

“Great Transformation and the Media - Alternatives to Growth as a Model of Communication”

Summary of the Conference Report

The conference on “Great Transformation and the Media” took place on 10th and 11th of July 2017 at the Schwanenwerder Evangelical educational centre.

The conference investigated the role of the media in the upcoming transformation processes, its failure to present complex issues and asked how alternative social guidelines describing a different kind of progress can be initiated. The media, but also science and politics are faced with new challenges of communication and strategic solutions.

The circumstances have changed significantly over the last decades. The environmental problems of our time are so serious, that in many cases the ‘Planetary Boundaries’ – the ecological breaking points – have already been exceeded. There is not much time left to resolve environmental damage and to impede climate change. As well as in the areas of energy, transport and agriculture, urgent fundamental changes are necessary: a rethink towards less growth, a “green economy” and ultimately less mass consumption.

It may be optimistically true, that there are many possible solutions that have been scientifically developed and applied by society. However, these approaches are not discussed enough in the public arena. A broad social acceptance is necessary for a shift in thinking and a change in politics. Thus, the conference was primarily concerned with the issue of how possible solutions and approaches could be better communicated by the media.

The conference was the third part in a series of events on the theme of “Great Transformation” and its political communication, which also took place in 2015 and 2016 at the same location in Schwanenwerder. The first two events focused on science and politics, whereas this time the focus was on communication strategies.

Around 80 people participated in the event, which was primarily aimed at specialists: scientists, representatives from the areas of social organisations, politics and the media. Citizens interested in the topic of a greener economy and with questions around a better communication of this were also welcome.

Starting Point: Economic Growth as Catalyst for Anthropocene

In the first block of the conference, Ferdinand Knauß, an economic journalist from Düsseldorf (Wirtschaftswoche, literally: business week), gave a keynote speech entitled, “Growth above all. The establishment of a paradigm by the media”, where he illustrated how the concept of growth has been developed historically. He made a plea to all economic journalists and economic politicians, to develop historical awareness once again in order to overcome the growth paradigm. Knauß named the “deeper reason” for this fixation on growth as “the historical blindness of economic journalism, not only regarding history, but also regarding the historical conditioning of its own convictions”. Any historical classification of the concept of growth is also missing in the economic lexicon. Gaining awareness that economic growth is a historically conditioned phenomenon, is at the same time a prerequisite to be able to bid farewell to it in the future.

Alternatives to Growth as a Model of Modernity

As a response to the question around the alternatives to a quantitative understanding of increasing prosperity, the scientist Kai Niebert who specialized in sustainability raised the role of

semantics – the search for and the distribution of understandable concepts. The complex problems and the possible ways to solutions in the context of the Anthropocene and sustainability must be broken down into concepts that can be understood by everyone. As such, Niebert suggests no longer talking of “moving away from coal” anymore but to speak of “clean energy” instead, not of an “eco tax” but rather about a “polluter levy”, not about “decarbonisation” but of the “renewal of infrastructure”.

As an example of direct distribution of information via networks and personal communication, Roland Zieschank from FFU at the FU Berlin quoted from the National Prosperity Index. The Index, complements the GDP, but is adjusted for the social prosperity in ecological and social subsequent costs and although it did indeed arise out of a research plan, in the meantime, it has become well known in Germany as a conceptual, and likewise, empirical starting point for the discourse and discussions about a different development of welfare. An indicator tool which was created within a scientific environment has thus “over time proven itself as a communication tool suited to the social environment”.

Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler from the The Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management presented the initiative “Growth in Transition”, which has been initiated by the Ministry and connects more than 20 organisations, to explicitly deal with questions around growth, prosperity and quality of life. This unusual spectrum, from a German perspective, spans from the Federal Ministry of Finance to the Austrian National Bank through to the REWE-Group of retail traders and the European Environment Agency.

The initiative has reached the European level, where Elisabeth Freytag-Rigler works in many groups and on many levels. The conferences are at the heart of the initiative, but so are the future dossiers, stakeholder dialogues and publications. These activities in Austria show that substantive discussions on a new understanding of economic development do exist and also that these concepts are integrated into other state institutions and parts of society and have made significant progress with regard to the areas of information dissemination.

