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Strategic Communication as an Emerging Interdisciplinary Paradigm

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Abstract

This study explores future directions in strategic communication scholarship by examining the emergence of strategic communication through the lens of interdisciplinary science. The disciplinary status of strategic communication is described through a content analysis of manuscripts published in the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* since its inaugural issue in 2007 ($N = 207$). Results reveal positive trends in research productivity, authorship, and globalization of the discipline over an 11-year period. However, analysis of the methodological and theoretical attributes of strategic communication scholarship suggests that more interdisciplinary research is needed. This study proposes definitional refinements that may strengthen the consistency of purpose among strategic communication scholars for future research and theory-building. In addition, this study proposes that scholars embrace an interdisciplinary worldview to further the development of strategic communication as a unique and innovative domain of study in the future.

Introduction

The rationale for this study centers on the need for reflection on the future of strategic communication scholarship due, in part, to the lack of “universal understanding of the pillars on which the field rests” (Nothhaft, Verčič, Werder, & Zerfass, 2017, p. 1). This study attempts to inform macro-level questions about strategic communication as a global field of communication research by reflecting on how strategic communication is evolving as a discipline.

Disciplinary integration has emerged as a “critical yet underrecognized” component of strategic communication scholarship and practice (Smith, 2012, p. 66). However, limited empirical evidence exists to substantiate the degree of integration that has been achieved in strategic communication research and theory-building thus far. This introspective study examines the emergence of strategic communication as a unique domain of study, and it attempts to describe the strategic communication body of knowledge, while privileging the notion of disciplinary integration as its defining attribute.

A review of literature first examines the definition of strategic communication, then provides interdisciplinary science literature to inform understanding of how disciplines emerge and how integration contributes to this emergence. This is followed by a summary of the methods and results of a content analysis of scholarship published in the *International Journal of Strategic Communication (IJSC)* over an 11-year period ($N = 207$). Finally, this study describes how and where the discipline is developing, what trends exist in research, and what insights can be gained for the future of strategic communication scholarship.

The Evolving Definition of Strategic Communication

In the inaugural issue of *IJSC*, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh posited that strategic communication is “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” and assumes that people will engage in “deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements” (2007, p. 3-4). Most notably, the authors of this often-cited definition argued that strategic communication could more fully explain the communication function of organizations because “it examines organizational communication from an *integrated, multidisciplinary* perspective by extending ideas and issues grounded in various traditional communications disciplines” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3-4; emphasis added).

This conceptualization has provided a foundation for the study of strategic communication from diverse theoretical approaches. Specifically, strategic communication draws from organization theory, communication theory, leadership and management theory, message effects, narrative theory, crisis communication, public relations theory, socio-cultural theory, political science, organizational communication, communication philosophy, critical theory, branding, reputation management, ethics, and business, among others—as evidenced by work published in *IJSC* for more than a decade, as well as in texts and edited volumes like *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015b).

A multitude of perspectives on the process and function of strategic communication have emerged in the years following the publication of that seminal work. This led to a refinement of the definition six years later to a more comprehensive conceptualization that honed notions of strategy, action, agency, and communication—and situated the phenomenon in the public sphere. Specifically, strategic communication was later defined as “the practice of deliberate and purposive

communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity to reach set goals” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 74).

According to Holtzhausen (2008), communicative entities encompass “the full spectrum of economic and social sectors, such as trade and industry, politics, nonprofit and government agencies, activist groups, and even celebrities in the sports and entertainment industries” (p. 4849). This delineated the scope of organization type and communication purpose underlying the field, and it suggested the inclusion of both commercial and non-commercial goals. In addition, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015a) argued “the ultimate aim of strategic communication is to maintain a healthy reputation for the communication entity in the public sphere,” which has become “participative rather than representative” and evolved into a “communication sphere rather than a public sphere” (p. 5-6).

This review demonstrates how the definition of strategic communication is evolving over time. In addition to the work cited above, many scholars have attempted to further explain what it is and to explicate the concepts implicit in the definition (Heath & Johansen, 2018; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015b; Mahoney, 2011). There also have been efforts to demonstrate how theory-building in strategic communication differs from, complements, and contributes to theory-building in public relations and its other root disciplines (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018), although the focus has mostly been on public relations.

Some progress has been made in clarifying the core foci of the field; however, limited attention has been given to the criterion of disciplinary integration. An examination of literature from interdisciplinary science provides insight into integration and what it means for strategic communication research and theory building.

Integration in Interdisciplinary Science

In order to better understand how strategic communication has emerged as a unique disciplinary endeavor, this review of literature defines what a discipline is, describes the development path a body of knowledge takes to reach disciplinary status, and examines how integration of disciplines occurs. This is followed by a review of concepts that describe work from multiple disciplines according to its degree of disciplinary integration. Finally, the need for multiple disciplinary research is discussed.

The Evolutionary Path of a Discipline

In an “exhaustive” and “well-grounded” (Alvargonzalez, 2011, p. 388) review of disciplinarity and its related terminology, Choi and Pak (2006) define a discipline as a “branch of knowledge, instruction, learning, teaching, or instruction; or a field of study or activity” (p. 352). Although a variety of frameworks for characterizing and categorizing disciplines exist (Belcher, 1989; Biglan, 1973; Kuhn, 1970), there is general agreement that disciplines: a) have a particular object of research, b) have a body of accumulated specialist knowledge about their object of research, c) have theories and concepts that organize the accumulated specialist knowledge effectively, d) use specific terminologies, e) have specific research methods, and f) have some institutional manifestation (Stichweh, 2001).

The development of disciplines is a necessary aspect of social evolution; disciplines evolve and differentiate continuously just as the human effort continues to understand the environment in an increasingly penetrating and comprehensive manner (Stichweh, 2001). The linear progression of an academic discipline begins with specialized attention of scholars, focusing on a fragment of human experience. A community of agreeable scholars then coalesces around some

central premises regarding the experience, perhaps a uniquely defined practice of inquiry. Further development depends on specialized structures (e.g., universities, academic departments, professional associations) to support that community and its internal communication (Stichweh, 2001).

