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Developing advocacy strategies for avoiding discourse failure through moralizing and emotionalizing campaigns

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Matthias Georg Will und Ingo Pies

Developing Advocacy Strategies for Avoiding Discourse Failure through Moralizing and Emotionalizing Campaigns

Diskussionspapier Nr. 2019-01

des Lehrstuhls für Wirtschaftsethik
an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg,
hrsg. von Ingo Pies,
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Kurzfassung

In den letzten Jahren entwickelte sich eine lebhafte Debatte, wie NGOs ineffizientes Verhalten sowie Reputationsprobleme besser in den Griff bekommen können. Ein großer Teil dieser Debatte konzentrierte sich auf Accountability-Standards. Allerdings weisen diese Maßnahmen eine ernstzunehmende systematische Schwachstelle auf: Sie sind für NGOs mit einem Fokus auf Advocacy weitestgehend ungeeignet. Dieser Beitrag präsentiert einen beispielhaften Fall, um aufzuzeigen, wie NGOs trotz edler Ziele aufgrund moralisierender und emotionalisierender Kampagnen nicht-intendiert hohe Risiken eingehen. Anhand der empirisch fundierten Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) wird dargelegt, wie die Skandalisierung von Glyphosat den langfristigen Zielen der NGOs entgegenläuft, ökologische und soziale Probleme zu lösen. Hierauf aufbauend entwickelt der Beitrag Kommunikationsstrategien, wie mithilfe einer geeigneten Semantik riskante Kampagnen vermieden werden können. Darüber hinaus legt dieses Diskussionspapier dar, wie NGOs institutionellen Wandel innerhalb ihrer Organisationen und der Gesellschaft unterstützen können. Entsprechende Governance-Strukturen könnten NGOs helfen, der Versuchung zu populistischen Kampagnen zu widerstehen und so der sozialen Falle zu entkommen, ihre gesellschaftliche Selbst-Aufklärungs- und Selbst-Regulierungs-Funktion selbst zu gefährden.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Diskursversagen, Rational Choice, NGOs, Moral Foundations Theory, Advocacy

Abstract

In recent years scholars just as practitioners have been developing measures for addressing inefficiencies and reputational problems of NGOs, which offer goods and services. However, these accountability standards may not be sufficient for advocacy NGOs. As we show in an exemplary case, moralizing and emotionalizing campaigns may not-intentionally increase risks for NGOs even if the involved NGOs have noble aims. We use the psychologically and empirically well-founded Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to highlight how the scandalization of glyphosate counteracts NGOs' long-term interests in highlighting and solving ecological and social issues. Against the backdrop of MFT, we present communication strategies that enable appropriate semantics for avoiding such risky campaigns. Second, we highlight how NGOs can encourage institutional changes within the society and their organizations. Such governance structures may help them to resist the temptation of populist campaigning and thus to escape the current trap of self-endangering their important role for societal and ecological advocacy.

Keywords: Discourse Failure, Rational Choice, NGOs, Moral Foundations Theory, Advocacy

Developing Advocacy Strategies for Avoiding Discourse Failure through Moralizing and Emotionalizing Campaigns

Matthias Georg Will und Ingo Pies

Introduction

NGOs are important organizations for addressing social and ecological issues. In functionally differentiated societies, their special function is to help initiate processes for searching, finding, and implementing solutions to complex societal problems (Will et al., 2017). In other words, NGOs have an important role to play as advocacy initiatives. However, this role primarily depends on their capabilities to run responsible campaigns (Hielscher et al., 2017; Pies and Will, 2016). As we show in a case study that analyzes the public debate for a ban of the plant protection agent Glyphosate in the European Union, the rise of new communication technologies and the changes within the traditional media landscape may non-intentionally promote populist campaigns with many risks for NGOs even if the involved NGOs have noble aims. Under certain conditions, advocacy may promote “discourse failures” (Pincione and Tesón, 2006) – public debates that do not appease but aggravate social conflicts, or may cause political regulation that results in high costs for third parties and may thus even contradict the original aims of the campaign. As an outcome that is not intended, discourse failure may lead to political failure and – via (mis-)regulation – to market failure.

Hielscher et al. (2017) as well as Will and Pies (2016) apply rational-choice approaches for analyzing discourse failures as a consequence of deliberate advocacy strategies of NGOs. Such approaches employ the idea that discourses may fail because of “rational irrationality” (Caplan, 2000; 2001a; 2001b) – people may have an emotional tie and thus a preference for wrong beliefs on the consequences of alternative policies. For a psychological foundation of this research, we apply the empirically well-founded Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Graham *et al.*, 2009; Graham *et al.*, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2012a; Graham *et al.*, 2012b; Haidt *et al.*, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Iyer *et al.*, 2012)). We highlight how the NGO campaign for a ban of the herbicide Glyphosate addresses different moral beliefs on the right and left of the political spectrum. As MFT shows, triggering our moral beliefs limits our cognitive skills to balance pros and cons of an argument in an appropriate way. Moreover, if a campaign triggers our moral beliefs, we systematically tend to rationalize our emotional intuition ex-post. Exactly this makes scandalizing and moralizing campaigns so attractive for NGOs: with such a triggering of our moral beliefs, NGOs can reach a high media attention, which may further aggravate the bias in people’s beliefs, leading to an attention spiral that channels support to NGO campaigns. As our Glyphosate case shows, such a deliberate campaigning may result in discourse failure because such campaigns prevent appropriate debates between important stakeholders and cause conflicts that make it impossible to find mutually acceptable solutions for social and ecological problems. Against the backdrop, we present strategies how NGOs can implement higher standards for the self-governance of the NGO sector. By doing so, we assume that NGOs have a vital self-interest in achieving better outcomes, and especially in avoiding discourse failures, because otherwise they might lose their credibility for addressing and solving social and ecological problems.

The paper is organized as follows: In the first section, we discuss previous research on NGO accountability and NGO failure. We highlight how recent research reconstructs discourse failure by applying the idea of rational irrationality. In our second section, we present the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) as a psychological foundation of the concept of rational irrationality. We illustrate the explanatory power of MFT by reconstructing the NGOs' campaign for a ban of Glyphosate. MFT highlights first why NGOs often use moralizing and emotionalizing campaigns for advocacy, and second, why such campaigns bear a high risk of resulting in discourse failure. In our final section, we present strategies how NGOs can avoid discourse failure without surrendering their noble social and ecological aims. We discuss which strategies for campaigning can be implemented by single NGOs and which strategies have to be implemented collectively by the whole NGO sector. We thereby identify governance structures that help NGOs to resist the temptation of populist campaigning and thus to escape the current trap of self-endangering their important role for societal and ecological advocacy.

