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## FROM AMATEUR TO EXPERT: PROFESSIONALIZATION IN THE FIELD OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

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### Abstract

Professionalization in specialist disciplines like internal communication may lead scholars and practitioners working in a certain niche to question whether theoretical principles in the more established field of Public Relations are applicable to their specialization. In this paper we analysed whether different forms of knowledge transfer, as identified in the literature on professionalization, contribute to the creation of a professional identity. To this end we distributed an online survey amongst the members of a professional interest group.

We found that internal communicators do not all share the same educational background. Few have built their career on internal communication. Professionalization in this discipline mostly consists of peer contacts. A solid link between research and practice has not yet been established. Finally, we found that internal communicators are open to innovations in their field. This can speed up the process of professionalization and therefore the development of a unique social identity.

We made a contribution to the literature of both PR and internal communication by questioning the range to which PR theory can be applied to internal communication topics. We additionally inquired whether specialization in internal communication can be justified on theoretical grounds. Further research will determine whether professionalization of specialisms fragments the field of PR.

**Keywords:** Internal communication; professionalization; public relations; professional identity; specialization

## INTRODUCTION

History teaches us that small radical minorities armed with a strong ideology often prevail against a large indifferent majority. Such is the state of Public Relations (PR) where all kinds of specialisms claim their unique character and strive to become recognized as independent professions. In this study we take the example of internal communication as an extreme case where an important group of scholars and professionals advocate in favour of the formal recognition of this niche within the broad domain of organizational communication.<sup>1</sup>

We studied the existing literature on both PR and internal communication to understand how research in both domains has evolved. We found that PR still acts as an umbrella concept spanning most forms of strategic communication. However, some subdomains like internal communication stress their unique characteristics and gain in popularity. Unfortunately we witnessed that practitioners in this newly formed discipline seem to be asking the same questions that were addressed in PR research a long time ago.

From existing research we drew several parameters that could have played a role in the development of the idea that internal communication is different from PR. We decided to devote this paper to the study of professionalization as one of the potential drivers in this process. We, as well as many scholars before us, found the literature on professionalism and professionalization to be vast and confusing at times (Cullen, 1978; Freidson, 1994; Kaner, 2010). Nonetheless, we argue that this study offers a unique contribution to this body of literature by establishing a link between important forms of professionalization and the formation of a professional identity, which in turn is considered to be a necessary condition for the establishment of a community of practice (Goode, 1957; Larson, 1977; Wenger, 1998).

Additionally we found developments in the field of PR to be stagnating and therefore not able to accommodate progress made in specialist fields (C. Botan & Hazleton, 2006). The excellence theory developed by Grunig (J. E. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; J. E. Grunig & IABC Research Foundation, 1992) has been valuable but seems inadequate to explain phenomena in a time of mass self-communication (Castells, 2011). Indeed, the introduction of social media raises questions as to what will happen if we continue to

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the work by Mary Welch and Kevin Ruck and the efforts by national as well as international professional interest groups like Melcrum and IoIC (Institute of Internal Communication) to establish internal communication as a field different from PR.

view internal communication as part of a set of strategic communication activities within a PR department (Ruck & Welch, 2012).

For this study we included all major phases that practitioners encounter in their professionalization trajectory. To this end we launched an online survey amongst the members of the Belgian Association for Internal Communication (BViC) whom we expect to be supporters of further professionalization and recognition of their specialization.<sup>2</sup> A total number of 85 valid questionnaires were returned and subsequently analysed with the statistical software package SPSS.

We found that most of our respondents are women in their mid-career with an educational background in languages or communication studies. Although language and communication studies figure prominently in our data we found internal communication practitioners to come from a wide spectrum of educational programs in the humanities or social sciences. This indicates that recruiters do not yet consider a background in communication as a necessary condition to take up a job as an internal communicator.

A second finding is that most internal communication practitioners do not have a track record in internal communication. It seems as if internal communication consists of a set of tasks that is assigned to someone who has started a career in human resources, marketing or some branch of organizational communication. However, we do need to add that the recognition of internal communication as an activity in need of full-time care is relatively recent and presumably linked to the professionalization of the discipline.

Third, we were able to confirm van Ruler's (2005) claim that scholars and academics do value different kinds of knowledge. Therefore, work on the optimization of knowledge transfer systems is needed to stimulate research-driven professionalism. A last finding is that internal communication practitioners do seem open to learn about new developments in their field. This is important if scholars seek to disseminate their research findings amongst practitioners.