Generally, the evolutionary history of disciplines takes the following path: a) a knowledge base exists; b) specialization and fragmentation of the knowledge base occurs; c) a discipline develops; d) diversification and further specialization of knowledge within the discipline occurs; e) breaking of disciplinary boundaries and emergence of more specialized new disciplines results (Stichweh, 2001). Furthermore, disciplinary emergence may be provoked in three ways: 1) two or more branches of knowledge merge and develop their own distinct characteristics and form a new discipline; 2) a social and professional activity becomes an area of application for several disciplines and is recognized as an independent field of study; and/or 3) a number of disciplines converge into an important field of activity that results in two-way flow of ideas for the enrichment of both; it is an interdisciplinary approach in different disciplines (Stichweh, 2001).

A good indication of the maturation of a discipline is “the extent to which it becomes more interdisciplinary and advances knowledge by crossing the traditional (but arbitrary) boundaries between the subdisciplines and by synthesizing material from the subdisciplines rather than importing ideas from the ‘mainstream’ disciplines” (Abernathy, Hanrahan, Kippers, Mackinnon, & Pandey, 2005, p. 5). In addition, “when human activities have a practical objective, the participation of a diverse set of scientific, technical, and technological disciplines is usually required” (Alvargonzalez, 2011, p. 302).

Continuum of Disciplinary Integration

In an effort to clarify how interdisciplinarity advances the social science, Stember (1991) suggested a continuum based on degree of disciplinary integration. As shown in Figure 1, at the beginning of the continuum is *intradisciplinary* (also known as uni-disciplinary), which is work that occurs within a discipline. This is followed by *crossdisciplinary*, a viewing of one discipline from the perspective of another. *Multidisciplinary* work precedes the integration process and involves several disciplines that each provide a different perspective on a problem or issue but remain within the silo boundaries of their own disciplines and under their own corresponding sets of assumptions, restrictions, and philosophies. This results in adding to the professional body of knowledge, but with very little innovation, because the assumptions, restrictions, and philosophies are mostly fixed. *Interdisciplinary* status is achieved when integration of the contributions of several disciplines to a problem or issue is achieved. Interdisciplinary integration brings interdependent parts of knowledge into harmonious relationships to build new knowledge and theoretical solutions. The highest level of integration is *transdisciplinary*, which is concerned with the unity of intellectual frameworks beyond the disciplinary perspectives. The process is actually cyclical, since once transdisciplinary status is reached, a new discipline forms and the specialization process repeats.

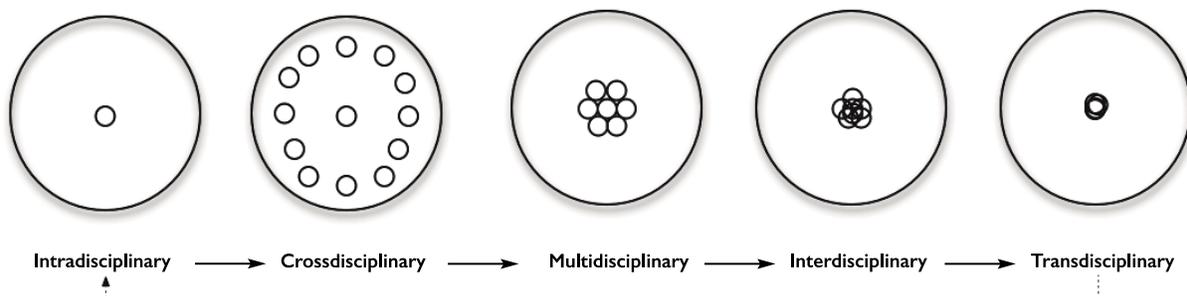


Figure 1. Continuum of disciplinary integration (Stember, 1991).

Multidisciplinary, Interdisciplinary, and Transdisciplinary Research

There is an increasing emphasis on research that involves multiple disciplines, and it is generally assumed that efforts to involve more than one discipline are valuable and beneficial (Choi & Pak, 2006). Terms like multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary have been used to denote efforts that involve several disciplines; however, “these terms have been ambiguously defined and often used interchangeably” leading to a “terminological quagmire” (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 352). In a comprehensive literature review of the use of these terms in academic literature, Choi and Pak (2006) offered a comparison of their meanings on multiple levels. Their findings are shown in Table 1.

Choi and Pak concluded that the terms multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary are all variously used to describe multiple disciplinary approaches of varying degrees on the same continuum and are commonly understood to be additive, interactive, and holistic, respectively. However, the terms are relatively new, poorly differentiated, confusing, and often used inaccurately (2006, p. 359). They propose that when the exact nature of the multiple disciplinary effort is not known, the terms should be avoided altogether and the more general and accurate term “multiple disciplinary” should be used instead (2006, p. 360).

The Concept of Integration in Interdisciplinary Research

In a widely-quoted definition of interdisciplinarity, Klein and Newell (1998) state that it is “a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession... [It] draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective” (p. 393-394).

