

Overcoming the “blame game” in strategic climate communication: from decoupling accusations toward an arena-spanning agenda

Overcoming
the blame
game

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Abstract

Purpose – The climate crisis presents a global threat. Research shows the necessity of joint communication efforts across different arenas—media, politics, business, academia and protest—to address this threat. However, communication about social change in response to the climate crisis comes with challenges. These challenges manifest, among others, in public accusations of inconsistency in terms of hypocrisy and incapability against self-declared change agents in different arenas. This increasingly turns public climate communication into a “blame game”.

Design/methodology/approach – Strategic communication scholarship has started to engage in this debate, thereby acknowledging climate communication as an arena-spanning, necessarily contested issue. Still, a systematic overview of specific inconsistency accusations in different public arenas is lacking. This conceptual article provides an overview based on a macro-focused public arena approach and decoupling scholarship.

Findings – Drawing on a systematic literature review of climate-related strategic communication scholarship and key debates from climate communication research in neighboring domains, the authors develop a framework mapping how inconsistency accusations of hypocrisy and incapacity, that is, policy–practice and means–ends decoupling, manifest in different climate communication arenas.

Originality/value – This framework creates awareness for the shared challenge of decoupling accusations across different climate communication arenas, underscoring the necessity of an arena-spanning strategic communication agenda. This agenda requires a communicative shift from downplaying to embracing decoupling accusations, from mutual blaming to approval of accountable ways of working through accusations and from confrontation to cooperation of agents across arenas.

Keywords Climate crisis, Decoupling, Sustainability, Strategic communication

Paper type Conceptual paper

Society is facing a global threat: the climate crisis, which is not only an environmental crisis. It has also led to a public legitimacy crisis of established authorities and their strategic communication (Marshall and Goldstein, 2006). Accordingly, over recent years, we can observe growing strategic communication efforts by organizations, associations, groups and their representatives across various arenas, that is, business, media, politics, academia and protest (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Imhof, 2011; Lock, 2020), to present themselves as change agents (Sandhu, 2018) accountable and potent enough to fight the climate crisis. However, these communication efforts often do not lead to the aspired legitimacy. Rather, self-declared change agents in different arenas see themselves confronted to accusations of inconsistency, both in terms of hypocritical talk (Brunsson, 2003) and practical incapacity (Bromley and Powell, 2012). This “blame game” is not only discouraging, but also hinders the



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strategic formation of an arena-spanning joint communication agenda, which scholars consider vital to spurring social change as a response to climate change (Bennett, 2021; Neverla *et al.*, 2019; Weder *et al.*, 2021).

In recent years, strategic communication research has begun to contribute to this debate. In doing so, it has extended its established emphasis on corporate actors and consistent communication as key to evade public blaming (Dahl and Fløttum, 2019; Furlan Alves *et al.*, 2019) toward a stronger consideration of the necessarily contested nature of strategic climate communication, transcending arenas beyond the corporate sphere (Anton, 2023; Lock, 2023; Ravazzani and Maier, 2022). Still, systematic engagement with central debates in neighboring domains of climate and sustainability communication research (e.g. climate-related journalism, political communication, science communication or protest communication) is scarce. Furthermore, despite growing awareness of strategic climate communication as contested, there is limited acknowledgement of general organizational scholarship describing rising inconsistency perceptions as an inevitable effect of organizational agenda expansion toward environmental demands (Snelson-Powell *et al.*, 2020). This is not only true for accusations of hypocrisy rooted in the perceived inconsistency between climate communication and established practices (policy–practice decoupling) (Brunsson, 2003; Christensen *et al.*, 2020). It is also true for accusations of incapability rooted in the perceived inconsistency between increasingly hybrid practices and aspired climate goals (means–ends decoupling) (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2013; Wijen, 2014).

The present conceptual article argues that a comprehensive understanding of such decoupling accusations as shared challenge across different climate communication arenas presents a crucial step to approach the demanded formation of an arena-spanning climate communication agenda (Laininen, 2019; Neverla *et al.*, 2019; Newig *et al.*, 2013): First, accepting decoupling accusations as inevitable suggests embracing rather than downplaying them in strategic communication in the context of the climate crisis. Second, acknowledging that various agents in different arenas are affected by comparable accusations proposes a shift from mutual blaming to mutual approval of successful engagement. Third, accepting the current “blame game” as a shared communication challenge suggests that the future of climate communication may not lie in confrontation but in arena-spanning cooperation.

