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**Strategic Communication:
Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice**

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Abstract

This article draws on a decade of research in strategic communication and especially on the contributions in this special issue to propose a new and more comprehensive definition of strategic communication. We argue that strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals. Entity includes all kind of organizations (e.g., corporations, governments, or non-profits), as well as social movements and known individuals in the public sphere. Communication can play a distinctive role for the formulation, revision, presentation, execution, implementation, and operationalization of strategies. While there are many ways to investigate these research objects, strategic communication as a discipline takes the perspective of the focal organization/entity and its calculus to achieve specific goals by means of communication under conditions of limited resources and uncertainty. The article takes a critical look at the current state of the field and outlines several requirements that will help scholars and practitioners alike to build a unique body of knowledge in strategic communication.

Introduction

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) introduced the notion of strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). This seminal definition in the first issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* gained broad attention and induced many researchers to investigate its features. A broad range of articles and books have been published, and study programs at the undergraduate and graduate level around the world have adopted ‘strategic communication’ as a common denominator in their names.

After a decade of debate, however, it is time to review the current state of strategic communication thinking. It has been argued that the overall concept is attractive, but rather fuzzy and not properly defined (Nothhaft, Werder, Verčič, & Zeffass, 2018), that its disciplinary status remains unclear (Werder, Nothhaft, Verčič, & Zeffass, 2018), and that variations of communication (Van Ruler, 2018) and strategy (Nothhaft & Schölzel, 2015; Winkler & Etter, 2018) are not explored to their full extent. Several authors have proposed alternative approaches to research the field. Only a minority argue explicitly for concentrating on a specific perspective and more rigor (Nothhaft, 2016; Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018). Most researchers tend to broaden the view and—ultimately—use strategic communication as an umbrella term for any communication by any actor to serve the interests of any constituency.

The latter way makes it easy to join the debate and jump on the train. Many scholars welcome strategic communication and its publication outlets as an opportunity to position their research without reflecting on the core and the borderlines of the field. Such an approach, however, leads to a dead end. It is comparable to building roads for everybody, using any kind of vehicle, without a rationale guiding admittance and traffic. In the long run, this is neither productive nor attractive. Traffic will be better organized by a variety of roads serving distinct purposes, based on specific rules and requirements, e.g., highways for vehicles with a minimum speed level compared to pedestrian precincts with limited access for bikes and delivery vans. Similarly, sciences and knowledge production are arranged in disciplines that build a unique body of knowledge by focusing on specific *research objects* from a distinct *research perspective*. Both economics and business administration, for example, reflect on business as a highly relevant phenomenon in social life. However, economics focuses on the macro (societal/global), meso (organizational), and micro (individual) level, while the research object of business administration is the firm as a specific entity on the meso level. At the same time, (managerial) economics portray humans as rational and narrowly self-interested agents who

try to pursue their individual goals in an optimal way, while business administration and management science incorporates a broader research perspective, taking into account multiple and bounded rationalities as well as the need to handle economic challenges, as well as legal, ethical, ecological, and psychological problems, to name just a few dimensions of company life.

Along this line, strategic communication can only flourish as a research field if it has specific research objects and a specific research perspective, along with institutional manifestations (publication outlets, conferences, study programs, research projects) that create an accumulated body of knowledge (theories, concepts and frameworks, empirical insights). These core assets will allow the discipline to enact a distinct role in the overall concert of knowledge production and disciplinary discourses. To this end, strategic communication needs to draw on other disciplines as well. As an applied science, it requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates—but also limits itself to—any knowledge that helps to expand knowledge about the designated object and perspective of research (Szostak, 2013; Werder et al., 2018).

This article is devoted to outlining such an approach. We begin by exploring the various understandings of strategic communication that have organically emerged over the last decade. After reviewing currently co-existing approaches, we attempt a more precise and focused definition of strategic communication by offering answers to five key questions that have emerged as central to the strategic communications debate. We then shift focus from the reality of practice to the academic discipline. Our question here centers on how strategic communication research is unique. Finally, we reflect on next steps and future challenges for strategic communication scholarship.

Different Understandings of Strategic Communication

Since the emergence of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication (IJSC)* in 2007, the term ‘strategic communication’ became popular in both academia and practice as a solution to many pragmatic problems. There are at least four different meanings of the concept that are often overlapping and make it seem obscure or, at least, elusive (Nothhaft et al., 2018).

First, the term ‘strategic communication’ operates as a replacement for ‘integrated communication,’ which is an umbrella term for all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organizations to address any kind of stakeholders and audiences. Introducing multi-faceted concepts of communication (and highlighting the six disciplines of management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication and

information/social marketing campaigns) helped to establish a discourse that made progress towards institutionalization of strategic communication through academic conferences, study programs, academic institutes, and a growing body of knowledge published in journals (Werder et al., 2018), handbooks and collections (Heath & Johansen, 2018; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015) and textbooks (Botan, 2018; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). The unifying aspect of this debate is the integrative and interdisciplinary view. It introduces a broad set of rationales for strategic communication, such as serving economic needs, forming the political will, and educating citizens. It also provides a foundation for understanding means (e.g., paid, earned, owned, and shared media), concepts (e.g., campaigns, programs), and modes (e.g., messaging/listening, monologues/dialogues, arguing/persuading/educating). Finally, it informs the basic distinction between communicating as an interactive process of meaning construction between different actors, on the one hand, and managing those communication processes as a willful activity, on the other hand (Zerfass, 2008).

Second, there is a growing debate about the new role communication is taking in contemporary, large, private, and publicly traded companies as *strategic* and *decisional*, as opposed to tactical and supportive. This is pushed by corporate communication scholars who link communication and management research (Argenti, 2017; Argenti, Howell, & Beck, 2005; Stanton, 2017; Steyn, 2003; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Zerfass, 1996, 2008; Volk & Zerfass, 2018), as well as by communication management scholars who use large-scale empirical research to identify patterns of communication in today's organizations (Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verhoeven, 2017; Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, & Falkheimer, 2018). The core contribution of this view is the notion of organizations as corporative actors that are embedded in society and characterized by specific interests, structures, processes, cultures, and modes of decision-making that are interdependent with those on other levels (macro, micro). This introduces a specific perspective and several questions: How can communication serve to define and reach goals? How can communication and strategy be aligned? How can this be distinguished from any kind of communication that inevitably happens in organizations and society?