Who tells the Stories of the Great Transformation? Examples from Politics, Science and the Media.

In the second block of the conference Michael Marten and Rainer Benthin from the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety as well as Gerd Scholl from the Institute for Ecological Economy presented the results of the new Study on Environmental Awareness and Behaviour in Germany. The results indicated that the awareness of the issues relating to the environment and climate protection within the German population has remained at the same level and for the majority of those questioned “keeping going” did not present a solution. However, the majority of those questioned were not yet convinced that the climate policy for the future would be successful. Too little is being done for the environment and climate protection. Greater consideration given to the topic found that environmental and climate protection is also increasingly an issue of social justice. The Study on Environmental Awareness and Behaviour presents a virtual mirror of the social resonance regarding ecological problem areas and also of the necessary relief strategies – in this way, the results of the study also give the impulse for communication activities by the environmental ministry and environmental agencies.

Torsten Schäfer, who holds a professorship for journalism from the Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, supported Niebert's critique of semantics in his presentation on the topic of “Green Journalism: Area of tensions between neutrality and transformation”. Concepts like “Great Transformation” or “Anthropocene” are scarcely known amongst the general public, because they are almost considered “scene concepts” within science.

For this reason journalists must find a language in order to be able to reach their readers. Schäfer also spoke in favour of the use of the concept sustainability, because this has “already found a

widespread use in regional, national, global regimes of law, political programs and markets and companies". Sustainability must therefore be thought of beyond ecological and economic dimensions and must also include social justice. Schäfer delivered detailed ideas for the development of communications on individual issues.

The ZEIT editor Petra Pinzler, reported from her journalistic practice, that even as science gathers more and more evidence of the factuality of Anthropocene, the situation is barely reflected, or at least, not reflected enough in the media and does not penetrate all the way to the core of the newspaper editors' and the media's description of the present day. The issues seem to be too big and too complex to be able to be integrated quickly into a news-stream or to be conveyed to an imaginary reader. To put it very simply, in the meantime, people are living in Anthropocene and are subject to massive ecological changes, but many in the mass media cannot write about it. Thus, it often remains as facets and splinters in the media or, in the best case scenario, as exemplary stories and reports. On the other hand, there are also signs of a rethink by editors, for example, solutions – such as the shift to environmental friendly transport methods – could be taken up and presented within a larger context. A further goal would be a kind of "background awareness" of sustainability that would be embedded in the various sections of the editorial and the daily composition of articles.

The Change in the Media Landscape and the New Agents

At the start of the third block of the conference an overarching context was provided, because under the leitmotif of the conference, the aspect to rethink the concept of social responsibility (also) of the media came into effect.

In the context of the transformation processes, the media are no longer just an accompanying commentary following downstream ideas, trends and solutions, but rather it raises the question of how anticipative, or in the terminology of environmental policy: "prevention orientated" the newspapers and other media are in the way they address the questions around the future.

This stance can be understood as the further development of the watchdog function of journalism: to demand timely solutions from science and politics, so that there is still scope for action before the ecological changes themselves demand this action. With regard to this issue, the journalist Thomas Leif from Südwestrundfunk Fernsehen (a German regional television channel for Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate) in Mainz gave a speech introducing fundamental considerations which ranged all the way to media policy entitled "A social perspective for the (new) media". With striking phrasing, he demanded "more content and less confetti" in journalism. This concentrated presentation of his well-founded critique of the current mass media operation models and his new suggestions for a qualitative, higher quality (scientific) journalism is groundbreaking.

On the other hand, a business management view from within the media sector was the contribution from the director of the "tageszeitung" (taz), Karl-Heinz Ruch from Berlin. Ruch presented the example of the taz, which since 1979 has built up an alternative publication project within the German media system, financed by the readership and largely free of advertising, that has been able to continue to survive until now despite the newspaper crisis. The transition to the co-operative model has proven to have future and has enabled the publisher a financially stable basis for action. The co-operative model is not only an alternative to the traditional market and quota orientated models of the media landscape, but also presents an option for new ventures launching themselves in the area of media.