I. Discourse Failures and Advocacy: Ruinous NGO Competition caused by Rational Irrationality

In recent years, the debate about NGO accountability has become more and more important both for academic researchers and for practitioners (Crack, 2013a; 2013b; 2014). For example, some NGOs founded in 1997 the so-called "Sphere" Project for achieving quality standards in the field of humanitarian assistance (Sphere Project, 2018). Another example is "Accountable Now" (formerly named as International Non-Governmental Organisations Accountability Charter or as INGO Accountability Charter), a self-regulatory standard of 27 big and international NGOs like Amnesty International, Transparency International, Greenpeace International or the SOS Children's Villages International Secretariat, to name just a few. This initiative, established in 2006, aims at supporting "civil society organisations [...] to be transparent, responsive to stakeholders and focused on delivering impact" (Accountable Now, 2018).

These endeavors by NGOs are reflected within academia. For example, Crack (2013a) summarizes these efforts as "two-waves" of NGO accountability. According to her summary, the first wave of accountability primarily focused on standards for donors. Against the backdrop of different NGOs scandals, in which NGOs lost reputation because of wasting and abusing donors' funds, NGOs had to implement accountability standards to improve transparency and management. Private and public donors required accountability regarding the sources and application of funds (AbouAssi, 2012; Cordery and Baskerville, 2010; Phillips, 2012; Sloan, 2009).

The second wave, according to Crack (2013a), focused on "accountability to mission". While the first wave concentrated more on "accountability for good governance", the second wave addresses NGOs' orientation to achieve their aims (Ebrahim, 2005; Murataza, 2011; Saxton and Guo, 2011; Schmitz et al., 2012; Hug and Jäger, 2014; Williams and Taylor, 2013). These accountability measures played an important part in contributing to NGOs' professionalization, since these organizations had to consider and solve tradeoffs among their activities. In some cases, the strong focus of NGOs on funding and social activism caused a crowding-out of their original mission, so they deviated from supporting their target groups. Instead of offering goods and services for their beneficiaries, some NGOs spent much too many resources for fundraising. In addition, many NGO

projects lacked efficiency and even effectiveness, which is a hindrance for the NGOs' mission to promote sustainable societal change. Against this backdrop, the second wave focused on the strategic capabilities of NGOs to implement their mission in an efficient and effective way.

However, both the first and the second wave of accountability have a blind spot regarding advocacy. For example, Bloodgood (2011), Hielscher et al. (2017), and Will & Pies (2016) argue that the above achievements for improving accountability had a focus primarily on funding and the provision of different goods and services. What is missing are standards that are appropriate for advocacy. By referencing to the work of Bloodgood (2011) as well as Will & Pies (2016), Hielscher et al. (2017) argue that the problems that cause a failure of advocacy are quite different from the problems of the first two waves. Regarding the reasons for the accountability standards of the first two waves, poorly managed interactions between NGOs and their funders and beneficiaries, respectively, may have caused problems. To solve such problems, NGOs can commit themselves through accountability standards. These standards make financial scandals more difficult (the first wave), and they improve the organizational processes so that NGOs become more efficient and effective (the second wave). Because these decisions can be taken by a single NGO, self-commitments are functional to overcome such deficits. Therefore, appropriate accountability initiatives can increase mutual trust, and they can foster efficiency and effectivity.

In the case of advocacy, however, collective problems within the whole NGO sector may prevent single NGOs from sustainably raising standards (Hielscher et al., 2017; Will & Pies, 2016). The reason for this might be that a critical mass within society is prone to populist campaigning. In such an environment, the dynamic of the public discourse may cause a race-to-the-bottom, resulting in discourse failures: such failures may drive NGOs into a situation in which they become populist as a means (and not an end) for achieving their organizational goals (Friedman, 1986; Hielscher et al., 2017; Swinnen, 2011; Will & Pies, 2016). Becoming populist might be a dominant strategy in discourses in which other actors are successful with such strategies. Even NGOs with noble aims may succumb to such a dynamic (Will & Pies, 2016). However, following such strategies may involve high reputational risks for single NGOs and even for the whole NGO sector. Compared to Bloodgood's (2011) counter-critique against right-wing critics, who accuse NGOs of having immoral aims for advocacy, this focus on the dynamics of discourse failures reveals that advocacy NGOs may find themselves trapped in a situation with strong incentives in favor of outcompeting each other via overpopulist campaigning strategies. As the rational-choice analyses of Hielscher et al. (2017) as well as Will & Pies (2016) highlight, this can happen independently of – and even contrary to – the NGOs' (noble) intentions.

The reason for such discourse failures and the involved misdirection of advocacy can be explained with the concept of rational irrationality. This idea goes back to Caplan (2000, 2001a, 2001b), who builds his theory on differentiating two forms of rationality: epistemic and instrumental rationality. Epistemic rationality considers how we form our beliefs. Instrumental rationality, instead, considers a means-ends problem: how can we achieve our aims in an efficient and effective way when our actual beliefs are given? If we assume that people undergo different processes of socialization, they might come up with mental models or even ideologies that inappropriately describe the functioning of the real world. Although they may have wrong beliefs of causal relationships, they might

have emotional ties with their wrong beliefs. Figure 1 shows why behaving in an epistemically irrational way may be instrumentally rational.

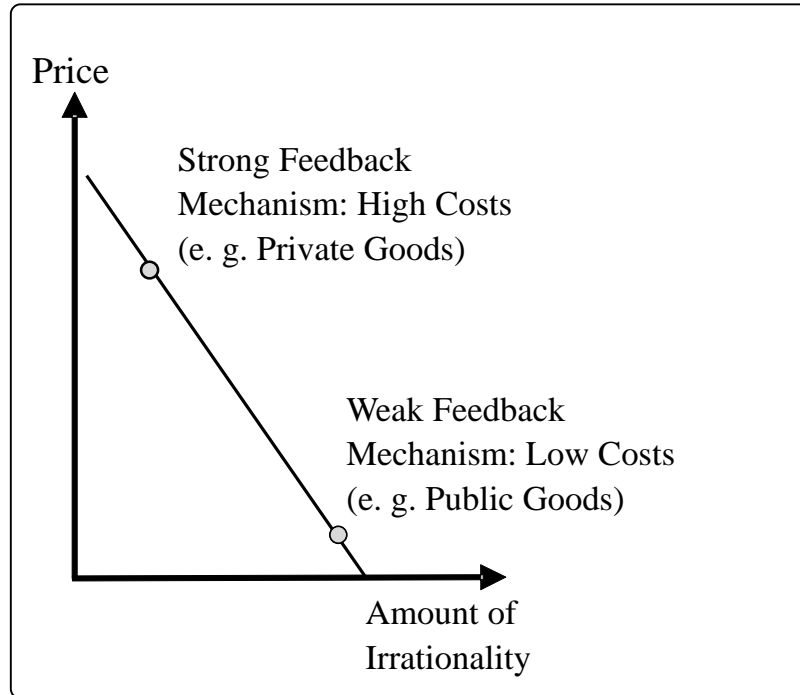


Figure 1: The Demand for Rational Irrationality (based on Figure 2 in Caplan, 2001a, p. 8; and see also Diagramm 3 in Caplan 2001b, p. 315)

The line with the negative slope in Figure 1 illustrates the individual demand curve for irrationality. According to the “price” of (epistemic) irrationality, we “demand” different levels of (epistemic) irrationality. Two examples highlight this interdependence (see also Thomas et al, 2013).

