

The importance of strategic communication in the organization

أهمية الاتصال الاستراتيجي في المنظمة

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Abstract:

In this article we will try to shed light on strategic communication, which is a new topic in the field of information and communication science, and this is by first introducing it and its pillars and removing the confusion between it and the communication strategy, which is a topic that is somewhat far away from strategic communication.

To this end, we have read in some articles from American magazines that have been interested in this topic, especially since strategic communication is a very important specialty in the United States of America and is considered one of the leading countries in this field.

The fundamental question underlying this study is: What is the importance of strategic communication within the organization?

Keywords: Strategic Communication _Organization_Management Strategy_research
Methods_Communication Theories

ملخص :

في هذا المقال سوف نحاول تسليط الضوء حول الاتصال الاستراتيجي الذي يعتبر موضوع جديد في حقل علوم الاعلام والاتصال وهذا عن طريق اولا التعريف به ومرتكزاته وازاحة الخلط القائم بينه وبين استراتيجية الاتصال والذي يعتبر موضوع بعيدا نوعا ما على الاتصال الاستراتيجي .

ولتحقيق هذا الغرض قمنا بقراءة في بعض المقالات من مجلات امريكية اهتمت بهذا الموضوع خاصة وان الاتصال الاستراتيجي هو تخصص مهم جدا في الولايات المتحدة الامريكية وتعتبر من الدول الرائدة في هذا المجال

السؤال الجوهرى الذي تقوم عليه هذه الدراسة هو: ماهي اهمية الاتصال الاستراتيجي داخل المنظمة؟ وماهي مقوماته؟

الكلمات المفتاحية : الاتصال الاستراتيجي - المنظمة_استراتيجية الادارة_ طرق البحث _نظريات الاتصال

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly complex world, organizations are competing for attention, admiration, affinity, alignment and allegiance of voters of all kinds — customers, employees, investors and donors, civil servants, special interest groups leaders, and the general public. In doing so, organizations make strategic decisions on the level and nature of the resources they will devote to these efforts. It is important to point out that not only businesses, but also activist organizations and citizen movements, use strategic communication to achieve their goals. Strategic Communication examines organizational communication from a multidisciplinary perspective by extending ideas and questions based on a variety

of traditional communication disciplines. It is important to note that these disciplines have been developed as specialized functions in the modernist world of the 20th Century. Yet, at the beginning of the 21st century, these disciplines postmodern environment that focuses on more holistic approaches to examining the phenomena, while having to deal with increasingly fragmented audiences.

This article provides the groundwork for a teaching-based approach strategic communication. Although the term strategic communication has been used in academic literature for many years, researchers are only now in the process to explore this in a coherent way in terms of a unified set of knowledge. Here, the terms will be examined from a variety of angles across national borders and academic disciplines, with the aim of laying the groundwork for a study of this new academic field. In this article we will first define strategic communication and say why the term communication as associated with the strategy then talk about the beginnings of strategic communication in the world and in different organizations and then talk about the importance of strategic communication in the company finally talk about the three lenses of strategic communication.

Definitions of Strategic Communication

Several definitions of strategic communication have surfaced, and like the myriad of definitions associated with the terms “strategy” and “communication,” we do not expect that a singular definition of strategic communication will ever be agreed on. Some of the early definitions of strategic communication that have been offered follow. Argenti, Howell, and Beck (2005) define strategic communication as “aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning” (p. 83). Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, and Sriramesh (2007) define it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). Grunig (2006), from the public relations domain, describes it as a “bridging activity” between organizations that should be institutionalized. The management literature speaks about the linkages between discourse and the social practice of strategizing, defining these practices as “actions, interactions, and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007, p. 8). While we understand that some may be eager to create definitions that characterize the boundaries of this area of study similar to the call for definitions for business communication, managerial communication, corporate communication, and organizational communication (see, e.g., *Management Communication Quarterly*, August 1996,)

