

Globe: A Journal of Language, Culture and Communication, 3: 1-9 (2016)

Strategic communication and identity construction in organisations: Different perspectives

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1. Introduction

This special issue of the journal *Globe: A Journal of Language, Culture and Communication* is devoted to articles based on selected papers that were presented at the 1st International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Discourse and Communication in Professional Contexts¹ with the title “Organizational Communication – from Academic and Practical Perspectives” held on 18–21 August 2015 at Aalborg University, Denmark, and hosted by the Department of Culture and Global Studies. This volume also contains relevant articles by researchers from outside the conference which thematically fit within the same frame as the conference – namely, discourse and communication in professional contexts.

In an increasingly complex world where groups with different interests and expectations are contesting dominant discourses, the adaptation of organisational communication constitutes a strategic, linguistic and communicative challenge. While previously the primary concern of organisations would have been to communicate with a clearly defined and relatively small number of stakeholder groups (e.g. customers, investors, suppliers and employees) about issues that relate to the financial and commercial aspects of the business, organisations are now required to address and communicate with a much more diverse set of stakeholders about matters that involve social and environmental change from local as well as global perspectives.

In part, this development has arisen from the increasingly global nature of business and its concomitant imprint on natural and social environments across the world. However, the increased public awareness of the contestability of professional and expert knowledge has also led to intensified interaction among professionals and non-professionals, among other things as a result of new web based possibilities of making one's voice heard. In this environment, communication becomes less predictable and less controllable, requiring that organisations adopt new modes of interaction. As an example, in recent years this has included focus on more dialogic forms of communication and the recognition of multiple and potentially conflicting identities among stakeholder groups (AAU 2015).

In this introductory article, we have chosen to focus on some central elements that the papers in this issue have in common, such as strategic communication in advertising and identity construction and communication. Furthermore, a short presentation of each article in this issue follows in the last part of the present article.

2. Strategic communication and advertising

An organisation, be it private or public, needs ways to achieve its organisational goals. A modern organisation can no longer be certain that its customers will buy or keep buying its products and services. Nor can it be sure that investors will keep investing or that all kinds of different social actors will not interfere in its actions. On the contrary, the organisation often faces severe difficulties in securing these interventions. In order to make its business goals come true, the organisation has to participate in a complex relationship with all its stakeholders, in which the act of performing *strategic communication* becomes pivotal for its survival.

1 This was the first conference in a planned series of conferences that is to take place biennially; the next conference will take place in Aberdeen in 2017.

One of the subjects discussed in this volume is *strategic communication*. Current marketing communication operates in an environment of saturation by product messages where consumers are becoming immune to what the organization is trying to tell them. The amount of communication options makes it difficult for advertisers to choose the most appropriate. Within this context, keeping the strategic consistency of all messages among different elements of marketing communication it is very important to ensure a consistent brand image that will appeal to the consumers. This strategic consistency may be one of the most recommended approaches for developing integrated marketing communication. Strategic consistency refers to the extent to which information conveyed by different communication options share meaning (Kjeller 2001, cited in Navarro et al. 2009). Kjeller (2001) states that communication tools are strategically consistent if the information they convey share meaning and content with the purpose of sending and reinforcing common brand associations.

The term *strategic* is often associated with practice and the tactics used to implement strategy (Mintzberg 1990). The concept of *strategic communication* was originally used in military theory and international relations (Stenberg 2012). The term *strategic communication* is constituted by two key words that are particularly significant. The words indicate that the activities are not random and unintentional communications. Furthermore, they indicate that there is an inherent plan behind these activities as the word *strategy* is often related to the achievement of a goal. The term is derived from the Greek word for generalship or leading an army. In Merriam-Websters online dictionary *strategy* is defined as: “The art and science of planning and marshaling resources for their most efficient and effective use”. The second definition of the term in Merriam-Websters online dictionary is related to wars and armies: “the science and art of military command exercised to meet the enemy in combat under advantageous conditions”. In *strategic communication* the third definition is applied: “A method or plan chosen to bring about a desired future, such as achievement of a goal or solution to a problem”.

In today's increasingly complex world, all organisations (used in the broadest sense of the word, referring to corporations, for-profit and nonprofit organisations, activist groups, nongovernmental organisations, organisations promoting various forms of social change, political parties or movements, and government organisations) compete in order to achieve the attention, affinity and admiration of their stakeholders: customers, employees, investors, donors, special interest groups, media and the public. This can clearly be seen from some of the articles in this issue e.g. Balfaqeeh's article on the banking in the United Arab Emirates, Winkler & Zerfass' article on key concepts in communication, Kedves' article on online crowdfunding and Baillargeon's article on marketing communication and advertising. Although organisations' activities can be conceptualized in various ways they all involve the organisation that needs to communicate purposefully to advance its mission. This is the essence of *strategic communication* which implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication (Hallahan et al. 2007: 3-35).