To develop such a comprehensive understanding, the current article proposes two theoretical expansions. First, it complements established issue- and crisis-focused arena approaches in strategic climate communication research (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Lock, 2020; Raupp, 2019) introducing an explicitly macro-focused public arena approach (Eisenegger *et al.*, 2019; Imhof, 2011). This allows for a systematic mapping of relevant climate communication arenas and how a global crisis such as the climate crisis impacts their institutional logics and legitimacy. Second, our article informs the research on the contested nature of strategic communication in the context of the climate crisis (e.g. Christensen *et al.*, 2013; Ihlen, 2015; Weder, 2022). To contribute to a more systematic understanding of genuine inconsistency challenges triggering the current “blame game” in strategic climate communication, we introduce the findings from the organizational decoupling literature, presenting accused policy–practice and means–ends decoupling as key manifestations of contested inconsistencies (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Stål and Corvellec, 2022; Wijen, 2014). Then, we systematically review extant climate-related strategic communication research for arena-specific inconsistencies and extend these considerations with central debates from neighboring domains of climate and sustainability communication research (Hammond, 2021; Yusuf and John, 2022; Yi and Feiock, 2015). This leads to a comprehensive framework of inconsistencies and decoupling accusations in different climate communication arenas. Concludingly, we discuss how this framework provides a promising basis for the formation of an arena-spanning strategic communication agenda. The framework provides the groundwork for strategic climate communication research and practice alike. For conceptual research, it

presents a comprehensive overview of the genuine communication challenges of established and hybrid agents in different climate communication arenas. For empirical research, the framework provides a basis for systematic sampling, data collection and analysis of decoupling accusations according to different types of agents and arenas. For climate communication practice, the framework creates awareness for the current blame game as a shared challenge, indicating steps for how to approach a joint strategic communication agenda.

Expanding the scope of strategic climate communication

Strategic communication research over the past two decades has developed growing interest in defining how to successfully communicate climate engagement in different application fields (e.g. [Dash and Dash, 2021](#); [Lee, 2021](#)), media environments (e.g. [Ihlen and Nitz, 2008](#); [Moreno and Capriotti, 2009](#)) and national-cultural contexts (e.g. [Gill *et al.*, 2008](#); [Thaker, 2020](#); [Yang *et al.*, 2017](#)). In line with the established definition of strategic communication as communication that “is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity” ([Zerfass *et al.*, 2018](#), p. 487), the focal research object to determine the strategic agenda and success of climate communication still presents the organization as a single, purposive agent with a particular emphasis on profit-driven corporations ([Dahl and Fløttum, 2019](#); [Furlan Alves *et al.*, 2019](#)). Only recently have scholars started to challenge and expand this focus ([Newig *et al.*, 2013](#); [Weder, 2021a](#)). This scholarship—prominently contributions following the rhetorical arena and issue arena approach (e.g. [Frandsen and Johansen, 2011](#); [Lock, 2020](#))—reflects on strategic climate communication as an arena-spanning, necessarily contested issue, hence calling for stronger reflection on distinct agendas and challenges of different agents involved.

Besides the core challenge of triggering behavioral and social change by strategic climate communication, the preceding challenge of positioning as a credible and potent change agent is regarded central ([Cox, 2010](#); [Laininen, 2019](#); [Weder *et al.*, 2021](#)). In strategic communication research, successful strategic positioning is traditionally equated to consistent communication (see critically: [Christensen and Christensen, 2018](#)). This also mirrors in climate-related research and its dominant recommendation of strategic communication that reflects corporate climate practices in a transparent, authentic and trustworthy manner (e.g. [Coombs and Holladay, 2021](#); [Kim and Lee, 2018](#)). This focus on consistency presents an understandable response to avoid a pervasive and often eligible critique of strategic climate communication as “greenwashing” ([Lyon and Montgomery, 2015](#)). However, more recently, scholars have reflected on the limits of consistency, placing stronger emphasis on the inevitably contested nature of strategic communication in the context of the climate crisis. This is reflected in recent propositions acknowledging the performative potential of corporate “aspirational talk” as a driver of public scrutiny and corporate change toward sustainability (e.g. [Christensen *et al.*, 2013, 2020](#); [Koep, 2017](#)). It also finds consideration in calls for stronger problematization of sustainability by facilitating exchange among antagonistic and dissenting voices (e.g. [Weder, 2021b, 2022](#); [Winkler *et al.*, 2020](#)). Also, it is part of the research on how to strategically deal with and work through persistent paradoxes of responsibility and sustainability communication (e.g. [Ihlen, 2015](#); [Jay *et al.*, 2017](#); [Morsing *et al.*, 2008](#); [Waddock and Googins, 2011](#)). Based on these recent advancements, our conceptual article contributes to an understanding of strategic climate communication as a genuinely arena-spanning and inconsistency-riddled communication endeavor.

