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Strategic Communication: Reflections on an Elusive Concept

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how strategic communication successfully established itself as an academic discipline despite (or perhaps because of) being centered on an elusive concept. Drawing on ideas about the evolution of academic disciplines proposed by Alexander M. Shneider, we argue that strategic communication is currently caught in a cycle of constant reinvention obscured by a discourse of emergence. Although the discipline is undoubtedly becoming more sophisticated, it is doubtful whether there is genuine progress. The authors examine facets of strategic communication that contribute to the current state of affairs. Although clearer conceptualization and a more realistic understanding of the discipline are identified as a prerequisite for maturation, progress—as opposed to sophistication—ultimately depends on the development of discipline-specific, unique, and robust methods.

Introduction

The preconference, *Future Directions in Strategic Communication: Towards the Second Decade of an Emerging Field*, at the International Communication Association's annual conference in San Diego 2017, was inspired by the observation of a curious development—the undeniable success of a discipline centered on an undeniably elusive concept. The conference theme, with its suggestion of paths to be chosen, reflected the organizers' own ambiguous stance. Of course, first and foremost, the idea was to celebrate 10 years of achievement. A decade after inauguration of its own dedicated international journal, the project “strategic communication” clearly had become a success story, with academic conferences around the world, a prestigious handbook, an encyclopedia in the making, textbooks, and large-scale research projects (Nothhaft, Verčič, Werder, & Zerfass, 2017, p. 1). At the same time, the organizers did not want uncritical self-celebration.

As Werder, Nothhaft, Verčič, and Zerfass (2018) argue earlier in this volume, there can be little doubt that strategic communication research fulfills the standard requirements of a discipline: a) a particular object of research; b) a body of accumulated specialist knowledge; c) theories and concepts that organize the accumulated knowledge; d) specific terminologies; e) specific research methods; and, f) some institutional manifestation. The preconference's Call for Papers not only took for granted that strategic communication had “emerged as a global field of communication research” (Nothhaft et al., 2017, p. 1), it also suggested that this global field was going strong. By lauding the efforts of scholars from a multitude of disciplines such as “public relations, corporate communication, organizational and internal communication, public diplomacy, political communication, advertising, marketing, health and intercultural communication” (Nothhaft et al., 2017, p. 1), the

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organizers tacitly suggested a trajectory: The best is yet to come for strategic communication. By breaking down disciplinary silos, by bringing together what belongs together, strategic communication scholars are doing the right thing.

But are things really going that well? Strategic communication surely has a particular object of research—the community is just not entirely clear about what exactly it is. Surely there is a body of knowledge, a specific terminology, a set of specific research methods; there is just very little agreement on what they are. Undoubtedly, scholars from many fields have contributed to strategic communication research; it is just not clear what their common denominator is, what to make of the diversity, and how to integrate the plurality. In the preconference call, the organizers point to another, even more fundamental worry: “There is still no universal understanding of the pillars on which strategic communication rests” (Nothhaft et al., 2017, p. 1). Unanswered questions are piling up, in other words, unresolved issues are accumulating.

One might think it strange that a discipline succeeds despite difficulties in defining its pillars, its core perspectives, its benefits, even its extra value. But there is nothing mysterious in the disconnect between practical, academic, and institutional success on one side and theoretical stringency on the other. Strategic communication is at present sufficiently sexy as a term so that many scholars and practitioners want to be associated with it. That our key terms—strategy and communication—remain vaguely conceptualized probably helps more than hinders. In the early stages of disciplinary development not going too far beyond a diffuse sense of “something important going on” might be healthy—not only because it attracts scholars, but because it is accurate and honest.

For an emerging discipline, a diversity of answers even to core questions is not a problem, then. Yet, 10 years after the inauguration of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication (IJSC)*, one might ask how long the discipline wants to go on with the label emergent, and where it wants to go afterwards. Is multidisciplinary an achievement in itself? Although it is true that a good number of colleagues are unconcerned by the field’s prolonged puberty (some are experienced parents, presumably, yet others enjoy teenage wildlife), there are others eager for a transition out of adolescence.

Unsurprisingly, the visions of disciplinary adulthood vary. One school of thought, exemplified by Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, and Falkheimer (2018, p. 466), wants to see greater sophistication: “To sum up, our vision of the development of strategic communication as a research field is a richer and broader field that can produce nuanced knowledge about the complex phenomenon of strategic communication.” The other school, exemplified by Seiffert-Brockmann (2018, p. 429), wants to see progress in a classic, scientific sense; it wants to “... reconcile the field with its theoretical and empirical shortcomings by providing a coherent framework with testable models and hypotheses.” The pieces in the mosaic should come together as a body of knowledge, in other words, not merely as a corpus of texts. No one argues against greater sophistication or progress in general, but theoretical stringency appears to be contested.

Although the greater-sophistication school does want key questions answered, first and foremost it wants sophisticated answers, preferably many, and as diverse as possible. For sophisticators, any attempt to impose one coherent research agenda underpinned by one mainstream definition, even if only as a working hypothesis, carries the risk of dumbing down the field: uninteresting output is the worst-case scenario. Theory-testing and weeding out is not a priority. The greater-progress school, in contrast, is willing to trade off—for progress to happen, there must be focus; for focus, there has to be closure, at least as a temporary working hypothesis. Progressers are not against open-mindedness, in principle, but they are concerned that insistence on paradigmatic diversity and theoretical pluralism at all times borders on self-sabotage. Although it may not be as important as in the natural sciences, testing hypotheses and weeding out wrong or overly complicated theory is important. The progressers’ main worry is not that output will be uninteresting—normal science in the Kuhnian sense often is laborious—but that it will be irrelevant. The worst-case scenario is that more stringent and methodically advanced disciplines find superior answers to the discipline’s own questions.