Third, there is an old but increasing interest in communication in the context of *military and national power* (Graham, 2017; Nothhaft & Schölzel, 2015; Paul, 2011). Bloom (1991) finds that the appeal of communication, when compared to force, lies in “the lethality and sophistication of weapons” (p. 708). For example, nuclear weapons are perfect deterrents, yet they can be used massively only once. In addition, Bloom (1991) argues that communication is “more cost effective” (p. 708). It costs billions of Euros per piece to build an airplane carrier,

as an example. When considering both force and cost, Bloom finds communication as “even morally appealing” (p. 708). Pashentsev (2013) underlines the increasing importance of strategic communication in information warfare from a Russian point of view and argues that the same rationale is true for other superpowers like the United States or China. For Pashentsev, “strategic communication is the state’s projection of certain strategic values, interests and goals into the conscience of domestic and foreign audiences. It is done by means of adequate synchronization of multifaceted activities in all the domains of social life with professional communication support” (2013, p. 210). The *Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communication* (NATO, 2010) for the Western military alliance states:

All aspects of the Western military alliance’s activities have a critical information and communications component. This concept proposes that strategic communications is not an adjunct activity, but should be inherent in the planning and conduct of all military operations and activities. As part of the overarching [sic!] political-military approach to Strategic Communications within NATO, the vision is to put Strategic Communications at the heart of all levels of military policy, planning and execution, and then, as a fully integrated part of the overall effort, ensure the development of a practical, effective strategy that makes a real contribution to success. [...] In accordance with NATO Policy, NATO Strategic Communications is the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps), as appropriate – in support of alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.

Interestingly, strategic communication as an integral element of warfare is widely neglected by communication science, probably due to the negative notions of information warfare and propaganda. However, it has gained new attention in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism (Botan, 2018, pp. 175-196). The same is true for public diplomacy as a more ‘civilized’ way of exercising soft power through global and intercultural communication that influences international relations. These topics resonate well in communication science (Löffelholz, Auer, & Srugies, 2015; Snow & Taylor, 2009; Pamment, 2018) and show first signs of an institutionalization of their own, e.g., through a dedicated public diplomacy interest group of the International Communication Association (ICA). In the real world, those practices are closely connected to military communication. The United States, for example, coordinates public diplomacy activities by the Department of State with the strategic communication activities of the Department of Defense, the National Counterterrorism Center, intelligence services, and other government entities through the Global Strategic Engagement Center

(GSEC), which is responsible for day-to-day communication across all media and stakeholders. Overall, the debate about strategic communication in military and intelligence introduces the necessity to distinguish between strategic and operational communication, and to focus on the perspective of actors who assess communication as an alternative to other means, i.e., who do not simply assume that communication is always productive and necessary.

Fourth, ‘strategic communication’ is used as an *alternative terminology for the established discipline of public relations*, without changing the underlying research objects or perspectives of that field. Public relations has roots in both media relations (as a counterpart to journalism) and speech theory (often focusing on internal communication in organizations). It typically deals with managed external and internal communication activities of organizations, with the exception of marketing communication and advertising (Broom & Sha, 2013; Heath, 2010). At the same time, it is not limited to the meso level of organizations or to the perspective of those using public relations as a means to a specific end. For example, critical public relations theory asks for the impact of professional public relations on society (Edwards, 2018), and much research in public relations is devoted to audience behavior (e.g., in crisis communication, online public relations) and relationships between organizations and their stakeholders or publics—without discussing alternatives to communication for fostering those relationships, which is common in military and marketing theories, as well as in sociology.

Strategic communication started to replace the discredited term ‘public relations’ in the second decade of the 21st century. The interesting point is that the discipline arose around the term ‘propaganda’ in the early 20th century (Bernays, 1928), but the close link to wartime communication and persuasive publicity stimulated the rise of the term ‘public relations’ by the middle of the century (Cutlip, 1994). Only a few decades later, the pejorative meaning of ‘public relations’ (Ewen, 1996) became so unbearable that even the key academic in public relations at the turn of the centuries, James E. Grunig at the University of Maryland, started to introduce ‘communication management’ as a new term to replace it (Grunig, 1992). And in 2007, several scholars from the United States and Europe, who originally all worked in public relations, introduced the seminal definition of ‘strategic communication’ mentioned above (Hallahan et al., 2007) in an attempt to break the traditional but superficial barrier to marketing communication, branding, etc.

Apart from the conceptual discussion, there is another reason why ‘strategic communication’ operates as a replacement for ‘public relations.’ The term ‘public relations’ is a very American concept (Sriramesh & White, 1992) that is nearly impossible to translate in other languages without major changes to its meaning. In Slavic languages, ‘public relations’

usually translates into “relations with the public,” which contradicts most definitions that public relations is about management and/or communication between an organization and its various publics. In Germanic languages, there are all kinds of more- or less-fortunate translations. The German ‘Öffentlichkeitsarbeit’ is peculiar and is often explained as work with the public, for the public, and in the public (Oeckl 1964, p. 36). Similarly, the term ‘Öffentlichkeit’ does not mean the same as a public in English, but it relates to the public sphere as an area of discourse. Many British companies name their public relations departments ‘public affairs’ and limit ‘public relations’ to relations with the media, while in the United States and Germany, ‘public relations’ is placed over ‘public affairs’ in professional and academic taxonomy, as the latter is defined as the part of public relations which deals with the government and other public influencers and decision-makers (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2004; Verčič & Grunig, 2000; Verčič, van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001).

In 2011, an empirical survey in 43 European countries confirmed that the term ‘public relations’ is discredited in most of them, with ‘corporate communication’ being a preferred alternative (primarily in the business sector), ‘strategic communication’ being preferred as the best alternative in non-profit and governmental organizations, ‘communication management’ in the third position, and ‘public relation’ lagging behind as the least preferred term (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011). For Europeans, any alternative to the term ‘public relations’ was welcome, and it appears the key academic institutions on the continent settled for ‘strategic communication’ (e.g., Leipzig University in Germany, Lund University in Sweden, IULM University in Italy)—even the London School of Economics in the United Kingdom, whose scholars spearhead critical public relations research, uses the term for its graduate program in the field.

What can we learn from the problematic career of the term ‘public relations’ for the debate on strategic communication? First, it is important to unpack and clarify basic concepts like communication and strategy, which have multiple meanings like publics and relations. Second, it is important to take a perspective that does not arbitrarily exclude phenomena that are inevitably linked to each other in reality—like earned and paid communication, or communication aimed at gaining legitimacy and pursuing profitability or other individual goals.

Strategic communication is a term used in many fields and by many actors in society: business and corporations, civil society and non-governmental organizations, politics and elections, diplomacy and governments, healthcare and public authorities, entertainment and celebrities, security and military. It is a common practice for organizations and persons of all

kind to use communication as one way, among others, to reach their goals. Armed forces as well as terrorist groups rely on intelligence services and use information campaigns to frame the public debate. Companies listen to stakeholders and monitor public opinion, build brands to differentiate themselves, and employ reputation management to retain their license to operate. Politicians, to name a last example, use grassroots networking and media contacts strategically to gain popularity and win elections.

