

## Historizing international organizations and their communication – institutions, practices, changes

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## Historizing international organizations and their communication – institutions, practices, changes

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### 1 Introduction

The Thematic Section focuses on a topic that has thus far received little attention from communication and media researchers: the history of international organizations and their communication. Since the second half of the 19th century, for numerous and diverse areas of social life, globally active international organizations of varying degrees of institutionalization and scope, both non-governmental and intergovernmental, have been founded and have dedicated themselves to the global challenges of the first modern age (Herren, 2009). The most famous of these is certainly the League of Nations, which was established in 1919 as the predecessor institution of the United Nations.

In this sense, the background of the Thematic Section is crucial. In recent years the Lab “History of Communication and Media Change” at the Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research (ZeMKI) of the University of Bremen has been the home of a large-scale project on the communication history of the League of Nations. The research project on “Transnational Communication History of the League of Nations in the Inter-War Period (1920–1938): The institutional, professional and public spheres of journalism in the League of Nations in international comparison”<sup>1</sup> aimed at identifying

and reconstructing the communication and media work of the League of Nations from the perspective of a transnational communication history of international organizations (Gellrich, Koenen, & Averbek-Lietz, 2020). This guiding principle was something we wanted to take up first during the planning of an international conference on “Communication history of international organizations and NGOs: Questions, research perspectives, topics”<sup>2</sup> to apply it more broadly to other organizations, objects, and the phenomenon of the communication of international organizations. On the one hand, the stimulating and topically diverse nature of our conference emphasized the significance of an explicit communication research and communication history perspective on international

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- 2 International ZeMKI Conference 2021 – Online “Communication history of international organizations and NGO: Questions, research perspectives, topics” (April 22–23 2021). Conference website: <https://www.uni-bremen.de/en/zemki/events/conferences/communication-history-of-international-organizations-and-ngos>

1 The project was led by Stefanie Averbek-Lietz, who worked together with research assis-



organizations.<sup>3</sup> Perspectives that communication researchers can add to the discourse with other disciplines, such as history and political sciences, that deal with international organizations. On the other hand, the conference clearly showed that the topic of international organizations in the dimensions of history, communication, institutions, and practices is still a largely unexplored field of communication studies. In order to highlight the possibilities and potentials of communication studies research on international organizations and not least to stimulate further research in this trajectory, we have launched this Thematic Section.

From a communication history perspective, international organizations played a highly visible role in the transnational intertwining and consolidation processes of journalism, culture, media, politics, technology, and the public sphere in the 19th and 20th century (Brendebach, Herzer, & Tworek, 2018). Against the background of the much-discussed boundaries between secret diplomacy and public diplomacy, especially after the First World War, such organizations contributed to the development of the first arenas and forms of international and transnational public spheres with an orientation toward global governance. To spread their concerns and goals globally, they constantly made use of the latest communication technologies and the growing diversity of the available media for their communication; they organized and professionalized their information work and developed specific information-policy instruments and strategies for that purpose. Woodrow Wilson's idea of "open diplomacy" (in fact, the early forerunner of today's public diplomacy), for example, was the idea on which the League of Nations based its information policy (Lange, 1991; Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945; Seidenfaden, 2022; Tworek, 2010).

Effects of the differentiation and organization of the communication of international organizations, such as the emergence of institutionalized public relations in these specific contexts, the development of inter-

national summit and conference journalism, the creation of publicity for international politics and, in parallel, the genesis of structures of inter- and transnational public spheres conveyed by the media, are issues and topics within this field of research, which from the perspective of media history has been by and large neglected.

## 2 Leading questions

In this light, the three relevant research perspectives and topical foci of a transnational communication and media history of international organizations reveal a broad spectrum of questions:

- › Communication activities and communication management of international organizations

How did non-governmental and intergovernmental international organizations design their communication to reach and inform the media and the public? Which actors and groups of actors did they address and how? What were the expectations regarding media and public attention? What ideas existed about the relationship between media and politics? What forms, infrastructures, instruments, concepts, and strategies were developed to generate the public and media visibility of international organizations? How and by whom was information and public relations work institutionalized and standardized? How were relations with individual media and their representatives organized and professionalized?

