Corporate communications from the top and from the center: comparing experiences and expectations of CEOs and communicators

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ABSTRACT

Common viewpoints as well as divergences between top executives and communication professionals influence the institutionalization of strategic communication. However, there is little empirical evidence on the accordance between both groups. Most research explores either communication professionals or chief communication officers (CCOs). Very few studies have combined both perspectives. This article identifies the research gap, explores insights from previous research, and contributes to the body of knowledge in strategic communication with an original study that is based on two surveys with replies from 602 CEOs and executive board members as well as 1,251 communication managers from companies in the largest European country, Germany. While top executives rate the information and motivation of employees as the most important objective of corporate communication, communication professionals focus on the creation of a positive image. Respondents from both groups also state different opinions about dealing with the demand for transparency. Both top executives and communicators give most support to a role model that describes communication professionals as a facilitator between an organization and its publics. Nevertheless the overall conclusion is that perspectives diverge quite often and attention should be directed towards a better alignment between top management and those leading the strategic communication function.

INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world, corporations find themselves confronted with multilateral demands from different stakeholders. This triggers debates on legitimacy, transparency and effectiveness of strategies in the public sphere as well as in fragmented communities on the social web. Many argue that the necessity of measuring up to those expectations leads to an increasing influence of the corporate communication function within organizations. The institutionalization of strategic communication seems pervasive from a rational point of view. Moreover, surveys among communicators in various regions show that they report about growing influence and new role models for the communication function (Gregory, 2008; Invernizzi & Romenti, 2009; Swerling, Thorson, & Tenderich, 2012; Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno & Tench, 2012).

However, neither rational arguments nor positive perceptions of those in charge mean that strategic communications is really respected and utilized by corporations to its full strategic boundaries. In the end, the relevance and power depends on the perceptions, beliefs and expectations which Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and other top managers hold towards communications and its contribution to organizational goals. The framing of the field, demands and resources *from the top* have to match the visions, strategies and actions of those who are *at the center* of the game as communication professionals.

This insight from practice reflects a common problem which has been broadly discussed within economics and management research (Pratt & Zeckhauser, 1991): the relationship between *principals* (in this case, top management) and *agents* (communication professionals responsible for planning and executing corporate communication activities). In order to flourish, principals and agents have to find common ground, otherwise it might be difficult or impossible to establish effective communications, even if there is no lack of competencies and resources. Interestingly, this aspect has rarely been discussed in strategic communication theory. Holtzhausen (2012, pp. 213-230) draws on agency theory to propose a new, critical role model for public relations practitioners within a *postmodernist paradigm.* Fischer (2006, 136-160) integrates concepts of agency and *new institutional economics* into the theory of corporate communications by Zerfass (2008) when discussing the role of new media in strategic communication. However, a conceptualization of the relationship between top management and communication executives is still missing. As purely economic models might not be able to grasp the manifold dimensions of this relationship, agency can be described as a social construction that is governed by institutional frameworks and cultural-cognitive settings (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). This aligns to *organizational institutionalism*, which has been applied to strategic communication to discuss overarching questions of legitimacy and institutionalization (Sandhu, 2009; Schultz & Wehmeier 2010; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Gregory, Invernizzi & Romenti, 2013). Institutional theory helps to explain the influence of the social environment on

organizations, which are confronted with various norms, values and understandings. They shape, empower and constrain the structure and behaviour of organizations and actors. According to Scott (2001), three pillars of overlapping cognitive, normative and regulative institutions can be identified in social life. The existence of such institutions which are recognized by relevant actors are necessary for a high degree of institutionalization of organizational practices like corporate communications. From this point of view mutual *understandings*, *experiences* and *expectations* between communication professionals as assigned agents and their principals are key drivers for the significance of corporate communications. Analyzing the status quo of cognitive and normative institutions in the relationship between communication managers and CEOs is a piece in the puzzle of explaining the institutionalization of corporate communications.

Empirical insights into the congruence or diversity of these viewpoints are very rare. The only large-scale comparison between communication managers and CEOs until now has been done as part of the *Excellence Study in Communication Management and Public Relations* in an Anglo-American context. This milestone in research is based on interviews in 168 corporations and 159 other organizations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). The number of studies exploring the views of top management is also quite small and mostly limited to small-scale qualitative designs. A remarkable exception and second milestone in the field explored here is a quantitative study of *Leaders in Norwegian Private and Public Organizations* by Brønn and Dahlen (2012). It is based on responses from more than 1,500 top executives. The sample includes a smaller number of 292 managers working in corporations which have a dedicated communication function, thus facing the principal-agent problem outlined above. In contrast to the rather small number of studies exploring the view from the top, a large number of quantitative studies in several regions have explored the activities of communication professionals.