(a) In the case of buying a private good – like a car –, epistemic irrationality is relatively expensive because wrong beliefs regarding the features of the good have a direct effect on our private welfare. We would waste our money for a product that does not fulfill our expectations. In such a situation, the consequences of our personal behavior have a strong feedback effect on our beliefs. Because we anticipate this, we try to prevent bad experiences and adapt our behavior in advance. For example, we collect information regarding the features of the good that we want to buy, and we adjust our prior beliefs accordingly. Therefore, the demand curve depicts a simple economic logic: the higher the price of irrationality, the lower is the demand (Tirole, 2002).

(b) However, in the case of public goods – like environmental and social issues –, the price of irrationality is relatively low because our erroneous beliefs have comparatively weak feedback effects. Because of the public goods problematic, we hardly realize the behavioral consequences of our beliefs, and this is why we can “afford” such beliefs because the consequences are socialized. From this point of view, it is not surprising that we can observe people having strong beliefs in favor of e.g. environmentalism in political discussions on the societal level without acting accordingly in their everyday behavior on the individual level (Humphrey, 2009). Furthermore, that we see a strong polarization regarding beliefs about anthropogenic global warming is just another case in point (Cook & Lewandowsky, 2016). The fast growth of social media and online news consumption

may even lower the price for epistemic irrationality because filter bubbles and echo chambers may promote confirmation bias. In such a discursive environment, problematic individual beliefs are likely not to be challenged anymore (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakshy et al., 2015; Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009; Pfeffer et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2015).

This may become a problem for NGO advocacy because campaigns often focus on public goods (like raising awareness for ecological and social issues). The according beliefs are especially prone to suffering from rational irrationality. Hence, the proliferation of social media may even reinforce a vicious circle of emotionalization and irrationality, thus leading to discourse failure. Such a societal context may cause a ruinous race-to-the-bottom among advocacy NGOs: faced with competitive pressure, modern media induce NGOs to address their potential supporters' irrational beliefs, and as a side effect the integrity and factual accuracy of NGOs declines (Hielscher et al., 2017; Will & Pies, 2016).

The theory of rational irrationality and its application to discourse failures provides a better understanding why NGOs might need appropriate accountability standards for advocacy, or why there is a demand for a “third wave” of accountability, as Hielscher et al (2017) call it. For developing appropriate governance structures, however, we might need a profound understanding of the psychological logic why exactly advocacy may contribute to – and finally suffer from – rational irrationality. This is why the following section draws on the so-called Moral Foundation Theory. This theory explains why morally perceived issues are vulnerable to rational irrationality. As we illustratively highlight in a case study, many NGO campaigns address social and ecological issues in a moral way, and exactly this makes the Moral Foundation Theory beneficial as a psychological foundation of the concept of rational irrationality. As we will argue in the last section, the Moral Foundations Theory is a valuable starting point for developing appropriate accountability standards for avoiding discourse failure through rational irrationality.

II. A Psychological Foundation of Rational Irrationality: The Moral Foundation Theory

In this section we provide a short overview of the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). This approach is a highly powerful framework for understanding how we might emotionally react to the campaigning of NGOs and why an emotionally driven campaigning strategy may exacerbate rational irrationality. As our Glyphosate case study reveals in the next section, addressing different moral beliefs through NGOs' scandalizing strategies is a powerful way of running a campaign. As we will highlight, such a campaign may cause a high in-group cohesion and strong support among the NGOs' target groups, whereas it may produce an increasing out-group divergence between the NGOs' supporters and other stakeholders. This may result in highly polarized public debates with intractable conflicts because of two reasons: (1) such campaigns may cause strong emotional reactions, which limit cognitive capabilities to reflect complex questions of societal (self-)governance, as we illustrate in our case study on the regulation of using plant protection products. (2) MFT identifies six moral dimensions, which are differently developed within the population; hence, emotionalizing campaigns may cause a divide between different groups and might give rise to irreconcilable narratives, thus jeopardizing democratic learning processes.

The above argumentation on epistemic rationality highlights that our beliefs are important for cognition. However, our cognition is not only influenced by reasoning alone. Emotions, too, are central for information processing, especially in the case of unforeseen and surprising events (Ekman, 1992; Lazarus, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Scherer, 1984; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). As the so-called social intuitionist model in Figure 2 (Haidt, 2001; Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2003; Haidt, 2012; Greene & Haidt, 2002) highlights, triggering events may cause judgements that mainly depend on a person's emotional intuition. Put differently, moral reasoning in the sense of "reasoned judgement" (case 5) or "private reflection" (case 6) seems to be the exception rather than the rule if strong moral emotions are involved.

As empirical findings from several large-scale studies reveal (Graham *et al.*, 2009; Graham *et al.*, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2012a; Graham *et al.*, 2012b; Haidt *et al.*, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Iyer *et al.*, 2012), our intuition is strongly influenced by six dimensions of moral beliefs: care/harm, liberty/oppression, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and/or sanctity/degradation. These six dimensions of moral beliefs are at the center of MFT.

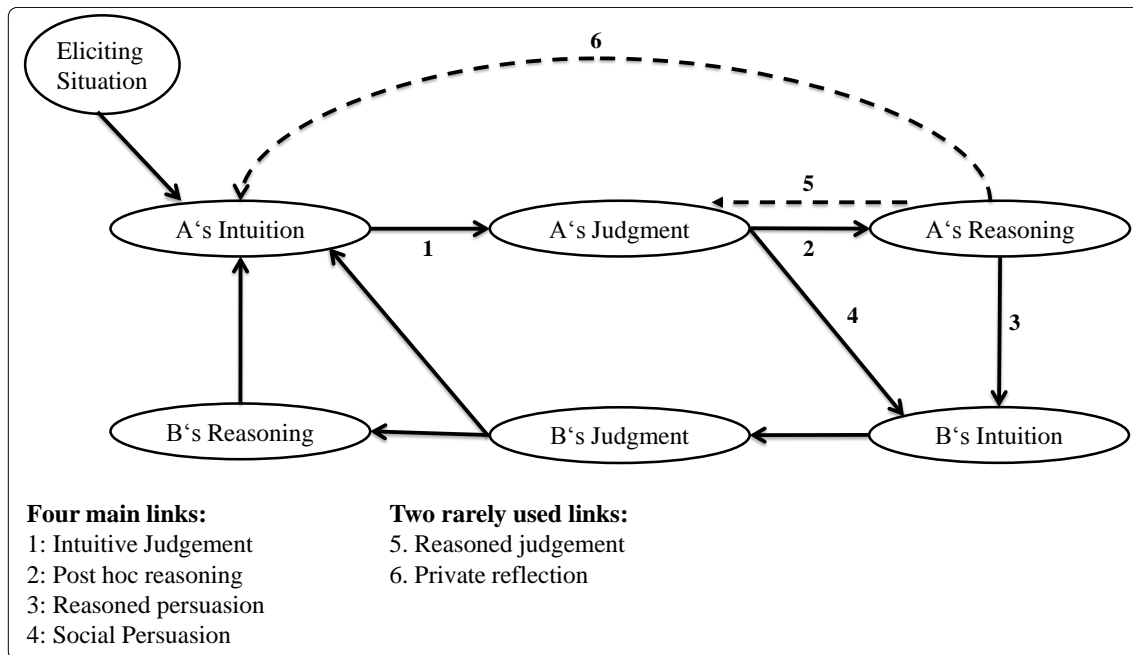


Figure 2: Social Intuitionist Model (own figure referring to Haidt (2001, p. 815, Figure 2))

