



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive

Faculty and Researcher Publications

Faculty and Researcher Publications

2014

An Introduction to Strategic Communication

Thomas, Gail Fann

International Journal of Business Communication 2015, Vol. 52, No. 1,
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/46416>



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

An Introduction to Strategic Communication

International Journal of
Business Communication
2015, Vol. 52(1) 3–11
© The Author(s) 2014
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2329488414560469
jbc.sagepub.com



Gail Fann Thomas¹ and Kimberlie J. Stephens²

Strategic communication is an emerging area of study in the communication and management social sciences. Recent academic conversations around this topic have appeared in publications such as the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, which was established in 2007, and *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, which will be published this year. Likewise, the discursive turn in the management literature has also begun to focus on organizational strategy (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014).

As conceptualized in this special issue, strategic communication sits at the intersection of management strategy and communication, and it is our belief that this intersection is relatively undeveloped in the academic literature. To date, the management strategy literature persistently points to the significance of communication but has only begun to theorize it (see, e.g., the special issue in *Journal of Management Studies*, “Strategy as Discourse: Its Significance, Challenges, and Future Directions,” 2014). Likewise, the communication literature infrequently incorporates theory from the strategy literature (see, e.g., *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods*, 2014).

Interestingly, both strategy and modern communication scholarship are relatively new in the social sciences. Business strategic planning, strategy formulation, and strategy implementation took root during the 1960s and 1970s with the work of scholars such as Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965), Drucker (1969), and Mintzberg (1973). Modern communication frameworks are also relatively young (for reviews, see Du-Babcock, 2014; Knight, 1999; Nickerson, 2014; Rogers, 2014; Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001). Therefore, it is no surprise that much scholarship has yet to emerge as we envision the intersection of these two topics.

¹Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA, USA

²University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Gail Fann Thomas, Graduate School of Business and Public Policy, Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943, USA.

Email: gthomas@nps.edu

Definitions of Strategic Communication

Several definitions of strategic communication have surfaced, and like the myriad of definitions associated with the terms “strategy” and “communication,” we do not expect that a singular definition of strategic communication will ever be agreed on. Some of the early definitions of strategic communication that have been offered follow. Argenti, Howell, and Beck (2005) define strategic communication as “aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning” (p. 83). Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) define it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). Grunig (2006), from the public relations domain, describes it as a “bridging activity” between organizations that should be institutionalized. The management literature speaks about the linkages between discourse and the social practice of strategizing, defining these practices as “actions, interactions, and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007, p. 8).

While we understand that some may be eager to create definitions that characterize the boundaries of this area of study similar to the call for definitions for business communication, managerial communication, corporate communication, and organizational communication (see, e.g., *Management Communication Quarterly*, August 1996, for various communication definitions), we prefer to purposefully defer drawing boundaries that would prematurely narrow the exploration of the topic of strategic communication. Instead, we choose to look at strategic communication through three lenses: strategy, communication theory, and research methods. Different combinations of these three lenses offer an infinite number of paths for studying strategic communication.

Expanding the Boundaries of Strategic Communication Through the Lenses of Strategy, Communication Theory, and Method

Figure 1 illustrates three lenses for the study of strategic communication. The first lens, *management strategy*, illustrates the numerous conceptual elements within the field that might provide conceptual resources for study. Unsurprising, this field is also characterized by numerous definitions. Jemison (1981) defines strategic management as “the process by which general managers of complex organizations develop and use strategy to co-align their organization’s competences and the opportunities and constraints in the environment” (p. 601). Conversely, Smircich and Stubbart (1985) define strategic management as “organization making—to create and maintain systems of shared meanings that facilitate organized action” (p. 725).

Most strategy textbooks address the formulation of strategy, strategic planning, and the implementation of strategy. Key concepts and theories associated with strategic management, just to name a few, include stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), population ecology and evolutionary theory (Aldrich, 1999; Hannan & Freeman, 1977),



Figure 1. Three lenses for strategic communication scholarship.

neoinstitutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Each of these concepts is ripe with opportunity for communication scholars.

The second lens, *communication theory*, includes the numerous theories that communication scholars use to study various phenomena. Examples of these theories include structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), critical theory (Mumby, 1988), communicative constitution of organizations (Cooren, Taylor, & Van Every, 2006; Luhmann, 2003; McPhee & Zaug, 2000), and identity and organizational identification (Cheney, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

The third lens, *research methods*, includes communication-related analytical approaches such as rhetorical analysis (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011), narrative analysis (Jameson, 2001), conversation analysis (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997), social network analysis (Monge, Heiss, & Margolin, 2008), and semantic network analysis (Thomas & Stephens, 2013).