According to Falkheimer and Heide (2014) *strategic communication* is a transboundary concept that captures, better than public relation does, the complex phenomenon of an organisation's targeted communication processes. Furthermore they argue that *strategic communication* is a “conceptual and holistic framework that is more valid and relevant than public relations” integrating different fields of goal-oriented communication and using a multidisciplinary and management approach. (Falkheimer & Heide 2014: 124, 126). They define *strategic communication* as: “An organisation's conscious communication efforts to reach its goal. In the broadest possible sense of the term, organisation in this context refers to private companies, public authorities and organisations, associations and interest groups” (Falkheimer & Heide 2014: 132).

Corporate communication and *strategic communication* have very much in common. While corporate communication has its origin in the management and marketing fields, strategic communication originates from media and communication studies and public relations. *Strategic*

communication also adopts a holistic approach to organisations in regard to their communication. This means that the dichotomy existing between public relations (focus on external communication) and organisational communication (internal communication) is no longer valid. *Strategic communication* contains the entire organisation and integrates knowledge from other disciplines such as organisation theory, social theory, media theory and communication theory (Falkheimer & Heide 2014).

According to Botan (1997) *strategic communication* is very often applied to planned communication campaigns. *Strategic communication* campaigns are conducted under many labels including public relations, community relations, constituent relations, crisis management, health promotion, issues management, investor relations, membership relations, outreach, public affairs, public health, public information, risk communication, strategic advertising, strategic marketing, etc. *Strategic communication* is the broader and more inclusive term for referring to planned, research-based persuasive and informational campaigns (Botan 1997). All the campaigns have as a common purpose the influencing of individuals, groups, organisations, even whole societies. A campaign intended to influence suggests a relationship, or a desired relationship, between the parties. Many campaigns define their goals only from the perspective of their sponsor so they typically seek to reduce the receivers as a vehicle for achieving those needs. The advance in communication technology make such campaigns more efficiently than before (Botan 1997).

Strategic communication permeates the entire organisation, thus affecting not only the traditional function that handles communication issues, but also those that handle marketing. A fundamental starting point in *strategic communication* is that communication is not a simple tool for transmitting information and knowledge between people in an objectified world, but the very means for producing and a resource that produces the social world (Falkheimer & Heide 2014: 132). Central to the issue of *strategic communication* is the idea of influence. Organisations that want to change the behavior of others have four tools at their disposal: physical force, patronage, purchase, and persuasion (Cutlip, Center & Broom 1995, cited in Hallahan et al. 2007). The latter involves the use of communication, which means that persuasion is the essences of *strategic communication* (Hallahan et al. 2007).

According to Halloran, “Successful *strategic communication* assumes a defensible policy, a respectable identity, a core value. In commercial marketing, the product for sale must be well-made and desirable” (Halloran 2007: 7). Furthermore, “*Strategic communication* begins with identifying audiences” (Halloran 2007: 7). The message must be clear, thought through, and tested for possible misunderstandings. As communication takes place through newspapers and the Internet via for instance Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogs and mobile phones, a single audience might be targeted, but due to social media many other groups will hear and read the transmitted message which means that the message must be directed to all audiences (Halloran 2007).

The contemporary rapid development of *strategic communication* is, according to Mahoney (2011), interpreted as a consequence of increased organisational uncertainty due to the global economic crisis of 2008/2009. In market communication, there has been a shift from short-spanned tactical communication to interactive, strategic and relationship-building communication (Jaffe 2007). Advertising on the Internet may take many forms, such as campaign sites, banners, portals, websites, search engine marketing, viral marketing, blogs, emails, pop-ups, in-game advertising or advertising in virtual worlds such Second Life. The Internet's status has become almost equal to other traditional media of mass communication, and it often plays a central role in integrated campaigns (Bugge 2010). Furthermore, the Internet is not only a communication channel; it is also a sales and distribution channel. The Internet allows online interaction with the customer and this engaging experience may give the consumer a stronger loyalty and commitment to the product than traditional one-way communication (Bugge 2010).

3. Identity

Identity is the second of the key issues discussed in several papers in this issue of *Globe*. One could say that Balfageeh, Li, Norlyk and Larsen & Pedersen all in one way or another deal with identity, directly or indirectly.