The climate crisis as an arena-spanning public legitimacy crisis

Climate-related strategic communication scholarship has recently discovered the value of arena approaches in expanding its focus on climate communication as an issue crosscutting

different stakeholder groups and publics (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Lock, 2020, 2023). Among the most prominent, the rhetorical arena approach envisions an arena as “space that opens during a crisis and where different actors, including other corporations, political actors, activists, experts, and the media, talk to and about each other” (Raupp, 2019, p. 2). It presents a socio-discursive model that takes other social actors beyond corporations into account. However, rooted in organizational crisis communication, the emphasis of this approach is still on corporate crises, and rhetoric is approached as an instrument of corporate identity and reputation management for meaningful engagement with relevant stakeholders (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011).

The issue arena approach understands arenas as spaces where different agents negotiate societal ideals and challenges, facilitating reflection on contested power relations among different communication agents pursuing various interests and strategies (Lock, 2020; Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). The approach seeks to overcome organization centrism by taking an issue-centric perspective; hence, it is attentive to topics related to rising societal challenges and crisis (Lock, 2023). However, given its focus on the communication dynamics of arena formation around upcoming issues, the specific institutional conditions and constraints of social agents negotiating an issue are less reflected.

Both arena approaches have substantially informed our field to better comprehend climate communication as a necessarily highly contested topic that requires prudent consideration of and flexible response to various agents and agendas to restore public legitimacy. Yet despite this extended view, current approaches still elaborate on crises in terms of specific critical events or issues and how to find strategic responses on the organizational level. A perspective considering the current climate crisis as of global scale that unsettles the legitimacy of agents across all public arenas is lacking. The public arena approach introduced by Swiss communication scholar Kurt Imhof and colleagues (Eisenegger *et al.*, 2019; Imhof, 2011; Schmidt, 2014) provides such a macro focus. This approach explains the public sphere as constituted by different subordinated communication arenas (Schmidt, 2014) and specifies their conditions in times of social order and crisis. Public communication is divided into three main spheres: first, the central public sphere, containing the media, political and business communication arena; second, the expert public sphere, containing arenas such as the science communication arena; third, the peripheral public sphere, characterized by counter-public arenas constituted by agents such as activists and protest movements (Eisenegger *et al.*, 2019).

In times of social order, each of the public spheres and arenas follows distinct institutional logics. Arenas of the central public sphere maintain core societal ideals, for example, growth-based economic prosperity, legitimate political hegemony, or media coordination of public attention, to provide normative guidance to society. The expert public sphere justifies and certifies these ideals by means of evidence production. As a counterweight, counter-public arenas challenge central ideals yet remain at the periphery of public attention (Eisenegger *et al.*, 2019; Imhof, 2011).

In times of societal crises, such as the climate crisis, however, these spheres and arenas get in motion. Established ideals are scrutinized, and previous sense-giving authorities erode. Counter-public agents move into the midst of public attention and directly challenge the capacity and accountability of central agents to adapt to the crisis. Consequently, crisis discourse increases, affects all public arenas, and exerts pressure to respond and react (Imhof, 2011). This has a profound impact on the legitimacy of agents in all arenas (Eisenegger *et al.*, 2019; Lörcher and Taddicken, 2019). Because of the high level of public uncertainty and perceived necessity of fundamental societal change, publicly exposed agents in all arenas are expected to transcend the specific institutional logics established during times of social order. They are now requested to present themselves as sense givers, change agents and problem solvers of a broader societal scope (Sandhu, 2018).

In sum, Imhof's public arena approach provides a useful macro-perspective for understanding how the climate crisis puts publicly exposed actors in all arenas under legitimization pressure because they are now expected to present themselves as credible and potent change agents. Therefore, it extends current arena approaches in strategic climate communication research by providing an explicit macro focus on societal crises and their disruptive impact on the institutional standing and legitimacy of agents in different public arenas. To provide a systematic explanation of how this legitimacy crisis manifests on the single-agent level, we present current insights from decoupling research next.

Decoupling accusations reflecting the current legitimacy crisis

Consistency has traditionally been considered a key communication source to strategically position as a credible and potent change agent (Elving and Kartal, 2012). However, in the current climate crisis and subsequent legitimacy crisis of self-declared change agents, this consistency ideal seems increasingly difficult to achieve. Hence, in line with the above-mentioned performative, agonistic and paradox approaches in strategic communication (Christensen *et al.*, 2013; Ihlen, 2015; Morsing *et al.*, 2008; Weder, 2022), we consider stronger engagement with key drivers of public inconsistency perceptions crucial. The decoupling literature facilitates such an engagement. Decoupling represents a core concept of neo-institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Initially, it was introduced to describe processes in which organizational actors adapt to social expectations only superficially in ceremonial communication and formal policies, while their practices remain—often unintentionally—unaltered (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In recent decades, scholars have substantially modified and extended this initial concept in two directions.

