

# Strategic Communication

## Opportunities and Challenges of the Research Area<sup>1</sup>

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Strategic communication is a term that has become quite popular in communication science education in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Originally only used for a niche, that is, communication programs in the domain of national governments and the military (Farwell, 2012; Paul, 2011), it is now increasingly popular as an umbrella concept embracing various goal-directed communication activities usually covered by public relations, marketing and financial communications, health communications, public diplomacy, campaigning, and so forth. In the United States, many universities have merged formerly distinct public relations and advertising programs into strategic communication curricula. In Europe, strategic communication is often used to signal a managerial approach to the field of integrated communications for all kinds of organizations. In Asia and Australia, strategic communication is a concept used in the professional field, in education and in literature alike (e.g., Mahoney, 2013).

However, strategic communication is not just a term used in substitution for disliked or ill-reputed concepts. It is a distinct approach focusing on the process of communication which offers complementary insights and open up new fields for interdisciplinary research. This chapter will review the original definition (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007) and its expansion (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). Subsequently it will reflect on those perspectives on the field's theoretical foundation that have emerged over the past few years, and consider the factors that contribute to successful strategic communication practice.

### Evolution of the Concept

Since the publication of the article "Defining Strategic Communication" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 243) in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, the definition put forward in that article has been used to explore, limit, argue, debate and study strategic communication. By the end of 2013 the article had been cited numerous times in other journal articles and had been downloaded more than 2,000 times. Not much has changed since 2007 in terms of the definition of strategic communication. However, much has been clarified and at this time a better picture emerges of what goes into a strategic communication process, what defines its success, what the impact is on the public sphere and what the commonalities are among different areas of strategic communication practice.

The 2007 article brought about an identity crisis, particularly in the public relations scholarly community, which has long held that strategic communication is its specific domain. This anxiety is

unnecessary because the study of strategic communication has never been intended to replace other areas of practice but has merely tried to explore what the different communities of practice can learn from each other and so break down the silos we have erected around ourselves.

Four reasons why the study of strategic communication is necessary and prudent were provided in the 2007 article: problems in differentiating between traditional communication activities; the changes in technology that makes it increasingly difficult to differentiate between different forms of communication; the increase in methods organizations use to communicate directly to stakeholders; and the fact that purposeful communication is “the fundamental goal of communication by organizations” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 10).

There is indeed a great deal of overlap between the different domains of practice, as this volume shows, and many of the developments in the field of strategic communication have emerged from public relations scholars. On the other hand, scholars of advertising, political, health and crisis communication, public diplomacy, management communication and marketing have since 2007 made important contributions to researchers’ understanding of strategic communication.

### Defining the Field

Hallahan et al. (2007) defined strategic communication “in its broadest sense, (as) communicating purposefully to advance (the organization’s) mission” (p. 4). They also held that strategic communication “implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements” (p. 4). The article further elaborated on the concept of *strategy* and argued that being strategic does not necessarily mean being manipulative, because practitioners often decide that being inclusive and collaborative will be more strategic and effective than being propagandistic or manipulative. However, influencing the levels of knowledge, changing or maintaining attitudes and influencing the behaviors towards issues, products or services remain the preferred outcomes for strategic communication.

Yet another property of the first definition was a focus on practice or action and on the role of the practitioner who serves as an agent communicating on behalf of others. Thus, rather than merely concentrating on the strategic communication process it also focused on the factors that enable or prevent communicators to execute a communication plan. Finally, the article pointed to the importance of *communication* in the strategic communication process as opposed to a strategic organizational process that does not necessarily revolve around communication. The strategic communication process typically is a communication process that follows from an organization’s strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in enabling the organization’s strategic goals and objectives. Two communication models were discussed. The transmission model followed from Shannon and Weaver (1949) and eventually evolved in discussions of two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical communication in public relations literature (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The interactive or ritualistic model of communication, following Carey (1989), has its foundation in symbolic interactionism and organizational communication and focuses on how messages and people themselves are shaped during the communication process.

This foundation remains largely intact at this time, although Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) proposed a more comprehensive, single definition incorporating most of the attributes above, with the inclusion of the public sphere. They proposed the following definition: “Strategic communication is the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals” (p. 74). Following Holtzhausen (2008), communicative entities “cover 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). While strategic communicators indeed do a great deal of work outside of the public sphere, such as managing communication programs and

communicating with internal stakeholders, the ultimate aim is to maintain a healthy reputation for the communicative entity in the public sphere.

Set against this more advanced definition, this chapter will review each of the attributes of the definition with the purpose of assessing previous and new theoretical approaches to the study of the field. First, it will review the philosophical foundations of strategic communication, particularly as they pertain to the public sphere, before moving to the role of practitioners and the organizational environment in which strategic communication is practiced, and finally to an assessment of the actual communication process in its various contexts.