- The question might well be asked why the term strategic should be applied in conjunction with communication to describe current formal communication practices in society in general and organizations in particular. Part of the problem with the term strategic is that it has been strongly associated with a modernist approach to management. Critics of this approach argue strategic communication privileges a management discourse and emphasizes upper management’s goals for the organization as given and legitimate. Strategic implies organizations and their functions are evaluated in terms of economic contribution and “rational” economic goals (Deetz, 2001, p. 9). The goal of the modernist approach is a world that can be controlled through administrative procedures, the elimination of dissension and conflict, and the blind acceptance of organizational goals and roles. The role of communication in this approach is to ensure information transfer from the supervisor to the subordinate in order to gain compliance and to establish networks to ensure the organization’s power in relations with the public. This perspective includes the concepts of strategic message design, management of culture, and total quality management (Holtzhausen, 2002). Theoretical approaches include covering laws, systems approaches, and an emphasis on skills development, particularly in the areas of communication and management (Deetz, 2001; Hatch, 1997). The term strategic is often associated with practice and the tactics used to implement strategy (Mintzberg, 1990). Traditionally, public relations literature argues strategic used in this context has the potential to reinforce the perception that the practice of public relations and communication is merely tactical and not considered of larger social, political, and economic factors. Dozier (1992), for example, argued that public relations managers make strategic decisions and that technicians merely execute those decisions. The concept of emergent strategy as would reject that notion and would argue that it is actually the successful practice of technicians that leads to successful strategic decision making.

The term strategic, therefore, also has the potential to investigate the importance and contribution of the tactical level of communication practice and so legitimate the work of communication practice at all levels.

the beginning of strategic communication

In the American and European contexts, the shattering of traditional discipline boundaries was best seen in the emergence of IMC (**integrated marketing communication**).

The IMC concept was not anything new. Clients had engaged in integrated communication for years by coordinating the activities of disparate outside vendors and consultants. Holtzhausen Publicity and Advertising in Johannesburg, South Africa, had already published in 1980 an IMC model in their corporate brochure. Advertising agencies in the early 1990s embraced IMC mostly as a defensive measure as they watched increased proportions of advertising dollars siphoned off to other promotional activities. Advocates of integrated communication (which goes by a variety of other names, such as convergent communications) argued that otherwise-fragmented activities should be coordinated in a strategic way that focused on the audience's needs, concerns, and interests—not merely those of organizational communicators or managers (Duncan, 2001; Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Hallahan, 2006; Moore & Thorson, 1996).

Strategic communication differs from integrated communication because its focus is how an organization communicates across organizational endeavors. The emphasis is on the strategic application of communication and how an organization functions as a social actor to advance its mission.

The purposeful nature of strategic communication is critical. Whereas academic research on organizational communications broadly examines the various processes involved in how people interact in complex organizations (including interpersonal, group, and network communications), strategic communication focuses on how the organization itself presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners. Of course, this does not exclude their use of relationship building or networks in the strategic process.

strategic communication in different organizations

Strategic communication, as a term, is now emerging as a descriptive term that is gaining acceptance. Among examples of its application are the following:

- An increasing number of corporations in Europe, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and North America use strategic communication to describe their units and the services they perform. Universities that have adopted this approach range from the University of California in the United States to the University of British Columbia in Canada and the University of the Free State in South Africa.
- The giant Mercer Human Resources Consulting group prominently uses the term to describe its services (Mercer Human Resources, 2005), while various smaller agencies and consultancies position themselves as strategic communication consultants (CACI Strategic Communications, 2005; Foundation Strategy Group, 2005; Garmonal, 2005; Holtzhausen Publicity and Advertising, 1980; ICF Communications, 2005; Strategic Communication Laboratories, 2005; Wright, 2001).
- The National Investor Relations Institute in the United States has organized its own Center for Strategic Communication as a resource for investor relations and corporate communications professionals who seek information and best practices for the development of strategic communication plans for their companies (National Investor Relations Institute, 2006).
- The not-for-profit arena has embraced the idea to describe their use of communications activities that meld advocacy and development and offer training in the strategic uses of communication in the public debate about issues (Bank, Griggs, & Tynes, 1999; Benton Foundation, 2001; Kirkman & Menichelli, 1992; Media Alliance, 2006; National Missions Board, 2005; Radtke, 1998).