Organizational sociologist Nils Brunsson (2003) has further elaborated on the above-described idea of *policy–practice decoupling* based on decision and system theory (Luhmann, 2018). Brunsson argues that contemporary organizations are increasingly confronted with manifold, often competing, social expectations that must be acknowledged to maintain public legitimacy. This has severe implications for the identity and positioning of contemporary organizations. It implies a gradual decline of what Brunsson calls the “action organization,” that is, an organization that is seen as legitimate because it fulfills a specific, self-defined logic. Rather, there is a growing tendency to present oneself as a “political organization,” that is, an organization that handles several, also competing, social expectations. This growing incorporation of incompatible expectations, however, often leads to processes of intra-organizational decoupling, which Brunsson (2003) identifies on the level of organizational talk, decisions and actions.

Applied to public expectations regarding the current climate crisis, this implies that organizations are under pressure to communicate and decide more regarding climate-related issues. As a result, however, they also increasingly struggle to decide and live up to this talk in practice. Following Brunsson, an increased public perception of hypocritical communication (Graafland and Smid, 2019) regarding climate-related communication is not necessarily rooted in strategic deception (Seele and Gatti, 2017) as accusations of greenwashing imply (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). It can also be interpreted as an unintended and often unavoidable consequence of organizational efforts to respond to external expectations.

Based on extensive literature reviews (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Jabbouri *et al.*, 2022), the literature has recently identified a second form of decoupling with particular empirical evidence in sustainability research (Stål and Corvellec, 2022; Wijen, 2014). This line of scholarship argues that, because of extended public scrutiny and pressure, established routines of policy–practice decoupling are complemented and replaced by *means–ends decoupling*. This concept applies to organizations that already align their practices with

pressing social issues and expectations. Many of them then turn into hybrid organizations—such as social enterprises, environmental entrepreneurs, or science activists—incorporating different institutional logics (Jay, 2013; Pache and Santos, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2013). Yet because of the incommensurability of logics, overcomplexity, lack of experience or excessive demands, such practical efforts of adaptation and hybridization also run the risk of being perceived as lagging behind or even counterproductive regarding aspired goals (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). Applied to the current climate discourse, public perceptions of means–ends decoupling need to be considered as a second crucial driver of the legitimacy loss of climate communication agents. They find expression in accusations of incompetence and hubris of self-declared change agents as they are perceived to underperform in the concrete implementation. In the following, we develop a framework providing a comprehensive overview of how such accusations of policy–practice decoupling and means–ends decoupling manifest in different climate communication arenas.

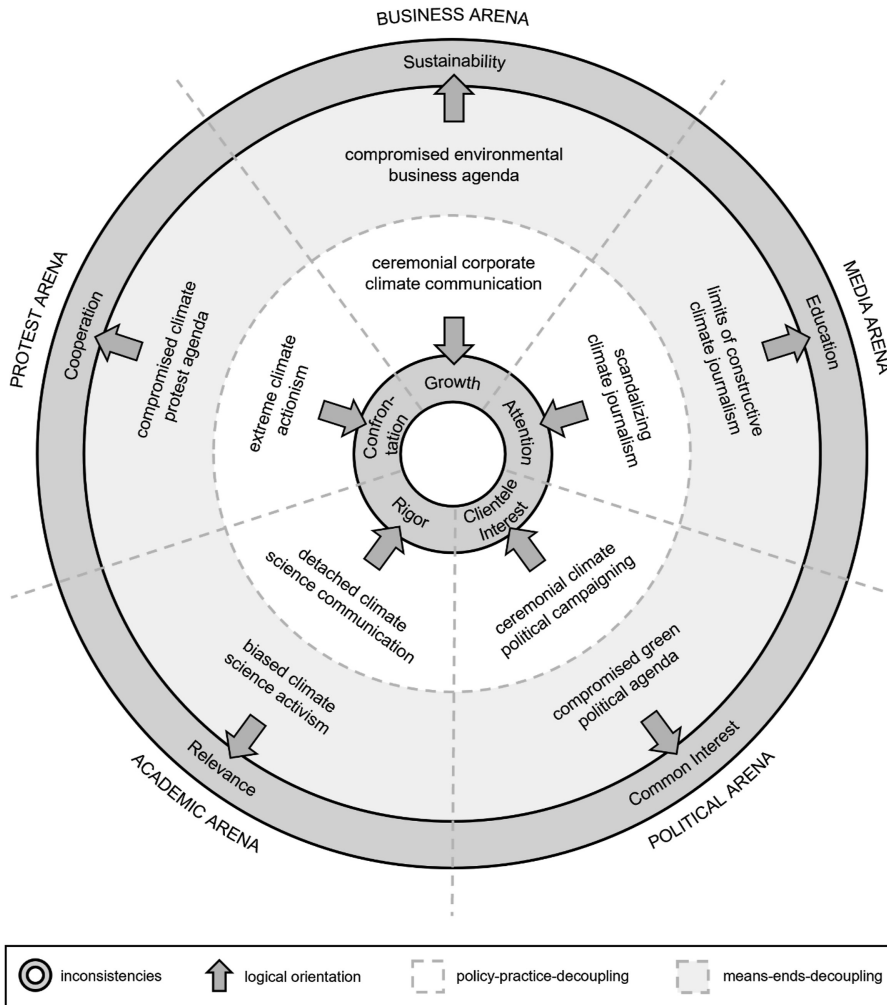
Decoupling accusations in climate communication arenas