Managing and executing strategic communication in a global and mediatized world is a complex task. Large organizations tend to delegate much of it to communication professionals working in communication, public relations, advertising, marketing, and information departments, or to agencies and service providers. But all other members of the organization can be part of the game as well. And they are quite active in this regard. It is rather common that general managers, leaders of non-profits, and ministers speak publicly on behalf of their organizations. And many strategy shifts have been triggered by co-workers listening to weak signals in dynamic environments.

The academic discourse about strategic communication is spread across various disciplines. Because of the two key terms involved, one would expect to find scholarly debates in the fields of strategic management and communication science. Interestingly, this is only partly true.

What is Strategic Communication?

The majority of articles in this special issue are variations on the theme that existing definitions of strategic communication are too narrow. This is a trend that has surfaced in many other contributions to the definitional debate. It is argued that existing approaches: 1) neglect emergent strategies and strategies-in-practice, 2) are organization-centric and not inclusive of stakeholder interests, 3) discount the constitutive role of communication for strategy-making and organizations at large, and 4) place undue emphasis on communication professionals at the expense of the day-to-day communication activities of other organizational members.

While some criticism derives from misunderstandings, most observations are useful. The problem with nearly all, however, is that they open new avenues for research without defining an original domain that differs from existing discourses. Combining the suggestions of Heide et al. (2018), Winkler and Etter (2018), Macnamara and Gregory (2018), and van Ruler (2018), *every* communication activity by *any* member of an organization could be designated as strategic communication, and those activities should be geared and evaluated towards the goals of the organization, as well as *all* of its stakeholders.

It is doubtful that this is a viable research agenda. Instead, making distinctions and carving a territory is indispensable when trying to constitute a distinct body of knowledge that is specific enough to attract researchers and gain acceptance from other disciplines. Therefore, we suggest building a new, more precise definition of strategic communication. Our approach is to give answers to five basic questions.

1. What differentiates strategic communication from nonstrategic communication?
2. What drives the complexity that makes problems strategic problems?
3. How does communication come into play?
4. What is strategic communication management?
5. How does the strategy process look like?

Strategic Versus Nonstrategic Communication

Any attempt to clearly define strategic communication is hindered by three sources of confusion. The first source of confusion is the widespread colloquial use of the term—a fact already bemoaned by Clausewitz in the 19th century (Clausewitz, 1989; originally published 1832). A second source of confusion is that the use of the term is tied up with the prestige of practitioners and, to a degree, educational programs. The third source is the confusion of subject matter (perspective) and object of research (manifest phenomena) (Nothhaft et al., 2018).

As for the colloquial use, the term ‘strategic’ tends to be used as a synonym for good, well-executed, and state-of-the-art. Management gurus are inclined to employ the term in a circular argument in which the term is almost synonymous with ‘successful’—if a strategy fails, it is not simply a failed strategy, but never was a strategy, really. Appealing as that may sound, colloquial and circular definitions lead nowhere in sustaining a discipline. What should be noted, in contrast, is that the term strategic already has two established opposite terms that have grown out of reality and are integral to its meaning: *tactical* in the military world, and *operational* in the business sphere.¹ The key problem with the seminal definition of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007) is that tactical and operational communication are also purposeful; even ‘routine’ communication is purposeful. The routine announcement of a flight by an airline also serves the airline’s mission.

A second source of confusion is that the term ‘strategic’—in its vague and colloquial

¹ Operational is also a military term, of course, and denotes the intermediate level between strategy and tactics, especially in maneuver warfare.

meaning of simply ‘important’—is a matter of prestige for practitioners and educational programs. ‘Strategic communicator’ sounds better than ‘communicator,’ a Master’s Degree in Strategic Public Relations probably carries more weight than a Master’s Degree in Public Relations. Consequently, any attempt to define strategic communication as strictly in line with the commonly accepted military use of the term runs the risk of exposing pretensions and may be resisted. If strategic communication scholars are serious about their discipline, they must constructively deal with this resistance. The acknowledgment of *operational excellence* as a key strategic success factor—or diligence-based strategy focused on doing fundamental business activities well (Powell, 2017)—might be of use here.

Finally, the third problem is the confusion of subject matter and object of research. As has been argued (Nothhaft et al., 2018), disciplines emancipate by selecting a subject matter and imposing a perspective onto the world; otherwise, they are without boundary or center. Ideally, this selection will lead to the discovery of more or less unique objects of research (i.e., genes for genetics). In many cases, however, the discipline will zoom in on the same manifest phenomena as other disciplines and be defined only by its *unique perspective*. For example, strategic communication research that examines communication processes shares its object with communication and media studies. Similarly, a strategic communication scholar and a management scholar might observe the same meeting, but they are not looking for the same things. In other words, attempts to simply find strategic communication ‘out there’ are misleading. In contrast, it is not misleading to define, as precisely as possible, when to apply the perspective and what the perspective entails (i.e., what to look for).

What is the perspective of strategic communication as a unique area of research and practice? Our suggestion—informed by strategic management scholars like Kirsch (1997), Müller-Stewens and Lechner (2005), and Nag, Hambrick and Chen (2007)—is to consider an issue as strategic when it becomes *substantial* or *significant* for an organization’s or other entity’s development, growth, identity, or survival. As such, the discipline is defined as follows:

Strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.

This twofold definition has some important implications. First, not all purposive communication is strategic. Communication is not strategic for the focal entity when it is about known operational and routine issues with well-established tactics of intervention.

Nevertheless, such nonstrategic communication can make important contributions to goal accomplishment.

Second, conversations of strategic significance might happen in a variety of arenas, ranging from the global spheres of mass and social media to private talks between consumers, employees, or analysts. So, organizations and other entities, or those acting on their behalf like communication departments and agencies, have to be aware of the changing communication landscape, its technological drivers, and those who influence it.

Third, communication includes both messaging and listening, e.g., running campaigns, initiating stakeholder dialogues, informing employees, monitoring social and mass media, auditing communication, and talking off-the-record with politicians or journalists. All kinds of earned, paid, owned, and shared media and channels might be employed for this.

Fourth, the term ‘entity’ should be understood as broad and scalable here. In its broad scope, the term entity encompasses corporations, governments, non-profits, social movements, and known individuals in the public sphere, e.g. celebrities, politicians. As a scalable term, it comprises an actor or coalition of actors with several distinct characteristics: 1) a certain sphere of responsibility (an enterprise, a division, a CEO); 2) a given or perceived purpose in the sphere, no matter whether it is vague and implicit or explicit and precise; and 3) a limited amount of resources to achieve the purpose. Often, the purpose in the sphere is *contested*, so that the strategic actor faces competition or even antagonism—others want to sell a similar widget to the same people, lay claim to the same territory, be ‘top of mind,’ or dispute a narrative. In addition to the ‘spatial’ dimension that includes contested spaces in geography, markets, minds, etc., the temporal dimension comes into play. Strategic actions often do not have immediate consequences; therefore, they cannot be quickly corrected or reversed. If they turn out to be wrong, it is often too late to follow a different path.