- › International organizations, media and journalism

What influence have international organizations had on trends in globalization and on the inter- and transnationalization of journalism and media communication? How did new forms of foreign journalism such as summit and international conference journalism develop? What position did journalistic and media practices occupy within the context of international organizations? Which international media policy agenda developed from

3 Conference program and review by Elisa Pollack, Niklas Venema and Simon Sax on H/Soz/Kult: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-127538>

the interaction of international organizations and media institutions, for example, with respect to: ensuring the free movement of global news; tendentious reporting and dissemination of false reports; unimpeded activity of correspondents; and international standards of the freedom of the press and copyright? Which international organizations were established, especially in the media context?

- › International organizations in the public sphere

What notions of a global or inter- and transnational public sphere were generated in the context of international organizations? How were conferences involving international organizations publicly staged? What public image did international organizations have? On which topics and with which objectives did international organizations try to address and reach the public (e.g., disarmament, gender justice, health, or nature)? How were international organizations perceived beyond the mass media (e.g., in art, caricature, film, literature, photography, or posters)?

### 3 Contributions

The contributions gathered in this Thematic Section take up some of the questions posed here, making a significant contribution to the burgeoning field of a transnational communication and media history of international organizations. In doing so, the relevance of this research perspective for questions of the history of journalism, organizations, media and science as well as for the current view on international organizations becomes apparent. The various approaches in this section discuss the institutionalization and the goals of communication in the organizational context of international organizations, they offer perspectives on communication practices and strategies of international organizations, and they deal with film and the press as concrete forms of their media work. International organizations discussed in this section include the League of Nations, the International Labour Organization, the Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación para América Latina – CIESPAL, and

the United Nations. Based on examples, the contributions by Pelle van Dijk, Arne L. Gellrich, Jürgen Wilke, and Otávio Daros primarily reveal the historical conditions and the diversity of communicative contexts of international organizations. The contribution by Sigrid Kannengießner builds a bridge to the present and addresses current communicative challenges and problems of international organizations.

The first article of this Thematic Section by Pelle van Dijk provides a brilliant addition to the still small yet rapidly growing amount of research on League of Nations public relations. In contrast to the dominant press relations of the League of Nations, here van Dijk focuses on the then still young medium of film and its use in public communication for the organization. The article is especially enlightening in illustrating the complicated struggle in which the League of Nations' information officials found themselves as they tried to reach out to an international public using modern means of mass communication while at the same time being bound by their credo of abstaining from any form of the infamous "propaganda" that had caused such catastrophic effects during the First World War. However, moving away from the institutional focus often taken in studies of League communications, van Dijk does not limit his study to the ambivalent position of League officials but also emphasizes the work of national League of Nations Associations, especially in Britain, the Netherlands, and the U.S., both in their cooperation with the organization and in their own film productions. Van Dijk takes a chronological approach and shows his narrative skills in presenting a documentary text with exactly the "necessary color" which, as League official H. R. Cummings lamented in 1926, was so hard to reproduce by films advertising the League of Nations.

The contribution by Arne L. Gellrich is dedicated to the institution and practice of the almost unexplored press monitoring of the League of Nations in the 1930s. The League of Nations was not only interested in maintaining the closest possible ties with the public and the press, it also wanted to know how its work and its politics did resonate in the public. This means that the communica-

tion work was not only about the PR of the organization, but also about monitoring the public discourse about the public image of the League of Nations. For that purpose, the Information Section as the League's public relations department established what it called a "Daily Press Review". Focusing on this internal reception of external communication about the League and its work, Gellrich asks what processes and practices have been put in place by the organization in relation to media monitoring and which views these practices (re-)produced for the organization. In this sense, by means of a hermeneutic analysis, press monitoring is interpreted and understood as an instrument of the discursive construction of the organization. To do so, he compiled and evaluated a collection of 701 press clippings. The topical focus here is on the international control of the League's colonial policy. In this sense, on the one hand the question of the infrastructures, practices, and processes of press monitoring is central: How and by whom were they handled, read and studied? On the other hand, the public image of the League and its colonial policy in the press is of interest.