Identity has been studied for many centuries: “The topic of 'who we are' is one that has attracted scholars and thinkers throughout the centuries” (McKinlay & McVittie 2011: ix). In Merriam-Websters online dictionary the word *identity* is defined in a first simple definition as: “who someone is: the name of a person”, letting it quite simply be equal to a person's name. The second simple definition is: “the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others”. This definition highlights two important points of the concept, i.e. that both persons and groups can have an identity, and that the identity differentiates that particular person/group from others.

The notion 'who we are' might indicate that identity is a fixed concept, that one's identity does not change when it is once established, but nowadays most researchers agree, that this is not the case and that identity is a very complicated concept (Hansen 2014: 140). A plausible distinction between social/group identity and personal identity is suggested in the definition of identity by Van Dijk (2000): on the one hand the personal identity, which is “a mental representation as (personal) self as a unique human being with its own, personal experiences and biography...”, and on the other hand the social or group identity that can be seen as “a mental representation of (social) self as a collection of group memberships, and the identification processes that are related to such membership representations” (Van Dijk 1998: 119-120). A relatively similar division of identities is made by Aaker (2002: 86) concerning brand identity. He separates a fixed core identity representing the essence or DNA of the brand, based on the brand's history, and an extended identity that can be constructed more freely by the company. Although the latter distinction suggests that the part of identity referred to as DNA is fixed, it also states that the foundation is history and thus it is gradually constructed and based on abstractions from (personal) experiences and located in episodic memory (cf. Van Dijk 1998: 118). This makes it comparable to the above mentioned definition by Van Dijk.

According to Van Dijk (1998) the processes leading to the building of identity depend on comparisons between the personal self and the social self: “If the membership criteria, activities, goals, norms, values, position or resources of the group are in line with (at least consistent with) those of the personal self-construct, identification may be more or less strong” (Van Dijk 1998: 120).

In Baker & Ellece (2011), two perceptions of identity are mentioned. Identity is defined by some as “fixed and stable and is what people speak of when they talk about 'who we really are’” (Baker & Ellece 2011: 58), whereas others hold the opinion that identity can be 'acquired' as “it is a conscious or internalized adoption of socially imposed or socially constructed roles” (Baker & Ellece 2011: 58).

We see identity as a complex concept that is partly stable (personal identity) and based on history, biography or previous experiences, partly being negotiated as well as “constructed, maintained and challenged through the particularities of social interaction” (McKinlay & McVittie 2011: ix).² Identity is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion and gender among other dimensions, and, as stated by McKinlay & McVittie (2011: ix), is applied in all contexts.

It can be difficult to 'be someone' or at least to know 'who we are' in isolation. In interaction with others, however, we compare ourselves with the others, as individuals, as group members, as companies, etc., and construct and (re)define ourselves accordingly. In other words, individuals examine which similarities and differences between 'me'/'us' and 'the others' can be detected. This is

² See the discussion of 'self' and 'identity' in McKinlay & McVittie (2011: 3-6).

a crucial aspect of establishing identity for an individual or a group. “The identity concept is not about individuals as such, nor about society as such, but the relation of the two” (Verkuyten 2005: 42). This point also highlights the fact that a person can construct many group memberships (cf. Van Dijk 1998: 118) and thus many identities at the same time, due to the many types of interaction the individual continuously engages in. An individual might at the same time be a mother, a wife and a daughter, which leads to different identities with different characteristics for that same person. Similarly she might also, at the same time, be a consumer and an employee, if she works in for instance a pharmaceutical company and buys goods produced by that very company. As another example from this issue of *Globe*, if a person makes her living as an artist she is to some extent both an artist and a businesswoman. These different parts of the identity, or in fact different identities that a person holds, gives her affiliation to different groups. The different identities and groups might not all the time share the same interests and ideas; this makes the concept of identity even more complex. The consumer might appreciate and enjoy lower prices of pharmaceuticals, while her interests as an employee of the pharmaceutical company might be that prices of company goods to a certain extent go up in order to make it possible to secure larger profits for the company and eventually higher wages (cf. Bauhofer 2004: 33; Pedersen 2006: 59-60).

As we have seen above, it is important that identity is not seen as a stable concept that does not change over time. This becomes especially clear in Norlyk's paper, where artists are confronted with different possible identities.