Contrary to what we expected from the literature we found that most practitioners with internal communication activities are not in favour of having separate internal communication departments. This may be a reflection of the situation in existing organizations today. However, it may also be an indication that internal communicators do not yet have a strong professional identity. This opens up opportunities for PR scholars to adjust

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<sup>2</sup> The survey was online from 10 April 2013 until 24 April 2013.

their theoretical premises and, as a result, reassert their dominant position in the field of organizational communication.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **THE UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

Some argue that internal communication has its own unique value proposition while others consider it to be part of PR.<sup>3</sup> In this paper we invite the reader to reflect deeper on this debate. First, we need to know what defines value. In most for-profit organizations “money” would be the most straightforward answer. One might argue that the situation is different in non-profit organizations. The question is whether non-profit organizations would care less about the cost-efficiency ratio of internal communication expenses. One thing is certain, although we would argue that internal communication happens all of the time in all parts of the organizations, expenditures in the area of internal communication are usually linked to the conviction that these expenses result in helping the organization to attain its goals, be them profit or non-profit in nature.

The idea behind spending money on internal communication is that it in some way contributes to the success of the organization. Indeed, when we look at internal communication as a tool to influence a certain situation in order to achieve a certain outcome we enter the domain of management communication or, to use another term, strategic communication (Zerfass & Huck, 2007). In traditional, some would say paternalistic, top-down management systems that can often be found in large enterprises the underlying rationale is seemingly straightforward. Expenses in the field of internal communication need to support management decisions. It is in this old management paradigm that the excellence theory by James and Larissa Grunig was developed (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS AS THE UMBRELLA CONCEPT**

Scholars like the Grunigs led the quest for excellence but the funding came from industry, the International Association for Business Communicators in particular. The excellence studies used ‘Public Relations’

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, we did not yet find a systematic review of the literature on internal communication. However, we did notice that there are variations in the way scholars define the relationship between internal communication and PR.

as the umbrella concept to define all efforts in which communication is issued in order to achieve management goals. Two research questions guided the excellence study. First, scholars needed to answer the effectiveness question in order to discover the extent to which Public Relations increase organizational effectiveness. Second, the excellence question was asked in order to establish a prescriptive framework consisting of conditions linked to the ultimate goal of achieving excellence (C. Botan & Hazleton, 2006).

### **THE QUEST TO MEASURE RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)**

Although purely theoretically value is not restricted to monetary value alone, it is the kind of value for-profit companies seek. In non-profit organizations the monetary value is not embedded in a profit rationale but is a factor to be taken into account given the fact that non-profit organizations also operate in a capitalist environment in which money in most cases is necessary to the survival of the organization.

According to Grunig et al. (2002) Public Relations creates value by improving organizational effectiveness through the optimization of communication processes. These authors state that “the literature on organizational effectiveness is large and contradictory” (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 97). Building on the work of Robbins (1990) and Hall (1991) they sought to establish a connection between organizational effectiveness and investments in communication. In the excellence study the core theoretical assumption on organizational effectiveness is that relationships with stakeholders contribute to organizational goal attainment (C. Botan & Hazleton, 2006).

Notwithstanding the many merits of the Excellence Study no simple and measurable framework could be developed to answer the financial “ROI” question of practitioners in the field. In fact, the question itself was rejected altogether because deemed unanswerable on four grounds (J. E. Grunig et al., 2006, p. 35):

1. Relationships with stakeholders affect organizational performance. PR affects these relationships, thereby affecting performance. However, factors other than relationships, like competition and the economic climate, affect performance too.
2. Good relationships with stakeholders save money by avoiding costly issues. However, it is not possible to calculate the cost of something that did not happen.
3. Good relationships are built over many years. The immediate ROI therefore cannot be traced.

4. The return on good relationships is usually lumpy. Relationships with donors must be cultivated for many years before they make a major gift.

Over a period of time good relationships result in the building of a solid reputation. This explains why some scholars who have written on PR turned their attention to research on reputation management instead. In this respect the work by Van Riel (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007) is noteworthy.

### **HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF**

When the IABC dedicated resources to stimulate research in PR it did so with the intent of establishing a sound theoretical framework that could be used by practitioners to improve their actions while at the same time making these actions more tangible (J. E. Grunig et al., 2006). However, exactly the same questions seem to surface in the domain of internal communication. We must question why this is the case.