We argue that these three lenses offer a rich set of resources for communication scholars. Because communication scholars have deep reservoirs of expertise in analyzing text and talk as well as capabilities in network analysis, they are particularly well positioned to make contributions in this emerging area of study. Evidence of these skills is apparent in the articles that are included in this special issue.

Overview of Articles

This special issue includes five feature articles and one forum article that address distinct yet complementary aspects of strategic communication.

Alison Henderson, George Cheney, and C. Kay Weaver's article, "The Role of Employee Identification and Organizational Identity in Strategic Communication and Organizational Issues Management About Genetic Modification," asks the question, "What roles do employee identification and organizational identity play in strategic communication and organizational issues management about controversial public policies?" This study examines two New Zealand primary export organizations that managed the debate surrounding the potential impact of genetically modified (GM) products. One of the focal organizations planned to pursue the commercial development of GM products, which was at odds with New Zealand's national value position, whereas the comparison organization was opposed to developing GM products. The researchers interviewed organizational members within the two firms including research directors, communication/marketing managers, production managers, and an executive director. Additionally, they conducted focus groups with farmers and growers. These actors were asked to discuss their value perspectives in relation to GM technologies. Not surprising, the stakeholders held a wide range of views with respect to the adoption of GM. Using a critical-interpretive perspective, the authors employed Burke's theory and critical discourse analysis to examine the intersection of stakeholders' values and the two focal organizations' position vis-à-vis GM products. The authors show that various organizational stakeholders draw on different value premises that create congruities as well as incongruities with an organization's identification. Practically, the authors show that organizations' strategic communication should be attuned to explicit and implicit value premises, organizational identifications, and actor identities at multiple levels within and by the organization.

Sandra Evan's article, "Defining Distinctiveness: The Connections Between Organizational Identity, Competition, and Strategy in Public Radio Organizations," uses theories of organizational identity, networks, and strategic groups to examine employees' perspectives about their organization's competitors. Evans conducted 75 semistructured interviews with managers and digital/interactive media staff at 14 public radio stations. She discussed each interviewee's views on recent changes in his or her organization, the firm's digital media strategy, and his or her views about innovation, innovation constraints, and the competitive landscape. After coding the interview data, she created network visualizations to compare the coding results. Her analysis revealed that the way employees talk about their organization's competition illuminate perceptions of organizational identity and how these perceptions inform the value that is placed on strategic choices such as the expenditures of resources on analog versus digital projects. Ultimately, she argues, these views can affect innovation and organizational change.

Matthew Weber, Gail Fann Thomas, and Kimberlie Stephens's article, "Organizational Disruptions and Triggers for Divergent Sensemaking," challenges existing theory that predominately conceptualizes sensemaking as a convergent activity among stakeholders. Instead, they show how the interplay of sensemaking and sensegiving among numerous stakeholders can lead to divergent paths and ultimately failed initiatives. Using an in-depth case study whereby the U.S. Coast Guard attempted to implement a change, the authors analyzed interview data, public comments, transcripts from public

meetings, and media accounts to examine a divergent sensemaking process and identify four critical triggers that led to organizational disruptions. The authors suggest that organizations incorporate stakeholders' multiple perspectives at the earliest stages of the change and engage in collaborative sensemaking and sensegiving throughout the process.

Jacqueline Mayfield, Milton Mayfield, and William Sharbrough III's article, "Strategic Vision and Values in Top Leaders' Communications: Motivating Language at the Higher Level," builds on Sullivan's (1988) original work on motivating language as well as their previous research that addresses a model of Motivating Language at the individual, dyadic, and team levels. This iteration of Motivating Language takes organizational level outcomes into account. This model uses speech act theory—specifically locutionary (meaning-making language), illocutionary acts (empathetic language), and prelocutionary (direction-giving language)—to explicate imperatives that might increase the effectiveness of strategic communication. Their article lays out specific propositions that provide direction for future empirical work related to top leaders' strategic vision and values.