### Strategic Communication and the Public Sphere

The notion of control of public dialogue has always been inherent in the debate on the role of strategic communication. Habermas (1979, 2006) in particular has been critical of the ability of those in power to hire powerful agents to communicate on their behalf and so influence and skew public debate. His work was largely influenced by the reality that, at that time, the media were crucial in shaping and instigating public discourse, with the assumption that the media were neutral in this role and thus open to influence by strategic communicators.

Popular understanding of the public sphere has changed, particularly during the past decade, with the increasingly important role of the Internet, which brought a radical expansion of the public sphere and a marginalization of the major public media. While Bentele and Nothhaft (2010) argued the virtual sphere can only exist in a solid and real society that surrounds it, they also contended that

The dominant characteristic (of the public sphere) is that the communication sphere, to a degree, collapses structural constraints, such as time, distance, technical limitations, and physical handicaps of the person, to mention a few. The public sphere is not a place of gathering as the *Tingstead* any more (sic). Neither is it a force field of media attention constituted by a limited amount of actors. It is a network of points of interest. Something, e.g., a brand, the swine-flu, a politician or any other topic, is in the public sphere because communicators, who are points in the network of communications, communicate about it.

p. 112

They argued that the public sphere is now controlled by the truthfulness of the statements issued in the public communication sphere as perceived by the public. If strategic communicators can argue that their communication is in the public interest and contributes to the wellbeing of society, and if their arguments are accepted as such, they will make a contribution to the public sphere, even if they use their own communication platforms to do so.

In an analysis of the contribution of Dewey to the understanding of the public sphere, Self (2010) argued that Dewey believed discourse in the public sphere already was action, which was preserved in the form of shared meaning. Thus, for Dewey, discourse was already action that shaped the public sphere and subsequently society. Similar to Bentele and Nothhaft (2010), Self (2010) argued that the public became activists through participating in the public sphere, which eventually led to solving society's problems. Whereas in the past the consequences of public deliberation, because of mediators, only vaguely reflected the public debate "now the relation between public communication and public action seems to grow more and more ominous" (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010, p. 114).

What sets the current public sphere apart from that of the 20th century is that it is more participative rather than representative. There still are some major media who contribute to the public sphere but *contribute* here is the key word rather than *mediate*. Whereas the media was the main force in presenting different viewpoints representing society in the 20th century, digital media now allows members of the public to directly participate in public debate without going through these mediated

channels. Thus the public sphere has become participative rather than representative. Now everybody matters in what is a communication sphere rather than a public sphere.

### **Public versus Private**

To understand the role of strategic communication in the public sphere it is important to briefly review the difference between the public and the private, which also is called "The good Life" (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1984, pp. 229–230). Traditionally the public sphere was viewed as the arena where the wealthy, aristocratic and well-connected were expected to make a contribution. Women, peasants and tradespeople were typically excluded from the public sphere because they were viewed as second-class citizens who did not have the necessary competency, education and background to make decisions for themselves. Thus, the public sphere belonged to a very select group of people; it was a place where equals met, that is, the free and the privileged. This perspective led to the well-known quote that "The Personal is Political" (Hanisch, 1970), also often presented as "The private is political."

Although this scenario has now changed with a public sphere that is more accessible to a variety of voices than ever before, it nonetheless highlights the split between the public and the private, which also frames the role of strategic communication in the public sphere. If strategic communicators are participants in the public sphere and the role of the public sphere is to solve society's problems, they have a responsibility to present debatable issues to the public sphere. If not, their work will be ridiculed. Individuals who wish to manipulate the public sphere to their own benefit without bringing ideas and arguments that contribute to the public debate will be rejected, as is the case in the United States when Donald Trump used his own brand to make unfounded political statements about President Barack Obama's birthplace (Swindell, 2011). Trump has no elected status and has never run for office and the way he used his public profile to insert himself into a political debate was met with ridicule. Since that public humiliation Trump has been quite absent in the public sphere. This is an example of how arguments in the public sphere are rejected when they are not authentic or do not contribute to the improvement of society.

The inclusion of the public sphere in a definition of strategic communication is therefore valuable in debating the role of the practice. In addition to its many other attributes the role of strategic communicators should surely include helping others gain access to the public sphere through good, thoughtful arguments that can advance the interests of the communicative entity while contributing to the improvement of society. That in itself already represents strategic action, as per Dewey (1954). Furthermore, many strategic communicators will attest to the notion that the pervasiveness of the public sphere makes them more thoughtful about what and how they communicate about issues, even when they communicate in the marketing and branding context. As Bentele and Nothhaft (2010) succinctly pointed out, the public sphere has become "a corridor that limits your maneuverable space when trying to make sense out of reality" (p. 114).