In this paper we set out to answer why a new generation of communication practitioners continues asking questions that were answered decades ago. We do so by focusing on professionalization mechanisms in the domain of internal communication, a field closely related to PR. Central to our argument is the idea that professionalization in an age of hyper-specialization leads to the balkanization and eventually the demise of older overarching disciplines like PR (Malone, Laubacher & Johns, 2011). Before uncritically hailing the idea of further specialization we need to study closely what causes this trend and how it would affect both theory and practice.

### **NOT YET A DISCIPLINE BUT MORE THAN A SPECIALISM**

The first question we need to answer is of a more theoretical nature. Before doing empirical research we need to know how scholars have positioned internal communication vis-à-vis Public Relations. Studies dedicated to internal communication are scarce and tend to define internal communication in terms of traditional management communication. Even Mary Welch, a scholar generally in favour of seeing internal communication as an autonomous discipline, relates it to communication between senior managers and all employees, thereby positioning it within the strategic Public Relations arm of corporate communication (Welch, 2013, p. 615).

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) recently updated its definition of Public Relations in 2012. In their view “Public Relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (PRSA, n.d.)” In this

definition Public Relations is a management controlled communication process aimed at fostering beneficial relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. If we view internal communication as a specialism within PR we effectively reduce it to classic management communication with the purpose of fostering a good or at least workable relationship with the workforce.

### **COMING OF AGE**

Before we can consider internal communication to be an emerging domain different from PR we must understand the mechanisms that underlie the maturation process of an emerging discipline. For this we consulted the sociological literature on the concept of profession, the socio-psychological literature on professional identification and the literature on the concept of communities of practice.

### **DIFFERENT PATHS TO MATURATION**

Sharing a common history could be an indication that disciplines evolved from the same starting principles. The roots of PR as a profession must be sought in the US of the early twentieth century. The idea of persuasion clearly dominated the profession at that time (Grunig et al., 2006). The history of internal communication on the other hand is less clear. Scant evidence suggests that the discipline is more related to corporate journalism in which the focus has always been more on information instead of persuasion, thereby displaying a more “neutral” character (Ruck & Yaxley, n.d.).

The concept of PR, although recognized and used globally, seems to be most closely connected to an Anglo-Saxon tradition of communication as persuasion aimed at influencing target groups and steering behaviour. Internal communication on the other hand does not seem to have such strong connotations. Therefore we draw from the literature that a seemingly different cultural, historical and geographical background are part of the explanation why professional and scholarly interest in internal communication does not seem to be easily framed as an emerging specialism within the field of PR.

### **MARKET CONTROL**

The maturation of internal communication as a discipline independent from PR can also be related to economic benefits derived from market control. According to Magali Larson (1977) professional interest groups try to establish a monopoly on expertise and use it as a central bargaining chip to

get the privilege of self-regulation from the state. The protection enjoyed by the 'free' professions like medicine, law and engineering seems to be the end-goal many occupations, including internal communication, aspire to reach.

These ideas can also be found in the works of Caplow (1954) and Wilensky (1964) who approach professionalization as a process consisting of five stages: (1) the emergence of a full-time occupation; (2) the establishment of a training school; (3) the founding of a professional association; (4) political agitation directed towards the protection of the association by law; and (5) the adoption of a formal code (Johnson, 1972, p. 28; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006, p. 266). As most scholars would agree, expertise can only develop if a clear body of knowledge stands at the core of the discipline and is recognized as such by other actors in the field. Therefore we must look in more detail at the literature in order to determine how internal communication measures up to public relations in terms of theoretical backing.

#### **A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE**

Already more than a decade ago Botan and Taylor (2004) wrote that PR was achieving the status of a mature discipline. According to these authors "Public Relations has become much more than just a corporate communication practice. Rather, it is a theoretically grounded and research based area that has the potential to unify a variety of applied communication areas (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 659)." In this respect internal communication could be considered as one of these applied communication areas. However, PR is for the most part still dominated by the Excellence Theory developed by Grunig. In contrast to what Botan and Hazleton anticipated in 2006 no "paradigm struggle" has yet emerged in the field of PR. And in the words of these same scholars "we would expect any field that fails to develop a paradigm struggle to stagnate and even to slip backwards (Botan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 11)."