Ron Dulek and Kim Sydow Campbell's article, "On the Dark Side of Strategic Communication," offers a provocative view of strategic communication. These authors challenge the prevailing view that business, managerial, and corporate communication should be clear and effective and argue that ambiguity, and even deception, may be appropriate choices given an organization's or senior leader's strategic intent. These authors use a strategic and linguistic framework to develop a continuum of intentional ambiguity—moving from positive to neutral to negative. Analyzing multiple meanings or ambiguity from a linguistic approach, they use a pragmatic ambiguity lens to dissect four business finance scenarios—three public pronouncements from executives about future stock offerings and a fourth scenario involving an interchange between a CEO and an important client. Building on Eisenberg's (1984) argument that ambiguity can be seen as normal rather than deviant, these authors show how various actors use ambiguity in a variety of ways—some more acceptable than others—to achieve their purpose. Dulek and Campbell challenge communication researchers to more critically assess the role of clarity and ambiguity to accomplish one's desired end state.

In the forum article, "Leveraging Social Networks for Strategic Success," Eric Eisenberg, Zachary Johnson, and Willem Pieterse show the power of composite metrics—the combination of social network analysis and traditional attitudinal survey data. Such state-of-the-art tools allow organizations to monitor real-time informal communication networks as they implement a strategic change. This approach often employs user-friendly visualization tools that allow managers and other organization members to more easily grasp the results of large amounts of data, allowing them to make better decisions.

Key Themes

Taken as a whole, these articles have several commonalities that speak to both the complexity and the potential for this area of research. One of the most prevalent

themes is the central role that *stakeholders*, of all varieties, play in strategic communication. As can be seen from the article by Weber et al., public citizens, environmental activist groups, and government representatives engaged with the U.S. Coast Guard in an effort to shape the organization's strategic agenda. Henderson et al. outline the ways in which the organization's strategic position on genetically modified food was influenced both by the national value position on the issue, as well as the individual organizational members' value positions. Mayfield et al. acknowledge the critical position of stakeholders both inside and outside the organization by proposing that leaders should employ empathetic language when discussing organizational strategy with any stakeholder. These studies demonstrate the fluidity of organizational boundaries and highlight how stakeholder communication can shape an organization's strategy from either inside or outside the organization. In other words, "strategic" does not necessarily equate to influence and control by top management (Deetz & Eger, 2014). Rather organizational strategy is often influenced, if not driven, by internal and external stakeholders (Rouleau, 2005).

Another theme present across all the articles is the notion of *alignment* of an organization's strategic position. Alignment must be achieved in a multitude of directions. Dulek and Campbell noted that the extent of ambiguity that can or should be employed in a strategic communication needs to align with the audience for which the strategic message is intended. In studying the public radio stations, Evans suggests the need for alignment between individual organizational identities and the reality of the industry landscape. Without such alignment, organizational change is likely to be hindered. The methodological approach that Eisenberg et al. propose provides a means for objectively assessing structural alignment of organizational members on strategic issues. Weber et al. also show how misalignment between cognitive notions of an event can influence communication surrounding an event and ultimately alter an organization's strategic approach.

Finally, each of these articles examines strategic *communication at multiple levels*. In this way these authors show that strategic communication is operating across traditional research study boundaries. Mayfield et al. propose that in order for firms to reap the strategic benefits of motivating language that it must be practiced throughout the organization, from the leadership down to the frontline managers. Henderson et al. and Evans show how individual notions of organizational identity aggregate up, having an impact on the strategic direction of the organization. Eisenberg's notion of network analysis can capture both individual-level behaviors or connections and network or organization-level patterns. By bridging multiple levels, we can begin to conceptualize strategic communication as an ongoing process that links individual cognitions, words, and actions to organization-level actions and outcomes. This notion presents both an invigorating opportunity, but also a research challenge, as collecting data that crosses levels also often requires multiple methods and significant cooperation from study participants. As can be seen from this set of articles, however, this complexity should not be a deterrent.

While these six articles provide examples of the integration of the three lenses, we offer some additional questions for future research: In what ways do organizations

engage multiple rhetorics to address both internal and external stakeholders? How do organizational members use language to enact the environment? What are the relationships among language, materiality, and strategy making or strategy implementation? What is the role of language in establishing organizational legitimacy? How might we use language to understand the “black box” of strategizing processes? How do organizations use discourse to shape an institutional space? What is the role of storytelling in the development and implementation of strategy? How does strategic communication affect organizational outcomes such as shareholder price? What is the role of talk in executives’ strategy-making meetings? How does narrative horizon scanning work as a means of developing strategy? These questions are but a few that might provide additional insights into the phenomena of strategic communication. We hope that this special issue and the unique articles included in it serve as motivation as well as a call to continue exploring questions in this arena.