While technology facilitates public communication, there also are indicators that it might pose a future danger to that very important contribution through the process of "datafication", which means putting phenomena "in a quantified format so it can be tabulated and analyzed" (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013, p. 77). Datafication is the process underlying the concept of big data, and which allow people to collect vast quantities of data through the use of algorithms. While it allows for the collection of vast amounts of data, it simultaneously allows for the collection of unique data from individuals, which already is used to target communication with those individuals, particularly on the Internet. Anybody who has shopped online will know how the products and services searched beforehand keep cropping up while one is using the Internet.

What people do not realize is the extent to which they offer up information willingly in the era of big data simply because the nature of this kind of data is so different from what we generally perceive as data. Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013) described datafication as the ability to

(take) information about all things under the sun – including ones we never used to think of as information at all, such as a person’s location, the vibrations of an engine, or the stress on a bridge – and transform it into a data format to make it quantified.

*p. 15*

This data is vastly different from statistical data, as the authors explain. Because of the sheer quantity of data available it questions the need for statistical analysis, which is based on random sampling and analysis of subsets of populations. Because big data focuses on real-time data and the collection of multiple data sets on, for instance, one individual, “the danger shifts from privacy to probability: algorithms will predict the likelihood that one . . . will default on a mortgage (and be denied a loan), or commit a crime (and perhaps get arrested in advance)” (p. 16). There is already evidence that gaming companies are collecting evidence on gaming behavior of individuals and translating that into a profile of the individual that determines her or his suitability for certain types of jobs based on how the individual progresses through a game (Wheatley, 2013).

In the same way big data poses a danger to individual privacy it also poses a danger to the public sphere. It will be very tempting to strategic communicators to rather communicate with individuals on issues, products and services based on algorithms that expose attitudes and behaviors than to communicate with them through open and public communication. This issue highlights the tension between the role of the public and private spheres in society. Although it is not apparent, the danger of big data for individual privacy is directly linked to the public sphere. When this kind of data and the ability to communicate with individuals did not exist, the public sphere was the way in which people were informed and educated themselves on social issues. This also ensured that policy and other issues were debated openly and transparently. When the need for communicating publicly on issues of public concern disappears society loses its ability to collectively protect itself from less transparent practices. For instance, hypothetically a pharmaceutical company might develop a controversial product such as a vaccine and only market it to doctors and individuals who, based on big data, have the potential to develop the disease. At present such a product will most likely be advertised and discussed in the media in an effort to promote it. The company might, however, be tempted to keep the information from the public sphere because it is controversial. Because they have the names and profiles of people who might be possible patients they can with ease personalize messages to those individuals and keep all controversy from the public.

Thus, although certain communication can and should sometimes be private, it is crucial that some information be released in the public sphere for debate and discussion. It will be important for strategic communicators to keep the balance between these two interests and not to be tempted to keep private communication that should have been public and transparent.

## The Nature of Communication in the Strategic Process

The notion that communication can be controlled and regulated is now largely redundant. In fact, one of the most important emerging perspectives in strategic communication is the rejection of linearity in the communication process. It is indeed tempting to still teach and adhere to Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) transmission model, which is simple and easy to grasp. It also still has a use in the sense that it reminds practitioners in particular to think about media used for a particular communication process, message construction, and target audiences (Boromisza-Habashi, 2013). As Bell, Golombisky, and Holtzhausen (2002) argued, the transmission model only investigated “how we get information from here to there” (p. 5). While this remains a valid question, the more important one really is: “What happens to communication in that process and how is meaning shaped and co-created?”

Both symbolic interactionism (Bauer, 1964; Blumer, 1969; Carey, 1989; Thayer, 1968) and postmodernism (through the extensive writings of Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard)

have deeply changed perspectives on the role of communication in organizations and society, and they both form the basis of today's communication theories. Collectively known as the constitutive model of communication, these theories represent "a dialogical-dialectical disciplinary matrix" (Craig, 1999, p. 120) that represents seven different theoretical approaches to communication theory and, broadly speaking, focuses on how individual and shared meanings are shaped through the communication process itself. What is particularly important here for the communication strategist is to understand that all meaning is constructed through a communication process that often focuses on opposing arguments, through what Ermarth (2001, p. 211) referred to as the "linguistic in-between." Without communication there cannot be co-construction of meaning. For the strategic communicator this might occasionally be in a face-to-face context but it mostly relates to communication through other channels.