Notwithstanding the fact that PR as a concept and field of study is still in full development, other related disciplines like internal communication are questioning the value of general PR theory for their domain. Indeed, the question is whether PR theory has evolved enough to accommodate the new bulk of research in neighbouring disciplines. In the case of internal communication the use of general PR theory to address existing questions has generally been low and mainly restricted to the work of authors who are familiar with the Anglo-Saxon literature.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely because of this reason

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<sup>4</sup> A future study is needed to confirm whether there are cultural differences with regard to the kind of theoretical frameworks scholars use when addressing questions related to internal communication.



that this study focuses on how the professionalization of practitioners acts as a driver for the development of a unique social identity amongst the members of what PR scholars long considered to be subsidiary disciplines.

### **KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER**

Claiming expertise is central to the process of professionalization. In this sense Freidson (1994, p. 40) notes that “professions have no intrinsic resources other than their command over a body of knowledge and skill that has not been appropriated by others.” Pieczka and L’Etang (2006, p. 277) have identified the limited availability of abstract knowledge in PR to be an important reason why practitioners in the field have a hard time legitimizing their expertise vis-à-vis other actors, including practitioners in related emerging disciplines like internal communication.

What expertise exactly is and how it can be acquired tends to be less clear. Van Ruler (2005) argues that scholars and practitioners tend to value different kinds of knowledge and as a result have different opinions on what it means to be a professional. Deficiencies in the knowledge transfer between academic research and professional practice leads to situations where practitioners from PR-related fields like internal communication tend to ask questions that were answered by PR research decades ago.

Scholars have tried to design systems to improve knowledge transfer between the academic and professional field (Wehrmann & van Ruler, 2013). Nevertheless, research is needed to discover which professionalization mechanisms practitioners prefer and how this is linked with how these practitioners value certain types of expertise over others. Shedding new light on these mechanisms might help us understand why some communication specialists argue in favour of elevating their expertise to the level of a fully-fledged discipline independent from, but somehow related to, PR.

### **THE PERCEPTION OF PR**

PR, both in research and in practice, does not seem able to prevent related specialisms from challenging its hegemony as the core discipline from which all theoretical principles emanate. Apart from flaws in knowledge transfer systems and attempts to control the existing market or create additional markets, we derive from the socio-psychological literature that perception can sometimes be more powerful than reality itself. The concept of social identity, of which professional identity is but one form, must also be looked at if we are to extend our knowledge on the socio-psychological effects of professionalization mechanisms.

More in particular the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner (1986) helps us understand how social identities are formed and how they are related to the concept of professional identity. Complementary to the Social Identity Theory, we used the concept of “Communities of Practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a sociological construct to inform us on how perception of identity is linked to the formation of professional groups. From this body of literature we infer that socialization, of which formal education is but one form, plays an important role in the formation of professional identities, which in turn may lead to intergroup conflicts between new and established communities of practice with similar interests.

## **METHODS**

From our literature review we infer that emerging specialist knowledge domains within the communication discipline have the potential to thoroughly disrupt the field of PR. We have chosen to take internal communication as a case to illustrate our argument.

Internal communication as a field of study is growing in importance. In large organizations internal communication is being recognized as a reality in need of management. The concept of PR does not seem able to act as the umbrella under which specialist forms of organizational communication can be placed.

Existing literature informs us that contextual factors like historical and cultural differences may have led to different evolutions and a different use of terminology within the broad domain of organizational communication. However, we must take into account that the drive of some specialisms to become recognized as full-blown professions claiming a unique expertise may also be a deliberate attempt to seize market control. Unfortunately, this proliferation of professions creates a situation in which walls are built instead of bridges. As a result both scholars and professionals are asking the same questions that were answered a long time ago.

Concepts like PR, internal communication, strategic communication, corporate communication, organizational communication, stakeholder communication all seem to build on the same communication principles. Nevertheless, the lack of a powerful central theory or set of theories creates a situation of confusion where the hype of the day further obscures the central premises needed to clarify a series of problems spanning all of the aforementioned ‘specialisms’. To do this we need to understand what is causing the confusion and why certain specialisms seem to ignore progress in neighbouring disciplines.

In our quest for answers we looked closely at the concept of professional identity and the processes of professionalization. We used a survey to gather information on the main parameters that are central to the creation of a professional identity. Therefore, we included questions related to educational background, internal communication as expert domain and professionalization mechanisms in our questionnaire. To conclude we developed an “Innovation index” to detect how open our respondents are to innovations in their field. High scores on the innovation index are needed if we want interdisciplinary efforts to succeed.