- The prestigious American Bar Association, which represents United States attorneys, operates a Standing Committee on Strategic Communication, whose jurisdiction includes oversight of the Association's communications priorities and goals; development of integrated communications messages, plans, and strategies; and development and evaluation of demonstration projects (American Bar Association, 2006).
- The U.S. government recognizes strategic communication as a critical element in public diplomacy and in military intervention in troubled areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2004; Siddiqui, 2004); the need to engage in such activities has been called for by others (Gregory, 2005; Jones, 2005; Manheim, 1994).
- A United Nations report adopted in 1997 recommended establishment of a strategic communication function "aimed at making the United Nations a more powerful and effective advocate for the programs, policies and values its members to advance" (United Nations, 1997; see also United Nations System Staff College, 2006). Various affiliates of the United Nations, such as the International Labour Organization in Geneva, operate strategic communication programs.
- The World Bank's development communication division explains that the unit "supports the Bank's mission of reducing poverty by providing clients with strategic communication advice and tools they need to develop and implement successful project and pro-poor reform efforts" (World Bank, 2005).
- In Africa and other parts of the developing world, the Health Communication Partnership has as its goal "strengthening public health in the developing worlds through strategic communication programs" (Health Communication Partnership, 2006).

In an array of other uses, strategic communication has been used synonymously for public relations (Kaplan, 1991; White & Mazur, 1995), but also to redefine political persuasion (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 2004), to promote litigation advocacy services (Decision Quest, 2005), to characterize crisis communications (Ray, 1999), and to promote brand building (Temporal, 2001, pp. 211–231). Strategic communication also is the focus of the newest generation of communication audits (Downs & Adrian, 2004).

- Workshops on strategic communication are being offered by various professional groups ranging from the Public Relations Society of America (2005) to the European Federation of Biotechnology (2006). Similarly, strategic communication is the focus of at least two institutes in the United States. American University in Washington, DC, operates the Institute for Strategic Communication for Nonprofits to provide training. Arizona State University's Consortium for Strategic Communication promotes advanced research, teaching, and public discussion of the role of communication in combating terrorism, promoting national security, and successfully engaging in public diplomacy worldwide.
- A practitioner-written trade journal produced by Melcrum Publications, Strategic Communication Management, brings together practitioners in areas such as corporate and internal communication, human resources, knowledge management and intranets, and corporate responsibility.

The importance of strategic communication

As suggested by the vitality of these examples, the term strategic communication makes sense as a unifying framework to analyze communications by organizations for at least three reasons. First, the ability of communicators to differentiate between traditional communications activities and their effects is rapidly disappearing. Although IMC focused attention on the coordination of various functions, many of those functions themselves are being redefined. Public relations practitioners, for example, are increasingly relying on paid advertising to communicate critical messages on topics ranging from

corporate reputation and social issues to events sponsorships. Meanwhile, marketers are spearheading cooperative programs and cause-related marketing programs that once were the exclusive province of public relations. The reason is simple: These techniques work in an era in which organizations must differentiate themselves and in which audiences view organizations from multiple perspectives—including their product and service offerings, their expertise and competence, their service commitment, and their social responsibility. Any claims to exclusive responsibility for particular activities within an organization are becoming challenged in many organizations.