Drawing on previous arena-focused strategic climate communication research (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Lock, 2020; Raupp, 2019) and Imhof's (2011) public arena approach, we define communication agents in the arenas of business, media, politics, academia and protest as publicly most exposed and scrutinized in the current climate crisis debate. The following framework aims at a first systematic mapping of decoupling accusations against self-declared change agents in these arenas.

We identified arena-specific decoupling accusations, starting with a systematic literature review of climate- and sustainability-related strategic communication research from 2007 until the end of June 2023. We chose 2007 as the starting date because it represents a hallmark in climate discourse with the publication of the fourth IPCC assessment report proving climate change as anthropogenic induced (IPCC, 2007). We focused on articles in five leading strategic communication journals (*International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Management Communication Quarterly*) containing the search terms “climate”, “sustainab*” or “environment*” either in the headline, keywords or abstract. In total, this resulted in 499 articles, 265 of which dealt with our research topic. We examined these articles for descriptions of agent-specific agendas and challenges of climate communication, with particular emphasis on spotted inconsistencies. We took into consideration inconsistencies directly addressed in the articles and inconsistencies that emerged analytically from divergent arena-specific descriptions.

Most articles focused on corporate climate communication. However, we identified communication challenges attributed to other arenas—journalism, politics, academia and protest—either focused on one specific arena or in an arena-comparative way (e.g. Bowers, 2010; Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). However, because reflections on the inconsistencies of climate communication were the most pronounced for the corporate sphere, we next consulted climate and sustainability communication literature in neighboring domains—that is, climate and sustainability communication in journalism, political, science and protest studies—to deduce and complement specific decoupling accusations for all relevant arenas. Our reflections on specific forms of policy–practice decoupling were primarily informed by key debates in critical scholarship, while our reflections on forms of means–ends decoupling stemmed from research on sustainability-related organizational hybridization.

Based on these reflections, we developed a comprehensive framework (see Figure 1) representing the key inconsistencies and corresponding decoupling accusations in the five climate communication arenas. We visualized the framework as a circle to emphasize the



Source(s): Created by the authors

Figure 1.
Inconsistencies and
decoupling accusations
across climate
communication arenas

logical comparability of decoupling accusations in different arenas. The framework consists of five sectors representing the specific climate communication arenas, along with four layers representing related challenges of climate communication. The inner and outermost layers of each sector present the key communication inconsistencies in each arena, which become apparent in the case of the current climate crisis. The inner layer stands for a self-referential institutional logic established in times of social order (Dernbach, 2015; Schimank, 2005), while the outer layer stands for extended environmental demands and scrutiny in times of crisis and legitimacy loss. Decoupling accusations resulting from perceptions of these inconsistencies are then mapped in the two middle layers. While the more central layer addresses accusations of policy–practice decoupling, hence the perceived inconsistencies between climate communication and practices still adhering to established institutional

logics, the more peripheral layer addresses forms of means–ends decoupling, hence the perceived inconsistencies between hybrid practices that already seek to adhere to environmental demands yet that are considered to fall short behind set goals. In the following section, we describe our model sector per sector. We start with the most researched climate communication arena—the business climate communication arena—and proceed clockwise. For each arena, we first explain the inconsistencies already identified in strategic communication scholarship (as fundamental tension between most inner and outer layer) and then outline the two corresponding forms of decoupling accusations (two middle layers). For space reasons, we cite literature only exemplarily in our elaborations.

Decoupling accusations in the business climate communication arena

The strategic communication literature is increasingly aware of the fundamental tension of climate communication in the business arena, which we define as *growth/sustainability inconsistency*. Despite pervasive claims of “a business case of sustainability” (Bowers, 2010, p. 249), this inconsistency indicates a growing acknowledgment that the principle of growth underlying profit logic is at odds with the principle of a long-term sustainable economy. Hence, the compatibility of adhering to the established profit logic and, at the same time, taking seriously the demands and prioritizing environmental issues can be considered a major challenge for corporate strategic communication (Bowers, 2010; McDermott, 2009).