Four stages of a discipline

The juxtaposition of sophisticators and progressers is hyperbolic, of course; the extreme ends of the spectrum populated by strawmen. But the discussion reveals that strategic communication in its current emerging state is not only beset by many unanswered questions, but by disagreements over what adequate answers should look like. And there is a profound asymmetry. For sophisticators, disagreements are not nearly as worrying. That the “definition misery” (*Definitionsmisere*; Fröhlich, 2008) stubbornly resists resolution only illustrates, for sophisticators, why the search for a coherent research agenda is chimerical— notions of progress, uncritically imported from the natural sciences, do not apply in the social sciences. There are many questions, many answers, hopefully inspiring ones, and that is it.

One can simply accept that the social sciences are stuck in Kuhn’s preparadigmatic stage, as philosopher of science Alexander Rosenberg (2008) suggests, and that progress in the scientific sense is a chimera. But there is a growing number of colleagues, the authors included, who do not accept that reasoning anymore. Although they do not naively expect progress as in the natural sciences, they do expect something else than continuous emergence and diversity for diversity’s sake. For progressers, it may be helpful, thus, to gain a better understanding of how the development of disciplines is conceptualized in the natural sciences, and what dynamics drive the development.

Shneider’s four-stage model

Apart from the model sketched in Werder et al. (2018), and Kuhn’s famous theory of scientific revolution (Kuhn, 1996, 1st edition, 1962), another promising perspective of disciplinary emergence is the four-stage model proposed by Alexander M. Shneider (2009). Complementary to Kuhn’s theory, Shneider’s model traces how scientific disciplines progress through four evolutionary stages that are not only fundamentally different but require different types of contributors.

Shneider’s first stage is the invention of a discipline, which happens by introducing “new subject matter into the realm of scientific analysis” (2009, p. 218). Perhaps contrary to popular understanding, a discipline rarely begins with the discovery of new facts. Neither Newton in physics nor Mendeleev in chemistry discovered new facts, Shneider argues, and even Crick and Watson, as founders of molecular biology, relied on the experimental results of others. What first-stagers do is develop a new and more powerful scientific language. In Newton’s case, it was differential equations to describe mechanical movements; in the case of Watson and Crick, it was the double helix and DNA-RNA-protein sequence. First-stagers are pioneering spirits, capable of persevering in the face of ridicule by established colleagues in their original discipline. Although they are open-minded, holistic, and lateral thinkers (Newton famously dabbled in alchemy), often inspired by philosophical, aesthetic, cultural, or humorous implications (Feynman comes to mind), their technical skills tend to be inferior, their attention to detail low, which explains why they moved sideways out of established fields. “In order for first-stage scientists to be able to create a new framework of thinking they often have to be somewhat imprecise and even somewhat inaccurate.” (Shneider, 2009, p. 218)

The second stage is dominated by contributors of “ingenuity and inventiveness,” “with an ability to implement ideas and a high risk-tolerance” (Shneider, 2009, p. 220). Men and women of action take the insights of the great first-stagers, in other words, and run with them. “Scientists at the second evolutionary state of a scientific discipline develop all the major techniques, enabling the language of the new science to be useful and sophisticated enough to describe a broader spectrum of phenomena” (Shneider, 2009, p. 219). As a consequence, the second stage is characterized by breakthroughs not in terms of theory, but in terms of methods. Shneider (2009, p. 219) gives the example that the original article on BLAST (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool), a tool for comparing genes by computer (i.e., a method), was the most frequently cited article in molecular biology in the 1990s.

The third stage is the most sophisticated—a discipline’s apex. Although genuine breakthrough discoveries are rare, most of the useful knowledge is produced here. Arguably, molecular biology is presently in its third stage, for an effect often seen in Stage 3 is the application in other areas. “... DNA sequencing, originally developed for biology, has become useful for archaeologists and historians” (Shneider, 2009, p. 220). For the scientists, the profile changes once again. Neither the pioneering spirit of first-stagers nor the ingenuity and inventiveness of second-stagers carries much weight—technical expertise reigns, standards are exacting, tolerance for mistakes low, appetite for risk even lower. “The leaders in the field tend to be the neatest, most hard-working and detail-oriented” (Shneider, 2009, p. 220).

Finally, there are Stage 4 disciplines. “How many discoveries are made today in anatomy, electrical engineering or classical philology,” Shneider asks (2009, p. 220). These disciplines are mature; they are mainly concerned with safeguarding a body of knowledge created by earlier contributors. Pedagogy is another concern—that a 12th grader today can learn what once was cutting-edge physics is a testament to its powers. But there is another aspect. Shneider (2009, p. 221) points out that first-stagers and fourth-stagers are often very similar in their capacity to see the big, holistic picture. In fact, many first-stagers, like Lavoisier who wrote a chemistry textbook in 1789, triggered the emergence of a new discipline by synthesizing, as fourth-stagers, the knowledge of their original discipline (Shneider, 2009, p. 221).

As mentioned, Shneider’s model reflects the situation in the natural sciences. Disciplines and subdisciplines in the social sciences are less homogenous, with one cluster of authors doing one thing, another doing entirely different things. Thus, it may be too simplistic to ask in what stage strategic communication is precisely. It might make sense, however, to look for familiar patterns. If Stage 3 disciplines are characterized by export of their methods into other fields, one can ask whether a similar development is evident in strategic communication. Another complex that might be of interest are typical dynamics. What could prevent maturation, for example?