To gather our data we launched an online survey amongst the members of the Belgian Association for Internal Communication (BViC) in April 2013. This professional association encourages the exchange of best practices. As a result, access to their member database allowed us to establish a purposive sample by contacting the segment of communication professionals already interested in improving their practices.

If certification of the profession would become a reality in the future, researchers would be able to use lists from which a representative sample could be drawn. With the data available today it is not possible to know whether the profile of our respondents is comparable to that of the broader group of practitioners. What we do know is that follow-up research with a stronger focus on testing our findings amongst niche groups like early and late career practitioners could be used to further develop our theoretical constructs.

The choice to do the survey online is related to the fact that online communication is the preferred mode of interaction between the association and its members. A total number of 85 valid questionnaires were returned. This comes down to a 17 % response rate.

## **FINDINGS**

If we look at the descriptive statistics we find that our respondents are mainly women (n 64, 75,3 %). With a mean and median of 41 years old we conclude that most participants are in their mid-career. Combined, respondents working in public sector organizations (n 34, 40 %) or healthcare (n 13, 15, 3 %) represent more than half of our sample. From the private industries we can see that the financial sector is well represented (n 10, 11,8 %). Our sample population is equally divided with half of our respondents working in organizations with less than 1000 employees and the other half working in big organizations with more than 1000 employees.

## EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Scholars who have written on the topic of professionalization all emphasize that establishing a shared “body of knowledge” is central to the idea of elaborating a professional identity (Cullen, 1978; Freidson, 1994; Larson, 1977; Yang & Taylor, 2014). This body of knowledge can develop entirely independently from practitioners’ day-to-day activities (Larson, 1977). In the field of PR the excellence/symmetry model developed by Grunig still maintains its hegemonic position (C. Botan & Hazleton, 2006; J. E. Grunig et al., 2006). In the case of internal communication we have found a vibrant community of internal communicators who, most importantly, identify themselves as such. However, internal communication as a field of study is under-theorized and can, to this day, not yet claim the existence of a unique expertise different from related disciplines.

When looking at our data we find that internal communication practitioners are on average well educated. All except two enjoyed at least some form of higher education. As expected most of them have a background in communication studies or linguistics. This reveals that recruiters, when hiring for a job in (internal) communication, do not consider a degree in communication a *sine qua non*. We do however notice that an educational background in the humanities or social sciences is considered compatible with the job profile.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AS EXPERT DOMAIN

In his study on professionalism Eliot Freidson (1994, p. 144) refers to the work of Goode (1957) who “characterized a profession as a “community”, a group that shares a common experience and identity.” This common identity can be the result of affiliation with a shared educational background or socialization during a common professional trajectory. However, to this day we know very little about the professionals who take up internal communication responsibilities. We could have asked them which profession they identify with the most. However, this would only provide us with a snapshot of the subjective opinion of practitioners at a given point. Such data would be highly susceptible to rapid changes in terminology. Instead we compared the number of years respondents worked for their current employer with the number of years they carried out tasks related to internal communication. A high number of cases where respondents have taken up internal communication related tasks throughout their career while working in succession for different employers would give us a measurable indication that internal communication is considered a profession in its own right on which people can build an entire career.

Contrary to what some active ambassadors of the internal communication discipline claim our data show that most respondents only started to build up expertise in internal communication after they started working for their current employer. We can therefore say that internal communication cannot as yet be considered to be a separate discipline in which expertise is acquired throughout someone's career. These results are congruent with the finding that the majority of respondents (n 58, 68,2 %) believe that internal communication should belong to the responsibility of a general communication department spanning all fields of communication. Only a minority (n 4, 4,7 %) thinks internal communication should form its own department.

### **PROFESSIONALIZATION: EXISTING PRACTICES AND DELIVERY PREFERENCES**

Given the lack of theory in the domain of internal communication as a field of study no efforts have, to the best of our knowledge, as yet been made to test whether PR theory can provide adequate answers to questions related to internal communication issues. At the same time we witness the increasing popularity of professional associations whose members, through all sorts of measures like accreditation and certification, try to establish their specialism as a profession in its own right. Unfortunately, the drive to claim expertise seems to ignore the developments in neighbouring, often older, disciplines. We have used our data to understand why existing knowledge does not seem to be adopted by these new expert groups.