Second, important changes in public communication are being driven by technology and by media economics. Digital technologies such as the World Wide Web and instant messaging, for example make it increasingly impossible to differentiate what is advertising versus publicity, sales promotion, or e-commerce. Technology is converging communications channels. Several universities now offer programs in Multimedia Journalism or Media Convergence to prepare future journalists to work in converged media environments. In a similar way, the array of hybrid messages being touted by profit-driven media companies worldwide—advertorials, product placements, sponsorships—is melding the traditional and familiar genres of public communication. This is an important, but overlooked, example of postmodernism at work in communications.

Third, organizations use an expanding variety of methods to influence the behaviors of their constituencies—what people know, how people feel, and the ways people act—relative to the organization. Thus, audiences' experiences with and impressions of organizations are the sum total of the people's experiences—and it is increasingly questionable whether the effects of any particular communication activity can be validly examined in isolation. People do not necessarily differentiate between the various forms of communications in which organizations might engage. One example is the difference between advertising and publicity (Hallahan, 1999). Thus, it is important to consider an organization's communications activities from a strategic and integrative perspective.

Expanding the Boundaries of Strategic Communication Through the Lenses of Strategy, Communication Theory, and Method

Figure 1 illustrates three lenses for the study of strategic communication. The first lens, *management strategy*, illustrates the numerous conceptual elements within the field that might provide conceptual resources for study. Unsurprising, this field is also characterized by numerous definitions. Jemison (1981) defines strategic management as “the process by which general managers of complex organizations develop and use strategy to co-align their organization's competences and the opportunities and constraints in the environment” (p. 601). Conversely, Smircich and Stubbart (1985) define strategic management as “organization making—to create and maintain systems of shared meanings that facilitate organized action” (p. 725).

Most strategy textbooks address the formulation of strategy, strategic planning, and the implementation of strategy. Key concepts and theories associated with strategic management, just to name a few, include stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), population ecology and evolutionary theory (Aldrich, 1999 HANNAN & freeman 1977).

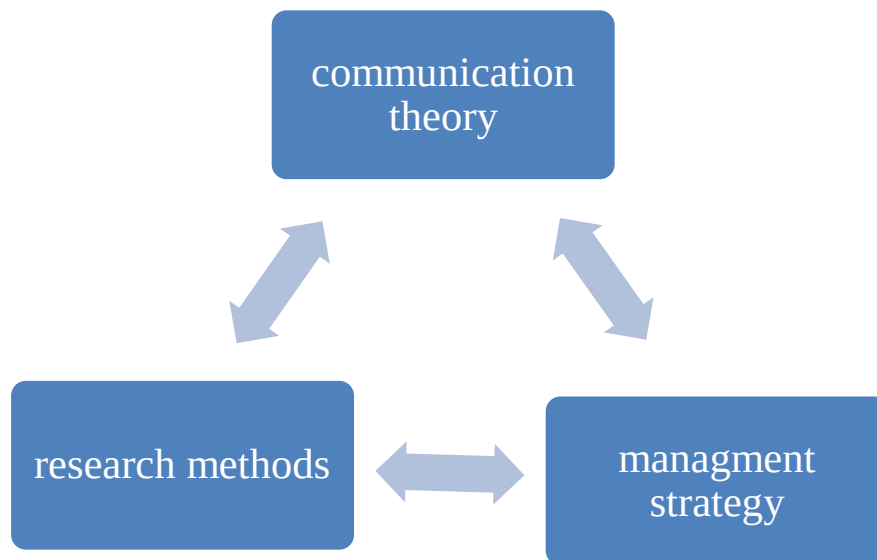


Figure 1. Three lenses for strategic communication scholarship. Neoinstitutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Each of these concepts is ripe with opportunity for communication scholars.

The second lens, *communication theory*, includes the numerous theories that communication scholars use to study various phenomena. Examples of these theories include structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), critical theory (Mumby, 1988), communicative constitution of organizations (Cooren, Taylor, & Van Every, 2006; Luhmann, 2003; McPhee & Zaug, 2000), and identity and organizational identification (Cheney, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

The third lens, *research methods*, includes communication-related analytical approaches such as rhetorical analysis (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011), narrative analysis (Jameson, 2001), conversation analysis (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997), social network analysis (Monge, Heiss, & Margolin, 2008), and semantic network analysis (Thomas & Stephens, 2013).