Familiar patterns

Stage 1 disciplines are characterized by pioneering spirits who introduce new languages to describe relatively well-known phenomena or phenomena that have become observable only recently. This sounds very familiar. In a way, strategic communication is a new language already. To view communication as a strategic resource for organizations fundamentally broke with the way one of the root disciplines, communication and media science, viewed the very same well-known phenomena. However, there is a current tendency to continuously introduce new language. The contribution of Winkler and Etter (2018), which introduces Mintzberg’s famous distinction between deliberate and emergent strategy, is a good example. The vocabulary of neo-institutionalism (e.g., Sandhu, 2009) or the adoption of the CCO perspective (e.g., Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011) are others. There is nothing wrong with the introduction of terminology, of course. The important point is that the state of immaturity as a young and emergent discipline and the state of constant reinvention—especially if it is semantic reinvention—are one and the same thing. In Shneider’s model, disciplines mature when their own unique new language begins to be demonstrably useful in sustaining novel methods and techniques. That does not seem to be the case presently in strategic communication.

Stage 2 disciplines are characterized by energetic contributors who not only develop the new language further, but develop methods and techniques that yield concrete, increasingly precise results. It is interesting to examine where our efforts come closest. The evaluation and measurement debate, for example, is one area where colleagues work in cooperation with the industry to develop systems that are not only academically sound but work in practice (Buhmann, Likely, & Geddes, 2018; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2017; Volk, 2016). Part of the effort here consists of setting standards for the industry (via involvement in the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication, AMEC, for example), and it should be noted that the community involved is

rather small and tightly knit with many colleagues driven by methodological knowledge. For all its success, however, scholars admit that the area is currently in a “deadlock” (Macnamara, 2014, p. 1) or “stasis” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2017, p. 319), with unsatisfactory transfer between academia and practice and practice more inspired by academia rather than academics taking the lead. In other words, the discipline reaches Stage 2, but falls short of Stage 3.

Stage 3 constitutes the apex of a discipline, where the harvest is brought in. A typical characteristic of a Stage 3 discipline is that its methods begin to inform other disciplines. Again, this does not sound like strategic communication. Transfer of knowledge *out* of strategic communication, towards other disciplines is traditionally rare; import from other disciplines is far more frequent, as bibliometric studies show. Wehmeier (2012) demonstrates this clearly for public relations. The fake news debate sparked great interest in strategic communication as a subject matter and an object of study (Nothhaft, Pamment, Agardh-Twetman, & Fjällhed, 2018), and colleagues begin to work with disciplines which seek scientific and technological answers to the problem, such as computer linguistics, data science, cognitive science, neurobiology. Yet, it remains to be seen who takes the lead in these cooperations. A positive scenario is that strategic communication becomes comfortable with new methodological approaches and develops into a multiple discipline effort, as Werder et al. (2018) suggest. An alternative negative scenario is that strategic communication remains as it is, low-cost and education-oriented, and substantial research on our questions is done elsewhere.

Stage 4 disciplines are characterized by the safeguarding of the body of knowledge, with emphasis on the refinement of pedagogy. This sounds familiar in one way, but unfamiliar in another. In many of the contributor disciplines, such as public relations, marketing or organizational communication, there is a tendency, evidenced by the production of “authoritative” textbooks, to claim a state-of-the-art. In strategic communication itself, a state-of-the-art exists in the sense that there is, momentarily, a best practice acknowledged by practitioners. What is perhaps more dubious is whether that state is fully underpinned by rigorous research. Stage 4 in strategic communication tends to mean saturation, i.e., a sense that there is nothing more to say at present, as academics and practitioners are more or less in agreement. Thus, specialized areas of strategic communication research temporarily achieve Stage 4 status, as issues are satisfactorily addressed and/or go out of fashion. To the authors, it is presently inconceivable that strategic communication should reach Stage 4 status as a whole. It is hard to imagine that the discipline should switch from frantically catching up with ever-changing reality to a mode of dignified administration.

In conclusion, it is perhaps fair to say that the field is oscillating between Stage 1 and a stage of “proto-4,” in a way jumping the intermediate stages, then jumping back. There are the occasional conceptual and methodological advances into Stage 2, but they rarely fulfill the criteria of a genuine Stage 3 discipline.

Although it sounds dismissive to label the discipline as “proto-4,” extenuating circumstances apply. Contested as it may be, we conceptualize strategic communication as an applied field. As such, it is not only oriented towards knowledge production per se, but towards resonance of its production in practice. The most crucial point to note for progressers, who wish to see a genuine climbing up the ladder, is Shneider’s emphasis on discipline-specific methods and techniques. Despite exciting groundwork in fields such as data science, there appears to be very little methodological development that is unique to strategic communication and its questions. On a basic level, many of the research methods applied in strategic communication research are generic methods of the social sciences. But the basic level is not what Shneider has in mind. What is of interest is something comparable to standardized tests in psychology (like “the big five”), which use surveys as a platform, but constitute a unique contribution of psychology. Such methods are probably being developed by research groups, but there is currently no collective effort—at least it is not known to us—that would lead anywhere near an inventory of discipline-specific, widely shared and consequently well-understood standardized tests, techniques or tools. What is lacking is a critical mass of scholars who are not only on the same page method-wise, but who are robustly ahead of practice. Why is this so? One answer has been given and is further explored next—because the discipline’s language, in its current state of constant reinvention, is not yet powerful enough to give rise to unique methods. Another, more complementary, reason might lie in social dynamics.