Companies can be said to share many characteristics with humans. Consequently, companies can be seen as individuals with their own identities and with an understanding of their own personalities, too, as is suggested for example by Herbst (2012) and other researchers working with the concept of Corporate Identity. This identity is based on the employees' understanding of the company, and this identity is demonstrated in the thinking, acting and performance of the company as a whole (Herbst 2012: 28). According to Herbst (2012), companies can benefit strongly from investing in identity work, as it helps the stakeholders' orientation and identification with the company. This evokes trust from the stakeholder, which is important in order to be successful in this globalized world with growing competition of companies (Herbst 2012: 12-14). In opposition to this, Bolten (2007: 93) rejects Corporate Identity as a relevant notion for companies to focus on, due to the quick changes in cooperation and strategic alliances in the globalized world. It is, of course, true that alliances change rapidly nowadays, but it seems too hasty to conclude that identity has lost its significance for companies. Accordingly, in the paper by Larsen & Pedersen, we see how nationality is used to construct identity discursively in companies, and in Balfaqqeh's paper we see how a company uses nationality, religion and personalization of communication to mark its relations to stakeholder groups and to construct its identity. In the analysis performed by Li, we see how the identity of a company shows itself in its acts in the form of impoliteness in autoreplies. This shows us that identity is closely related to discourse in the sense that “[p]eople will construct identities for themselves and for others as they interact with others through discourse” (McKinlay & McVittie 2011: 14). Therefore, discourse research can provide a useful framework for studying identity as we will see in the articles presented below.

4. Presentation of the articles in this volume

Texts meant for customers represent an essential part of the corporate communication aiming at promoting the organisation and its products. In the article “*It's all about you...: The discourse of banking in the UAE*”, Balfaqqeh analyses an advertising campaign realised for the Al Hilal Bank in the United Arab Emirates which has changed people's perceptions of banking and the relationships between the bank and society. The change of perception and the tools used for this purpose are the focal points of the study when analysing the discourses presented in a selected corpus of 19 advertising posters used on commercial billboards and in the different branches of the bank. The

analysis of the posters is based on Critical Discourse Analysis and semiotics and accentuates how a new slogan 'It's all about you...' paved the way for the promotion of patriotism and nationalism, of religious occasions and references as well as of social values and the sense of responsibility towards the family. Leaving out references to banking services, but indirectly promoting the bank by appealing to people's emotions and important occasions, the bank managed to create a shift from conducting traditional banking to communicating in ways that supported costumers' possibilities to become better citizens.

For many years now, theorists as well as practitioners have discussed the influence of the constantly growing globalisation on market communication, specifically in relation to the traditional use of nationality markers such as country of origin and made-in. On the one hand, globalisation entails a weakening of the local nationalities when technologies, products and life styles are similar and equally accessible to everyone on a worldwide scale. National companies have to be able to compete globally in regards to quality, amount, product price and brand identity. Thus, differentiation from competitors is necessary in order to survive on a market place where globalising as well as localising are on-going processes. Larsen & Pedersen investigate this complex set of tendencies in the article *Corporate identity in a globalised world: A study of elements marking national identities on company websites*. Focusing on the use of nationality, verbally and visually, on company websites, the article revolves around the identification of the extent to which companies related to the wind power industry use nationality in their positioning and as a marker of identity. For this purpose, the authors conduct analysis of a corpus of 256 selected websites distributed in Germany, Denmark, Great Britain and the United States against a theoretical background of corporate identity and country of origin. Although globalisation tends to neglect the importance of nationality, the analysis points to the preference of some companies, particularly Danish companies, to use aspects of country of origin as an identity and positioning signifier which is a tendency differentiating the Danish companies from companies in the other countries studied in the article.

One of the digitalized world's new phenomena is online crowdfunding, which is an easily accessible way for projects to raise funds when working for e.g. human rights. For this purpose, Internet based platforms have been created and serve as means to reach and persuade potential supporters to engage with specific projects. In the article *Discursive legitimation in online crowdfunding: A study of Kickstarter projects promoting human rights*, Kedves studies the discursive strategies applied by project creators in the descriptions of projects on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter which is one of the most popular platforms of its kind. As the focus of the actual study is the identification of strategies used to legitimise the crowdfunding, a framework within discourse analysis is applied to analyse the legitimation strategies of the social action 'donating money'. On the basis of a corpus of 96 projects related to human rights and launched between 2013 and 2015, the author analyses occurrences of authority, morality, rationalisation or mythopesis in the project descriptions. Results indicate that support and donation offer social validation and altruistic identity to donators, and that rationalism and the appeal to morality are the conspicuous discursive strategies used to legitimize the social action of crowdfunding. Furthermore, the author suggests that rationalisation and appeal to morality in relation to specific campaign causes within crowdfunding is indicative of a new genre.