Our perspective does not limit the strategic sphere to top management, and it acknowledges that one agent’s strategic issue is another principal’s operational matter. But it does insist on a minimum requirement of complexity and uncertainty; otherwise, the use of ‘strategic’ is just pretentious. We argue that it is logically impossible to address a conversation or issue strategically without specifying a focal entity. The question of *for whom* the conversation or issue is strategic must always be addressed.

In a way, the term ‘substantiality’ echoes the colloquial understanding of strategic as ‘important.’ Substantiality, or *strategic significance*, has an objective and a subjective dimension. The subjective dimension is, by and large, the attributed, assigned importance of the issue or conversation. If the top management considers a question strategic, it tends to

become strategic for that reason alone. Many managerial initiatives are of that quality—they become strategic issues in a top-down process that tends to infect other entities as they imitate industry leaders in isomorphy (see Sandhu, 2009). Winkler and Etter (2018) capture exactly that dimension, amongst other similar dynamics, when they draw attention to preceding and proceeding forms of emergence.

In contrast, the objective dimension of substantiality reflects the true impact of an issue on an entity's present configuration, future plans, and fundamental purpose. Objective strategic importance is only fully and thoroughly revealed in retrospect, of course, but organizations undeniably can pick up signals that the environment is changing. This results in a bottom-up rather than a top-down process. Heide et al. (2018), with their emphasis on co-workers and middle managers, draw our attention to this side of strategy.

It is a key postulation of the discipline that strategic significance is not *only* constituted by subjective attribution, although that may be the mechanism that carries 'change' into entities. Military history, business administration, and management studies—disciplines that have traced the rise and fall of organizations through the lens of successful or unsuccessful adaptation to strategic change—are not naïve victims of collective delusion. There can be conversations 'out there' that are not picked up by those who are responsible for managing the strategic communication of an organization, but they *objectively* have a substantial bearing on the company's prosperity. From a research perspective, these conversations qualify as strategic communication, since the failure to pick them up and shape them constitutes a failure of strategic communication management.

Table 1 identifies three types of strategic issues that result from the interplay of two variables: 1) the substantiality of the issue to the entity, and 2) the identification of the issue as substantial to the entity. The table illustrates why Müller-Stewens and Lechner (2005) identify "den Zufall durch den Irrtum ersetzen" (p. 21)—replacing mere chance with mistakes—as the key principle of strategic management. Instead of trying to do everything and ending up with merely 'muddling through,' strategy means making choices, and choices can be mistakes.

Table 1

Taxonomy of Strategic Issues

TAXONOMY OF STRATEGIC ISSUES		
Identification of Issue	Substantiality of Issue	
	<u>Insubstantial</u> Retrospective Analysis Objective Dimension	<u>Substantial</u> Retrospective Analysis Objective Dimension External Constitution
<u>Identified as Substantial</u> Subjective Dimension Internal Constitution	STRATEGIC ISSUE Top-down Incorrectly Prioritized	STRATEGIC ISSUE Bottom-up & Top-down Correctly Prioritized
<u>Not Identified as Substantial</u> Subjective Dimension	NONSTRATEGIC ISSUE Operational or Tactical Correctly Deprioritized	STRATEGIC ISSUE Bottom-up Incorrectly Deprioritized

The wrong choice that Winkler and Etter (2018) emphasize in their reflections on strategy is represented in the lower right-hand corner. An issue that is objectively of strategic importance is not picked up as such by the management; however, it *may* be picked up, and then becomes acknowledged as an unplanned, unidentified success factor, an emergent strategy. Cyril N. Parkinson’s *Law of Triviality* (Parkinson, 1986) humorously emphasizes the other wrong choice, in the upper left-hand corner, i.e., that top management gives undue attention to tiresome debates about the color of the bike shed. Once again it must be emphasized, however, that the social dynamics among top executives who disagree about what is subjectively considered strategic can make any issue objectively important for reasons of power struggles and organizational politics alone.

The upper right-hand corner represents a strategic issue as it is commonly conceptualized, i.e., one that is objectively important and subjectively addressed as such. Finally, the issue in the lower left-hand corner is not a strategic issue at all; it is operational, tactical, or even routine. It is here, however, that top executives will often be lobbied by managers of other ranks to acknowledge an issue as strategic, because, as has been hinted, strategic status is a matter of prestige. The established definition of strategic communication as purposeful is too broad to be helpful here. The manager of an airline at an airport may well argue that flight announcements help the organization to achieve its mission; thus, they are of strategic importance. What the argument confuses, is the difference between ‘getting *this* right,’ which is the imperative in a genuine strategic issue, and the operational matter of ‘getting

this type of situation right every time.’ The airline will not be affected by a botching up a single, everyday flight announcement. If it botches up thousands of flight announcements, it will surely be affected, as an operational failure of magnitude becomes easily a strategic issue.

The revelation of objective strategic significance only in retrospect, often with a considerable time-lapse, is why we insisted earlier, in agreement with most strategy authors, that strategic communication happens under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and considerable risk (Nothhaft et al., 2018). If the paths to success were obvious, a matter of sticking to rules gained from books (Whittington, 2001, p. 1), everyone would follow them, and the issue would become operational as a consequence. Technical, procedural tasks—with a clear best practice and considerable opportunity to experiment until one gets things right—should not be considered strategic for that very same reason. What makes a major speech by a CEO an item of strategic communication is not only that it involves the CEO or that outlining a future vision for the company is difficult; it also involves the fact that there is no way to test the reception of the speech before it is delivered, and that it may turn out a great success or a major disaster.

The greatest problem with defining strategic communication in opposition to operational, tactical or routine communication is the *volatility* of communication as a resource. Ballistic missile submarines *are* strategic assets, consequently their movements are always strategic deployments. An interview, however, might be 99 percent routine and 1 percent strategic disaster. Rolf Breuer, a previous CEO of Deutsche Bank, found this out to his dismay when he commented on the credit the bank gave to the collapsing empire of media mogul Leo Kirch, in what became the world’s most expensive interview. Deutsche Bank settled with the Kirch companies for roughly €800 million, as the interview significantly damaged their reputation.