Typical dynamics

Shneider's four-stage model goes beyond Kuhn insofar as it proposes that disciplines in different stages favor different researcher personalities. The typical dynamic is that a new and emergent Stage 1 discipline attracts not only more pioneering spirits, but energetic developers of methods, techniques and, in a way, systems. Similarly, the development from a Stage 2 to a Stage 3 discipline depends not only on the availability of sophisticated theories and methods, but on the recruitment of personalities that are detail oriented enough to work hard for small gains.

If Shneider's reconstruction of social dynamics is correct and applies, at least by and large, to the social sciences, one corollary is that contributors—or the discipline's structures or recruitment patterns—can deliberately or accidentally prevent maturation. Why would contributors do that, or remain inactive in the face of unfortunate disciplinary structures or recruitment patterns? Shneider's model makes clear that entry into well-established mature fields with precisely defined and increasingly narrow research questions (i.e., Stage 3 disciplines) is costly for academics—fruit hang high, standards are exacting, and “mistakes or imprecision are unforgivable” (Shneider, 2009, p. 220). As long as the discipline thrives, meaning it resonates in practice, there are reasons for contributors to keep a field in a constant state of emergence. The vagueness of an emerging field—a Stage 1 discipline in Shneider's terminology—not only allows creativity to flourish and comes with a sense of vibrancy, it also lowers the costs of market entry.

Another factor comes into play when a new discipline emerges as a sideshow of more mature or established disciplines, as may have been the case for strategic communication and public relations. Shneider notes that first-stagers and fourth-stagers are often similar in personality. Consequently, the more innovative fourth-stagers in established disciplines, where the air has turned stale and the discipline has grown “tired” (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 358), find it easy to move sideways into the new discipline. They might be accused of reselling their old wine in new bottles, as has happened in strategic communication, but they also bring sophistication, which is appreciated. Shneider's model suggests that they will do well and gain in influence; however, they might prefer the discipline to remain in Stage 1.

Strategic communication: facets of a concept

So far, we have suggested that strategic communication, in terms of progress, oscillates between Stage 1 and a stage of proto-4, a situation probably not uncommon for applied fields where resonance in practice is a complementary success criterion (*Harvard Business Review* looks different from *Science* or *Nature*). There are occasional advances into Stage 2 in strategic communication, but rarely consolidation at Stage 3, at least not discipline-wide. We suggested that there might be social dynamics at play, too, but they should not be overemphasized. The main reason why strategic communication struggles to progress towards Stage 3, we suggest, lies in the lack of a critical mass of scholars fully acquainted with an inventory of discipline-specific methods and techniques—strategic communication's equivalent of DNA sequencing. That these methods and techniques have not yet been established was traced back, in turn, to the conceptual and theoretical state of the field (i.e., its unique language), which is currently, at least from the perspective of progressers, caught in cycles of constant reinvention. For the many method- and technique-oriented colleagues (i.e., second-stagers with a focus on empirical research), the ground is constantly shifting; results rarely intermesh with the results of other contributors.

What can be done? We do not suggest to forcibly break the cycles of reinvention. At worst, the attempt might lead into the blind alley of artificial and sterile pseudo-research; at best, it is futile. What must be done is to simply go on with the search for strategic communication's own powerful and unique new language—hopefully with a greater awareness of what we are looking for, a greater appreciation of the need to find common ground, and a hope that it holds before one moves to the next patch. If there is one recommendation to take away from Shneider's model, it is to look for a language that first and foremost allows for operationalization in methods and techniques, that allows

for empirical research, for testability, at least in principle. Resonance in practice is important for an applied field, to be sure, but it is secondary; genuine acknowledgment in practice will come with genuine results. With the mind sciences progressing and data science expanding its reach, the danger that other disciplines find better answers to our questions is real.

None of these recommendations is new or original. It behooves progressers to ask, therefore, why the required steps have not been taken already. Maybe the sophisticators are right and strategic communication is so complex that it does not lend itself to operationalization? If the “normal” recipes applied, sophisticators could ask with some justification, why does it appear so difficult to formulate a coherent research agenda that integrates all the interesting and valuable work that is being done. Maybe multifaceted appreciation is the best way to approach a multifaceted subject? If it were otherwise, why does strategic communication remain so elusive as a concept, as a theoretical term? We believe that there are many interrelated reasons that make strategic communication elusive as a concept, but that they are not exceptional. In the spirit of simply going on with the search, three areas will be investigated: 1) the concept’s explanatory power, 2) the discipline’s research object, and 3) the discipline as a viable academic agenda.

Explanatory power

On a basic level, the value of a concept lies largely in its explanatory power, i.e., in its ability to explain something, to cover the observed facts without explaining everything else (*divine will*, in contrast, covers any observed fact, but also all facts). “Stress” is a good example on both counts. Before the pioneering work of Hans Selye, chroniclers and commentators sought the reasons for inexplicably bad decisions by leaders as “character flaws.” In retrospect, many out-of-character decisions are probably best explained by acute or chronic stress. Reviewing the effects of stress on the frontal cortex, Robert Sapolsky concludes that “stressed people often make hideously bad decisions, marinated in emotion” (2017, KL 1053–1054). Nowadays, of course, stress is in danger of becoming a meaningless explanation because it is applied to almost every situation. “Stress has become a universal explanation for human behavior in industrial society” (Viner, 1999, p. 391).