(a) If people perceive a situation through the care/harm dimension, they ask whether people in need receive help. This causes a positive emotion. In contrast, if innocent people are injured, negative emotions arise. (b) Liberty can cause positive emotions, while oppression causes negative emotions (c) If people reconstruct a situation through the fairness/cheating perspective, they are sensitive for ideas of equality. In general, fair outcomes cause positive emotions, whereas inequality, exploitation, or discrimination result in negative emotions. (d) The dimension loyalty/betrayal is addressed positively when we perceive someone as being committed to a mission or a person. In contrast, when we see that someone is betraying this mission or this person, this causes negative feelings. (e) Accepting authorities can create positive emotions. Subversion, however, is for many people linked with negative emotions. (f) Sanctity and the belief that something is perfect

or sacred can trigger our feelings in a positive way, whereas degrading holy and worshipped people or venerated and enshrined objects can cause negative feelings.

As the empirical findings of Graham *et al.* (2009), Graham *et al.* (2011), Graham *et al.* (2012a), Graham *et al.* (2012b), Haidt *et al.* (2009), Haidt (2012), Iyer *et al.*, (2012) reveal, personal traits explain up to what extent individuals are affected by these six dimensions. Because of this, individuals and groups of individuals might differ in their reactions to a triggering event. However, findings also show that three universal characterizations exist that are quite stable over nations, cultures and ethnic groups, namely – referring to the US American political system – liberal (i.e. left), conservative and libertarian. Empirical research shows that individuals with a liberal trait are emotionally affected in a strong way if events trigger the care/harm dimension, whereas triggering events that can be perceived through the dimensions of liberty/oppression or fairness/cheating have a medium effect. All other three dimensions hardly influence the emotions of liberals. In sharp contrast, individuals with conservative traits have a more balanced focus on all six dimensions. Thus, triggering events cause medium emotional reactions. Again, this is different for libertarians. They are strongly triggered if events affect the liberty/oppression dimension, and they may react in a medium way if events touch the fairness/cheating dimension. However, all other four dimensions hardly influence libertarians' emotions.

According to the social intuitionist model (Figure 2), these traits influence how people judge triggering events. In addition, these judgments are in most situations emotionally based rather than well-reasoned and reflective. As Haidt (2001, 2002, 2003) and Greene and Haidt (2002) reveal, people are likely to use their reasoning capabilities for an ex-post rationalizing of their emotional intuitions (see Arrow 2 in Figure 2) (see also Kahneman, 2011 and Schleifer, 2012). In addition, triggering events make a deliberate reasoning more difficult because intuitive and emotional judgements may bias people's skills for deliberate reasoning. As van Bavel & Pereira (2018) show, strong (emotional) beliefs may even predispose us to believe in fake news.

MFT provides another interesting insight on our reasoning capabilities. We often use these skills for persuading our social environment of our intuitive reasoning (see Arrow 3 in Figure 2). Here, reason works like our personal "full-time public relations firm" (Haidt, 2012, p. 54). According to these findings, our cognitive capabilities have an important function, which is not primarily reflecting our intuition in a (self-)critical mode. Instead, we use these skills for gaining social acceptance and bringing about group coherence. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that our judgements are also influenced by the moral beliefs of our peers (see Arrow 4 in Figure 2, Haidt, 2001; Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2003; Greene & Haidt, 2002). This enables us to adopt our judgements to the beliefs of our social environment.

As the above model indicates with the dashed Arrow 5 in Figure 2, we can change our moral and intuitive judgements by reasoning. This however requires a reflection of the situation and of our emotions. From a cognitive perspective, this is much more exhausting and challenging than following our intuition. Especially in a stressful environment, or when we do not distance ourselves for reflecting, well-reasoned assessments hardly take place (Kahneman, 2011).

Finally, our reflections can also change our epistemic beliefs (see dashed Arrow 6 in Figure 2). This is possible through a continuous reflection of our beliefs and of our reactions to triggering events. Compared to reasoned judgements, this takes even more time and effort – and is thus less likely.

MFT contributes to a better understanding of rational irrationality in an additional way. MFT has a strong explanatory power for explaining social and political conflicts that emerge from different moral beliefs. As Haidt (2012) argues, the conflicts between different political camps – like the conflicts between liberals and conservatives – may rest on different moral beliefs influencing the perception and resolvability of a problem situation. This fits quite well with empirical research on rational irrationality. For example, Cook & Lewandowsky (2016) analyze the polarization of political debates that is due to different beliefs. They argue that finding a consensus may become more and more difficult. MFT supports this hypothesis because our reasoned as well as our social persuasion is primarily focused on convincing others of our beliefs instead of trying to find mutually acceptable solutions for conflicts. Echo chambers and filter bubbles may even aggravate this problem because we virtually live in an environment of social cohesion. Exactly this may reduce our reflective skills to challenge our moral beliefs, which would be more likely in an environment with more diverse views.

Addressing the six dimensions of moral beliefs through scandalizing strategies is an efficient way of running an effective NGO advocacy campaign, as the following subsection illustrates. As we will highlight, such a campaigning strategy may cause a high in-group cohesion among the NGOs' target groups, whereas it produces an increasing out-group divergence between the NGOs' supporters and other stakeholders. Taken together, such polarization may result in a situation in which solving conflicts becomes extremely difficult.

III. Case Study: Applying Moral Foundations Theory to Understanding the Campaign against Glyphosate

In 2009, the European Parliament and the Council issued Plant Protection Products Regulation No. 1107/2009 as an institutional framework of the market for pesticides (European Parliament, 2009). This regulation became law in 2011 and has a strong focus on the precautionary principle regarding the usage of plant protection agents. Paragraph 24 reads:

“The provisions governing authorisation must ensure a high standard of protection. In particular, when granting authorisations of plant protection products, the objective of protecting human and animal health and the environment should take priority over the objective of improving plant production. Therefore, it should be demonstrated, before plant protection products are placed on the market, that they present a clear benefit for plant production and do not have any harmful effect on human or animal health, including that of vulnerable groups, or any unacceptable effects on the environment.”