Moreover, strategic impact does not even have to feature the CEO. A junior marketing professional engaging on social media might hazard a company’s multi-billion-dollar brand by a flippant remark interpreted as racist. Conversely, a high-investment, deliberate global corporate branding campaign may begin as the strategic initiative of the year but end up strategic only because of the resources it soaked up, as it peters out ignominiously, with very little impact on the performance of the company. It is here, perhaps, that the multidimensional network approach advocated by O’Connor and Shumate (2018) can further our understanding of the rules and principles that govern the volatility of communication as a resource.

Drivers of Strategic Complexity: What Makes an Issue a Strategic Issue?

What drives the complexity that makes a problem a strategic problem, an issue a strategic issue, or a conversation a strategic conversation? We hope that readers recognize their own work when we contend that strategists, and in extension strategic communication researchers, begin to be interested when situations are ‘important’ and ‘out of the ordinary’ in the sense that there is no blueprint. The difference can be illustrated by analyzing a game of chess. Typically, the opening phase of a match is characterized by a large, but limited number of moves. Potential moves and counter-moves are extensively documented and top players will memorize them. The end phase is governed by tactical rules. The mid-phase of a chess match, however, is strategic (Kasparow, 2007). Similarly, to solve strategic problems—to navigate complexity—requires a ‘free play’ of intelligence. Some typical drivers of strategic complexity—signs for communicators to bring out their strategy hats—are listed below. The factors are not mutually exclusive, but additive, of course.

- *Resource-driven:* Critical resource decisions and involvement of high value assets almost always warrant careful consideration. Initial public offerings (IPOs) of corporations, which put the value of the whole entity to the test, are a good example. The military designation of strategic assets (e.g., ballistic missile submarines, long-range bombers, special forces, cyber warfare capacities) is another example of a ‘resource-based’ view of strategy. Economically, the existence of high value assets that represent ‘sunk costs,’ i.e., investments that cannot be recovered, like a nuclear reactor built in a foreign country, are also drivers of strategic complexity.
- *Competition-driven:* Perhaps the most important driver of strategic development is the attempt by entities to gain an edge over the competitor or antagonist in order to evade direct competition. Direct competition (e.g., via prices in business, attrition in the military context, paid media in communication) is costly. Entities are almost always under pressure to establish a niche, to find alternative, *indirect ways*, of competition. This is as much reflected in Michael Porter’s works on competitive strategy (1998) as in Basil Liddell-Hart’s criticism of Clausewitz’s emphasis on the decisive battle (1991).
- *Environment-driven:* Change in environmental conditions—be it gradual or sudden, be it due to political upheaval, technological development, or ecological cause—is another driver of strategic significance, on par with competition and in a way complementary to it. Environmental change threatens the niches and the operational procedures and tactical precepts that entities have established. The degree and rate of environmental change decides, by and large, whether strategic learners or operational champions,

whether flexibility or formidability prevails. Whittington's (2001) evolutionary theory of strategy reflects the emphasis on environmental change.

- *Risk-driven:* High-risk scenarios, make-it-or-break-it situations, extraordinary situations, 'black swans,' and 'unknown unknowns' tend to greatly drive strategic complexity. IPOs, again, are a good example of make-it-or-break-it situations. Crises are extraordinary situations in the sense identified by Karl Weick (1985). They are 'cosmology episodes,' i.e., situations where the established order of things breaks down or is temporarily suspended. Black Swans, generally, are extremely rare. They are by-and-large only retrospectively predictable events with a disproportionately high impact. In his book *Black Swan*, Nassim Nicolas Taleb (2008) discusses the highly sophisticated risk management of a casino, which featured mathematical models and advanced systems of cheater detection. Despite this, the four disasters that hit the casino hardest were unpredictable—a tiger maimed one of the casino's stars, a disgruntled contractor tried to dynamite the casino, an employee did not send required forms to the IRS but for inexplicable reasons stashed them under his desk, and the daughter of a manager was kidnapped. Strategy authors Clegg, Schweitzer, Whittle and Pitelis (2017) devote considerable attention to this complex under the headlines of 'strategic surprise' and 'serendipity'.
- *Innovation-driven:* Situations quickly become strategic when new things are tried and the security of routines and well-established methods and procedures are left by the wayside. Pioneering efforts are often strategic initiatives, sometimes deliberate and sometimes emergent. The great emphasis that strategic communication researchers currently place on multidisciplinaryity is a symptom of innovation-driven strategic complexity. As companies break down traditional barriers between communication functions in order to realize synergies and gain an edge over the competition, established ways of doing things in fields like marketing communication, public relations, and public affairs will become obsolete. The emergence of strategic communication as a research area right now is probably a result of the rapid rate of innovation in communication and the current state of hybridity in the media system. As Chadwick (2013) puts it: "Hybridity is inevitably associated with flux, in-betweenness, the interstitial, and the liminal. It is about being out of sync with a familiar past and a half-grasped future" (p. 8).
- *Engagement-driven:* Another driver of complexity is the existence of free resources,

i.e., resources that are not tied up by operative processes and are at the disposal of the strategic actor. Here, strategic significance does not only derive from the difficulties of deciding where to employ free resources to the best use, but from the signaling effect of the investment. If UBER invests heavily in driverless driving-technology, it is not only an investment, but it is also a signal to its partners.

- *Operationally-driven:* Finally, fundamental change—when the operational configuration of the organization is ‘unfrozen’ for one reason or another, when organizations alter the ways they go about their business—is almost by definition a strategic issue. This is perhaps the most far-reaching, yet subtle process. The point here is not that entities must adapt to changes in environment or competition, but that breaking up the existing system is not trivial. Change reflects that strategy is not only made by employing free resources or reacting to the extraordinary, but to a far greater degree, strategy is formed by decisions about tying down resources in operational processes or facilities.

How Does Communication Come Into Play?

On the concrete level of organizations and their management, communication comes into play: 1) as a *process* (one-way relaying of information as well as two-way engagement in a conversation), 2) in the form of communicative *resources* like brands, established media with a significant audience, or platforms with established reach and followership, or 3) in the form of *intangible assets*, i.e., social capital such as trust, reputation, image. On a broader, societal level, the strategic question is to what degree the organization and its strategists are *embedded* in society, in harmony with prevailing cultural values. A nuclear reactor might be viewed as a symbol of progress or as a relic of a fortunately bygone, irresponsible age. The broader societal view is what Whittington (2001) captures as the systemic, ‘sociologically sensitive’ (p. 37) view of strategy.