If the test of a concept lies in its ability to explain, then it should be possible to demonstrate the value of strategic communication by showing that its introduction, like the early talk about stress, facilitates more powerful explanations for known phenomena. Stress, as opposed to character flaw, is a more powerful explanation because it can be managed by the individual. Stress also has a physiological basis, a hormonal signature. Alas, things do not seem that way when it comes to strategic communication. Rare are the cases where the introduction of strategic communication sparks an “aha” effect. The raw explanatory power of strategic communication, and thus its value as a concept, remains elusive. If there is explanatory power, it seems to be more of the universal, meaningless kind. As every communication scholar knows, there are tendencies to blame any unsatisfactory state in society or organizations, at least partly, on a lack of communication. The qualification “strategic,” a notoriously vague concept, does not make things easier.

But is there no explanatory power in the strategic communication concept? We argue that there is. What makes it hard to see is that strategic communication does not introduce a new explanation; it reinstates an old one. The explanatory power of strategic communication, we contend, becomes obvious only against the highly differentiated and deeply demarcated landscape of the many disciplines and subdisciplines that have become concerned with communication and its many correlates and derivatives (e.g., brand, image, reputation, trust, legitimacy).

An example illustrates our point. In 2013, organization and marketing scholar Jens Rennstam wrote about the negative or destructive side of branding (Rennstam, 2013). Rennstam’s article explored a critical incident concerning Malmö police and, after having conducted many interviews with members of the force, theoretically reconstructs it as branding in the “sacrificial mode.” The case, briefly, was the following: During the 2008 riots in one of the city of Malmö’s more troubled areas, three police officers sitting in a van pelted by stones made racist comments about the rioters.

The utterances would not have been heard by anyone, except for the fact that a third officer was videotaping the events outside. When the video was used in court, the comments could be clearly heard on the tape. This sparked an outrage. Police leadership took action, suspended the officers, and persisted with disciplinary proceedings even after they were cleared from criminal charges. Rennstam's interviews as well as some differentiated media coverage illuminate another side of the story, however. Police leadership signaled to the force that they did not consider the three officers "bad apples" yet made clear that someone needed to be sacrificed to save the police brand. Rennstam's interviews revealed the destructive effect of the leadership's hypocrisy (a term later used by Rennstam) on force morale.

The interesting aspect, here, is that Rennstam's article goes to great lengths to explain the incident in terms of branding alone. To do so, he expands the familiar boundaries of "brand" by introducing the "sacrificial mode." Not uninterestingly, the sacrificial mode draws attention to the fact that the complexity reduction normally associated with branding comes at a price. All this is legitimate, but it should be noted that the sacrificial mode is not necessary to understand the case, for the critical incident can be easily reconstructed as corporate communication, without using the term "brand," which is slightly inappropriate in the case of the police anyway. Rennstam's article remains a rich and highly interesting case study, but one cannot help thinking of the adage "give someone a hammer and he will go in search for a nail." And it is here that the explanatory power of strategic communication lies. With strategic communication as a core concept, brand scholars do not need to explain everything in terms of brand anymore, just as public relations scholars do not need to explain everything in terms of public relations.

Research object and subject

Although the term "subject matter" is common, the conceptually different term "research object" is not yet. On a basic level, things seem simple. Strategic communication researchers ought to study strategic communication, so that is the discipline's object. Unfortunately, the identification of research objects, as opposed to the semantic and programmatic delineation of an area of study, is not the starting point for a discipline, but marks a major breakthrough. Gregor Mendel is considered the father of modern genetics because he had fully grasped the subject matter or "problem," i.e., the laws of inheritance in mathematical and statistical form. But Mendel knew nothing about genes. It only became clear in the 1950s that DNA was the place where genetic information was stored. It was a major breakthrough to find out that the hidden factors Mendel conceptualized had a molecular equivalent. Genes became the central research object of genetics when it became clear that they were not only a useful postulation, but actually "there," i.e., tied to something *material*.

What is the subject matter (problem) and the research object (in a way, material equivalent) of strategic communication? Dirk Baecker, Luhmann-disciple and prodigious organization theorist, makes an interesting observation when writing about the work of Erich Gutenberg, one of the founders of *Betriebswirtschaftslehre* (business administration) in Germany. Baecker (2003) observes that Gutenberg laid the theoretical foundations (*Gründungsakt*) of business administration by insisting that its subject matter was not and could never be the empirical organization. Organizations, as they exist in reality, are far too messy to be the object of a stringent research agenda. Gutenberg's key insight, in Baecker's words, was to view the organization as an "economical enterprise" (Baecker 2003, p. 11). Business administration's subject matter, thus, became the economic calculus that pervaded the empirical organization to a greater or smaller degree. In order to emancipate as a discipline, Gutenberg argued, business administration needed to make the assumption of a perfect for-profit organization, a hypothetical organization fully pervaded by the economic calculus, entirely governed by the economic principle. As the discipline developed, the "real" organization in all its messiness was reintroduced into business administration, as Baecker admits, but the discipline's emancipation was due to the clear identification of a subject matter to be superimposed on empirical reality—the economic calculus.

One should be careful with dismissing reality, of course. The unrealistic assumptions of economics and business administration, encapsulated in the postulation of *homo economicus* (economic human), have been thoroughly criticized. At present, behavioral economics is successful as a research agenda that tries to repair the damage done by *homo economicus*. Nevertheless, one might ask whether strategic communication's current state of constant reinvention results from the attempt to come to grips with the messiness of empirical organizations, as opposed to finding its own calculus. If a discipline lets its subject matter be determined by 'messy' empirical reality (i.e., organizations, decisions, communication, networks, people), there is no end to factors that could also be taken into account.