This study investigates and compares the perceptions and expectations of top executives and corporate communication professionals by using unified research instruments and a large sample,

which allows statistical analyses. The term "corporate communication" is used to describe processes of managing and conducting communication that serves organizational goals in a corporate context (Cornelissen, 2011; Zerfass, 2008).

The objects of the research are major corporations with distinct communication functions in the largest European country, Germany. The article starts with a literature review and presents empirical findings from surveys among communicators and top managers relevant to the topic. Research questions and hypotheses are derived from this discussion and the neo-institutional framework mentioned above. The empirical research is based on two quantitative surveys among 1,251 communication professionals and 602 CEOs and executive board members from large German companies in ten industries, all of which have professional communication functions. Results are presented and discussed. The comparison reveals similarities in terms of role and strategic influence: both top executives and communication professionals see communicators as facilitators with moderate influence. But there were significant differences concerning the objectives of corporate communications. CEOs as well as communicators believe that a positive image and corporate trust are most important. But while communication professionals rate trust ascribed by journalists, objective information and fostering the corporate image very high, CEOs value motivating employees and transparency much higher. The results deliver empirical insights into how principals and agents, top executives and communication managers understand corporate communications. Although the study has been conducted in one specific business culture, the comparative methodology and the broad empirical basis make it unique and should help to inform the international body of knowledge and stimulate further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Surveys among communication professionals

A large number of quantitative and qualitative studies have analyzed practices and perceptions of communication managers around the world. However, linkages between corporate communications and overall organizational goals, as well as executive-level influence, are topics that are seldom covered. Two studies that have focused on this over a longer period of time are the annual *European Communication Monitor* (ECM) and the *Communications and Public Relations General Accepted Practices* study (GAP), which is conducted every second year in the United States.

The *GAP VII* study is based on a sample of 620 American communication professionals (Swerling, Thorson & Tenderich, 2012). The seventh *ECM* is based on statements from 2,710 communication professionals in 43 European countries (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič & Verhoeven, 2013a). Both studies confirm a strong advisory influence of communication managers, which means that recommendations of the communication function are taken seriously by top management. 82.8 per cent of the US professionals and 79.4 per cent of their European counterparts confirm this situation. Executive influence in the sense that communicators are likely to be invited to senior-level meetings, dealing with strategic planning for the organization, is less prevalent (73.7 per cent in the US; 75.7 per cent in Europe).

Although 59.9 per cent of the highest-ranking communication managers in European organizations report directly to the CEO (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno & Verčič, 2011, p. 49), eight out of ten communicators denounce a lack of understanding of communication practice within top management (Zerfass et al., 2012, p. 38). A possible gap between top management and communications is underlined by the fact that linking business strategy and communication is named the most important strategic issue by communication professionals in Europe, while only 28.8 per cent evaluate the demand for more transparency as a significant challenge (Zerfass et al., 2013a, p. 84).

When relating their own role as communicators to those of their principals and the organization at large, most European practitioners (67.6 per cent) act as strategic facilitators which help to define business strategies and support goals by managing communication. On the other hand, a large group (23.2 per cent) perceives themselves as operational supporters, which focus on communications only (Zerfass et al., 2011, p. 41). The multi-faceted responsibilities of communication professionals are underlined by the twelfth *CCI Corporate Communication Practices & Trends* study (Goodman, Genest & Keller, 2011). 650 communication professionals in the United States were asked about their role enactment. The results indicate that "communication executives continue to see their primary role as 'counsel to the CEO' & 'manager of the company's reputation" (Goodman et al., 2011, p. 18). Based on a qualitative study with 17 communication professionals from the United Kingdom, Gregory (2008) derives a *Universal Competency Framework* with several dimensions of competencies which communicators should own. She concludes that "for the private sector group the evidence indicated that the *Understanding Others* dimension had slightly more importance than the others" (Gregory 2008, p. 220; emphasis by the authors).

Nothhaft (2011) has used participative observation to explore the daily work of eight Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) in Germany. His research states that the more they have advanced in their career, the more they have to play the "management game" (Nothhaft, 2011, p. 553) without losing sight of their communication functions. A quantitative study by Invernizzi and Romenti (2009) has asked 240 Italian communication professionals about their profession. The authors identify three indicators as evidence for a high degree of institutionalization of the corporate communications function in Italy: the number of CCOs has risen from 12 to 78 percent since 1994; 61 percent pursue an *advisory role* for the top management and the majority has implemented an evaluation system for corporate communications:

> "In regard to the relationship between evaluation and institutionalization, there is a positive correlation between the use of various methods of evaluation and the fact that top management take the proposals of the communication managers seriously. […] In

fact, not only the more complicated forms of evaluation but even the simplest ones can take on an important role in the evolution of the complex process of institutionalization of communication in corporations" (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2009, p. 128).