We argue that these three lenses offer a rich set of resources for communication scholars. Because communication scholars have deep reservoirs of expertise in analyzing text and talk as well as capabilities in network analysis, they are particularly well positioned to make contributions in this emerging area of study. Evidence of these skills is apparent in the articles that are included in this special issue.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

this part includes five feature articles and a forum article that deal with complementary aspects of strategic communication

- 1- Alison Henderson, George Cheney, and C. Kay Weaver's article, "The Role of Employee Identification and Organizational Identity in Strategic Communication and Organizational Issues Management About Genetic Modification," asks the question, "What roles do employee identification and organizational identity play in strategic communication and organizational issues management about controversial public policies?" This study examines two New Zealand primary export organizations that managed the debate surrounding the potential impact of genetically modified (GM) products. One of the focal organizations planned to pursue the commercial development of GM products, which was at odds with New Zealand's national value

position, whereas the comparison organization was opposed to developing GM products. The researchers interviewed organizational members within the two firms including research directors, communication/marketing managers, production managers, and an executive director. Additionally, they conducted focus groups with farmers and growers. These actors were asked to discuss their value perspectives in relation to GM technologies. Not surprising, the stakeholders held a wide range of views with respect to the adoption of GM. Using a critical-interpretive perspective, the authors employed Burke's theory and critical discourse analysis to examine the intersection of stakeholders' values and the two focal organizations' position vis-à-vis GM products. The authors show that various organizational stakeholders draw on different value premises that create congruities as well as incongruities with an organization's identification. Practically, the authors show that organizations' strategic communication should be attuned to explicit and implicit value premises, organizational identifications, and actor identities at multiple levels within and by the organization. Sandra Evan's article, "Defining Distinctiveness: The Connections Between Organizational Identity, Competition, and Strategy in Public Radio Organizations," uses theories of organizational identity, networks, and strategic groups to examine employees' perspectives about their organization's competitors. Evans conducted 75 semistructured interviews with managers and digital/interactive media staff at 14 public radio stations. She discussed each interviewee's views on recent changes in his or her organization, the firm's digital media strategy, and his or her views about innovation, innovation constraints, and the competitive landscape. After coding the interview data, she created network visualizations to compare the coding results. Her analysis revealed that the way employees talk about their organization's competition illuminate perceptions of organizational identity and how these perceptions inform the value that is placed on strategic choices such as the expenditures of resources on analog versus digital projects. Ultimately, she argues, these views can affect innovation and organizational change.

- 2- Matthew Weber, Gail Fann Thomas, and Kimberlie Stephens's article, "Organizational Disruptions and Triggers for Divergent Sensemaking," challenges existing theory that predominately conceptualizes sensemaking as a convergent activity among stakeholders. Instead, they show how the interplay of sensemaking and sensegiving among numerous stakeholders can lead to divergent paths and ultimately failed initiatives. Using an in-depth case study whereby the U.S. Coast Guard attempted to implement a change, the authors analyzed interview data, public comments, transcripts from public meetings, and media accounts to examine a divergent sensemaking process and identify four critical triggers that led to organizational disruptions. The authors suggest that organizations incorporate stakeholders' multiple perspectives at the earliest stages of the change and engage in collaborative sensemaking and sensegiving throughout the process.
- 3- Jacqueline Mayfield, Milton Mayfield, and William Sharbrough III's article, "Strategic Vision and Values in Top Leaders' Communications: Motivating Language at the Higher Level," builds on Sullivan's (1988) original work on motivating language as well as their previous research that addresses a model of Motivating Language at the individual, dyadic, and team levels. This iteration of Motivating Language takes organizational level outcomes into account. This model uses speech act theory—specifically locutionary (meaning-making language), illocutionary acts (empathetic language), and prelocutionary (direction-giving language)—to explicate imperatives that might increase the effectiveness of strategic communication. Their article lays out specific propositions that provide direction for future empirical work related to top leaders' strategic vision and values.
- 4- Ron Dulek and Kim Sydow Campbell's article, "On the Dark Side of Strategic Communication," offers a provocative view of strategic communication. These authors challenge the prevailing view