Obviously, the calculus, perspective, and subject that strategic communication researchers must impose on messy empirical organizations—contra-factually, at least in the first step—would have something to do with strategy and communication. What that means is presently not clear, which is equivalent to stating that the discipline has not found its language yet. The strategic part is perhaps easier to understand, as it has been thoroughly investigated in military academies and business schools.

The term "strategy" is traditionally—in its original 'modernist' military sense—a calculus of purpose, ends, and means under conditions of limited resources, as seen against a horizon of predictability. What counter-factual 'perfect' strategists are interested in is options, what they do is deciding in accordance with a given purpose. Purposiveness, it will be noted, is already a key concept in current definitions (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). Nevertheless, the question of what purposive communication is remains tricky. Is it "out there," or is "strategic" an attribution? Are architecture, the peacock's train, and redeploying military assets purposive communication? The alchemy of the two terms strategic and communication taken together, qualifying each other, does not make things easier.

Intricacies accepted, one must start somewhere. With "communication" left as it is, the calculus of strategic communication can perhaps be tentatively formulated as: *What is the best course of action for entity E to achieve X in context alpha by means of "communication" under conditions of limited resources and high complexity, and consequently uncertainty?* Viewed as a calculus, then, strategic communication research is not simply the *carte blanche* to look into everything that could be a means of communicating strategically, i.e., acts, instances, or "flows" (Edwards, 2012, p. 7) of intentional, purposive communication. Viewed as a calculus—a mindset—strategic communication research is first and foremost the attempt to answer the above question by adopting, but also transcending, the perspective of one focal, 'perfect' strategic actor. With this conceptualization in mind, the next section addresses the cartographers' challenge and asks what we know and what we do not yet know.

Viable academic agenda

One might argue that the issues raised so far betray a certain naiveté. At the end of the day, the challenge does not lie with a definition, explanatory power, subject matters, research objects, or even an account of how something works, why it exists, or whether it exists at all. Academically, the big question is whether a core concept supports a viable academic agenda, i.e., whether it can sustain disciplinary emergence. Subtleties aside, we argue that a viable agenda requires as many affirmative responses as possible to the following questions: Are the area of study and the object of research defined in a way, so that...

- ... they can be studied/researched with gain and/or progress?
- ... there is a critical mass of dedicated scholars who will do so?
- ... this enterprise will be supported by higher education providers?

In pursuit of gain and progress

As the yearly Ig Nobel awards – the awards for the world’s most trivial achievements in scientific research – amply demonstrate, everything can be studied and researched in some way or another, be it the intestinal pressures produced by defecating chinstrap penguins or the link between suicide rates and the amount of country music played on radio (Improbable Research, 2018). The question is whether study and research have a hope of either gain or progress or both, with gain a more short-term beneficial effect and progress a longer-term accumulation. For example, there is very little progress to be expected in the study of literature, which would mean that we’ve finally figured out, once and for all, why Hamlet “works.” But there is undoubtedly gain. In contrast, there is little short-term gain in the systematization of ant species, but, in the long run, a systematic inventory of the earth’s biosphere is scientific progress.

The juxtaposition of gain and progress harkens back to the discussion between sophisticators and progressers. Because sophisticators hold the easier position—no one doubts that there is gain in studying strategic communication—our discussion returns to the question whether progress is conceivable, what it looks like, and what currently stands in its way.

An interesting self-test that reveals to what degree the subject is well-defined and whether there is hope of progress is to identify, as precisely as possible, what the scientific community, when employing its own language, does not know yet. This is equivalent to the cartographer, whose language is two-dimensional graphical projection, and who points out *terra incognita* on the map. Intriguingly, there is an historico-epistemic dimension here, as blank spaces appear to be a rather recent invention. Maps did not always allow *terra incognita*. In chapter 15 of his bestselling “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,” Harari (2011) discusses two Western world maps, one dated to 1459, and the other the so-called *Salviati Map* of 1525. The superficial difference is that the newer map displays the coastline of the New World, while the older map limits itself to a rough representation of Europe, parts of Africa, and parts of Asia. The striking difference lies in the fact that the older map is complete; it suggests that everything is known. Furthermore, while the 1525 map leaves the inner areas of the two Americas blank, the 1459 map is uniformly covered in incredible detail. And that is so even where the map is clearly wrong, e.g., its representation of the African continent.

Harari’s point, not glossing over the problems of colonialism, is that the discovery of the Americas was an important catalyst of the scientific revolution because it taught Europeans to value present observation over past tradition and introduced the powerful notion that things of importance were not yet known but could be found out. This mindset starkly contrasted with the traditional idea, which held that everything is known already, although knowledge might be buried. No one suggests that everything is known in strategic communication, of course. Yet, after 10 years with a dedicated journal, it remains difficult to see where the blank spaces are, not to mention the map. Certainly, there are big questions, but they often take the shape of vague concerns, such as the generalized notion that some societal transformation (e.g., social media) is inadequately understood.

Magda Pieczka (2002) identified this permanent state of confrontation with a new and inadequately understood “environment” as one of the constitutive principles of the public relations and consultancy industries, and that may be a hint as to the origin of the problem. Going back to Harari’s map, one cannot help wondering whether the creators of the 1459 map were more consultants and less scientists, and whether the consultant mindset might affect strategic communication research, too. The great step forward, in Harari’s account, consisted of the admission of ignorance. The genuine scientist, Harari notes, has the luxury to say “We don’t know, yet.” The consultant, in contrast, is rarely allowed to admit ignorance. Science is a long-term, accumulative project; blanks are filled in over decades and centuries. Consulting is a short-term endeavor. Consultants always come with the latest map, which is always complete.