Another important issue that can be identified by research among communication professionals is the relevance of *stakeholder dialogues*. Eight out of ten respondents in a group of 130 European practitioners interviewed for a study on *The Future of Stakeholder Engagement* (Riggins, 2013) confirmed that dialogues with stakeholder groups contribute to organizational success. The importance of such approaches will grow within the next five years (Riggins, 2013, p. 4).

Surveys among CEOs and top executives

As indicated above, the *Excellence Study* was the first one to compare the perceptions of communication professionals with those of top executives (Grunig et al., 2002). Based on an interdisciplinary literature review, a quantitative survey was conducted among 327 organizations in the United States, Canada and Great Britain including 168 companies (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 3). Additionally, a qualitative survey among 25 of the 327 organizations was carried out. As a result, three spheres of excellent communication were identified: the *knowledge core* of the communication department, the *shared expectations* between top executives and communication managers and a *participative culture* within the organization (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995, p. 10). The comparison revealed that:

> "In organizations with less-than-excellent communication, dominant coalitions often view communication as a narrow technical support function. […] Narrow vision is not a malady of CEOs alone – sometimes communicators regard themselves as technicians in support of other organizational functions" (Dozier et al. 1995, p. 90).

According to this study, the power of the communication department is an indicator for excellence in corporate communications. It comprises the top management's support and appreciation, the involvement in strategic decision-making processes and organizational reporting lines (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 75).

The Arthur W. Page Society (2007) conducted a qualitative survey among 31 American CEOs and made the following conclusion:

> "CEOs identify personal credibility, unique information and long-term vision as the key drivers (apart from communication skills, which they take for granted) for a given communications chief's proving him- or herself at the company's strategic decision-making level" (p. 50).

According to this study, CEOs support the vision of corporate communicators "becoming facilitators of two-way and multi-directional conversations" (Arthur P. Society, 2007 p. 17). They ought to change their role enactments. Instead of mainly speaking out to publics, communicators can be experts who investigate the dynamics of public opinion building, interests of key stakeholders and multipliers, as well as emerging networks and interactions those groups.

Sterne (2008) analyzed the perceptions of eight CEOs and 24 senior managers in New Zealand. He observes a certain "aversion to the term PR" (p. 34) and a "low opinion of PR practitioners" (p. 30). Consequently, the participants expect communicators to prove their contribution to value more than ever.

Murray and White (2005) examined CEO's views on reputation management by interviewing 14 CEOs and chairmen from leading corporations in the United Kingdom and international organizations. The answers revealed that respondents "do not expect or look for a simple return on investment (ROI) for public relations expenditure" (Murray & White, 2005, p. 348), but value the enhancement and protection of organizational reputation by corporate communications. Nevertheless,

> "CEOs believe it is they who own the management of reputation, with help from their chairmen and boards. Public relations professionals were required to provide advice on how reputation can be managed and oversee various communication activities. All recognised that reputation is perhaps the most important single asset the company has" (p. 351).

Will, Fleischmann and Fritton (2011) conducted a qualitative study in Germany and analyzed the perceptions of eleven top executives. Respondents stated that corporate communications is a critical success factor for the organizational strategy and a core element of modern top management

(Will et al. 2011, p. 22). Therefore CEOs pose high expectations on communication professionals, which they value as internal business partners. Form a methodological point of view, the study's results are limited due to the fact that all top executives were interviewed in presence of their communication director.

A similar study by Shugoll (2012) for the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) interviewed 20 CEOs from American and Non-European countries. The author states that "CEOs view corporate communication as one of their top business challenges" (p. 10) but does not make any further conclusions by building upon existing theoretical or empirical findings.

The fifth *IBM Global CEO Study* (Berman & Korsten, 2012) asked 1,709 CEOs and top executives from 64 countries about their major challenges and identified the strengthening of employees by transmitting values as one core defiance (Berman & Korsten, 2012, p. 8). This shows the growing importance of internal communication as one objective of corporate communications.