This growth/sustainability inconsistency can manifest in two forms of decoupling accusations in the business arena. Critical management and organization studies particularly scrutinize *policy–practice decoupling* based on ceremonial climate communication, respectively “greenwashing”; hence, there is the accusation of a constellation, in which symbolic, exaggerated or distracting climate talk conceals practical adherence to the established business principle of profit and growth (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Seele and Gatti, 2017).

The drivers of *means–ends decoupling*, in turn, find consideration in studies on efforts to transform business in a long-term sustainable way, such as in the case of environmental entrepreneurship (Ansari *et al.*, 2013; Snelson-Powell *et al.*, 2020). However, because these efforts are embedded in an established growth-driven business environment (Banerjee, 2008; Bennett, 2021), profit logic still remains. This forces corporate agents into practical compromises of sustainability and profit goals (Pache and Santos, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2013; Wijen, 2014), which leads to accusations of incapability to pursue a devoted sustainability agenda against the climate crisis.

Decoupling accusations in the media climate communication arena

The strategic communication scholarship acknowledges the genuine tension of climate communication in the media arena, which we label *attention/education inconsistency*. On the downside, this inconsistency challenges the media arena to follow a short-term attention logic “of only bad news being good news” (Weder *et al.*, 2019, p. 370), which hinders long-term constructive engagement with the climate crisis. Yet on the positive side, scholars emphasize that the media can also play a key role in educating the public, thereby triggering behavioral change in accordance with climate change (Crumley *et al.*, 2022; Krishna, 2021; Weder *et al.*, 2019).

When elaborating on genuine forms of *policy–practice decoupling* in the media arena, critical media and journalism scholarship focuses on the attention side of this inconsistency. Thereby, these studies scrutinize scandalizing and dramatized climate communication, which focuses on climate change-related disasters, noncompliance and misconduct that attract quick public attention yet abstain from more substantial long-term awareness building (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Parratt-Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

Reflections on media-specific accusations of *means–ends decoupling*, in turn, find consideration in the literature on hybrid forms of journalism such as constructive journalism. These elaborations focus on journalistic practices seeking to provide solutions to grand societal challenges, such as the climate crisis, while offering concrete propositions on how to act beyond mere news dissemination (Thier and Lin, 2022). The capability of constructive climate journalism to trigger real social change, however, is controversially discussed because of the limits of positive communication psychology, particularly in times of crisis and increased public skepticism (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018). Further, it is deemed to “break with the norms of Western journalism” (From and Nørgaard Kristensen, 2018, p. 718) such as impartiality.

Decoupling accusations in the political climate communication arena

The strategic communication scholarship is also aware of a genuine tension of climate communication in the political arena, which we define as *clientele/common interest inconsistency*. Political agents must inevitably balance colliding interests. On the one hand, their communication has to be aligned to particular clientele and voter interests for power accumulation; on the other hand, political communication is also demanded to consider the general interests of *all* citizens in terms of “making policies and elaborating bills that are supposed to eliminate or abate the consequences of the climate change” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011, p. 515) for the sake of general public welfare.

Critical political communication scholarship scrutinizes a lean toward the clientele side of this inconsistency in elaborations on the roots of *policy–practice decoupling* in the political arena. This is the case when ecological issues find bold consideration in political campaigns and programs to attract general votership but are ignored in the real political implementation and execution because of divergent clientele interests (Leviäkangas, 2021).

Means–ends decoupling is addressed in scholarship engaged with political actors that already have a credible reputation as devoted change agents regarding climate issues, such as many green parties in opposition. However, when in charge, these actors are often accused of lacking the capability to act in the necessary scope and pace (Hammond, 2021). This is due to the highly formalized, necessarily compromise-seeking conventions of political decision-making and their coalitionary and locally limited scope of influence (Deese, 2019; Yi and Feiock, 2015).

Decoupling accusations in the academic climate communication arena

The strategic communication scholarship also limitedly engages with the genuine tension of climate communication in the academic arena, which we define as *rigor/relevance inconsistency*. The agents in this arena are functionally expected to produce, document and disseminate reliable evidence according to rigid institutionalized scientific standards (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). However, academia is increasingly also demanded to “convince publics about risks of climate change” (Jun, 2011, p. 245) and to provide relevant action advice to other agents and the general public (Koivumäki and Wilkinson, 2020).

Critical scholarship on established modes of science communication particularly addresses the drivers of *policy–practice decoupling* resulting from a too pronounced lean toward rigor. This finds manifestation in the critique of academic climate communication reduced to a detached delivery of “brute facts” remaining in the privileged “ivory tower”, while lacking further engagement according to what actions these facts indicate (Dahinden, 2004; Peters, 2013).