Table 1

Choi and Pak's (2006) comparison of multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research

Multidisciplinary	Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinary
Working with several disciplines	Working between several disciplines	Working across and beyond several disciplines
Involves more than two disciplines	Involves two disciplines (i.e. focuses on reciprocal action of disciplines)	Involves scientists from relevant disciplines, as well as stakeholders, nonscientists, and non-academic participants
Members from different disciplines working independently on different aspects of a project, working parallel or sequentially	Members from different disciplines working together on the same project, working jointly	Members from different disciplines working together using a shared conceptual framework
Individual goals in different professions	Shared goals	Shared goals and shared skills
Participants have separate but inter-related roles	Participants have common roles	Participants have role release and role expansion
Participants maintain own disciplinary role	Participants surrender some aspects of their own disciplinary role, but still maintain a specific disciplinary base	Participants develop a shared conceptual framework, drawing together discipline-specific bases
Does not challenge disciplinary boundaries	Blurring of disciplinary boundaries	Transcend the disciplinary boundaries
Summation and juxtaposition of disciplines	Integration and synthesis of disciplines	Integration, amalgamation, assimilation, incorporation, unification, and harmony of disciplines, views, and approaches
Additive, integrative, collaborative	Interactive, integrative, collaborative	Holistic, transcendental, integrative, collaborative
Graphically analogous to two separate circles	Graphically analogous to two partially overlapping circles	Graphically analogous to a third circle that covers two partially overlapping circles
External coherence (i.e. motivated by a desire to focus on a clients' needs)	Internal coherence (i.e. motivated by a desire to focus on the team needs)	
Participants learn about each other	Participants learn about and from each other	
Separate methodologies	Common methodologies	
Instrumental, use of complementary knowledge or perspectives to address a question	Epistemological, creation of new knowledge or perspective, even new disciplines	
The outcome is the sum of the individual parts	The outcome is more than the sum of the individual parts	

Integration is a critical element of interdisciplinary research; it is what distinguishes interdisciplinarity from multidisciplinary (Szostak, 2013). Bergmann, Jahn, Knobloch, Krohn, Pohl, and Schramm (2012) identify three types of integration. *Epistemic* integration is the merging of ways of knowing from distinct disciplinary perspectives into holistic understanding of a phenomenon. *Strategic* integration largely focuses on the communication challenges that exist when scholars of diverse bodies of knowledge attempt to come together to form new insights. *Organizational* integration addresses challenges inherent to work conducted by research teams made up of scholars from multiple disciplinary perspectives. A full review of these types of integration is beyond the scope of this study; thus, only epistemic integration is discussed here.

According to Bergmann et al. (2012), epistemic integration has several key elements. First, it focuses on the synthesis or blending of critically evaluated insights from multiple disciplines, authors, or groups. This synthesis is aimed at the creation of common ground, which refers to one or more shared concepts or assumptions that allow differing insights to be reconciled and thus integrated (Repko, 2008, p.272).

True integration that achieves common ground results in a more holistic and comprehensive understanding that integrates phenomena, theories, and/or methods from multiple disciplines (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012). It is respectful of but transcends each discipline's insights and is more detailed than any single discipline's understanding. True integration is characterized by an appreciation of the parts of something as intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole (Bergmann et al., 2012). In addition, the achievement of integration is an ongoing process that consistently and continuously focuses on a particular well-defined question that is understood and commonly agreed upon by those trying to

inform it. Although true integration is difficult to achieve, it is the key aim of interdisciplinary research (Bergmann et al., 2012; Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012).

The Need for Multiple Disciplinary Research

There are many reasons why research involving multiple disciplines is desirable. First, the use of knowledge from multiple disciplines allows the resolution of real world problems. Choi and Pak (2006) argue that life is multiple disciplinary. “Disciplines are the result of artificial fragmentation of knowledge. Real world problems are rarely confined to the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines. Multiple disciplinary research evolves to meet the demands of many societal, environmental, industrial, scientific, and engineering problems that cannot be adequately addressed by single disciplines alone” (p. 357).

Second, research from multiple disciplines provides the ability to resolve complex problems. Experts from different disciplines read things differently and multiple disciplinary provides different perspectives on a problem. “The requirement for multiple disciplinary is emerging at a time when pace and complexity of science and technology is accelerating. ... Multiple disciplinary teams, with people trained in different fields, are common in complex environments” (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 358).

Third, multiple disciplinary creates comprehensive theory-based prospective hypotheses for research. A multiple disciplinary approach gets closer to the true nature of a phenomenon because it allows researchers to develop the right questions to guide research, as well as to select the right post-hoc theories to explain findings.

Furthermore, individual disciplines can get “tired” and become predictable, then a crisis of ideas can develop that makes progress difficult—a multiple disciplinary perspective can reduce one-

dimensional evaluation (Choi & Pak, 2006, p. 358). Finally, a multiple disciplinary view can help develop consensus definitions and guidelines for inquiry, as well as provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective practice (Choi & Pak, 2006).

The Disciplinary Status of Strategic Communication Scholarship

Based on knowledge of how disciplines develop, coupled with an understanding of the evolving definition of strategic communication, it is clear that strategic communication qualifies as a discipline. It has: a) a particular object of research (i.e., the communication of organizations), b) a body of accumulated specialist knowledge (e.g., a journal, a handbook, an encyclopedia), c) theories and concepts that organize this accumulated knowledge (e.g., rhetorical arena, persuasion, and communication sphere), d) specific terminologies (e.g., strategic and agency), e) specific research methods (e.g., survey, content analysis, in-depth interview), and f) institutional manifestation (e.g., academic programs and corporate departments).

In addition, it is clear that strategic communication emerged according to the usual path of disciplinary evolution. It gained specialized attention of scholars, then a community of scholars coalesced around central premises of a uniquely defined practice (i.e., the integration of the communication function in organizations) that developed specialized structures (e.g., academic programs, corporate departments). Specifically, a knowledge base existed (i.e., public relations, marketing, organizational management, communication, sociology, psychology), specialization and fragmentation occurred (e.g., crisis communication, corporate social responsibility), and a unique disciplinary focus developed—strategic communication.

Moreover, this emergence was provoked when the professional activity of communication management of organizations became an area of application for several disciplines that then

experienced a breaking of disciplinary boundaries to more effectively solve complex problems. Strategic communication emerged as an interdisciplinary paradigm for studying the communication of organizations through different lenses.