The only quantitative study among CEOs and top managers on the institutionalization of communications until now has been conducted in Norway by Brønn and Dahlen (2012). Their study is based on responses from 1,343 top executives in the private sector (among them 292 with a distinct communication function) and 166 in the public sector. The findings show that top managers value the contribution of communication practitioners to organizational success and their broad expertise, but seldom involve them in strategic decision making (Brønn & Dahlen, 2012, p. 31). However, the communication department has a large influence on what leaders and other departments in the organizations do (Brønn & Dahlen, 2012, p. 24). This might be partly explained by the fact that the business landscape in Norway is shaped by small and medium-sized companies with mostly flat hierarchies and informal communication cultures. This makes networking and internal interactions easier, compared to large corporations with multiple responsibilities both on the business and communication side.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Given the limited status of theoretical and empirical research comparing the understandings, experiences and expectations of top executives and communication professionals, research questions and hypotheses for this study were derived from key results of the studies presented above. The overarching proposition to be tested is posed by organizational institutionalism: the cognitive coherence or divergence between principals and agents in corporate communications.

RQ1: What are the most important objectives of corporate communications for top executives and communication professionals?

> *H1: Building and preserving a positive corporate image is considered the most important objective of strategic communications by both top executives and communication professionals.*
> *H2: Fostering dialogues with stakeholders is rated as an important goal by the majority of top executives and communication professionals.*

RQ2: How relevant is transparency for top executives and communication professionals, and do both groups hold the same expectations how to deal with this issue in practice?

> *H3: Creating transparency about corporate policies and strategies is considered more important by communication professionals than by top executives.*
> *H4: A policy of being as transparent as possible and advocating openness towards relevant stakeholders receives a stronger support by communication professionals as by top executives.*
> *H5: While the majority of top executives prefers not to publish negative information if it is possible to conceal it, most communication professionals try to do so because they will not jeopardize their professional relationships with publics and multipliers like journalists and online gatekeepers.*

RQ3: Which roles do communication professionals enact from their own point of view and which one do they pursue from the perspective of top executives?

> *H6: Acting as a facilitator between an organization and its publics is the most important role attributed to communication professionals by both top executives and communicators.*
> *H7: CEOs and board members who have a close working relationship with communication professionals are more likely to ascribe them the role of a top management advisor.*

RQ4: What is the scope of influence exerted by communication professionals on organizational decisions and which expectations do top executives hold in this respect?

> *H8: The advisory influence of communication professionals is higher than their executive influence.*
> *H9: Communication professionals rate their influence higher than CEOs and executive board members rate this influence.*
> *H10: The percentage of communication professionals who demand a stronger strategic influence in the future is higher than the number of top executives who share this opinion.*

METHODOLOGY

Two quantitative surveys with a number of consistent questions were conducted to answer the research questions posed above.

First, an empirical study was conducted among communication professionals in Germany based on the largest database of practitioners available in the country. The database was provided by the largest German professional association *Bundesverband Deutscher Pressesprecher (BdP)* and contains addresses of both members and non-members in all areas of the profession. The survey was conducted online from May 30th until June 30th, 2012. A personal e-mail invitation was sent to prospective participants, followed by two reminders. The survey generated 2,368 responses overall (Bentele et al., 2013). For the study at hand, a sub-sample of communication professionals working in corporations was evaluated. The number of respondents was n = 1,251.

Moreover, a survey among CEOs, managing directors and executive board members (only on the top level of the organizational hierarchy) of German corporations was conducted, based on the *Hoppenstedt Manager Database.* This is the most comprehensive address list of company executives in the country. The database provides only postal addresses. Because of this, all top managers were invited by the researchers with a letter that included a personal access code to the online survey. The survey produced n = 602 replies from January 24th until February 27th, 2013 (Zerfass, Schwalbach & Sherzada, 2013b). Due to the enormous financial and operational effort, it was not possible to send

additional reminders. All participants work in large German corporations, joint stock or private owned, with an annual turnover of at least 50 million Euros.

In order to make the samples relevant and comparable, both studies were restricted to the ten following core industries of the German economy: automobile and suppliers, financial industry, energy and primary goods, trade, industrial products, information technology and communication, consumer goods, media industry, pharmaceuticals, transport and tourism.

Both questionnaires contained a subset of identical questions and instruments concerning the following topics: forecast of the future importance of corporate communications until 2015, advisory and executive influence of communication managers, objectives of corporate communications, relevance of transparency, and roles of communication professionals. As the terms corporate communication, public relations and organizational communication are used synonymously in the professional community in Germany, variations in expressions used in the questionnaires were acceptable.

Procedures for preparing, conducting and evaluating the surveys followed the established rules of social research. Pretests were made for both studies with 53 participants (45 top managers and 8 communication professionals). Data was collected using the professional web-based software Enterprise Suite Survey (EFS). Only fully completed questionnaires were considered for the analysis, and in the second survey if the questionnaires were not filled in by top executives, but handed over to their communication departments (which was explicitly tested), these survey questionnaires were deleted. The software IBM SPSS Statistics 21 was used for data analysis. Chi-square tests and two sample t-tests were performed to compare means and absolute frequencies between both groups.