Because of this new law, a long-term debate gathered speed: Should the usage of Glyphosate, the globally most-used herbicide, be allowed or forbidden? This debate reached a new climax in the second half of 2017, as the European Union had to decide about the renewal of the approval of this herbicide. Against the backdrop of this plant protection regulation, it is hardly surprising that several NGOs have been lobbying for a ban of Glyphosate within the European Union. The aim of their campaign was a reduction of environmental and health risks through banning this herbicide. In 2011, for example, Greenpeace in cooperation with GM Freeze presented a report evaluating the harm

through Glyphosate as follows: “The evidence detailed in this report demonstrates that glyphosate-based products can have adverse impacts on human and animal health and that a review of their safety for human and animal health is urgently needed” (Greenpeace, 2011, p. 4). Especially before the European Parliament decided to renew the approval in 2017, NGOs became quite busy to lobby for a ban because of supposed environmental and health risks. In a press release, Greenpeace (2016) highlighted that they found residues of this herbicide in a non-toxic dose in wine and juice. Greenpeace argued that the proof of such residues makes a ban of this herbicide necessary because less dangerous alternatives were available. In another paper, Greenpeace (2017a) argued that Glyphosate can be measured as a residue in many meals and drinks and even in human urine. In their paper, Greenpeace furthermore argued that more and more studies doubt the harmlessness of Glyphosate. Thus, Greenpeace pronounces itself in favor of a ban of this chemical. A quite similar argumentation and claim is presented by the German NGO foodwatch (2015) and by the Austrian NGO Global 2000 (Global 2000, 2018).

This NGO campaign was quite successful. In the forefront of the renewal, a European citizens’ initiative collected 1.3 million signatures to ask for a ban (European Parliament, 2017). Another indicator that this NGO campaign became quite vibrant comes from Google Trends. Both Google’s search history and its search news history indicate that many internet users searched for the effects of Glyphosate before the European Union took a decision (Google, 2018). In addition to this influence on the public debate, Greenpeace might have had additional influence as a listed observer of the European Parliament’s group “Competent Authorities for Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and restriction of CHemicals (REACH) and Classification, Labelling and Packaging (CLP)” (Transparency Register, 2018).

Despite of the NGOs’ reference to findings from the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer that – based on a simple *hazard analysis* – evaluated Glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic to humans (Group 2A)” (IARC, 2017, p. 398), several authorities heavily question the NGOs’ calls for banning Glyphosate. For example, the European Food Safety Authority (2017), the US-American Environmental Protection Agency (2016, pp. 142-143; 2017) as well as the German Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung (Federal Institute for Assessment, 2018) approached the topic with a thorough *risk analysis* and hence derived a completely different assessment of Glyphosate’s possible dangers for human health, especially cancer. Their point of view was supported by a joint report of United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) together with the World Health Organization (WHO). In a joint meeting, they summarized the health risks of this chemical as follows: „[G]lyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic risk to humans from exposure through the diet.“ (JMPR, 2016) These authorities argued that even minor health risks do not exist because the typical uptake of this substance via the food chain is much too low. Following this risk assessment, Glyphosate poses only minor health dangers because the normal contamination is far below a critical level.

Against the backdrop of such risk assessments, why did the campaign against Glyphosate receive so much public attention? Why chose NGOs to scandalize Glyphosate, when in 2015 the same WHO sub-organization (IARC 2015) published another hazard analysis according to which red meat is “probably carcinogenic to humans” – thus belonging into the same category (2A) as Glyphosate –, while holding processed meat to be even *more* hazardous, since it is seen to be certainly “carcinogenic to humans” (category 1). Why is it so attractive for NGOs not to change their campaign? Why do they instead continue to

contradict recent risk assessments by numerous scientific agencies? MFT can provide answers to these questions – by analyzing the NGO campaign with a special regard to the six dimensions of moral beliefs:

(a) Care/harm: A core argument of this debate is that Glyphosate has negative effects for humans and the natural environment. To trigger our emotional reactions, it is hardly surprising that Greenpeace – among others – frames this chemical as being “toxic”. Especially their advertising material that shows pictures of people wearing chemical splash suits illustrates the scaring approach of the campaign quite well (Greenpeace, 2017b).

(b) Liberty/ oppression: A side argument of this debate is that the usage of Glyphosate reduces the consumers’ freedom of choice because the mass use of this herbicide causes a contamination of many foods and drink. Thus, it was argued that consumers lose the freedom to buy Glyphosate-free products (Greenpeace, 2016; Greenpeace 2017a).

(c) Fairness/ cheating: In the beginning of the campaign, this dimension was hardly addressed. However, after the above mentioned authorities intervened, NGOs came up with new accusations. For example, the Austrian NGO Global 2000 accused authorities and scientists of concealing the real dangers of this chemical (Global 2000, 2017): “Glyphosate and cancer: Buying science – How industry strategized (and regulators colluded) in an attempt to save the world’s most widely used herbicide from a ban”. This twist of the campaign conveyed the impression that regulators and scientists have conspired against the interests of the broader public.

(d) Loyalty/ betrayal: Of course, the alleged conspiracy of authorities and scientists may also be seen through the perspective of loyalty and betrayal. The public was called to perceive the supposed cheating of officials and scientists as a betrayal of consumers. Another pattern of argument of this campaign was to claim that modern agriculture was a reason for the alleged poisoning of consumers (Greenpeace, 2011, Greenpeace, 2012, foodwatch, 2015). Linking this herbicide with modern farming methods creates the belief that farmers betray consumers. This belief might emerge because farmers are often glorified as custodians of our natural resources and as being responsible to society for guaranteeing food security and quality (for this popular image see for example European Commission, 2017).

(e) Authority/subversion: Emotions critical of Glyphosate may also be triggered through the campaign’s allegations against authorities and scientists. If the allegations were true, authorities and scientists would lose the basis for having functional authority: being independent and skilled for giving advice to solve complex issues.

(f) Sanctity/degradation: Finally, the campaign also addressed spiritual beliefs, and this occurred both in a clerical and secular way. As Haidt (2012) argues, food is often seen through the lens of purity, and this has an evolutionary background. Our beliefs for purity emerged during evolution to protect ourselves from spoiled food. Such beliefs are triggered in the Glyphosate campaign because of two reasons. First, NGOs try to reveal the contamination of everyday food. Second, NGOs try to connect campaigns against GMOs with the fight against Glyphosate (Greenpeace, 2011, Greenpeace, 2012). Especially in the campaign against GMOs, there are religious and secular beliefs that humans should not play god (the religious version of the argument), and rescue nature in its naturalness (the secular version of this argument). Many arguments along these lines try to evoke feelings of disgust.

As the research of Graham et al. (2009), Graham et al. (2011), Graham et al. (2012a), Graham et al. (2012b), Haidt et al. (2009), Haidt (2012) and Iyer et al., (2012) indicates,

not all six dimensions may emotionally affect people because different patterns exist within modern society. These patterns define to what extent we react to these six dimensions. However, and this is very interesting from the NGOs' perspective, the anti-Glyphosate campaign was able to address people on the right and left of the political spectrum: leftists were addressed because of the campaign's focus on the dimensions care/harm, liberty/oppression, and fairness/cheating. On the right side, this campaign also addressed conservatives because of the campaign's focus on loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation in addition to the former three beliefs. From this point of view, the campaign was able to bring together people from different political backgrounds because it triggered a broad spectrum of different moral emotions at the same time.

