ABSTRACT

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is the only organisation of the United Nations with a clear mandate related to communication and information. This thesis closes a gap in research about UNESCO and its involvement in international communication debates by analysing the emergence of UNESCO’s policy discourse on the information society between 1990 and 2003, the intermediary period between the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Taking into account the historical, political and institutional background of UNESCO and its activities in the field of information and communication, the empirical analysis focuses on three different policy processes that contributed to UNESCO’s policy discourse on the information society: the INFOethics conference series; the creation of UNESCO’s intergovernmental Information For All Programme (IFAP); and the preparation of the Recommendation concerning the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace. However, instead of assessing the discourse as it is reflected by the final output of these policy processes, the thesis aims to challenge traditional policy analysis by focusing on the interaction of policy actors and the practices and arguments they use in order to retrace the emergence of discourse during these processes.
To account for this interest in the collective creation of discourse, the empirical research is based on a conceptual framework that draws on different, yet interrelated, theoretical and methodological approaches. On the one hand, the analysis of discursive exchanges is built on poststructuralist approaches to International Relations and policy studies and the method of Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA). On the other hand, the analysis of actors and their practices is inspired by constructivist perspectives on meaning-making in social processes, and draws on concepts and tools from Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Building on extensive archive research and interviews, these approaches are combined in such a way as to make possible a detailed account of UNESCO’s policy-making and to analyse the emergence of its policy discourse on the information society as the outcome of discursive struggles among networks of actors. The results of this analysis suggest that UNESCO’s policy discourse was influenced by the concrete dynamics on the micro-level and conflicts between competing ideas far more than by abstract interests and overarching power structures. Based on the empirical evidence, the thesis frames these conflicting ideas as the result of paradoxes deriving from deep-rooted misunderstandings about the value of information and the possibility of intervention in a society driven by digital technology. It thereby contributes both empirically and theoretically to the fundamental understanding of the ideas and interests underlying international policy debates about the cultural, social and economic challenges posed by the growing digitalisation of society.