However, the attributes of strategic communication scholarship are less understood. This study seeks to describe the state of strategic communication by examining its scholarship. It aims to further understanding of how the field is developing, what trends exist, and what we consider to be important to the strategic communication body of knowledge. The following section describes the methods and procedures used to collect data for this study.

Method

To uncover trends in strategic communication scholarship, a content analysis was conducted of all manuscripts published in *IJSC* from its première in 2007 (Vol.1, No. 1) through December 2017 (Vol. 11, No. 5). According to the *IJSC* Web site, the journal “represents a multi-national effort to integrate various communication disciplines into a coherent body of knowledge and facilitate the emergence of strategic communication as a domain of study” (Zerfass & Werder, 2018). While the work published in *IJSC* is not a complete representation of strategic communication research production, it is the only academic journal in the world dedicated to strategic communication. In addition, *IJSC* provides the only continuously produced academic source from which to draw longitudinal data regarding the breadth and scope of scholarship in strategic communication.

The content analysis procedures followed best practices outlined in Lacy, Watson, Riffe, and Lovejoy (2015). Analysis began by identifying the sample, unit of analysis, and variables of interest, followed by the creation of a classification system for quantitatively coding these variables.

Sampling Procedures and Unit of Analysis

A total of 208 manuscripts were published in *IJSC* during the 11-year study period. This included 195 original research articles, 10 guest editor introductions to special issues, two editorials written by the journal editors, and one letter from the editors explaining the introduction of a new section. All of the manuscripts except the letter contributed insight into strategic communication scholarship; therefore, the letter was omitted and 207 manuscripts were analyzed. The complete article served as the unit of analysis.

Variables of Interest and Categorization Procedures

To inform understanding of the work published in *IJSC* and how it has developed over time, data were collected in 10 manifest content categories and four latent content categories. Categories for all variables were mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Manifest content. Each article was assigned an identification number and coded according to its year of publication, volume number, and issue number. This data provided insight into the frequency of manuscripts published in the journal over time. Next, articles were coded by location of study (country) to better understand how strategic communication scholarship is advancing globally. In addition, the number of authors per manuscript and the country where the authors were working when the article was published were coded. Articles were examined to determine if the research involved an international collaboration, which occurred if authors of a manuscript were working two different countries.

To better understand the research methods used in strategic communication scholarship, each manuscript was examined for its methodological attributes. First, articles were coded according to whether they were conceptual essays or empirical studies. An article was coded as an

empirical study if it contained data collected through observation; articles with no observed data were coded as conceptual essays. Next, empirical studies were examined to determine the type of methodology used. Categories included quantitative methods, qualitative methods, and mixed methods. Finally, empirical studies were coded according to the data collection tool used. Categories included survey, experiment, content analysis, case study, in-depth interview, focus group, observation, mixed method, and other.

Latent content. All manuscripts were examined for their theoretical attributes. Data was collected for four variables: level of analysis, topic of study, disciplinary focus, and level of disciplinary integration.

The level of analysis for each article was coded using the framework provided by Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013), which outlines micro-, meso-, and macro-level applications in strategic communication research. Micro-level analyses address communication between a communicative entity and its stakeholders and includes the application of theories to understand how communication takes place in a strategic context. Examples of micro-level analysis in strategic communication include crisis communication, corporate social responsibility (CSR), relationship/image/reputation management, branding, consumer research, social media engagement, new media technology, political communication, public diplomacy, and studies of the effect of strategic messages on publics (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013).

Meso-level analyses focus on the organizational level of practice and emphasize the strategic process in organizations (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). Examples of research at the meso level include internal and employee communication, roles, management and leadership, structure, goal-setting, strategic planning (e.g., MBO, SWOT), and organizational culture.

Macro-level analyses pertain to philosophical and meta-theoretical applications of strategic communication and focus on communication in the public sphere. Examples of macro-level analyses include studies of systems, chaos, and complexity theory, change communication, socio-cybernetics, and some studies on the conceptualization of publics (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013).

The primary topic of study for each article was analyzed using a process of emergence. Specifically, the main topic was determined by reading the manuscript, and a list of all topics were compiled. Next, similar topics were grouped into 25 discrete categories (shown in the results) that reflected the scope of topics in strategic communication scholarship. An article was assigned to an ‘introspective’ category if it focused on defining and/or conceptualizing strategic communication.

The disciplinary focus of each article was assessed and articles were assigned to one of seven categories: strategic communication, public relations/corporate communication, organization theory, marketing, political communication, communication theory, and management. To be assigned to the strategic communication category, articles had to apply concepts and theories from two or more root disciplines, having either a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary level of integration. To be assigned to any other category, the article had to apply concepts and theories from the root discipline without a view toward synthesizing ideas with another area of study.

Finally, each article was assessed for its level of disciplinary integration based on the definitions provided by Stember (1991). Articles were coded as intradisciplinary if they applied concepts and theories from a single discipline. An article was coded as cross-disciplinary if it mentioned concepts and theories from other disciplines but framed them from the perspective of a single discipline. Articles that applied concepts and theories from two or more disciplines but failed to achieve integration (i.e., did not produce new concepts, models, or theories) was coded as

multidisciplinary. Articles were coded as interdisciplinary if they merged concepts and theories from two or more disciplines to identify new concepts or create new models or theoretical perspectives. Finally, articles were coded as transdisciplinary if their conceptual approach was fully integrated and produced entirely new theoretical insight.

Reliability Analysis

To assess the reliability of the categorization system, a single researcher coded all content for the 207 articles, then a second researcher coded all content for 20 percent ($n = 42$) of articles randomly selected from the full set. Holsti's (1969) formula was used to assess intercoder reliability. All latent variable achieved alpha coefficients of 1.00, indicating perfect agreement. For the four manifest variables, alpha coefficients ranged from .80 to 1.00. These coefficients were considered acceptable for further data analysis (Krippendorff, 2004); however, a process of reconciliation was initiated to resolve discrepancies. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 25. The next section reviews the results of the content analysis.