RESULTS

The results of the empirical studies showed that there are similarities as well as significant differences between the perceptions of top managers and communication professionals. Furthermore, the

expectations of CEOs and board members are influenced by the endurance of their managerial responsibility and the amount of time which is personally spend for strategic communication. It also makes a difference whether top managers work together with communicators on a regular basis or not. Last but not least, the size of the company (measured by the annual turnover) and the main market segment (Business-to-Business or Business-to-Consumer) influenced the perceived relevance of corporate communications.

Objectives of corporate communications (RQ1; H1, H2)

The first research question asked about the most important objectives of corporate communications. Fostering corporate trust (evaluated as important or very important by 96.1 per cent of the CEOs and 90.3 per cent of the communicators) and a positive image (95.5 / 93.4 per cent) are the most important objectives of corporate communication for both groups. But while CEOs value informing and motivating employees (95.0 per cent) and creating transparency about corporate policies and strategy (72.8 per cent) very high, communication professionals are much more geared towards gaining trust from journalists (84.3 percent) – an operational goal that is supported by a significant smaller portion of the top executives (56.2 per cent).

Objectives which are rated less important by both groups are those which focus on listening, i.e. creating opportunities for dialogues with stakeholder groups (51.5 / 60.7 per cent) and capturing trends and social issues (51.5 / 51.7 per cent).

Table 1 depicts the data in detail and shows that the differences are statistically significant for all items except for the two communication goals "exploring trends and developments in society" and "creating opportunities for stakeholder dialogues".

Hypothesis 1 was only partly validated by these results. For communication professionals working on the corporate image is the most important objective measured on a 5-point scale ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.63$). But for CEOs and other top executives, informing and motivating employees ($M = $

4.53, *SD* = 0.63) and conveying corporate trust (*M* = 4.48, *SD* = 0.60) is slightly more important than a positive image (*M* = 4.46, *SD* = 0.61).

Hypothesis 2 has to be rejected. Other than expected, top executives rate transparency as an objective of corporate communications much higher (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = 0.82) than communication professionals (*M* = 3.55, *SD* = 0.97).

Insert Table 1 here / Table 1: Objectives of corporate communications

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Transparency in corporate communications (RQ2; H3, H4, H5)

The second research question asked about the relevance of transparency and the means to deal with this issue. Corporations strive for competitive advantages and they ought to do so in a market economy. This means that strategies and core principles of operations have to be kept secret and intellectual property has to be safeguarded. At the same time, stakeholders demand information and openness is a proven way to gain legitimacy and create new ideas, which are prerequisites for organizational success. Corporate communications is at the center of this game, and a common understanding of transparency, its necessity and limits, as well as principles of creating transparency in a networked world, is indispensable for any organization.

Table 1 has already revealed that CEOs and board members value transparency about corporate policies and strategies relatively high (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = 0.82); it is the fifth important goal of corporate communications from their point of view. Communication professionals rank transparency as number 10 out of 11 communication goals, though the overall mean is still positive (*M* = 3.55, *SD* = 0.97).

Hypothesis 3 has not been supported. Unexpectedly, communication professionals consider transparency to be less important than top managers. The difference between both groups is

statistically significant; there is no cognitive concurrence between principals and agents regarding this important aspect in German corporations at large.

When asked about different ways to deal with the demand for (partial) transparency of corporations, nearly seven out of ten CEOs and other top executives (68.8 per cent) expect communication managers to be as open as possible and to advocate openness towards relevant stakeholders. In sharp contrast to this, the approach which is favored most among communication professionals is holding back negative information as long as it will not become public anyway. Almost every second respondent supports this view (48.5 per cent). However, both top executives and communication professionals agree that simulating transparency by publishing as many information as possible to conceal critical aspects does not make sense. Only very small minorities of 1.0 and 2.9 per cent respectively support this approach. Table 2 shows the results for this question in detail.

Hypothesis 4 has to be rejected. Based on previous research among communication professionals and the strong support for transparency in the communications literature, it was assumed that a policy of being as transparent as possible and advocating openness towards relevant stakeholders receives a stronger support by communication professionals than by top executives. The empirical data shows that the opposite is true, at least in the sample of large companies in Germany. CEOs and board members support transparency and openness (M = 3.82, SD = 0.87) to a higher degree than communication professionals (M = 3.05, SD = 1.24). The difference is statistically significant. Moreover, the less rigid approach of gaining trust by being as open as necessary, but not more, is also rated higher by top managers (M = 3.49, SD = 1.09) as by communication professionals (M = 2.66, SD = 1.23).