The campaign's success over political camps increased pressure on legislators regarding the renewal of Glyphosate. On the one side, the recommendations of the scientific bodies were quite outspoken in giving the all-clear, while on the other side large parts of the broad public insisted on a ban of this herbicide. Because of the strong emotions being triggered by this campaign, it was difficult or even impossible for legislators and authorities to convince the broad public. Global 2000's accusations further aggravated this problem. Now, the broad public was locked in a trap of moral beliefs, and because of the strength of their beliefs, a rationalization of the debate could not be achieved despite of the authorities' reassuring findings. Furthermore, the arousal of strong emotions made many people believe the NGOs' allegations and aspersions, whereas authorities were not able to convince with their factual statements exactly because of this emotionalization (van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). In addition, ad hominem attacks against scientists and authorities proved to be quite powerful in denying the expertise of these actors (Barnes et al., 2018).

Because of this emotionalizing campaigning strategy, an adequate public discourse about the risks and benefits of Glyphosate became more and more impossible. As the research of Will & Pies (2016) highlights, such moralized discourses often fail because populist campaigns force regulators to implement regulations that, while being popular, fail to promote the common good. In the case of Glyphosate, opponents of this herbicide did not consider that, given the relevant alternatives, there are many good reasons in favor of using this chemical. A ban of Glyphosate, which is patent-free, would result in the usage of more expensive and more dangerous chemicals. Furthermore, without Glyphosate, many farmers would return to drilling their fields, thus aggravating the problem of soil erosion. Substituting organic agriculture for conventional farming drastically increases land use, which is ecologically extremely problematic. Therefore, taking the campaign's aims seriously, all relevant alternatives have strong disadvantages, which makes Glyphosate an attractive option, especially from an ecological point of view. This is why the precautionary principle requires a proper *risk assessment*, while a mere *hazard analysis* can easily lead the public astray (Bernstein, 2017; Extoxnet, 1994, Ryan, 2014, Trautmann, 2001).

Moreover, the campaign caused a social divide between authorities and scientists on the one side and parts of the broad public on the other side because this campaign damaged the reputation of scientists and legislators. This is a burden for finding solutions to complex regulatory issues in the future because the legitimacy of democratic processes critically depends on the people's perception that experts take decisions according to the interests of the public and that they do not illegitimately follow particular private interests (Luhmann, 2013). If regulatory processes lack this reputation, decisions within a representative democracy lose legitimacy.

Finally, the campaign framed Glyphosate as a danger for humans and the environment. A more constructive perspective would have been to see Glyphosate – like every other herbicide – as a risk that has to be managed properly. Of course, this requires controls and audits through independent authorities, more research regarding negative side-effects of Glyphosate on humans and other organisms, and an adequate handling of this chemical through farmers. Such a framing would have contributed to a rationalization of this emotional debate and would not have reinforced a divide between big parts of the public on the one side and authorities, scientists and farmers on the other side. From such a fact-based perspective, the mild toxicity of Glyphosate residues in our food would not have caused an outrage. For example, to reach an alarming level of Glyphosate through beer consumption, people would have to drink around 1,000 liters of beer a day (Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung, 2017).

IV. Implications and Discussion: Advocacy Strategies for Avoiding Discourse Failure

Hielscher et al. (2017) as well as Will & Pies (2016) argue that strongly emotionalizing campaigns causing discourse failure need not result from bad intentions on behalf of the NGOs. Instead, such discourse failures with their negative consequences for the whole society may be the consequence of poorly governed incentives that exert a strong pressure for engaging in such dangerous campaigns. Addressing moral beliefs through emotionalizing communication strategies tends to systematically create campaigns resulting in populist claims that are conflicting with scientific evidence. Such polarizations may cause or aggravate many conflicts between different stakeholders and thus hinder NGOs from reaching their social and ecological aims.

Against the backdrop of Caplan's (2000; 2001a; 2001b) understanding of rational irrationality, the findings of MFT (Graham *et al.*, 2009; Graham *et al.*, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2012a; Graham *et al.*, 2012b; Haidt *et al.*, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Iyer *et al.*, 2012), and the observation that NGOs compete for public attention (Hielscher et al. (2017) as well as Will & Pies (2016)), we argue that discourse failures may be a not-intended outcome of well-intended NGO behavior that aims at reaching a higher level of ecological and social sustainability through advocacy. Similar issues have been analyzed in the field of business ethics for quite a while (Pies et al. 2009; 2010; 2014). This research argues that socially and ecologically questionable outcomes are often not the consequence of managers' or corporations' bad intentions. Instead, it might be the result of poor governance structures providing actors in the business sector with strong incentives for unsustainable behavior. Given a media bias for highly emotional campaigns, the analogous argument applies to NGOs finding themselves in a social dilemma, i.e. a situation in which they are likely to collectively self-harm themselves.

How can NGOs develop strategies that help them in implementing better governance structures, thus preventing populist campaigns that result in discourse failures? To answer this question, we apply the so-called three-level schema of business ethics (Pies et al. 2009; 2010; 2014) to discourse failures triggered by strongly emotionalizing NGO advocacy campaigns (see Figure 3):

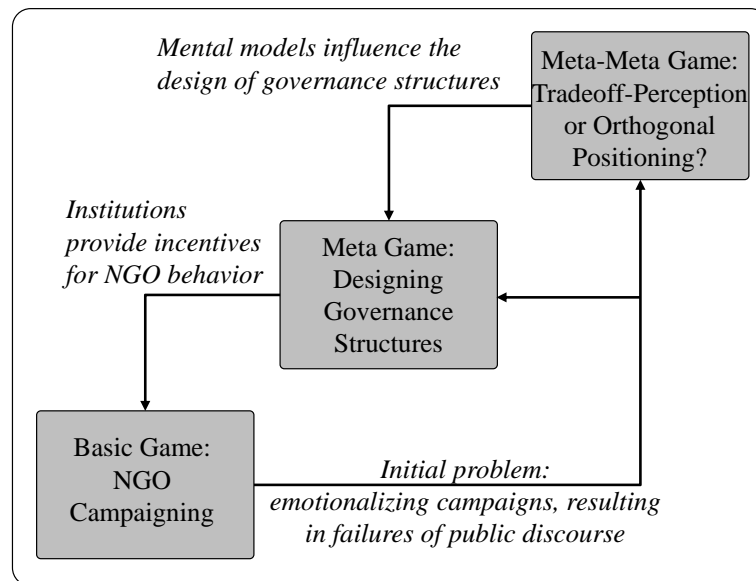


Figure 3: The Three-Level Schema of the Interdependence between Behavior, Institutions and Mental Models (own figure based on Pies et al. 2009; 2010; 2014)

(1) On the level of the basic game, we can observe that NGOs tend towards populist campaigns with the above-described outcomes: discourse failures regarding the achievement of social and ecological sustainability. As Swinnen et al. (2011) argue, to restrain from emotionalizing campaigns might be problematic – i.e. individually disadvantageous – within the basic game because public awareness is a central resource for many NGOs. Therefore, Swinnen et al. (2011) argue that NGOs might have two different levels of communication (and even a kind of organizational double-speak): public communication that addresses our moral beliefs for fund raising and publicly announces the agenda of the NGO; and a more reasoned communication with close cooperation partners like experts, authorities and companies so that NGOs can implement their agendas together with these stakeholders. Following this argument, NGOs would be able to get public awareness, while at the same time they would be able to do responsible advocacy. As Will & Pies (2016) argue, however, such a nuanced communication may become more and more difficult because of an increase in transparency that is a direct consequence of social media. NGOs’ supporters might regard it as a betrayal – also called “mission creep” – when NGOs try to implement more nuanced measures compared to the “radical” proposals they make in public campaigns. Thus, more transparency in NGOs’ communication with politicians, authorities, and companies may limit NGOs in having a target-group-specific communication, simply because they find themselves committed to the populist claims of their public campaigns. The campaign against Glyphosate highlights this issue: the reaction of the Bundesinstitut für Risikoforschung against NGOs’ accusations is clear evidence of the fact that these NGOs did not pursue two different communications. Instead, they were bound by their public accusations and thus unable to bring forward more nuanced arguments behind the scenes.