Communication can complicate matters, of course. A tainted reputation and lack of credibility aggravates strategic complexity in its own way. It is one of the axioms of the discipline, however, that communication can be managed in a way that helps entities cope with strategic complexity. How that happens constitutes the bulk of research in the strategic communication discipline at present. Strategic listening, as advocated by Macnamara and Gregory (2018), helps organizations in making sense of fundamental changes in the environment quicker than other organizations can, which provides a substantial strategic

advantage. A unique brand can be one way of evading direct competition. Although Porsche and Ferrari both build luxury sports cars, it is doubtful whether they really compete directly, as they are desirable on their own terms. High value assets like nuclear weapons lose a lot of their strategic value if antagonists are certain in their knowledge that they will never be employed under President A. If later, President B starts to signal that they might be employed, the strategic situation changes fundamentally, *although nothing has happened*.

Strategic Communication and Strategic Communication Management

Strategic communication as a subject matter is not the same as strategic communication management (SCM). At base, strategic communication management is the attempt to *manage* the communication of strategic significance with regard to a focal entity. It is a process and will most likely be a functional derivative of the general strategic management of the organization. Strategic management, as a specialization of business administration, has been defined as dealing “with the major intended and emergent initiatives taken by general managers on behalf of owners, involving utilization of resources, to enhance the performance of firms in their external environments” (Nag et al., 2007, p. 944; italics deleted). Strategic communication management can be understood along the same lines. It deals with communication activities and resources which are of substantial relevance for the focal entity, e.g. an organization. The agents in charge are mostly communication departments, professionals or agencies; but entrepreneurs, politicians or CEOs might also decide to manage strategic communication themselves – whether they possess the necessary competences or not. Analyzing drivers of excellence and developing management tools for strategic communication management is a field of research that has gained much attention recently (Tench et al., 2017; Verčič & Zeffass, 2016; Volk, Berger, Zeffass, Bisswanger, Fetzer, & Köhler, 2017; Zeffass & Viertmann, 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates the difference between strategic communication and strategic communication management. Inspired by Heide et al. (2018) and their theoretical commitment to the CCO perspective (Communicative Constitution of Organizations; see Schoeneborn, Blaschke, Cooren, McPhee, Seidl, & Taylor, 2014), the image depicts organizations nearly in the same way as publics, namely as dense aggregations of communication. The illustration shows that the focal entity, in competition with other actors, attempts to manage three conversations, A, B and C. Conversation A might be about the quality of the product and is therefore shared with the entity’s principal competitor. This is the contested space of product publicity, for example. Conversation B is about a peculiarity of the production process and is watched by the focal entity, as well as an activist organization. This is the contested space of

corporate social responsibility. Conversation C is about a peculiarity of the competitor's production process and is monitored routinely by the focal entity for that reason. Conversations A and B frequently rise to a level, indicated by the shade of grey, that is considered of strategic significance. What is above the threshold level becomes strategic communication, so that the focal entity engages strategically (although it might be continuously involved on a routine or operational level). What the focal entity might not know in this case, is that there is Conversation D, which is, say, about the focal entity's hiring practices. This conversation would be considered strategic communication and trigger strategic engagement if it were picked up, but at present it is not on the focal entity's radar screen.

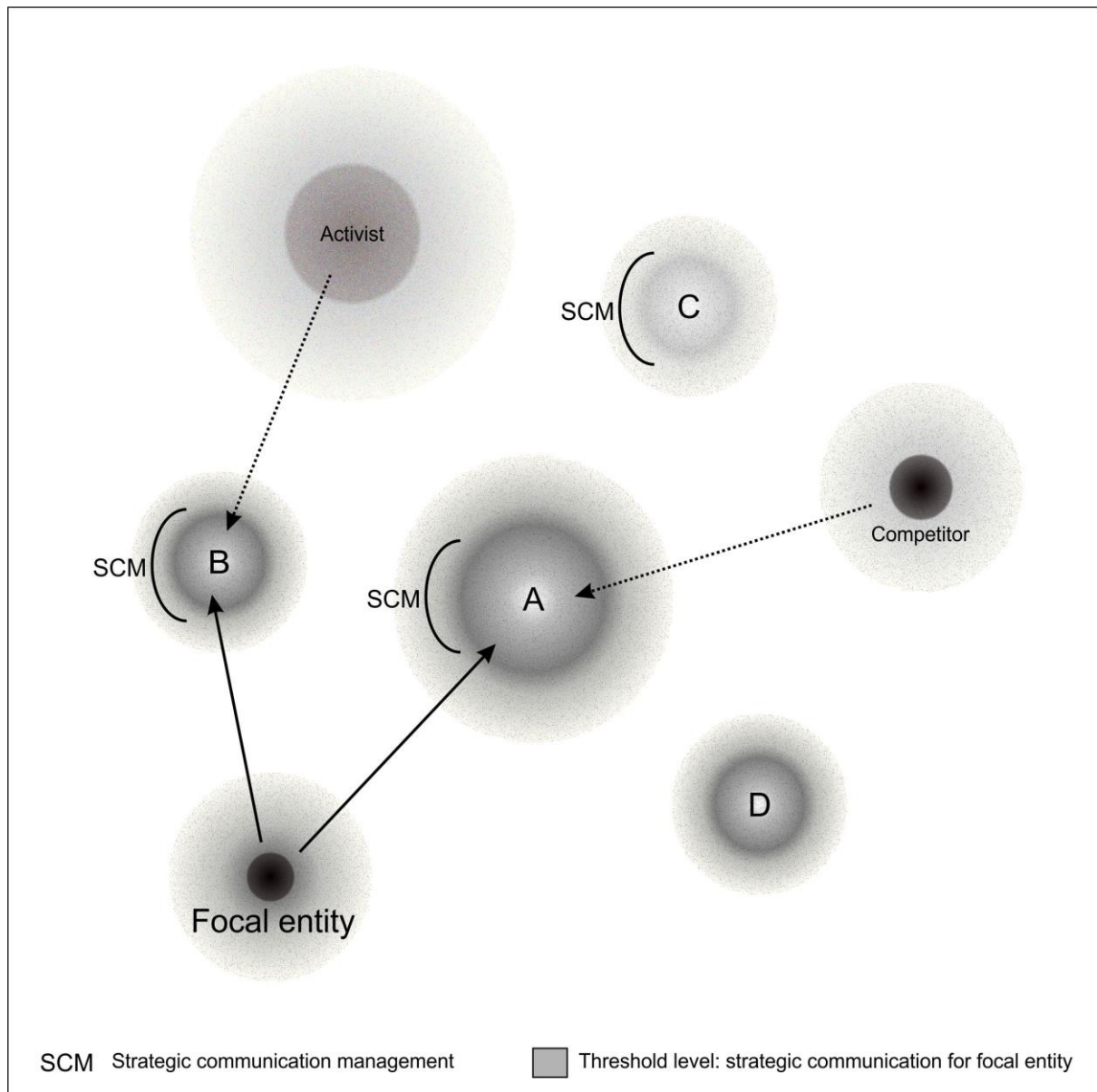


Figure 1. Strategic communication and strategic communication management

In some cases, strategic communication management might be a clearly defined, institutionalized function, but it can also be a mindset, as long as there is some systematic element to it. It might be a ponderous process or agile in the sense emphasized by van Ruler (2018). What gets picked up by this process becomes strategic communication for reasons of subjective attribution of significance, but the purpose of the process is to pick up what is objectively important for the entities' business model. It is also reflexive insofar as the strategic actors acknowledges that there are 'unknown unknowns'. A seasoned strategic communication manager is aware that there are conversations out there that *are* strategic communication, not

because they are picked up, but because *they should be picked up* (yet they are not, because any process is unavoidably incomplete).