Insert Table 2 here / Table 2: Transparency in corporate communications

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Hypothesis 5 was also not verified. It was posed that the majority of top executives prefers not to publish negative information if it is possible to conceal it; whereas most communication professionals try to do so in order to fulfill their boundary-spanning function. The data shows that only 29.9 per cent of the CEOs and board members interviewed support this view. The mean values show a lack of determination, as the average rating hits the middle of the 5-point scale ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.92$). Communication professionals, on the other hand, support this approach of holding back information stronger with 48.5 per cent agreement and a slightly, but significantly different mean rating ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.12$).

Roles of communication professionals (RQ 3; H6, H7)

Communication professionals can pursue different roles in corporations. Most communicators describe themselves as facilitators between their organization and its publics (80.2 per cent), as an advisor for top management (56.0 per cent) and as speaker of the organization (53.4 percent). Comparing this self-perception with the view from the top reveals both similarities and differences, which are statistically significant. CEOs and board members also give most support to a role model that describes communication professionals as facilitators, but to a lower extent (64.6 percent). This is followed by the roles of advisors (48.7 per cent) and speakers (43.0 per cent). Table 3 shows details. In general, more advanced and strategic task assignments like advising top management, representing the interests of the company, and scouting for important developments in the internal and external environment are supported to a lesser extent by top executives. Less than two out of ten CEOs and board members say that communication managers in their organization act as scouts. At the same time, 14.4 per cent of the top managers reduce the role of communicators to operational aspects by perceiving them as in-house journalists. Speaking out is clearly part of the cognitive pattern in the top

management realm, while the listening aspect of communications, which includes monitoring the public opinion and identifying threats and opportunities within stakeholder settings, is less recognized.

Hypothesis 6 has been verified. Previous research has shown the importance of the facilitator role and it was assumed that this would be the most important role attributed to communication professionals by both top managers and communicators. As mentioned above, this was the case.

Hypothesis 7 was also supported. As cognitive models and relationships between principals and agents are constructed in social interactions, it was suspected that CEOs and board members who have a close working relationship with communication professionals are more likely to ascribe them an advisory role. Statistical analysis revealed a number of significant correlations between the intensity of interactions between top executives and communication professionals and role assignments. 52.4 per cent of the CEOs and board members who regularly work with communicators in projects, 51.8 per cent of those who assign jobs to them because they hold own communication budgets and 50.3 per cent of those who are directly responsible for the communication function see them as advisors for the top management. Among those top executives who never or only seldom get in touch with communicators in their daily job, only 31.8 per cent say that they advise top management within their organization (highly significant correlation, chi-square test, $p \leq .001$).

Insert Table 3 here / Table 3: Roles of communication professionals

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Advisory and strategic influence of communicators (RQ4; H8, H9)

The last research question asked about the scope of influence exerted by communication professionals on organizational decisions. This was tested with two questions.

In order to assess advisory influence, CEOs / board members and communicators should rate the situation in their organization on a 5-point bipolar scale ranging from "Top management accepts advices by communication professionals and converts them to corporate policies" (1) to "Top management gives only directives to communication professionals" (5). The data reveals rather moderate answers in both groups. Every second CEO or executive board member (49.2 per cent) confirms that recommendations from communicators are influencing corporate strategies. Top executives rate the advisory influence lower ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.92$) than communication professionals themselves ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.02$). The differences are highly significant (two sample t-test, $p \leq .001$). Only 17.6 per cent of the communicators and 6.3 per cent of the top executives report a very strong advisory influence (scale point 1) within their organization. At the same time, less than three per cent in each group (2.9 / 2.8 per cent) say that communicators are agents who just receive orders from their principals (scale point 5). This means that the advisory role of the communication function has been established to a certain degree in corporations, but it is not at all exploited to its full potential.

In order to assess executive influence, respondents were asked to rate the situation in their organization on a 5-point bipolar scale ranging from "Communication managers take part in strategy meetings of the executive board with a strong voice" (1) to "Communication managers never attend strategy meetings of the executive board" (5). The mean ratings are also on a medium level, but lower than for the advisory topic. CEOs and board members rate the executive influence exactly in the middle of both polarities ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.12$) and communicators have a slightly more negative perspective ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.29$). Differences are highly significant (two sample t-test, $p \leq .001$). 13.7 per cent of the communicators and 7.6 per cent of the top executives say that communicators are important participants of executive board meetings in their organization (scale point 1).

The advisory influence is rated significantly stronger by top executives in corporations with an annual turnover of more than 250 million Euros ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.95$) than in smaller companies with a turnover of up to 250 million Euros per year ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.89$).