However, was there a solution within the basic game? To begin with, the campaign’s communication strategy was already from the beginning based on supposing a strong tradeoff between the societal interests on the one side and the particular interests of farmers, agribusinesses, authorities, and scientists on the other side. Glyphosate was said to be an extremely toxic chemical; farmers and agribusinesses were accused of poisoning

the society; and supposedly corrupt authorities and scientists were charged with conspiring in this intrigue. NGOs' moralization constructed and fueled this tradeoff and thus strongly evoked moral emotions and moral beliefs across the political spectrum. This emotionalizing communication strategy by NGOs triggered a strongly polarizing framework of perception, juxtaposing the interests of the broader public on the one side with supposedly ill-intended farmers, agribusiness, scientists, and officials on the other side. As already highlighted (European Parliament, 2017; Google, 2018), this campaign was successful in reaching a high media coverage. This undeniable fact leads to the conclusion that modern media might be especially susceptible to emotionalizing communication strategies that aim at serving the media's negativity bias via scandalization (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakshy et al., 2015; Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009; Pfeffer et al., 2013; van Bavel & Pereira, 2018; Williams et al., 2015).

Because of this radical tradeoff communication, the accused farmers, agribusinesses, scientists, and officials were driven into a conflict that was neither in their interest nor in the interest of the broad public. To defend themselves, they had to take action against the NGOs, and this may even have worsened the situation because then these actors were perceived as having something to disguise (Barnes et al., 2018). At the same time, such counter-strategies may fail because convincing people with strong pre-established moral beliefs is difficult (Kahneman, 2011; Van Vavel & Pereira, 2018). This can easily result in a highly unproductive outcome for society: instead of looking for a herbicide regulation that makes all involved parties better off, a polarizing NGOs' advocacy campaign may force many actors to defend themselves against wrong accusations. This may even cause a further escalation and finally result in less trust, less cooperation and less capability of democratic processes to solve societal problems.

Because of this, NGOs have a long-run self-interest in avoiding discourse failures by altering their semantics into one that is more conducive for all involved parties to finding mutually acceptable solutions. Of course, Glyphosate is a toxic herbicide, and agriculture could gain through an optimized usage or by finding better substitutes. Such a communication could bring together farmers, agribusinesses, authorities, and scientists and make them join forces with NGOs that are really interested in problem solutions. Regarding the above case, a campaign that highlights the risks and not simply the dangers of Glyphosate might be more appropriate to reach such an alliance. A switch from the (misleading) semantics of dangers to a (responsible) communication of risks may not only create a public arena for a better risk management, it may also support an innovation-friendly environment for developing better Glyphosate substitutes.

(2) Changing the Meta Game through *institutional Changes as a Strategy for Sustainable Campaigning*: The three-level schema highlights that if poor governance structures on the second level – the meta game – provide wrong incentives, this is likely to result in poor outcomes at the level of the basis game. This is our explanation why, given disincentives, even NGOs with noble intentions may find it difficult to improve their behavior and abstain from misleading campaigning strategies.

Having identified a regulation problem, we are skeptical that the usual regulation strategies are appropriate for the challenge at hand. The basic reason is that state regulation might result in new forms of censorship and state control of NGOs, thus undermining the societal role of critical advocacy. Instead, we examine the possibility of successful self-regulation. In order to do so, we draw on the enlightened self-interest of NGOs in avoiding discourse failures and reputation damages for their sector.

This enlightened self-interest in self-regulation: in implementing appropriate governance structures that reduce incentives for populist campaigning (Hielscher et al., 2017; Will & Pies; 2016), results from the collective self-damage that is in the long run to be expected from societal polarization driven by strongly exaggerating and emotionalizing campaigns. In order to avoid self-endangering their important role for advocating sustainable solutions to social and ecological problems, NGOs can encourage institutional changes (a) within the whole NGO sector and also (b) within their individual organizations in order to overcome collective self-damage. The core idea is to take steps at the meta game that improve the incentives for their basic game.

(a) Collective commitments: For changing the rules of public discourse, a first step might be a collective (self-)commitment for responsible campaigning that holds for the whole NGO sector (Will & Pies, 2016). Such a standard might require that NGOs run campaigns after considering the scientific state of facts. In the campaign against Glyphosate, the overwhelming majority of studies gave an all-clear signal as long as farmers use Glyphosate in a responsible way. This can be interpreted as a strong signal that the claims of the NGOs' campaign were tremendously exaggerated. If NGOs committed themselves to higher accountability standards, this would amount to expanding the precautionary principle to the work of NGOs. They would have to take care that their campaigns do more good than bad. However, this would be in line with the genuine self-interest of NGOs because measures that sustain their reputation are essential for them to help implementing sustainable solutions to societal problems. On the other side, a lack of well-designed accountability standards may systematically cause a situation that provokes a loss of NGOs' reputation. Permanent and systematic exaggerations lead people to lose trust in NGOs, which then makes it much more difficult for them to reach their noble aims.

Supporting the development and implementation of a collective self-commitment for responsible campaigning, leading NGOs might form a meta-NGO, which informs about responsible and irresponsible campaigns. In the case of consumer protection, such meta-NGOs already do a good job to promote the quality of goods and services. For the NGO sector, such a meta-NGO might support NGOs in overcoming conflicts between triggering moral beliefs and the campaign's sustainability. As a case in point, the NGO initiative "Accountable Now" communicates (and incentivizes) the following promise: "Wherever we operate, we seek to ensure that the high standards which we demand of others are also respected in our own organisations." (Accountable Now, 2018).

Furthermore, NGOs might support political changes that aim at increasing the quality of regulatory processes. Lobbying often tries to manipulate such processes for implementing particular interests (Krueger, 1974; Tullock, 1967, 1993). Because of this, regulatory processes are an important bottleneck for implementing one's own agenda as the timely campaign against Glyphosate shows quite well. If the European Parliament had rejected the renewal of this herbicide, the campaign would have been a great success for all involved NGOs. However, NGOs are not the only actors in this process, resulting in rent-seeking activities with negative consequences for lobbyists and the society (Krueger, 1974; Tullock, 1967, 1993). These rent-seeking activities may force NGOs to increase their pressure on politicians in order to counter-balance the pressure of corporate lobbyists. This may result in a vicious circle with costly, unfair, and risky measures. To avoid this, NGOs might lobby for better political processes: for a stronger scientific evaluation of regulatory interventions. Such a change of the political game might make it more difficult for corporate lobbyists to participate in rent-seeking activities and thus relax pressure on NGOs to behave in a similar fashion.