that business, managerial, and corporate communication should be clear and effective and argue that ambiguity, and even deception, may be appropriate choices given an organization's or senior leader's strategic intent. These authors use a strategic and linguistic framework to develop a continuum of intentional ambiguity—moving from positive to neutral to negative. Analyzing multiple meanings or ambiguity from a linguistic approach, they use a pragmatic ambiguity lens to dissect four business finance scenarios—three public pronouncements from executives about future stock offerings and a fourth scenario involving an interchange between a CEO and an important client. Building on Eisenberg's (1984) argument that ambiguity can be seen as normal rather than deviant, these authors show how various actors use ambiguity in a variety of ways—some more acceptable than others—to achieve their purpose. Dulek and Campbell challenge communication researchers to more critically assess the role of clarity and ambiguity to accomplish one's desired end state.

- 5- In the forum article, "Leveraging Social Networks for Strategic Success," Eric Eisenberg, Zachary Johnson, and Willem Pieterse show the power of composite metrics—the combination of social network analysis and traditional attitudinal survey data. Such state-of-the-art tools allow organizations to monitor real-time informal communication networks as they implement a strategic change. This approach often employs user-friendly visualization tools that allow managers and other organization members to more easily grasp the results of large amounts of data, allowing them to make better decisions.

Finally, each of these articles examines strategic *communication at multiple levels*. In this way these authors show that strategic communication is operating across traditional research study boundaries. Mayfield et al. propose that in order for firms to reap the strategic benefits of motivating language that it must be practiced throughout the organization, from the leadership down to the frontline managers. Henderson et al. and Evans show how individual notions of organizational identity aggregate up, having an impact on the strategic direction of the organization. Eisenberg's notion of network analysis can capture both individual-level behaviors or connections and network or organization-level patterns. By bridging multiple levels, we can begin to conceptualize strategic communication as an ongoing process that links individual cognitions, words, and actions to organization-level actions and outcomes. This notion presents both an invigorating opportunity, but also a research challenge, as collecting data that crosses levels also often requires multiple methods and significant cooperation from study participants. As can be seen from this set of articles, however, this complexity should not be a deterrent.

CONCLUSION

This article suggests that a new paradigm for analyzing organizational communications is emerging that focuses on the purposeful communication activities by organizational leaders and members to advance the organization's mission. These activities can involve the varied organized endeavors in which an organization engages to communicate with constituents and can cross traditional communication disciplines.

The two keywords that comprise the term strategic communication are particularly significant. First, these activities are strategic, not random or unintentional communications—even though unintended consequences of communications can adversely impact the ability of an organization to achieve its strategic goals. Importantly, strategic must not be defined narrowly. Instead, strategic is a rich, multidimensional concept that needs to be examined broadly. Second, the concept of strategic communication emphasizes the fact that communication ought to be the focal interest of communications scholarship. The value of such an approach is readily apparent if communication is defined as the constitutive activity of management.

Strategic communication also includes examining how an organization presents itself in society as a social actor in the creation of public culture and in the discussion of public issues. Research can be

informed by looking beyond the bounds of traditional communications disciplines to include such diverse activities. Studying strategic communication as a social science and humanistic domain is reflective of real changes in society and its organizing principles. With the proliferation of media and the cacophony of messages they generate, it has become increasingly important for social actors and organizations to be deliberate and thoughtful in their communication. This is especially true as strategic organizational communication has become increasingly international and virtual in today's postmodern world. It is increasingly impossible to escape communicating across national, cultural, and linguistic borders.

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