Concerning the future strategic contribution of the communication function, a clear majority of the communicators demands a stronger strategic involvement (60.2 per cent, $M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.13$). Only one third of the top executives share this opinion (34.9 percent, $M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.90$). The difference is highly significant (two sample t-test, $p \leq .001$).

Hypothesis 8 is supported by the data. The advisory influence of communication professionals is higher than their executive influence, as confirmed by both top executives ($M_{AD} = 2.67$, $M_{EX} = 3.00$) and by communicators ($M_{AD} = 2.43$, $M_{EX} = 3.04$).

Hypothesis 9 has been partly verified. It was assumed that communication professionals rate their advisory and strategic influence higher than CEOs and executive board members. As discussed above, this is true for advisory influence, i.e. being heard by top management who then use recommendations on their own. However, CEOs rate the executive influence of communicators in the sense of attending board meetings and being involved in strategic decisions higher than communicators do themselves.

Hypothesis 10 was confirmed. The percentage of communication professionals who demand a stronger strategic influence in the future is significantly higher than the number of top executives who share this opinion.

DISCUSSION

The comparison of top executives and communication professionals regarding their views on corporate communications revealed overlapping perceptions on the one hand and diverging understandings and expectations on the other hand. Concerning the question of institutionalization,

there is evidence for the ongoing process of the communication function being institutionalized. The study identified cognitive patterns, norms and perceptions of CEOs and board members. Regarding cultural-cognitive institutions, top executives perceive corporate communications as a legitimate and necessary organizational function, which is taken for granted in a modern company. Concerning the normative institutions, respondents on the board level expect communication professionals to act as a facilitator with advisory influence. Furthermore, two third of the CEOs and executive board members interviewed (66.5 per cent, $M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.80$) predict an increasing importance of corporate communications until 2015 because of the impact of social media (85.3 per cent, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.76$) and stakeholder groups who tend to become more critical and active (73.7 per cent, $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.96$). Meanwhile, communication professionals themselves seem to underestimate the future relevance of corporate communications. Only 45.4 per cent of the respondents believe that their profession will gain more power within the next three years ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.79$).

The findings revealed that CEOs and communicators prioritize stakeholders as addressees of corporate communications, goals and basic approaches like those to handle transparency quite differently. Obviously, different understandings regarding certain aspects of the communication function (e.g. its strategic influence) constrain the actions of communication professionals and the institutionalization of their practices. On the other hand, the low self-confidence among the communicators regarding their future power hampers this process as well.

The lack of consistent cognitive patterns and diverging views between principles and agents of corporate communications might explain the moderate acceptance of roles and activities that go beyond traditional assignments for communicators. Listening to stakeholders, identifying strategic opportunities and threats, and advising top management are part of the organizational mindset for communicators in approximately every second organization by now, as reported independently by both groups. Communication professionals demand a stronger strategic involvement, but as long as their visions do not match those of their superiors, it is quite understandable that CEOs do not see a

necessity for an increased strategic influence of communicators. Moreover, they might even follow the paradigmatic shift proposed by de Bussy (2013): "Rather than focus on the representation, power and behavior of [communication] specialists within the dominant coalition, [their values] could be internalized by other (often more powerful) organizational leaders" (p. 82) – which means that top executives might be the driving forces and subjects behind strategic communication in the future. In the end, it is up to the communication function to prove their value for organizations. Although there is an ongoing debate on this for many years (Likely & Watson, 2013), methods and practices of linking communication to business strategies, setting measurable targets and evaluating communication activities continues to be a most important challenge for the institutionalization of corporate communications in Europe (Zerfass et al., 2013a, p. 84) and in other regions of the world (Macnamara, 2013).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

It has to be noted that the research reported here has, as any study, several limitations. First and foremost, the studies give an overview of *average* perceptions and experiences by CEOs and executive board members as well as corporate communication professionals. This is important to assess cognitive patterns in the field and the grade of institutionalization of strategic communication in corporations. However, the standard deviations show that there might be a much stronger coherence or much more diversity between principals and agents in *specific* organizations. Quantitative research provides a benchmark and identifies dimensions which have to be analyzed more deeply in individual corporate settings. The two empirical studies presented were restricted to Germany, which is characterized by a specific system of corporate governance (Schwalbach, 2001) and public relations or corporate communications (Bentele & Seiffert, 2012). Due to regulative and cultural differences, results may differ in other regions. Moreover, corporate communications might be valued differently in various industries due to disparities in public exposure, stakeholder settings and quests for

legitimization. The study proved some differences between companies acting mainly in Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer markets, but the sample did not allow for a detailed analysis of industry factors. Last but not least, the sampling method used for both studies relied on comprehensive and solid databases; this is rather advanced if compared to many studies in the field of corporate communications which use snowball sampling and similar approaches. However, the results are not representative because the population of communication professionals in Germany is not known and the distribution of participants in the sample of top executives might not reflect the overall characteristics in German corporations regarding gender, age, educational background etc.