In his speech, Berlin science journalist Manfred Ronzheimer presented the theoretical foundations of "transformational journalism" and practical experiences with "participative journalism" taking into account "civilian reporters". Ronzheimer observes that, considering their global

importance, there is far too little media reporting on themes of transformation. “Transformational journalism” would embrace this content in new ways, it would present both the dimension of the threats and also the concrete transformation approaches for society. At the same time this approach of “participative journalism”, which directly includes the agents of change in media production, is an innovative contribution to the question around the future design of media systems.

The example of scientific platforms on the topic of sufficiency, which have been developed and are now used in the directing of environmental organisations also demonstrate a new development, namely the knowledge transfer about an important area of the Great Transformation which is no longer dependent on the possibilities of traditional media, but instead uses social media and the internet directly. In her contribution, Christine Wenzl from the Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) demonstrated the sufficiency strategies for important alternative messages against the growth imperatives outlined at the beginning of the conference on the one hand, and on the other hand, explained that by using new media formats (social media) knowledge transfer capacities regarding examples of “good practice” can be made available via the internet by and for communities.

The contribution from Hermann Ott from the Wuppertal-Institute in his capacity as head of the project “Fokus Wachstumswende” (a project with the intent of new, sustainable change of the economic system) used the project financed by third-party funds to illustrate how co-operation between the Federal Environmental Agency, a research group, civilian organisations and journalists can support the communication of a complex issue. An outcome of the project was a crash-course for journalists on the issue of quantitative economic growth and the results from research about degrowth and other information were presented to the public within the framework of a parliamentary evening.

Utopias as an Anchor for Narratives?

In the evening event, the book “Ecotopia” by American author Ernest Callenbach was presented using various media formats. It is an ecological, futuristic novel written in 1975 describing the political split of the West Coast of the USA and the development of a self-sufficient, ecological republic. Taking the narrative form of a diary-novel, it outlines a vision of a dematerialised, sustainable social order, free from the paradigm of growth. The book has sold more than one million copies and had an enormous effect on the young environmental movement of that year, reaching all the way to The Greens in Germany.

In closing, Dr. Thomas Klein (Collegium for the Management and Design of Sustainable Development – KMGNE) and Eva Quistorp, who as co-founder of “The Greens” political party was able to meet Ernest Callenbach personally, discussed the relevance of the book for the present time. The question was whether the narrative approach to the description of an alternative society is better suited for far-reaching awareness raising than a purely fact orientated, non-fiction book. And: how should today’s major ecological challenges (Anthropocene) be narrated and conveyed in a comparable way?

On the Way to New Narratives

The fourth conference block on the second day, focused primarily on the communication approach of “narration”. Ole Meinefeld from the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation explained the discussion about a new “green narrative”, which took place after The Greens’ poor results in the 2013 Federal Election. A reason for this was the “Veggie Day” and the image of The Greens as a “prohibition party” which wanted to dictate the behaviour of citizens. According to Meinefeld, in order to gain citizens’ acceptance for a social transformation, the chain of reasoning must be available to clarify why the measures, which in some cases may be associated with restrictions or prohibition, are also

necessary. This would be easier to achieve if the ecological necessity was not phrased as a critique of modern achievements, but as “a better kind of modernisation”. Thus, narratives must be positively worded. Instead of the narrative of the reduction of fossil fuels, the narrative of technological change should be chosen, instead of doing without “generational justice” should be talked about. The relevance of semantics and the development of a clearly understandable concept were again emphasised.

For Joachim Borner, director of the Collegium for the Management and Design of Sustainable Development, narratives are “story-telling in a social discourse” which also – as in the case of sustainability – can contain a “goal orientated direction”. Narratives have the advantage that due to their emotive elements and style (e.g. personalisation) they are more easily absorbed by the recipients than a purely fact-based range of information and also because they make contexts clearer, opening up the possibility to integrate other people’s experiences into one’s own behavioural patterns. A number of recommendations deal with how via the virtue of “stories” – a cultural heritage in all societies – not only information, but also an attitudinal transformation can be spread. He especially highlighted the “narratives from the future” which present the outcomes of a successful transformation process and thus, can have an effect on the here and now.