As for strategic communication research, scholars tend to look at strategic communication as viewed by the focal entity, through the lens of the strategic communication management process. Because a certain case constituted a crisis for a specific company, like IKEA, researchers begin to look at the same case, from the same viewpoint, only in a disinterested, scholarly way. But the shared perspective is a convenient choice, not a logical necessity. With established and robust methods of strategic analysis, for example, strategic communication scholars could add a distinct academic perspective that is complementary to the practical perspective. The clinical psychologist's view, in other words, is different from the patient's view, although it is designed to help the patient.² Seiffert-Brockmann's approach (2018), for example, offers a way to tie any issue back to a limited number of fundamental human motives.

The Strategic Process

Once again, it should be clear that the term *entity* is flexible and scalable. It is not only top management that 'does strategy.' Strategic actors, to use the established business term, can be responsible on *corporate, business, functional* (e.g., communication, HR, IT) or *program levels* (e.g., communication campaigns), or their equivalents in the military, in politics, in international organizations, etc. Although levels of complexity may vary greatly between a 20-year-investments counted in billions of whatever currency and a six-month awareness initiative, the strategic process on every level can be analytically separated into three distinct phases or modes:

1. Strategy formulation and revision;
2. Strategy presentation;
3. Strategy execution, implementation, and operationalization.

Strategy formulation and revision is to be understood in the dual meaning that a strategy is not only a 'silent' resource allocation, but also a communicative intervention that gives *sense* to actions. Strategy formulation and revision involves communicating, of course, and it is

² Maybe it is here that greater sophistication is required. In fact, it is perhaps a contribution of critical and postmodern scholars that they deliberately deny viewing the world through the same glasses as the organizations they study. As a consequence, they tend to see problems that organizations do not see. In many cases, organizations argue of course that they do not see the problem because they do not have it. The criticism of more management-oriented scholars towards their critical and postmodern colleagues is that a scholars' attribution of strategic significance does not constitute objective significance for the organization: scholars identify pseudo-problems, in other words.

tempting to recursively state that the negotiations about what is part of the strategy is strategic communication in and of itself. However, this is largely a semantic question. What is more important is the subjective dimension of strategy. If the dominant coalition severely quarrels about an issue, that issue is of strategic significance on account of the dispute, it creates its own objective significance.

Strategy presentation is to be understood in the sense that actors involved are made aware of the strategy and its requirements and affordances. The presentation of strategies, e.g., in annual reports and on corporate Web sites (Moss & Warnaby, 1998; Köhler & Zerfass, 2018), is the sphere of *strategy communication*. This is one of the few fields where management research explicitly mentions the necessity of communication; however, it has rarely attracted the attention of strategic communication researchers until now. Volk and Zerfass (2018) highlight this complex by advocating for a closer scrutiny of the concept of alignment.

Strategy execution, implementation, and operationalization is resource allocation. It is committing resources to operational procedures or tactical dispositions. Sometimes, strategies are executed by strategic actors (free resources); in most cases, however, strategy execution cannot be witnessed directly as such. In complex organizations, strategy execution manifests itself in a certain way of doing operational things, results in a pattern of tactical engagements, or even takes the shape of routine instructions. A nexus that is interesting for strategic communication researchers is of course whether and to what degree the agents executing these operational, tactical or routine tasks are aware of the fact that they are executing strategy (again, a question of alignment). It is in this stage, in any case, that the entity acts, communicates, and maybe most importantly, signals deliberately and consciously. Here, the entity ‘produces’ strategic communication in the messaging sense of the term. Prime ministers and CEOs give speeches, ‘maneuvers’ of combat assets signal willingness to step up the aggression, and brands are associated with corporate social responsibility initiatives. Communication departments, professionals, and agencies spend lots of time and resources to create strategic communication programs and campaigns across owned, earned, paid and shared media in a structured way (Van Ruler & Körver, 2018). At the same time, listening activities (e.g., social media monitoring, consumer and employee surveys, reputation analyses) established by communication departments help to integrate strong and weak signals from different spheres into decision-making processes. As such, communication does support strategy execution and contributes to overall success of organizations in rather different ways (Volk et al., 2017). Van Ruler perhaps captures this best in the notion that the nexus constitutes an “amalgam of continuous communication processes in order to build, define, present, realize, and rebuild

strategy” (2018, p. xx).

Finally, to emphasize again, strategic responsibility is reflexive. This is not only wishful thinking, but evidenced by the fact that top managers, like football coaches, are routinely held accountable for events they could not affect. They did not know, maybe, but they should have known. Macnamara and Gregory’s contribution (2018) emphasizes the very same responsibility when the authors argue that the industry is currently not served well by its existing evaluation models with their “narrow organization-centric focus on evaluating organizational messaging” (p. xx). Genuine strategists, as opposed to actors that execute strategic planning programs, are aware that the currently selected prioritization and resource disposition might be faulty, that the success factors currently identified by the strategist might not be the real success factors, that success might be due to a covert, unseen strategy, a de facto pattern of resource distribution that emerged *despite* strategic efforts placing the emphasis elsewhere. This is the nexus of deliberate versus emergent strategy.

In What Way is Strategic Communication a Unique Discipline?

In a way, the central question of strategic communication research as an endeavor centered on an entity is quite simple: *Why are some organizations or other entities successful with their communication efforts, i.e., achieve their desired goals, while others are not?* Since most communication activities in mature organizations are professionally managed and technically without fault, how is it possible that some organizations enjoy sustained competitive advantages while others seem to suffer more from public attention than they benefit? How can it be that some countries seem to do everything right, yet the coveted ‘soft power’ eludes their government and diplomats, while others seem to enjoy influence far beyond their geopolitical position in material terms. Conversely, how can it be that other actors, like nation states and transnational terror networks, break every rule of decent communication, including *coherence*, yet get away with it and even achieve their goals?