Whereas the transmission model focuses on how to get information from one point to another, constitutive communication focuses on the importance of communication to bring about actual change and action, as Dewey (1954) argued. From this perspective the role of the strategic communicator is not to send information via the most effective channel, although that is an important starting point. More importantly, the role of the practitioner is to send information that can act as the point of departure for meaning creation between a communicative entity and its stakeholders, which can actually lead to social change and social action. Indeed, an organization has to act publicly (Hallahan, 2010). Instead of transmitting information, with the underlying assumptions that one can control communication so transmitted, strategic communication increasingly focuses on the process of communication, which might take place over long periods of time and stretch over time long after a message has been transmitted.

With their focus on action, it is also important for strategic communicators to understand and utilize "mediatization," which "*is a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communication on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other*" [italics in original] (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197). Mediatization goes beyond media effects:

Put simply, something is going on with media on our lives, and it is deep enough not to be reached simply by accumulating more and more specific studies that analyze this newspaper, describe how that program was produced, or trace how particular audiences make sense of that film on a particular occasion.

p. 191

As "social" communicators strategic communication practitioners and audiences use the media on a daily basis, meaning here media in their broadest sense to include all forms of Internet and electronic communication. In the past strategic communication largely focused on mediatization from an institutional perspective. In this perspective media are institutions that have to be understood through "media logic"—understanding how the media operate—and is the reason why politicians and other interest groups who wish to have access to the media hire communication practitioners to do this work for them (p. 196). However, following the constitutive model of communication described above, it is important for communication practitioners to also be aware of how the media are and can be used to shape social and cultural realities.

From a theoretical perspective it is the convergence of these two strong theoretical traditions in communication that sets strategic communication apart from other communication disciplines. It forces academics and practitioners alike to consider both the constitutive nature of all communication and the role of media in the strategic communication process. Thus, instead of only viewing media as channels of communication and audiences as the receivers of messages, strategic communicators needs to consider how meaning is shaped in the interaction process involving stakeholders and the media practitioners use and how stakeholders interpret and recreate media content in the

process. Only then will strategic communicators truly understand how their practices impact and shape society and bring about change.

### The Concept of Emergence

When one lets go of control of communication and meaning creation, the sheer messiness of the communication process can be overwhelming. However, to have a realistic and pragmatic perspective on communication one has to embrace the messiness, risk taking and chaos of communication practice.

One outflow of this reality is the now-familiar concept of *emergence* (Mintzberg, 1990; Quin, Mintzberg, & James, 1991), which often describes strategizing in organizations, and that follows from the concept of constitutive communication, that is, a ritualistic rather than a linear process. Emergent strategy is dependent on the participation of many people including external stakeholders to provide a true richness to the process. Notions of strategy as control have largely been dispelled, depending on how the strategic planning process is executed.

Nonetheless, there is place for both a functionalist and an emerging strategic process in organizations, which depends on transformational and visionary leadership and broad stakeholder participation (Sloan, 2006). Even in transformational leadership the concept of emergence embedded in leadership communication has taken hold (Mitra, 2013). The dialogic activities of the transformational leader allow for change and transformation and result in the transformation of the leader herself. Mitra argues the processes of “both leadership and transformation are incredibly complex, contingent, and interconnected through communication” (p. 397), which all contribute to the messiness of the organizational communication environment.

Communication therefore remains the foundation for both transformational leadership and stakeholder participation, as Sloan (2006) argued. Hafi and Howard (2005, p. 243) argued strategy takes place at an intellectual and practical level and consists of five elements, namely, a leader’s statement, a community’s statement, a guide, building competitive advantage, and a relationship with the environment. Communication underscores all facets of strategizing, albeit functionalist or emergent.

A functionalist approach to communication planning requires a regular review of the strategic plans. While emergent strategy similarly focuses on the continuous shaping of strategy through communication, it also is closely linked to daily strategic thinking and actions of communication practitioners at all levels, focusing on practice and tactics to support the overall strategy. Creativity and innovation is an essential part of strategy execution (Bigler, 2004).

Lastly, emergent strategy emphasizes an important role for strategic communicators, namely, to ensure broad participation of stakeholders, particularly internal stakeholders. This has the potential to be a stumbling block for communicators because they have to convince organizational leaders that internal stakeholders can add value to the process, and have to assuage the fears of middle managers who often feel threatened by communicative processes that might expose their weaknesses. Holtzhausen (2012) argued strategy is “the most inclusive, although conflicting and contradictory, descriptions of the field of communication practice” (p. 158). It is inclusive because it “emphasizes communication as a management practice . . . (and) allows for the study of participatory communication practices, which include stakeholder communication, change management, and complex analyses or organizational environments and their contribution to emergent strategy” (p. 158). It also, as mentioned, requires the application of both the overarching theoretical approaches in communication, namely constitutive communication and mediated communication.

### Communalities Across Areas of Practice

Despite many attempts to formulate global theories of communication practice, they all fall apart in the face of situational variables such as culture; economic, political and media systems; organizational