasion for political decision-makers; especially what is written and broadcast for national audiences poses an influence (Ferree et al., 2002, pp. 14-15). ‘Going public’ has become a general term for actors’ efforts of introducing their positions into public discourse and harvesting the influence of imagined audiences. Seen the other way round, this also means that “doing badly in mass media discourse creates vulnerability in pursuing policy interests” (p. 15).

### The public sphere as network of different types of fora

The forum, consisting of arena, backstage, and gallery, is the basic unit of the public sphere. Contemporary public spheres comprise multitudinous fora of various types, which can be connected in different ways. Attempts in conceptualizing these links and describing the positions of various fora vis-à-vis each other have generated two dimensions of differentiation:

On a *horizontal dimension*, numerous less encompassing and more specialized fora cluster around the core of the national mass media forum. The latter constitutes a “master forum” (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 10), the backbone of nation-



wide public discourse, “*the major site of political contest*” (ibid., emphasis theirs). At the heart of this forum lies a small number of prominent news media, such as broadsheet newspapers, news magazines, or current affairs programs, which observe each other (Wessler, Peters, Brüggemann, Kleinen-von Königsow, and Sifft, 2008, p. 4). Some of their contents may circulate to or originate from other outlets of smaller reach that serve particular lifestyles, worldviews, or interests. These are sub-fora within the mass media forum, which may be partially influenced by what leading media report, but may also partially sustain separate public discourses (ibid.). The mass media forum is internally diverse; instead of a unified theater, it represents a multiplex venue comprising several auditoriums of various sizes – a few of them home to popular mainstream shows, but most of them housing more particular sideshows. And what is presented in one auditorium may well influence other shows under the same roof.

Besides the mass media forum and its respective sub-fora, public discourse also takes place in more specialized fora grouping around it (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 10). There, sets of speakers, mediators, and audiences are less encompassing and often defined by membership in an organization, profession, or other social group. A debate within an academic discipline or a political party’s internal proceedings might be of such nature. The arenas of such specialized fora feature their own ensembles of speakers exchanging speech acts through dedicated media like trade publications or party papers. At times, public discourses within specialized fora may also enter the mass media through appropriate communicative linkages (Tobler, 2006, p. 110). The arguments of a debate in science might be introduced into the mass media forum (and stimulate public debate there) through science journalism. Similarly, a demand formulated in a social movement might enter public debate in the mass media via an NGO spokesperson, who is interviewed in a news program. And even the ordinary citizen, usually not holding a public speaking role, might appear in mass media discourse if his neighborhood initiative is featured in the city paper: “civic activities become part of the public sphere to the degree that they are represented in public communication, primarily in the mass media” (Peters et al., 2005, p. 140). Issues from all spheres of society are constantly fed into the mass media forum.

On a *vertical dimension*, Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991, pp. 49-56; see also Gerhards 1993; Neidhardt, 1994) distinguish different ‘levels’ of the public sphere. The different examples of fora that have been discussed up to this point constitute more elaborate constellations featuring a separation of (professional) roles and an abstract, non-physical setting in which speakers and audiences are connected mostly by technical means. However, public discourse in and around the mass media constitutes only one of three contexts, in which public spheres may emerge. On an ad-hoc level, public discussion can also occur on the street

or at home – settings with spatial, temporal, and social boundaries (Donges and Imhof, 2001, p. 151). This is unmediated communication – simple systems of interaction (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 50) – in which speaking and listening roles are frequently switched and more private topics may take turns with those of public nature. Such episodes of communication are fragile and unstructured; they come into existence *ad hoc*, when individuals meet in the physical world, and may fall apart just as quickly.

More structured and topically focused is the type of public sphere that emerges at assemblies or protest events. Here, the roles of speakers and audiences are distributed more stably; selected individuals take the stage, whilst others form the audience. The latter may express direct approval or disapproval with regard to what is happening on stage yet remains in a rather passive role. Mediators are usually not required at assemblies, due to attendants' physical presence. In terms of reach and distribution of fixed roles, assemblies are located between simple encounters and media discourse: "encounters on the street can be considered as the smallest unit of analysis while the mass media are the only forums which reach out to the broader public" (Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg, 2009, p. 694).

Similar to the horizontal dimension, communicative linkages also exist vertically across these three levels. What is discussed in simple encounters may be carried into assemblies, which in turn might be noted in mediated public discourse. The other way round, issues debated in mediated discourse or at assemblies may be followed up by discussion in simple encounters. Viewed normatively, media discourse should be inspired by small-scale and medium-scale debate to stay relevant and authentic. Conversely, such discussions should be oriented towards media discourse to remain political in nature (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991, p. 56).

### Communicative linkages as prerequisite for the integration of the public sphere

It is the horizontal and vertical communicative linkages between the different fora in the public sphere that make a good point for viewing it as one integrated domain. These perpetual flows of monitoring, processing, and distributing communicative content between different sites in society make up the public sphere (Habermas, 1992, p. 436). Only through these processes does the public sphere come into existence. Therefore, when contemporary public spheres are referred to as 'fragmented' (Brüggemann, 2008, p. 44; Brüggemann and Schulz-Forberg, 2009, p. 698; Latzer and Saurwein, 2006, p. 11), this certainly holds some truth if we take into view the 'infrastructure' formed by innumerable fora on different levels. Yet, the question of fragmentation relates more to the strength of the

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