The stipulation of strategic communication as a research field is that the difference does not lie only in technology, technique, or tactics. Neither is it fully and satisfactorily explained by ‘realities,’ i.e., the differences in structures of companies or the culture of countries, with some being simply more attractive, and others less so. Strategic communication researchers hold that the answer to each question lies *at least partly* in communication strategy, strategy communication, and strategic communication management.

What ‘at least partly’ means is a contested issue. When it comes to concrete and specific cases, the matter is an empirical question. On a general level, it tends to be an article of faith.

For colleagues with disciplinary roots in strategic management or the armed forces, the primacy of strategy is a given. More successful entities, they believe, pay attention to the ‘right things,’ and play their cards right— by deliberate plan, emergent pattern, spontaneous intuition, or lucky accident, their communication has *an edge*; it stands out in the competition for attention. They focus on the swing voters in the swing states, comparatively few people, and win the election. They employ cheap and unobtrusive ‘nudges’ (Thaler & Sunstein 2008), like putting fruit at eye-height in shops, and achieve significant behavioral change with next to no cost. In the spirit of the 80/20-rule, they make a comparatively small but smart *extra* effort and reap big rewards.

Yet, there are traditions of thought that doubt the primacy of strategy. Scholars socialized in critical or postmodern theories engage in the debate to prove their point that the connection between strategy and success is at best spurious and in any case largely beyond managerial control. In extreme cases, strategy is just *strategizing*. It is a language game that is serious for the insider, perhaps, but for the scholarly outsider it is only faintly amusing. At best, it's a set of blinders ensuring ‘functional stupidity’ (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016) for managers; at worst, it's another instrument in the arsenal of managerialism and capitalism.

Yet again, other scholars, many from public relations, react not to the primacy of strategy per se, but to its self-centered assumptions, the emphasis on rationality, control, winning. Often inspired by normative conceptualizations of ethical communication, they believe that organizations could rise to new heights if they only discarded outdated, militaristic, and managerial notions of strategy—which Hallahan et al., in their seminal article of 2007, already tried to de-emphasize. Organizations would do far better, these scholars argue, if they engaged in true dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In a way, non-strategy and closing the eyes to power games and micro politics is at the center of this approach. Perhaps one of the most fundamental questions is whether the 80/20-rule holds in matters of public communication. Is it really the case that it takes only a comparatively small effort to gain a ‘smart’ edge over the competition, which then, in turn, leads to benefits and advantages out of proportion to the extra effort? Perhaps the answer lies in the properties of networks. The approach advocated by O'Connor and Shumate (2018), rigorously applied, could yield insights beyond common sense and intuition here.

The current vibrancy of the strategic communication discipline is certainly due to the tensions between the three poles, and maybe others, such as the strategy-as-practice-school (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidel, 2007), which in a way stipulates that strategy is real not despite, but *because* it is a language game. As has been argued

earlier (Nothhaft et al., 2018), the issue is not only merely theoretical, but social dynamics are at play. Some scholars prefer focus and progress and consequently gravitate towards the core, others enjoy diversity and sophistication and consequently resist any attempt to focus and specialize. It should be noted, however, that everything in the discipline, even provocation and denial, returns to the primacy of strategy.

Strategy, however, is not a new term. Marketing and public relations scholars have been talking about strategies and the strategic role of their contribution as long as their disciplines have existed. Why is strategic communication as a research field *unique*, then, and not simply an extension of established disciplines of ‘purposeful’ communication, such as marketing communication, public relations, organizational communication, public diplomacy, counter-influence, health communication, etc.?

The answer is that strategic communication research will *not* be unique as long as scholars in the field do not take the leap and make it unique by embracing the *strategic calculus as the defining perspective* with which to look at, in turn, communication (van Ruler, 2018), deliberate and emergent competitive advantages (Winkler & Etter, 2018), organizations (Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, & Falkheimer, 2018), networks (O’Connor & Shumate, 2018), and people (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018). And, as always in the scientific discourse, others may contribute to the field by provocatively criticizing and challenging this perspective, which will motivate scholars and practitioners alike to strengthen their efforts.

Conclusion

If our understanding of strategic communication is accepted so far, perhaps the greatest pragmatic obstacle to the development of a strategic communication perspective lies in the conviction that a community of scholars and practitioners already exists. Taking integrated communication seriously, the coming together of previously separate communication disciplines, a fresh take on public relations without unsavory baggage, public diplomacy and the geopolitical and military dimension as new kids on the block—that seems unique enough. And strategy is undoubtedly right in the center, for there is no practitioner in any field, arguably, who has not employed the term ‘strategic’ to signal some vague sense of significance.

To convey a vague sense of significance, to make that very clear, is in our view a *prima facie* correct use of the term strategy. But, for an academic discipline, the question is whether vague sense and a *prima facie* perspective can be substantiated, whether research can go beyond what is obvious. Can we say for a given entity, for example, why one conversation is of strategic significance and will most likely blow up, while another, which appears equally

significant on the surface, will not have any impact? Can we express, in theoretical terms, under what conditions communication is a superior course of action, a preferable utilization of resources compared to exerting power, using mechanisms of markets, etc.? Do we have the language to adequately capture how strategic communication management contributes to the performance of organizations; how it creates value? What are the ‘resources’ that communication management and strategic communication management are dealing with and how can they be conceptualized: intangible assets, social capital, resonance, relationships? What does it mean to ‘commit’ communicative resources, and what do we mean when we speak of tactical dispositions?

The wealth of vocabulary indicates that these questions have been touched upon by many scholars in numerous projects. As we argued before (Nothhaft et al., 2018), however, mere existence of terms and application here and there is not enough. What is required is a shared language that not only resonates with scholars and practitioners but is sufficiently powerful to underpin robust *methods*. As humans are naturally very good at communication, methods only have justification insofar as they go *beyond* common sense. The owners of a nuclear reactor do not need methods to find out that the formation of political opinion against nuclear power constitutes a strategic threat. Climate change activists know that they must convince the world’s population of an inconvenient truth.

In the past, the aggregated position of the strategic communication discipline towards methods, inherited from its contributor disciplines, was perhaps slightly contradictory. On the one hand, it was a matter of faith to view communication as unfathomably complex. Thus, the search for hard, scientific principles was often perceived as misguided. On the other hand, systematic planning and methodical research were and are propagated as the professional way; presumably, so as to inform decision-makers and aid their judgment. The infamous case of Cambridge Analytica (The Guardian, 2018) demonstrates that scientific principles, in this case ‘big five’ personality tests used by the company, *can* be applied to strategic communication. Cambridge Analytica started with human psychology, it will be noted, in the same way as Seiffert-Brockmann (2018) begins his argument with the human mind. Robust methods do exist and they do work; they are just being developed in other fields. The cutting-edge of strategic communication as a practice is elsewhere at present. It is about time for researchers in strategic communication to get back in their game.

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