Results

The purpose of this content analysis is to produce descriptive profile of strategic communication scholarship. The results are divided into sections based on whether the variables of interest related to the following: 1) research production, 2) globalization of the discipline, 3) authorship, 4) methodological attributes, and 5) theoretical attributes.

Research Production

An analysis of the frequency of manuscripts published per annual volume of the journal indicates an increase in manuscripts published over time (see Table 2). The larger numbers for

volume years 2016 and 2017 reflect an increase in pages per issue and issues per volume beginning in 2016. The number of manuscripts published each year generally doubled from 2007 to 2017.

Table 2

Frequency of Manuscripts Per Volume

Volume	Year	Frequency	Percent
1	2007	15	7.2
2	2008	14	6.8
3	2009	17	8.2
4	2010	16	7.7
5	2011	16	7.7
6	2012	20	9.7
7	2013	18	8.7
8	2014	17	8.2
9	2015	17	8.2
10	2016	29	14.0
11	2017	28	13.5
Total	11	207	100.0

Globalization of the Discipline

Of the 207 articles analyzed, 164 articles examined strategic communication in a specific country. Articles published in the journal reflect research conducted in 29 different countries, and 22 studies (13.4%) focused on strategic communication in multiple countries. These results are shown in Table 3. The United States of America was the most frequent country of study (n = 63, 38.4%), followed by China (n = 16, 9.8%) and Denmark (n = 10, 6.1%). Country data were collapsed to show strategic communication research in specific regions. The results, shown in Table 4, indicate that strategic communication in the U.S., North America, Europe, and Asia has received the most attention from the scholarly community.

Table 3

Frequency of Manuscripts by Country of Study

Country	Manuscripts	Percent
USA	63	38.4
Multiple countries	22	13.4
China	16	9.8
Denmark	10	6.1
Germany	7	4.3
South Korea	6	3.7
Sweden	6	3.7
India	3	1.8
Italy	3	1.8
Switzerland	3	1.8
Indonesia	2	1.2
Israel	2	1.2
Nigeria	2	1.2
Norway	2	1.2
South Africa	2	1.2
Australia	1	.6
Brazil	1	.6
Columbia	1	.6
Estonia	1	.6
Finland	1	.6
Iraq	1	.6
Malaysia	1	.6
Mexico	1	.6
Netherlands	1	.6
Peru	1	.6
Romania	1	.6
Singapore	1	.6
Spain	1	.6
Uganda	1	.6
United Kingdom	1	.6
Total	164	100.0

Table 4

Frequency of Manuscripts by Region of Study

Region	Manuscripts	Percent
North America	64	39
Europe	43	26.2
Asia	30	18.3
Multiple regions	15	9.1
Africa	5	3.0
South America	3	1.8
Middle East	3	1.8
Australia/Oceania	1	.6
Total	164	100.0

Authorship

Results indicate that 418 scholars authored work published in *IJSC* during the time frame analyzed. The number of authors per manuscript ranged from one (n = 59, 28.5%) to six (n = 1, 0.5%), with the largest number of manuscripts authored by two people (n = 97, 46.9%).

Authors who published work in *IJSC* during the study period were employed in 26 different countries. Table 5 shows the production rate of strategic communication scholarship from authors by country. Results indicate that the majority of strategic communication research is being produced by authors working in the U.S. (n = 233, 55.7%), followed by Germany (n = 36, 8.6%), Denmark (n = 31, 7.4%), Sweden (n = 25, 6%), China (n = 15, 3.6%), and Switzerland (n = 10, 2.4%). Of the 207 articles analyzed, 42 (20.3%) were authored by teams of researchers from different countries. In contrast, 165 (79.7%) articles did not have an international collaboration.

Table 5

Country of Origin of Authors

Country	No. of Authors	Percent
USA	233	55.7
Germany	36	8.6
Denmark	31	7.4
Sweden	25	6.0
China	15	3.6
Switzerland	10	2.4
Netherlands	8	1.9
South Korea	8	1.9
Singapore	7	1.8
Finland	6	1.4
Italy	6	1.4
Norway	6	1.4
Australia	5	1.2
Israel	3	0.8
Brazil	2	0.5
Estonia	2	0.5
Indonesia	2	0.5
New Zealand	2	0.5
Nigeria	2	0.5
Taiwan	2	0.5
United Kingdom	2	0.5
Canada	1	0.2
Malaysia	1	0.2
Slovenia	1	0.2
South Africa	1	0.2
Spain	1	0.2
Total	418	100.0

Methodological Attributes of Strategic Communication Scholarship

Of the 207 articles analyzed, 160 (77.3%) were empirical studies and 47 (22.7%) were conceptual essays. Of the 160 empirical studies, quantitative methods were used in 79 (49.4%), qualitative methods were used in 72 (45%), and 9 (5.6%) studies used mixed methods. Table 6 shows frequency of use of specific data collection tools. Surveys were most frequently used (n = 38, 23.8%), followed by content analyses (n = 36, 22.5%), and case study methods (n = 33, 20.6%).

Table 6

Frequency of Data Collection Tool Used in Empirical Studies

Data Collection	Manuscripts	Percent
Surveys	38	23.8
Content analyses	36	22.5
Case studies	33	20.6
In-depth interviews	20	12.5
Experiments	18	11.3
Multi-method	15	9.4
Total	160	100.0

Theoretical Attributes of Strategic Communication Scholarship

Strategic communication was analyzed at the micro level in 133 (64.3%) articles, the meso level in 50 (11.1%) articles, and the macro level in 24 (11.6%) articles (N = 207). The analysis of the disciplinary focus of the articles indicated the majority of articles (n = 105, 50.7%) were classified as multiple disciplinary strategic communication research that reached multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary level integration. Articles with disciplinary focus in public relations and corporate communication were the second most frequent (n = 79, 38.2%). Strategic communication was examined from a purely communication perspective in the fewest number of studies (n = 2, 1%). These results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Disciplinary Focus of Study

Disciplinary Focus	Manuscripts	Percent
Strategic Communication (multiple disciplines)	105	50.7
Public Relations/Corporate Communication	79	38.2
Organizational Communication	9	4.3
Political communication	5	2.4
Marketing	4	1.9
Management	3	1.4
Communication	2	1.0
Total	207	100.0

Analysis of the primary topic of interest of the 207 articles resulted in the emergence of 25 unique categories, shown in Table 8. The most frequently studied topics were management/leadership/consulting (n = 21, 10.1), crisis/risk/disaster communication (n = 18, 8.7%), social media/new technology/big data (n = 18, 8.7%), and corporate social responsibility (n = 17, 8.2%). Almost no studies had ethics as the central topic (n = 1, 0.5%).