When business partners originating from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds communicate, they often use English as a lingua franca and emails as the preferred media for written interactions. The complexity of having to deal with a lingua franca, of possible cultural differences, of the genre specific style featuring traits from written and spoken language may entail the risk of being misunderstood or regarded as being impolite by the interlocutor. In the article, *Investigating impoliteness in workplace emails by Chinese users of English*, the author Li investigates politeness strategies and impolite devices to get an insight into the functions of

politeness/impoliteness when dealing with high-stake activities, such as making strong requests and conveying negative messages. The data used for the analysis consist of 373 emails gathered from 2008 to 2012 in a company operating in the textile production industry in Hong Kong with offices in mainland China. Methodologically, the study is based on a corpus approach and discourse analysis in order to study the relationship between speech acts and the occurrence of impoliteness and non-politeness as well as to get an insight into the circumstances, patterns and functions of impoliteness in the workplace emails. The analysis points to the assertive speech act as the most hazardous when it comes to possible provocations of impoliteness whereas message enforcers are the impoliteness device, which is most common when making demands, emphasizing positions or placing blames.

Advertising and promotion may be regarded as outcomes of an important marketing communications industry in which creativity is paramount. Agencies traditionally working from regions surrounding major cities are known to set the standard for creativity within the industry and to succeed in legitimizing the standards via public and social media, prestigious clients and major campaigns. In his article, *"We're not here anymore": The cultural dislocations of creative organizations in outlying regions*, Baillargeon addresses how smaller agencies which are situated outside major cities in Canada, and which rarely create campaigns achieving prestige, maintain a creative culture. Two case studies of smaller advertising agencies are analysed from a discourse analytic approach when conducting analysis of their websites and data from in-depth semi-structured interviews of 33 employees as well as when analysing observations of the work, the internal meetings and the meetings with clients. Introduction of the ideas of ventriloquism is used in regards to the assessment of organisational culture and to unite the macro and the micro levels of the organisational discourse when studying the relations between regionality, organisations and creativity. Using five 'iconic figures' of creative culture: seclusion, defence, distinctiveness, maturity and expansiveness, the author suggests that a creative culture is maintained in outlying regions by dislocating to 'a creative elsewhere', but furthermore, that regionality constantly appears in the discourse of the employees in these outlying agencies.

Taking the starting point in a perception of identity as being not stable but negotiable, identity is closely related to discourse and interaction. This implies that identity may change and that one person may possess more identities each of them related to different settings, occasions and contexts. When professional designers within jewellery, fashion, graphic and installation art participate in a course on business and entrepreneurship they experience identity conflicts of personal and professional kind as studied by Norlyk in the article *Professional discourse and professional identities at cross-purposes: Designer or entrepreneur?* These identity conflicts emerge when the designers have to adopt the ideas of business and market considerations alongside their professional ideas of aesthetics. The data of the study consist of recorded discourses, metaphors and framing devices put forward by 25 designers during a business course as well as of 12 in-depth interviews with the designers, which have been analysed within the framework of phenomenology and Reflective Lifeworld Research. The methodology allows involving studies on discourse, metaphors and framing, studies on identity in a business and organizational context, and studies on sensemaking and sensegiving processes in organizations. The data demonstrate four lexical clusters present in the designers' discourses, metaphors and framing devices. The clusters consist of the themes: a) experiences of physical force related to the body; b) experiences of conflicts of identity; c) experiences of the enemy; and d) experiences of entrapment. Thus, the study reveals the identity conflict appearing between the designers' intellectual need to develop business skills and their emotional, professional and personal identity.

For several years, theorists have discussed the relationship between organisational culture and strategic communication, as well as the question of the impact of these concepts on organisational communication. In their article *Strategy and organizational culture. Conceptualizing the interplay*

of key concepts in communication, Winkler & Zerfass develop the discussion by outlining definitions of strategy and organizational culture, by applying the generic similarities to the concept CCO (communication constitutes organisations) and by the explanation of how cooperation between organizational culture and strategic communication may reveal insights for science and practice. Using the 'four flows of communication' to analyse organizational change and the communication related to it, the authors accentuate the generic similarities between the concepts and demonstrate the impact on organisational communication. Analysis based on 'the four flows' may help raising awareness of organisational communication as being positioned between openness and identity, and between consistency and flexibility, whereas credibility, trust and good stakeholder relations may appear from the interplay between the concepts of organisational communication. Furthermore, the authors stress the importance of practitioners to be aware of the relationship between strategy and culture as well as between stability and flexibility, an awareness that may facilitate organisational change processes and cultural boundaries.

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