In pursuit of a dynamic balance

The second condition for a viable academic agenda—the ability to attract a critical mass of focused scholarship—has been mentioned already. But what does focused mean? It means that the people who come together in a conference room know what the others in the room are talking about. By and large, they are interested in the same questions, read the same literature, and apply the same concepts, methods and techniques. Therefore, they are fully competent to criticize each other substantially, not only formally. In other words, a sufficient number of people who really do the same thing.

Foremost, focus seems a function of clear concepts and precise definitions. Although the absence of clarity and precision is crippling in the long run, as has been established, it is doubtful whether words on paper suffice. Focus is equally a function of enforcement by senior scholars and editors of journals, i.e., acknowledgment of the social dynamics identified by Shneider. That is a dynamic balance, of course. If the focus is too narrow, it will be difficult to achieve critical mass because there are too few colleagues who are willing to submit to the entry criteria and to conform to the stringent requirements of a narrow-minded, highly specialized field—a Stage 3-discipline. If the focus is too wide, there will be lenient entry criteria (open-minded and vibrant), but there is equally little chance to achieve critical mass. People may be in the same room, but they do not talk about the same things.

In pursuit of institutionalization

Finally, one of the most important questions may simply be whether higher education providers (HEPs) will support a discipline's maturation. For reasons that will become clear, HEPs do not necessarily have a reason to support every discipline's progress towards Stage 3.

Although much can be said about differences in educational systems, in the long run the attractivity of a discipline for HEPs will always be a function of economic viability, either via societal interest (expressed in research funding), industrial interest (also expressed in research funding), student numbers (tuition fees), or a combination of these. The system might be quicker to react in more market-driven education landscapes, slower in more state-funded ones,¹ but someone has to pick up the bill, whether it is the state, an industry, or the students.

Established disciplines do not compete eye-to-eye with emerging disciplines—not in a privatized higher education market and even less so in a state-funded one—because tradition and prestige come into play. With the hurdles high, the real question for emerging disciplines, therefore, is whether they manage to make the leap given the terms they are granted. Put simply, there are three ways this may be possible. The first way is to address questions of societal relevance and deliver inspiring results. In that case, societal resources become available, although they might dry up when the political climate changes, i.e., when the two-pronged approach of creating a burning problem as well as offering inspiring solutions fails in one prong or another. A second way is to address questions of practical importance and deliver useful results. In that case, societal research funding for basic research and industrial research funding for applied research is inevitable, although everything might dry up as soon as the problem is solved or better technologies come to the fore. The third way is fundamentally different—it is to create an education “product” (or service) that remains commercially viable for HEPs without a large amount of external research funding. The discipline must secure a constant stream of students who can be educated to their satisfaction at a reasonable cost, because it is by and large the surplus, in the form of academic staff's remains of the day, that finances the discipline's development. There is only one way of securing a reliable student stream, and that is to capture a job market, either by capturing an attractive profession (as law schools have done) or by establishing education in the discipline as the premier entry ticket to a lucrative career (as business administration has done).

¹ Even for the United States, traditionally seen as market-driven, Caplan estimates for the year 2011 that federal, state and local governments taken together subsidized education with roughly a trillion dollars. (2018, p. 5).

In reality, disciplines often rely on a mix of factors. Nowadays, many classical disciplines such as philosophy continue to exist due to a continued belief in their societal relevance and inspirational power on the side of the HEPs, as well as a stream of students who choose the subject for reasons of academic tradition and lack of market transparency. This is not the case for disciplinary newcomers. For example, neuroscience delivers results of practical importance, but also has been helped by the fact that it contains societally relevant and inspirational elements. Cognitive neuroscientists have addressed the traditionally philosophical question of free will, for example, and are offering advice on the reform of the criminal justice system (see Sapolsky, 2017, Chapter 16 for a controversial example).

Where is strategic communication, and where are its constituent disciplines, in this process? Despite the current interest in fake news, which made strategic communication sociopolitically relevant to an unprecedented degree, the discipline rests on a mix of societal contribution and industry relevance, with education in the center. Vigilance towards corporate and political abuse of communication power is an important societal function. The development of management tools and rationalization of best practice is certainly useful for the industry. It is doubtful, however, whether societal relevance and industry utility can carry the discipline on their own. Student education remains the main source of income. As institutionalization by legal requirement for practice is not on the table, the strategy is to position the discipline as the required entry ticket to a career in communication. If you want to become a CEO, study business administration. If communication director is your dream job, strategic communication is the way to go.

If we expect strategic communication to develop as an applied field, with a constant stream of students, recent criticism of the higher education landscape centering on exactly this dynamic is perhaps of interest. In *Triumph of Emptiness* (2013), management scholar Mats Alvesson devoted a critical chapter to higher education, arguing that there is an element of “image boosting” (2013, p. 95) in lightweight educations that has little to do with the reality of the jobs waiting at the end, which are often mundane. Professor of anthropology and anarchist activist David Graeber,² who is more concerned about student debt and the subtle exclusion of the working class, makes a case against *credentialism* in advanced economies in his book *The Utopia of Rules* (2015). “Almost every endeavor that used to be considered an art (best learned through doing) now requires formal professional training and a certificate of completion” (2015, p. 23). Interestingly, journalism is Graeber’s prime example.