Table 8

Topic of Study

Topic of Study	Manuscripts	Percent
Management/Leadership/Consulting	21	10.1
Crisis/Risk/Disaster Communication	18	8.7
Social Media/New Media Technology/Big Data	18	8.7
Corporate Social Responsibility	17	8.2
Introspective (defining strategic communication)	13	6.3
Relationship Management	13	6.3
Campaigns	11	5.3
Strategy	10	4.8
Internal/Employee Communication	9	4.3
Political Communication	9	4.3
Practitioner Roles	9	4.3
Publics	8	3.9
Branding/Advertising/Marketing	7	3.4
Identity/Image/Reputation Management	7	3.4
Public Diplomacy	6	2.9
Institutionalization	5	2.4
Investor Relations	5	2.4
Mass Media/Agenda Setting/Framing	5	2.4
Governmental/Public Sector Communication	4	1.9
Non-Profit Communication	3	1.4
Health Communication	2	1.0
Media Relations	2	1.0
Message Effects	2	1.0
Propaganda	2	1.0
Ethics	1	.5
Total	207	100.0

Finally, analysis of the degree of disciplinary integration present in the articles indicates that a narrow majority of strategic communication scholarship is multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary (n = 105, 50.8%). Intradisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches were

employed in 49.3% of the articles (n = 102). Integration at the interdisciplinary level was present in 44 of 207 manuscripts (21.3%). These results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Disciplinary Integration of Strategic Communication Scholarship

Disciplinary Integration	Manuscripts	Percent
Intradisciplinary	53	25.6
Crossdisciplinary	49	23.7
Multidisciplinary	61	29.5
Interdisciplinary	44	21.3
Total	207	100.0

Discussion

A review of the findings of this study is provided below. It attempts to describe the disciplinary characteristics of strategic communication in its current state. This is followed by a call for strategic communication scholars to adopt an interdisciplinary worldview toward research and theory building. To facilitate this, a description of the interdisciplinary research process and best practices for achieving an interdisciplinary worldview are reviewed.

Describing the Discipline

Strategic communication can be described as a growing discipline. The results of this analysis indicate positive trends in research productivity, authorship, and globalization of the discipline during the 11-year study period. The number of manuscripts published per annual volume of the journal doubled from 2007 to 2017. In addition, results indicate that strategic communication is receiving attention in many parts of the world. It has been examined in 29 different countries, with 13 percent of studies published in the journal focusing on multiple countries. While North America was the most frequent region of study (n = 64, 39%), strategic

communication in Europe (n = 43, 26.2%) and Asia (n = 30, 18.3%) has received considerable attention from scholars. These results support the aim of the journal to reflect an international community of scholars, and the presence of work from under-represented countries like Malaysia, Estonia, Slovenia, and Nigeria is encouraging.

Strategic communication has a diverse scholarly community. Findings indicate that articles were published by 418 authors¹ from 26 different countries. The majority of strategic communication scholarship was produced by authors at American universities (n = 233, 55.7%); however, many authors worked at German (n = 36, 8.6%), Danish (n = 31, 7.4%), and Swedish universities. This reflects the growing ‘schools of thought’ on strategic communication at the University of Leipzig, Aarhus University, and Lund University. It is also encouraging to see research on strategic communication from Indonesia, Israel, Brazil, and South Africa. Scholars working in these countries provide different perspectives that help inform the cultural scope of strategic communication research and practice, and they inform issues that may not be apparent to scholars working in different societies.

Strategic communication scholarship largely results from team collaboration. The majority of work—nearly 72 percent—was conducted by teams of researchers; however, only 20 percent of studies were produced by international teams. Although this suggests the international reach of strategic communication scholarship, it also points to the need for more international collaboration, as this can facilitate the merging of dissimilar perspectives and cultural contexts.

An examination of the methodological attributes of strategic communication scholarship reveals that empirical methods were used to produce formal research with primary data in 77

¹ Note: Authors were not mutually exclusive.

percent of the articles (n = 160). Of these, quantitative (n = 79, 49.4%) and qualitative methods (n = 72, 45%) were used with generally the same frequency. A few studies employed mixed methods (n = 9, 5.6%); however, the results suggest a need for more triangulated research that investigates strategic communication phenomenon from multiple observational approaches. In addition, the findings suggest that conceptual work is sufficiently present (n = 47, 22.7%); however, scholars must maintain introspective inquiry and fully engage in the disciplinary debate as strategic communication matures.

Surveys, content analyses, and case studies are the most popular tools for data collection, providing data for 67 percent of empirical studies. Interestingly, neither focus groups nor observational methods were used, not even in the few multi-method studies (n = 15, 9.4%). Focus groups and observational methods provide a perspective on phenomena that other methods are unable to capture. More scholars should use these methods to inform a diverse, multi-perspective body of knowledge.

In terms of theoretical attributes, strategic communication can be described as disproportionately focused on micro-level problems (n = 133, 64.3%). Specialized areas like crisis communication and CSR have captured the attention of scholars. Meso-level analysis in strategic communication largely focuses on management and the strategic process, although internal communication and roles research are prevalent. Findings reveal a need for more macro-level analyses that further understanding of strategic communication in the public sphere.