Accusations of *means–ends decoupling*, in turn, find consideration in scholarship that reflects on the implications of new hybrid forms of engaged science, such as “Mode 2”, “transformative” or “activist science” (Nowotny, 2008; Priest, 2019; Reincke *et al.*, 2020). They transcend the agenda of rigorous evidence provision and explicitly aim at creating relevant, socially robust knowledge capable of fighting pressing issues such as the climate crisis.

However, the collaborative process between researchers and practitioners has been criticized as exceeding the core scientific competences of providing neutral, reliable evidence. Furthermore, it runs the risk of neglecting the norms of thoroughness and rigor, turning science into an object of personal ideology or political instrumentalization (Bartunek, 2011; Hessels and van Lente, 2008; Mielke *et al.*, 2016; Yusuf and John, 2022).

Decoupling accusations in the protest climate communication arena

Finally, strategic communication scholars address a genuine tension of climate communication in the protest arena, discussed here as *confrontation/cooperation inconsistency*. Confrontation concerns the established protest logic to provoke through often radical and disruptive “social-communicative actions [that] shape the public debate to bring about social change” (Oliveira *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). However, to transcend episodic peaks of attention and create constructive change, protest agents engage in network building and cooperation over time, which is at odds with the initial confrontative appeal (McDermott, 2009; Woods, 2022).

Critical scholarship on protest communication emphasizes the downside of confrontative communication in its elaborations on *policy–practice decoupling* in the protest arena. It scrutinizes that protest communication, with its attention-seeking extreme positions and actionist campaigns, insistence on radical maximum demands, and immediate scandalization of deviant behavior, tends to jeopardize the practical necessity of building relationships with journalists, politicians and companies (Fox and Frye, 2010; Lee, 2016).

The drivers of *means–ends decoupling* in the protest arena find reflection in scholarship on constructive forms of protest movements, which emerge when these movements extend, differentiate and formalize their original profile and organizational structure, for example, toward an NGO or political party (Toplišek and Thomassen, 2017). However, these new streamlined practices betray foundational principles because increased cooperation readiness also implies adaptation to the logics of compromising. Consequently, “activists lose their typical activist attributes as they become institutionalized” (Holtzhausen, 2007, p. 369).

Discussion

Our contribution provides a first systematic overview of decoupling accusations in different climate communication arenas—business, media, political, academic and protest. Starting from the recent acknowledgment of climate communication as a necessarily contested, arena-spanning endeavor in strategic communication research, we develop a framework informed by Imhof’s (2011) public arena theory and decoupling literature. The framework draws on a systematic review of climate-related strategic communication literature and key debates in neighboring fields. It reveals publicly perceived inconsistencies as a shared, often inevitable, challenge of strategic climate communication. This counts for climate communication across various arenas, and it concerns both established and hybrid agents; hence, agents that still adhere to as well as agents seeking to transcend established institutional logics.

Conceptual contribution

We consider our findings to be a valuable conceptual contribution to the current strategic climate communication research. It complements current efforts in strategic communication scholarship to approach the climate crisis as an arena-spanning communication challenge, most prominently by scholars applying the rhetorical arena and issue arena approach (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Lock, 2020). Concretely, we introduce Kurt Imhof’s (2011) explicitly macro-focused *public arena approach*. This approach facilitates a conceptualization of the current climate crisis as a global crisis, in which self-declared change agents in different

arenas struggle with a comparable legitimacy crisis. This insight supports recent critiques of the limits of conceptualizing strategic climate communication on a single-actor level. Rather, it underscores the necessity of stronger arena-spanning research.

Second, our findings contribute to current insights in strategic communication research that climate communication inevitably leads to public perceptions and accusations of inconsistency (Christensen *et al.*, 2013; Ihlen, 2015; Morsing *et al.*, 2008; Weder, 2022). Concretely, our contribution does so by substantiating our diagnosis of a shared legitimacy crisis—the current “blame game” in public climate communication—by elaborating on *the concept of decoupling*. Our findings underscore an understanding of decoupling as a perceptual (Seele and Gatti, 2017), often inevitable phenomenon in climate communication. Competing demands when dealing with climate-related issues imply a growing visibility of inconsistencies—either between climate talk and practices (policy–practice decoupling) or between practices and acclaimed climate goals (means–ends decoupling). Furthermore, we show that raised public awareness and scrutiny of decoupling are by no means limited to corporate communication. In related ways, they also count for climate communication in the media, political, academic and protest arenas. This, again, calls for a stronger exchange between different subfields of climate communication research (Bendito and Barrios, 2016; Schipper *et al.*, 2021).