More recently, professor of economics Bryan Caplan published *The Case against Education* (2018), which argues that contemporary higher education is less about learning something useful and more about signaling, although there are useful elements in every education. Even with tuition fees rising, Caplan demonstrates that the individual’s investment in higher education continues to pay off. However, it does not primarily pay off because the education imparts skills eagerly sought after by employers. For the majority of jobs, the primary function of degrees is not to guarantee a skill level, but to signal intelligence, conscientiousness and conformity to prospective employers. Caplan invokes the metaphor of magic. It is the magic of education that the “labor market doesn’t pay you for the useless subjects you master; it pays you for the preexisting traits you reveal by mastering them” (2018, p. 13).

If this is the path tread by strategic communication and it is hard to see a viable alternative, there are warning lights. Maybe the most important warning is not to be complacent about academia’s power to define a field and secure a discipline’s status as an entry ticket. If intelligence, conscientiousness, and conformity are the traits most employers are really looking for, with specialized skills merely a bonus, there will be only a small education-based advantage for graduates in strategic communication even when seeking careers in their own field. Judging from anecdotes and perennial professional debates, that is what many professors experience. Their students compete with graduates from many other fields, from archeology to zoology. Although they might get the communications job in the end, they enjoy little material advantage. Salaries reflect that there is a long queue of others, philosophers, biologists, and students of language and

² In a recent book Graeber (2018) also qualified public relations as a bullshit job and categorized its practitioners as “goons,” i.e., the class of people with bullshit jobs that require them to act aggressively on behalf of their employers (the other classes of bullshit jobs are “flunkies,” “duct-tapers,” “box-tickers,” and “taskmasters”).

fine arts. Apart from legal institutionalization, the only way to break this dynamic would be to impart specific, tangible, marketable skills that other candidates do not possess. But where are they? With the discipline oscillating between Stage 1 and proto-4, it is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to say that current education is first and foremost a socialization process. Graduates acquire ways of thinking and maybe communication-specific management tools. For sophisticators, that is not a problem, because they assume that a typical graduate socialized in multifaceted critical reasoning will outperform a typical biologist on the job, even though employers do not fully reward it. For progressers, the matter is not so clear. Progressers worry about what happens if other fields give superior answers to the industry's questions. What if the biologist becomes the preferred candidate simply because she acquired a professional qualification in Google Analytics or some other certificate?

Future directions

There is a certain irony in bemoaning the lack of progress in a discipline while spending page after page on meta-reflection. But in this case, meta-reflection points to quite clear and practical conclusions. If Shneider's model is supported and can be at least partly applied to our discipline, one way towards progress emerges above everything else. Methods are the key. It is methods that take a Stage 2 discipline to the Stage 3 apex. Not generic methods like surveys, interviews, and content analysis, but rather advanced and specific methods that give answers to strategic communication's unique questions; instruments that have been developed, refined, replicated, and reviewed in strategic communication to a point where they are robust. If strategic communication is to be an equal partner in multiple disciplinary scholarship efforts, it has to bring something to the table.

Certainly, our methods will never be as robust as DNA sequencing, maybe not even as robust as personality tests, but they could be similar in one very important way. They could be instruments created in fundamental research, but then developed further to be usefully applied by practitioners, as well as in the education of practitioners. For example, what if the ongoing measurement and evaluation efforts of hundreds and thousands of organizations were accessible in standardized databases and directly comparable due to standard methods?

The emphasis on methods is perhaps surprising. Sophisticators and progressers all tend to complain chiefly about the lack of theoretical development. Theory precedes methods; it is challenging to develop specific methods that answer undefined questions. But it is only in the transition from Stage 1 (unique language and new vocabulary) to Stage 2 (specific and useful methods) that the elusiveness of strategic communication begins to matter. The term's diffuse explanatory power, the ambiguity of subject (perspective) and object (material and manifest basis), and the widespread wishful thinking about the discipline's status and consequently the fragmentation of effort, become problematic only in transition from Stage 1 to 2, and especially 2 to 3. It is here that progressers and sophisticators part ways. For sophisticators, theory can be developed more or less independently of methods. In a way, theory *is* a method in the sophisticator's inventory—a pedagogical method to socialize students into multifaceted, nuanced, critical thinking and sound judgment, or *phronesis*. For progressers, in contrast, it is not clear what inadequate theoretical development means, other than to result in theory that is not operationalizable by available methodology.³ Pragmatically, a progressers' definition of strategic communication must not only resonate with practice, be sophisticated, inclusive, or diverse. First and foremost, it must facilitate and support research. For

³ There is a basic level of theory-building that can be addressed in absence of methodology: the issue of consilience in a narrow sense, of hard-to-vary explanations in a wider. Based on the case made by Edward Wilson (1998), Nothhaft (2016) and others argue that theory in strategic communication must be compatible, i.e., *consilient*, with the mind sciences. The argument draws ultimately on David Deutsch's (2009) exposition that scientific explanations are characterized by the quality of being "hard to vary." Mythological explanations, in contrast, are normally easy to vary, i.e., one can replace the supreme serpent by the archaic turtle, one god by another god, without disturbing everything else. For strategic communication research, hard-to-vary explanations mean that theory must arrive at a point where explanations for a phenomenon are not easily substituted by another, slightly different explanation, as in the case of Rennstam's article, where "branding in the sacrificial mode" can be effortlessly replaced by other explanations.

progressers, the future direction of theory is intertwined with the future direction of methodology, and moving towards mutual alignment is the right direction.

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