The disciplinary focus of strategic communication is divided equally between scholarship that adopts a multiple disciplinary perspective (n = 105, 50.7%), and scholarship that does not. A

substantial amount of scholarship maintained a classic public relations /corporate communication focus (n = 79, 38.2%), which likely reflects its path to disciplinary development.

The scope of strategic communication scholarship is reflected in 25 discrete research streams that emerged as topics of interest to the scholarly community. The body of knowledge is dominated by meso-level management research (e.g., Hamrin, 2016; Luo, Jiang, & Kulemeka, 2015; Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011), and micro-level research in crisis communication, (e.g., Kim, 2013; Mishra, 2017; Schwarz, 2008), social media (e.g., Chen, Ji, & Men, 2017; Smith & Taylor, 2017), CSR (e.g., Rim & Song, 2013; Tao & Ferguson, 2015; Werder, 2008), and relationship management (e.g., Ki & Hon, 2009; Sweetser, 2015; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010). Together, these five streams account for 44 percent of scholarship in strategic communication. The abundance of micro-level work in these areas reveals a preoccupation with strategic communication between an organization and its stakeholders; however, many of these studies are where integration of concepts, models, and theories from multiple disciplines takes place (e.g., Men & Tsai, 2013; Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2016; Zhao, Falkheimer, & Heide, 2017).

The discipline also has a healthy stream of scholarship dedicated to introspective examination of strategic communication as a domain of study, including as how it is defined and how it should be studied (e.g., Christensen & Svensson, 2017; Nothhaft, 2016; Sandhu, 2017). However, more work is needed that attempts to reconcile perspectives as the discipline continues to emerge and clarify its domain.

Although ethics were mentioned in some articles, only one article had ethics as the central focus (Ikonen, Luama-Aho, & Bowen, 2017). Although this article may have been assigned to the CSR category, which includes studies on organizational legitimacy, transparency, and sincerity

(e.g., Bachmann & Ingenhoff, 2017; Ragas & Roberts, 2009), its focus is distinct and meaningful enough to merit its own category. Its inclusion in the table provides empirical support for the call for more scholarship with ethics as the focus.

Despite its length, the topics list fails to capture the depth of the field. For example, only one article had a reference to *feminization* in the title (Simorangkir, 2011). The topical focus of the article was the influence of gender on public relations roles, but the feminization of the field was central to the conclusions. Communication-related professions continue to experience challenges related to gender and diversity (Harrington, 2017). Certainly, more research is needed that seeks to close the gender gap in communication-related professions.

Finally, strategic communication scholarship can be described as lacking in its attempt to achieve high levels of disciplinary integration. Only half of the articles published in *IJSC* over the 11-year period examined strategic communication from a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary perspective. These articles integrated concepts, models, and theories from two or more disciplines, to varying degrees. Integration at the interdisciplinary level was present in only 21 percent of articles. These findings support the need for more interdisciplinary scholarship.

Although the largest number of articles ($n = 61$) adopted a multidisciplinary approach (as the field has been defined until now), this study posits that a multidisciplinary approach will not facilitate the growth and development of strategic communication as a unique disciplinary endeavor. Instead, the adoption of an interdisciplinary worldview toward scholarship in strategic communication is needed to achieve growth and innovation in the next decade.

Consistency of Purpose in Strategic Communication Scholarship

More than a decade of research published in *IJSC* provides evidence that strategic communication embodies the characteristics of a discipline. This body of work demonstrates that disciplinary integration is present in strategic communication scholarship; however, the unclear conceptualization of *integration* provided by scholars—specifically, its positioning within multidisciplinary boundaries—does not allow the integration that generates novel perspectives on problem-solving; thus, it limits potential for future knowledge building and innovation.

This study proposes that refinements to the way strategic communication has been defined may strengthen the consistency of purpose for research and theory-building among scholars. Specifically, it is argued that any definition of strategic communication should underscore that it is, at base, an *integrated, interdisciplinary* approach.

Figure 2 provides an example of how the disciplines that have been most relevant to strategic communication thus far might be organized, based on the results of this study and the literature. The grey area represents an environment—or community—of other disciplines, subdisciplines, and research streams that have the potential to provide unique insight into the same phenomena that interest strategic communication scholars. This representation privileges the notion that each individual discipline is embedded in an environment of other disciplines, as “the continuous mutual observation and interaction of these disciplines is the most important factor in the dynamics of science” (Stichweh, 2001, p. 13727). However, it should be noted that the figure explains the disciplines that have been important to strategic communication so far. Additional disciplines that can or should contribute might have been neglected by scholars, or their importance might surface in the future. One example is information technology, which can inform the analysis of algorithms and their use for communicative goals. Other examples include research

in public diplomacy and work related to military and national power—an area where strategic communication is intensively discussed in a way that has seldom resonated in communication science until now (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, & Werder, 2018).