Nevertheless, the empirical data and reflections can be used as a starting point for further research on the views of top executives, on the relationship between principals and agents, and on the institutionalization of corporate communications in a broader sense. Hence, organizational structures and regulative institutions need to be analyzed as well because they influence cognitive processes of actors in the field. Also additional methods like action research or participative observations of the interactions between top executives and communication professionals would be insightful. A replication of the studies presented here would be necessary to research the change of perceptions over a period of time.

This research adds to the body of knowledge on strategic communication by providing a comprehensive insight into the perceptions of top executives on corporate communications and comparing this with the views of communicators. The only study that has done this before, the Excellence Study, has been conducted 20 years ago. This research builds on a larger sample and a quantitative method to stimulate new discussions within theory and practice. Last but not least, the results support those who argue for strengthening interdisciplinary collaborations between communication studies and management theory, and for introducing strategic communication into the curriculum of business schools. Reaching to the top is only possible if those who are at the top and their perceptions, cognitive frameworks and theoretical approaches are taken into account.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TABLE 1

Objectives of corporate communications

Objective	CEOs and board members %	Corporate Communicators %	CEOs and board members M	SD	Corporate Communicators M	SD
Informing and motivating employees **	95.0	68.8	4.53	0.61	3.96	1.10
Conveying corporate trust **	96.1	90.3	4.48	0.60	4.43	0.71
Building and preserving a positive image *	95.5	93.4	4.46	0.61	4.63	0.63
Informing objectively **	84.2	76.9	4.13	0.73	4.06	0.88
Creating transparency about corporate policies and strategies **	72.8	53.4	3.87	0.82	3.55	0.97
Keep the company out of negative headlines **	70.4	61.3	3.86	0.96	3.77	1.11
Standardizing corporate design **	69.7	61.0	3.83	0.86	3.69	1.13
Gaining trust from journalists **	56.2	84.3	3.50	0.95	4.28	0.82
Fostering dialogues with stakeholder groups	51.5	60.7	3.48	0.83	3.65	1.00
Exploring trends and developments in society	51.5	51.7	3.46	0.91	3.48	1.02
Influencing journalists **	29.9	56.7	2.95	0.97	3.59	1.01

n = 602 CEOs and executive board members; n = 1,251 communication professionals
Percentages: respondents rating the goal very important or important, 4-5 on a 5-point scale
Means: importance on a 5-point scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important"
* Significant differences (two sample t-test, p < .05)
** Highly significant differences (two sample t-test, p ≤ .001)

TABLE 2

Transparency in corporate communications

Approach to handle demands for corporate transparency	CEOs and board members	Corporate Communicators	CEOs and board members		Corporate Communicators	
	%	%	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Communication professionals should be as transparent as possible and advocate openness towards relevant stakeholders **	68.6%	41.0%	3.82	0.87	3.05	1.24
In order to gain trust from relevant stakeholders, communicators should be as open as necessary, but not more than that	56.9%	26.9%	3.49	1.09	2.66	1.23
It is helpful to keep negative information unpublished, if they would most probably not leak to the outside **	29.9%	48.5%	3.04	0.92	3.28	1.12
Communicators should publish as much information as possible without structuring it in order to conceal negative issues **	1.0%	2.9%	1.43	0.65	1.42	0.75

n = 602 CEOs and executive board members; n$_{min}$ = 1,241 communication professionals
Percentages: respondents rating the goal very important or important, 4-5 on a 5-point scale
Means: importance on a 5-point scale, ranging from "do not support at all" to "support totally"
** Highly significant differences (two sample t-test, p ≤ .001)

TABLE 3

Roles of communication professionals

Roles of communication and PR managers	CEOs and board members	Corporate Communicators	
	%	%	Δ
Facilitator between an organization and its publics **	64.6	80.2	15.6
Speaker of the organization **	43.0	53.4	10.2
Representative of interests **	40.0	47.8	7.8
Scout **	18.8	30.9	12.1
Advisor for the top management **	48.7	56.0	7.3
Journalist in the organization **	14.3	12.2	2.1
Other **	2.3	5.2	–

n = 602 CEOs and executive board members; n = 1,251 communication professionals
Percentages: respondents characterizing the role of communication managers in their organization (CEOs) respectively their own role (communicators); multiple answers possible
** Highly significant differences (chi-square test, p ≤ .001)