Based on the literature we tested a first barrier found in van Ruler's (2005) claim that practitioners and scholars value different kinds of knowledge. We did this by asking our respondents how they keep track of new developments in the field of internal communication. After defining multiple response sets we found that a large majority followed extra courses and workshops (87,5 % of cases), joined professional associations (86,3 % of cases) and kept informal contacts with colleagues (85,0 % of cases). Reading professional literature (78,8 % of cases) and attending academic lectures and colloquia (66,3 % of cases) are decidedly less popular.

From these results we infer that van Ruler's (2005) claim can indeed be confirmed. We did find that practitioners would rather share information during professional workshops and informal gatherings instead of reading books and attending academic lectures. This partially explains why developments in research do not seem to trickle down to practitioners in the field.

We defined a similar response set to probe which activities inspired our respondents most. Our data show a similar pattern comparable to the

results of the previous question. However, we did notice that response percentages regarding this question were lower than in the previous question. This can be an indication that respondents are not yet satisfied with the existing delivery systems of knowledge transfer.

### **INNOVATIVENESS INDEX**

The results of our survey indicate that internal communication practitioners do not seem to look at research in order to find answers to questions they may have with regard to their professional activities. In this paper we examined whether the practitioners were open to innovations in their field. This parameter is crucial if prototypes designed to improve knowledge transfer between scholars and academics, like the one developed by Wehrmann & van Ruler (2013), are to have any chance of success.

Our index initially consisted of five questions measured on a five-point Likert scale. Based on a reliability analysis followed by an item analysis we decided to use only four questions. This resulted in a Cronbach Alpha of .619, which is acceptable according to George & Mallery (2014). With a theoretical minimum score of 4 and a maximum of 20 we can conclude that a mean and a median of 15 with a standard deviation of 2,13 can be considered “high”. Our respondents therefore seem to be innovative when it comes to adopting new tools and techniques in their field.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper we focused on the question of how professionalization in the field of internal communication affects PR theory and practice. In the PR literature we found internal communication to be an increasingly popular topic. This runs parallel with the strong advocacy of an active group of practitioners who identify themselves as internal communication professionals in favour of elevating their specialism to the status of a profession. We analysed the literature on professionalization in-depth to assess whether these claims have any theoretical ground of justification. Additionally we wanted to know where the desire for recognition and thus the establishment of a distinct community of practice comes from.

In the literature we found several parameters to be potential drivers in the social identity formation process. The drivers we found to be important are culture, market control, theory, knowledge transfer mechanisms and perception. We used insights from the Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the work on communities of practice

(Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to elaborate further on knowledge transfer systems as vectors of professionalization processes. This choice is informed by the fact that there is little known about how existing knowledge transfer systems contribute to the emergence and development of a community of practice with an own specific professional social identity.

Most scholars would agree that PR is still considered to be the overarching discipline spanning all forms of organizational communication. However, we did learn that internal communication grew out of different professional and cultural backgrounds. Whether the identity creation process of this emerging domain is the result of efforts from a dedicated group of practitioners attempting to seize control of a niche within the market is plausible but cannot be tested empirically by means of a survey like the one used in this study.

From an academic perspective the literature review did reveal that the place of theory development in the field of PR remains slow compared to other domains like the computer sciences (C. Botan & Hazleton, 2006). This could potentially have triggered scholars interested in internal communication to build on alternative theoretical principles to support their research. The absence of a strong theoretical underpinning could additionally have encouraged practitioners to value other kinds of knowledge. A last element we drew from the literature is that the perception of PR also plays a substantial role in current developments.

By means of an online survey we sought to expand our knowledge on how socialization mechanisms contribute to the efforts of internal communication specialists to create a common identity different from PR. In doing this we effectively tackled an issue that has been neglected in PR literature. All respondents were members of the same community of practice, in this case the Belgian Association for Internal Communication.

Contrary to what we expected due to our review of the literature on professionalization, we discovered that most internal communicators are highly educated but are not recruited from one specific discipline. Most of these practitioners did not build their career in internal communication. An overwhelming majority is not in favour of establishing specialist internal communication departments. The ones who try to professionalize their actions prefer hands-on knowledge gained through peer contacts and professional workshops instead of following developments in academic research.

From these results we infer that only a small group of internal communicators advocate the idea of internal communication as a

field independent from PR. There is, however, a strong need to improve knowledge transfer systems between scholars and practitioners. In this light the work by Wehrmann and van Ruler (2013) is particularly valuable. At last, scholars should renew their efforts to apply and expand PR theory in all specialist domains of organizational communication.

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