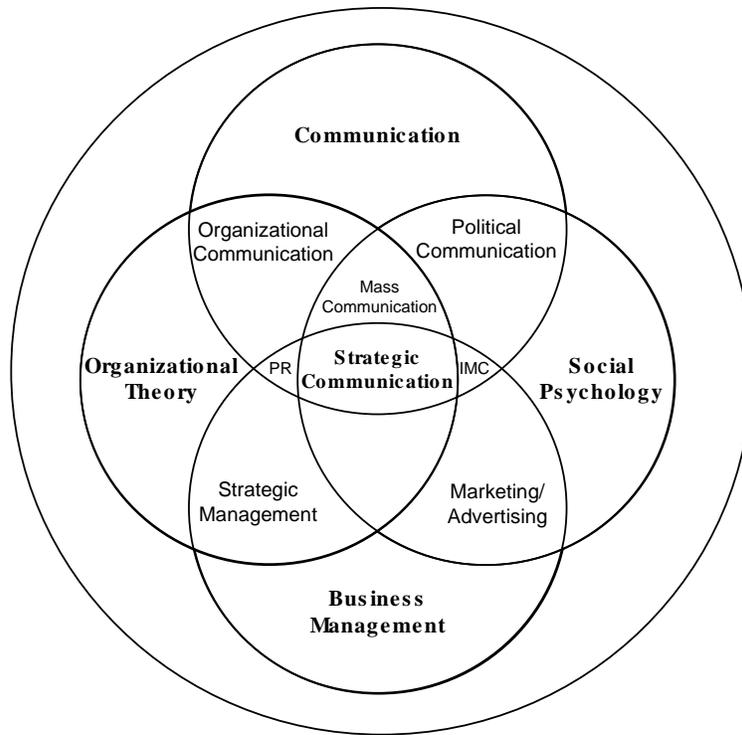


Figure 2. The interdisciplinarity of strategic communication.

Adopting an Interdisciplinary Worldview in Strategic Communication

There is broad consensus among many academic and professional communities for the value of an interdisciplinary perspective in solving today’s complex problems (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012). This article argues that strategic communication scholars must embrace an *interdisciplinary worldview* for it to evolve and become more widely recognized by other ~~disparate~~ disciplines. Augsberg and Chitewere (2013) describe worldview as the lens through which one sees the world. This article emphasizes the need for more scholars to engage in work that falls outside

the boundaries of their specialized perspectives. More collaboration between disparate disciplines is needed to synthesize competing views on phenomena and create novel approaches to solve problems.

However, the integration of disparate perspectives—which is central to interdisciplinary research—can be difficult to achieve. To further this endeavor, a deeper appreciation for interdisciplinary knowledge generation is needed. Specifically, improved understanding among scholars is needed in two areas: 1) the interdisciplinary research process, and 2) best practices for achieving an interdisciplinary worldview.

The Interdisciplinary Research Process

In order to achieve true integration, scholars must possess an understanding of the interdisciplinary research process, which is different from intra-, or uni-disciplinary, methodologies. Intradisciplinary research exhibits strong preferences for particular methods and the use of particular tools and techniques, while interdisciplinary research exhibits openness to the use of any method, technique, or tool that might illuminate the question under evaluation (Szostak, 2013). This openness aims to facilitate communication among interdisciplinarians, encourage quality research, facilitate the assessment of that research, and enhance the reputation of interdisciplinary research within the academy (Szostak, 2013).

Repko, Newell, and Szostak (2012) argue that researchers must be self-conscious and explicit about this research process and should approach it in terms of different steps, or stages, in the interdisciplinary research process. They stress that these steps are iterative—researchers need not start at the first step and will often revisit earlier steps or perform multiple steps simultaneously. In team projects, one important form of iteration is when team members present

interim results and these are critiqued by other members. This may lead to revisiting earlier steps in which teams revise their expectations as interim results are presented. Repko (2012) describes the steps of the interdisciplinary research process as follows:

- 1) Forming a research team (if team research is appropriate);
- 2) Solving communication problems;
- 3) Identifying a good research question;
- 4) Identifying and evaluating disciplinary insights;
- 5) Mapping interdisciplinary connections;
- 6) Performing mixed methods research;
- 7) Integrating insights from different disciplines;
- 8) Reflecting, testing, and communicating research results; and
- 9) Assessing interdisciplinary research, which is an external step performed by others.

These nine steps are logically distinct, and one critical strategy for evaluating interdisciplinary research is to ask whether all relevant steps have been performed appropriately (Repko, 2012). In addition, reflection is critical. The interdisciplinarian is urged to be self-conscious about the interdisciplinary research process itself and about the biases that one might bring to one's research (Szostak, 2013).

Best Practices for Achieving an Interdisciplinary Worldview

Although definitions of interdisciplinarity are diverse and often contested, there is an emerging consensus around certain best practices that should exist as scholars work toward interdisciplinarity (Szostak, 2013). In describing the lens through which the interdisciplinarian sees the world, Szostak (2013) states that interdisciplinarians focus on particular problem or questions

that are too complex to be answered satisfactorily by any one discipline. Some interdisciplinarians may be guided by a search for a particular policy or technology requiring input from different perspectives. Others may search for insights into what a concept means across different realms.

Interdisciplinarians also draw upon and evaluate the insights of specialized research (Szostak, 2013). Specialized research is performed by communities of scholars who share a set of guiding questions, concepts, theories, and methods. In addition, interdisciplinarians utilize multiple theories and methods. They are conscious that all theories, methods, and disciplines are useful for some purposes but also have weaknesses. Interdisciplinarians appreciate that each discipline is characterized by an evolving disciplinary perspective or way of looking at the world.

Finally, interdisciplinarians integrate the best elements of disciplinary insights in order to generate a more comprehensive (and often more nuanced) appreciation of the issue at hand. This may come in the form of a new understanding, product, or meaning (Szostak, 2013).

The Future of Strategic Communication Scholarship

This article argues that strategic communication will advance through the adoption of an interdisciplinary worldview among its scholarly and professional communities, although this has already happened in practice to an extent. While this is a difficult proposition—one that is easier said than done—it is necessary to ensure that strategic communication scholarship continues to contribute to and further understanding of ~~the management of~~ communication in organizations. Strategic communication scholars must develop concepts and theoretical frameworks that are uniquely integrated and provide a holistic view of communication management in organizations.

This study describes the development of strategic communication research in the first decade of its evolution. The newly emerging discipline has achieved a notable breadth and depth.

However, the most pressing challenge for future scholarship is the need for closer conceptual and methodological collaboration across various disciplines, as well as true interdisciplinary integration that pursues new insights, innovation, and production of new knowledge in and about strategic communication. Interdisciplinary integration is the greatest challenge for strategic communication scholarship in the future.

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