Wilfried Kraus from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research placed the focus on the long-term and participation. These are expressed in the research policy practice of the programs Research for Sustainable Development (FONA) and “Kopernikus” (research on energy transition) which are invested in the research into the implementation and impacts for the coming decades.

The participation of affected citizens and experts within the scope of their research is also becoming increasingly important. This has also changed the way science is communicated in order to achieve a better discourse with the public. It is no longer adequate for science to be developing solutions, whilst the media and public barely find out anything about it. Kraus gave the concrete example of communal climate land registers – to use in the long-term preparation for the negative effects of climate change, such as the development of a sustainability aligned finance sector.

Podium Discussion: Narrative for the Great Transformation

The conference closed with a podium discussion with Michael Müller, retired parliamentary undersecretary and chair of the Commission for the Disposal of High-Level-Waste (Endlager-Kommission), Berlin, Ernst-Christoph Stolper, deputy chairperson of the Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), Berlin and Christian Füller, Editor in Chief of der Freitag newspaper, Berlin.

Moderated by Manfred Ronzheimer and Roland Zieschank, the podium discussion debated the issue of possibilities for better communication of the Great Transformation to society and in politics from a range of perspectives. This communication should not only be limited to information sharing, but also incorporate motivation and guidance for changes in practice. Müller clarified the comprehensive civilisation-historical connection in which the transformation discourse stands. The central theme of European Modernity is social emancipation; it was the liberation of people that ultimately became the world model of democracy. The error exists therein, that the modernisation which led to this emancipation is now considered an end in itself and the ecological limitations are disregarded. It is effective to connect the two again in new ways, “We must find an idea to make the ecological debate the debate over the future of civilisation”.

Stolper preferred the concept “values” over “narratives” because values steer behaviour. According to Stolper, politics is wrapped around contradictions. Transformations are thus, not harmonious transitions, but thoroughly conflict-laden processes. This means specifically that tangible public pressure will be applied to environmental polluters. The demonstrations against TTIP trade agreements, which were co-organised by Stolper through The Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), are an example of how civil society organisations can ultimately apply political pressure

through protesting on the streets and do so on a topic, which is thoroughly complex, and not one-dimensional.

For Füller it is not so much about a big plan for the transformation, but rather about wrangling a tough fight. Indeed the press publishing houses do not follow a mission. But their job is also to present such themes for discussion in society, which until now have not been discussed in politics or have not been discussed satisfactorily. Therefore, it is also about being understandable and for this central concepts are not suitable for a broad discourse. Füller's clear statement was that to some extent the conference theme itself is unable to be communicated further. However, from the perspective of the organisers, the conference should put exactly these issues on the agenda. In journalistic practice, this can be seen as a trailblazing statement, that it is thoroughly possible, for complex themes to be translated into formats suitable for the reader. This also includes the narrative format, "The long read is upcoming", according to the Editor-in-Chief of "der Freitag" newspaper.

A large hurdle was also identified in this round, which was the tension between concepts of the (scientific) "community" and the structural pressures of the media: the terminology of the Great Transformation, which is not well suited for use in popular media, as it creates a barrier of incomprehensibility and, as such, does not facilitate print runs. The same goes for the term "Anthropocene", "sufficiency" and in part, also for "sustainability". The transformation vocabulary firstly prevents many journalists from engaging with these themes; secondly it requires an increased level of "translation work" to change it from a specialist language into a language that can be generally understood. The communication approach of the "narrative" was seen as promoting understanding, because it connects individual facts with a contextual meaning.

Overall, there was consensus in the final round, that the media must play an important catalyst role for political debates in the public sphere. Besides reaching a broad audience with understandable and catchy narrative journalistic formats, particular themes of conflict for political analysis must be taken up by the press of their own accord and communicated in a targeted way to the readership of the political decision makers. In addition, an increased sensitising of classical political and parliamentary journalism in the areas of sustainability and transformation topics should be achieved. This, in turn, also necessitates a certain new orientation of the scientific systems towards communicating the research results which analyse the negative side effects of Anthropocene and firmly present the proposed solutions, which have been developed in many areas, to society for discussion.

Roland Zieschank and Manfred Ronzheimer

Alexandra Finkle (Translation)