Third, our contribution presents the groundwork to better understand the implications of growing *institutional complexity* in strategic communication research in the wake of a global, all-embracing crisis. It does so in two ways. First, our framework provides a systematic overview, which decoupling accusations are to be expected for self-declared change agents when performing in different climate communication arenas. Indeed, decoupling accusations show some similarities across arenas, yet they are also riddled by specific inconsistencies, given the underlying institutional logics and environmental demands. Second, our framework explicitly considers the strategic communication challenges of organizational hybrids emerging in the current climate crisis, hence agents seeking to integrate established institutional and upcoming environmental demands (e.g. sustainable business, constructive journalism, science activism or institutionalizing protest movements). The formation of these new hybrid agents may present a promising step forward. Still, our model shows that these agents also struggle with specific public perceptions and accusations of inconsistency in terms of means-ends decoupling, which calls for stronger consideration in future strategic climate communication research.

Contribution to empirical research

Our typology of decoupling accusations also provides the groundwork for future empirical research. Concretely, the proposed communication arenas, the inherent decoupling accusations, and underlying perceptions of hypocrisy and incapacity are instructive for three empirical purposes: first, the systematic sampling of arenas and agents playing a key role in the current climate discourse; second, the data collection (e.g. for content or discourse analysis) and conception of survey instruments (e.g. expert, problem centered or group interviews) based on specific inconsistencies and decoupling challenges; third, the deduction of categories and codes to analyze these data (e.g. according to arena and agent specific accusations). Again, as different communication arenas and their interaction are in focus, future empirical projects may benefit from cooperation among scholars from different subfields of climate communication research, such as scholarship in strategic communication, journalism, protest research or political communication.

Practical recommendations

Finally, we consider our findings to be a useful contribution to approaching a joint practical agenda in strategic climate communication (Laininen, 2019; Neverla *et al.*, 2019; Newig *et al.*, 2013; Weder *et al.*, 2021). We present this contribution in three propositions.

The first proposition is to *shift from avoiding to embracing perceived inconsistency* in strategic climate communication. We understand that this proposition contradicts consistency-centrism still dominant in strategic communication research. Yet we recommend this shift to overcome the current, increasingly discouraging “blame game”. Two lines of scholarship can inform what such inconsistency-sensitive strategic climate communication may look like.

The first line of scholarship builds on the already introduced concept of “aspirational talk” (Christensen *et al.*, 2013), yet it places emphasis on how to successfully engage with perceived talk-action inconsistencies (policy–practice decoupling) in the further process (Christensen *et al.*, 2020; Penttilä, 2020; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022; Winkler *et al.*, 2020). Concretely, this stream of the literature focuses on how to respond to public and internal scrutiny triggered by aspirational sustainability talk. It is argued that agents should acknowledge and learn from perceptions and accusations of inconsistencies; listen to and engage with affective opposition triggered by perceived inconsistencies; and acknowledge and integrate this opposition into the concrete realization of initial aspirations. These competencies, we propose, shall be at the heart of future strategic climate communication.

They can be complemented by the findings of a second body of literature engaging with the communicative challenges of organizational hybrids (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Jay, 2013; Pache and Santos, 2013; Wijen, 2014), hence an increased perception of means–ends decoupling. The literature suggests two promising ways of engagement in the face of inconsistent institutional logics: first, “selective coupling” in terms of identifying and mediating between opportunities that allow for situated matching of competing logics (Pache and Santos, 2013) and, second, paradox reasoning in terms of presenting different logics as mutually dependent, despite inherent competition (Jay *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2013). Hence, we consider communicative conciliation between competing institutional logics a second vital competency of future strategic climate communication to overcome the current blame game, restoring public legitimacy.

These two competencies are prerequisites to our second proposition: to *shift from mutual blaming to mutual approval of accountable engagement with perceived inconsistencies*. If strategic climate communication shifts its focus to successful engagement with perceived inconsistencies, one-sided blaming of the inconsistencies of other agents makes little sense. Rather, it calls for balanced mutual approval. This implies going beyond inconsistency spotting and blaming in public climate communication, which is comparably easy to do yet also increasingly discouraging. Instead, it invites climate communication agents to scrutinize each other in the way they engage with accusations of inconsistency. This shift in perspective still assures that strategic deception and duplicity in climate communication will be spotted and scrutinized. Yet it also supports the identification of accountable ways of communicative engagement with perceived inconsistency, which agents across different arenas can mutually learn from and positively approve for each other.

Our last proposition argues for *moving from mutual confrontation to cooperation between climate communication agents*. This proposition does not naively ignore the necessity of tensions between different public communication arenas, not least because of their different institutional logics. Yet if mutual approval of accountable engagement with perceived inconsistencies moves into the center of strategic climate communication, opportunities for strategic cooperation shall no longer be ignored. Just think of demanding sustainability aspirations, attempts at organizational hybridization or struggle with decoupling accusations, which may be solved by communicative support from other arenas. Various ways of arena-spanning cooperation are thinkable as soon as the joint communication agenda is clear: to overcome the “blame game” in climate communication to fight the climate crisis as a shared global threat.

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