(b) Individual self-commitments: In addition to this, NGOs might also have to professionalize themselves. Like firms from b2c industries, they might need a crisis management for retracting bad campaigns. As far as we know, most NGOs do not have such processes for making obvious changes within a running campaign. Of course, such changes are difficult and might even endanger the NGO's reputation in the short run. However, not correcting a faulty campaign may even cause higher reputational risks in the end. This is why NGOs have a profound self-interest in setting up a professional crisis management. Studies from the consumer industry reveal beneficial learning effects (Coombs, 2008; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Analogous arguments might hold for the NGO sector.

As Hielscher et al. (2017) argue, individual self-commitments that bind only individual NGOs might not be sufficient for avoiding ruinous discourse failures because other NGOs might abuse the public's sensitivity for moral beliefs. Amnesty International provides an interesting example of the (limited) functionality of such a self-commitment. This NGO was heavily criticized by other NGOs for supporting the decriminalization of prostitution (see Hielscher et al. (2017) for a reconstruction of Amnesty International's measures, Amnesty International, 2016). By highlighting strong evidence for their arguments, Amnesty International was able to convince important stakeholders despite of other NGOs' irresponsible claims of forbidding all sorts of prostitution. As this example highlights, an individual self-commitment for responsible campaigns is only possible as long as the NGO does not have to fear a ruinous competition by other NGOs that trigger our moral beliefs.

(3) Changing the Meta-Meta Game through Orthogonal Positioning: It is quite surprising that many NGO campaigns tend to result in discourse failures (see our example and see Hielscher et al. 2017; Will & Pies, 2016) and that the NGO sector struggles with above described institutional changes. Pies et al. (2009; 2010; 2014) argue for the field of business ethics that inappropriate mental models within governance discourses might exacerbate finding appropriate governance structures for the whole sector. According to Pies et al. (2009; 2010; 2014), actors might frame social interactions within a tradeoff: for enforcing own interests, they assume that the other side has to retreat (win-lose paradigm). However, such mental models often result in mutual conflicts that are difficult to solve within such a framing because one side is expected to make real sacrifices (see Figure 4a). Within such a tradeoff paradigm, it becomes difficult to find joint solutions because involved parties may oversee mutual gains through well-designed governance structures.

However, in a functionally differentiated society, NGOs have an important role: addressing social and ecological issues. At the same time, such a society is characterized by specialization. This means that NGOs fundamentally need other actors like companies, governments and scientists to implement their agendas (Valentinov, 2014; Will et al., 2017). Such a (re-)framing of the mental models is an orthogonal positioning compared to the originally perceived win-lose situation (see Figure 4b). Following this change in perspective, science, politics, and the economy are not conflicting with the NGOs' interests. These systems are complementary for achieving sustainable solutions in a modern society. Because of this, NGOs might have to adapt their mental models in a way that they realize complementarities instead of pure conflicts between actors. Such a win-win paradigm may foster cooperation and thus help in finding better governance structures for overcoming the ruinous competition for public attention that systematically results in populist campaigns and public discourse failures.

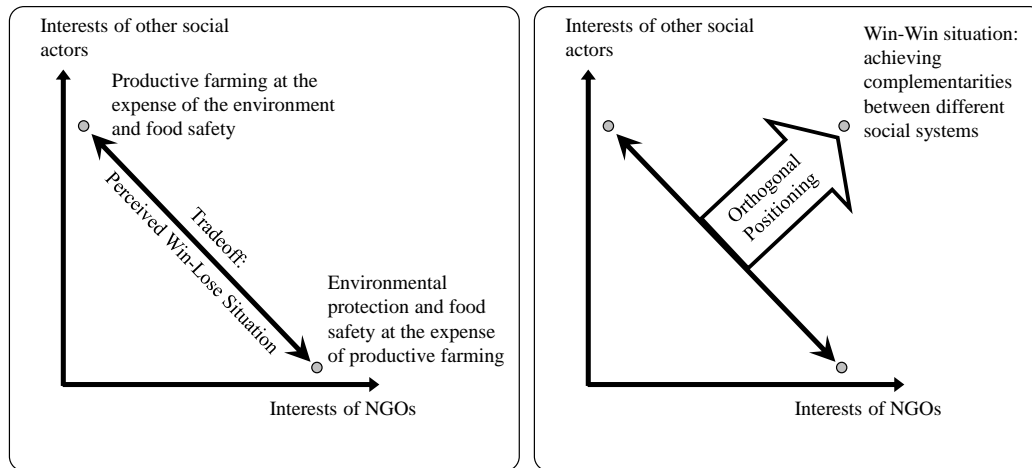


Figure 4a & 4b: Tradeoff Perceptions in Public Debates and Orthogonal Positioning for Avoiding such a Tradeoff Perception (own figure according to Pies et al. 2009; 2010; 2014)

Conclusion

MFT as a psychological foundation of the economic concept of rational irrationality positively impacts research in the field of political economy. So far, many researchers in this field see poor regulatory outcomes as a principal-agent problem within the political system (for a criticism see Caplan, 2000; 2001a; 2001b). Because of poor political and regulatory processes, politicians and authorities are assumed to take decisions that are not in favor of the broader public. Instead, they are seen to implement their personal interests by serving lobbyists' claims. However, the research on rational irrationality offers a second kind of explanation in addition to potential principal-agent problems. We might also get poor political and regulatory decisions because the broad public has irrational beliefs. In this case, it is not the political agents but the democratic principals who are the source of the problem. MFT emphasizes that rational irrationality might be widespread, especially in emotionalized debates, and that social media may even support this trend towards emotionalization. From this point of view, right-wing and left-wing populism is not just a failure of the political system, it is a failure of the public discourse that is logically prior to political and regulatory processes.

Further research should investigate whether it might be appropriate to make misleading statements by NGOs a criminal offence or a matter of litigation. For protecting consumers, some countries already have similar criminal laws for penalizing firms that advertise their goods and services with wrong promises (e. g. deceptive advertising, see for an example UK's Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008, United Kingdom, 2008). However, such a law has to comply with high standards because it might be quite difficult from a legal perspective to define misleading campaigns. In addition, such a law should not violate essential human rights like freedom of speech. Finally, further research might also consider the accountability of media for spreading misleading campaigns. This also holds for traditional media like newspapers as well as social media like Twitter or Facebook. All these media are in a similar situation like the NGOs: triggering moral beliefs increases attention, and although this runs the risk of causing discourse failure, it seems that click baiting is a strategy for many online newspapers (Beleslin et al., 2017; Blom and Hansen, 2015; Orosa et al., 2017).

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