In his case study on the communication history of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Jürgen Wilke describes how the ILO was constituted by communication and how communication was instrumentally used by the ILO under difficult conditions as "the means and use of communication were still far less developed and complex than today" (p. 100). Wilke, too, works hermeneutically, based on sources which were mainly produced by the ILO itself. While comprehending the process of development and consolidation in the early years, Wilke explains convincingly the primary role communication and communication processes played in this process. He states that the founding of the ILO was already the result of communication, namely the peace negotiations after the end of the First World War. Against this background, he analyzes the ILO's organizational structure as a basic principle of "tripartism", which is also shown by the signet or even in the seating arrangement of conferences. In describing the internal organization of the office and especially the Central Press Branch, he manages to show

that the internal structure demonstrated the prevalence of communication "as a goal and as a functional principle and means of organisation" (p. 94), which found particular expression by the funds that were earmarked in the organization's budget and resulted in an extensive publication activity of official, scientific, and individual, topically varying studies and reports. Overall, Wilke presents the ILO as "a model case of an organisation based on communication" (p. 99) and proves that the organization fully met its communicative intentions as defined in its constitution.

Otávio Daros' contribution presents Latin American communication research in the context of its organizational institutionalization, its being transnationally and transculturally influenced from the U.S., from France, and not least, under the auspices of the UNESCO's communication policy, closely related to dependency theory. He highlights how fruitfully the research of the transnational history of communication studies relates to the multi-dimensional analysis of the institutional and the actor's constellation of a discipline in a certain world-regional setting. The institutional body of the famous Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación para América Latina (CIESPAL) and its underlying body of ideas is traced back to its roots 63 years ago, its founding in Ecuador, the spreading of its ideas across Latin America, the shifts from press studies to social communication research and the constraints under dictatorship. Daros shows CIESPAL's emancipation from U.S. influence (at the same time needing financial support which came from the Ford Foundation and also from the German Friedrich Ebert-Foundation); its emancipation from the development paradigm of U.S.-scholars like Wilbur Schramm and also from the concepts of famous founders of French communication studies like Jacques Kayser, then giving rise to the influential work of the pioneers of early de-Westernization in Latin American communication and cultural studies like Jorge Fernández, Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Paolo Freire, Néstor Canclini, Jesús Martín-Barbero, and Eliseo Verón.

Last but not least, Sigrid Kannengießer's contribution illustrates the entanglements

between the impact of international organizations on a particular field of social reality and the research that observes that field. The policies of international organizations, in her case the United Nations, can aim at influencing social reality through their political measures and goals. At the same time, these goals become an impetus for paradigm adjustments in the very research that then observes these institutions and their policies accordingly. Kannengießer takes the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as her starting point. The SDGs were devised in 2015 and replaced the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the year 2000 to overcome global poverty and inequality. She argues that the very shift from mere development goals to sustainable development goals doubled and differentiated the dimensions of goals to be achieved. While the goals initially focused primarily on the world's poorest countries and the global South, the addition of sustainability as a target dimension meant that the richer countries of the North were also called to account. For communication research this also necessitates adjustments, since sustainability issues had previously played a minor role in the field of communication for development. Thus, Kannengießer advocates such a paradigm shift and lays out what it means for communication scholarship interested in sustainability, development, and social change. She argues that the concept of communication for development and social change should be transformed to sustainability communication following the shift on the international political level transforming the development goals into the sustainability goals.

The contributions of the Thematic Section can and should only offer a first attempt at a deeper communication studies analysis of international organizations from a current and historical perspective. Yet, we hope that they will stimulate further exchange and in-

ter- and transdisciplinary debate in this field and, particularly, encourage further research. In this spirit we believe to have arranged an exciting and diverse Thematic Section for the readers of SComS.

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