In closing, we are grateful to *International Journal of Business Communication*’s editor, Robyn Walker, and the Publications Board for granting us permission to publish this special issue on strategic communication. We also thank the many authors who submitted proposals in response to our call and the diligence with which the selected authors responded to the comments from the blind reviewers and us. Last, we thank the reviewers for their careful reading of the six manuscripts and for their thorough, yet supportive, manner in helping the authors shape their articles for this special issue. We hope that this special issue stimulates new ideas for research projects that integrate the lenses of strategy, communication theory, and communication-related analytical approaches.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Aldrich, H. (1999). *Organizations evolving*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ansoff, H. I. (1965). *Corporate strategy: An analytical approach to business policy for growth and expansion*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Argenti, P., Howell, R., & Beck, K. (2005). The strategic communication imperative. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 46(3), 82-89.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Balogun, J., Jacobs, C., Jarzabkowski, P., Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2014). Placing strategy discourse in context: Sociomateriality, sensemaking, and power. *Journal of Management Studies*, 5, 175-201. doi:10.1111/joms.12059
- Bargiela-Chiappini, F., & Harris, S. (1997). *Managing language: The discourse of corporate meetings*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Benjamins.

- Chandler, A. (1962). *Strategy and structure: Chapters in the history of the American industrial enterprise*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Cheney, G. (1983). The rhetoric of identification and the study of organizational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 69, 143-158.
- Cheney, G., & Christensen, L. T. (2001). Organizational identity: Linkages between “internal” and “external” organizational communication. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication* (pp. 231-269). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cooren, F., Taylor, J., & Van Every, E. J. (Eds.). (2006). *Communication as organizing: Empirical and theoretical explorations in the dynamic of text and conversation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cornelissen, J., Holt, R., & Zundel, M. (2011). The role of analogy and metaphor in the framing and legitimization of strategic change. *Organization Studies*, 32, 1701-1716.
- Deetz, S., & Eger, E. (2014). Developing a metatheoretical perspective for organizational communication studies. In L. L. Putnam & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (3rd ed., pp. 7-18). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 147-160.
- Drucker, P. (1969). *The age of discontinuity*. London, England: Heinemann.
- Du-Babcock, B. (2014). Business communication: A revisit of theory, research, and teaching. In V. Bhatia & S. Bremner (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and professional communication* (pp. 68-84). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Eisenberg, E. M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 227-242.
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Boston, MA: Pitman.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Grunig, J. (2006). Furnishing the edifice: Ongoing research on public relations as a strategic management function. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18, 151-176. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjpr1802_5
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1, 3-35.
- Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. (1977). The population ecology of organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 929-964.
- Jameson, D. (2001). Narrative discourse and management action. *Journal of Business Communication*, 38, 476-511.
- Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J., & Seidl, D. (2007). Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective. *Human Relations*, 60, 5-27.
- Jemison, D. (1981). The contributions of administrative behavior to strategic management. *Academy of Management Review*, 6, 601-608.
- Knight, M. (1999). Management communication in U.S. MBA programs: The state of the art. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 62(4), 9-32.
- Luhmann, N. (2003). Organization. In T. Bakken & T. Hernes (Eds.), *Autopoietic organization theory: Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's social systems perspective* (pp. 31-52). Oslo, Norway: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- McPhee, R., & Zaig, P. (2000). The communicative constitution of organizations: A framework for explanation. *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 10(1-2), 1-16.

- Mintzberg, H. (1973). *The nature of managerial work*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Monge, P., Heiss, B., & Margolin, D. (2008). Communication network evolution in organizational communities. *Communication Theory, 18*, 449-477.
- Mumby, D. (1988). *Communication and power in organizations: Discourse, ideology, and domination*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Nickerson, C. (2014). Business communication. In V. Bhatia & S. Bremner (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and professional communication* (pp. 50-67). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge creating company*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. (1978). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Rogers, P. (2014). Management communication: Getting work done through people. In V. Bhatia & S. Bremner (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and professional communication* (pp. 165-192). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rouleau, L. (2005). Micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensgiving: How middle managers interpret and sell change every day. *Journal of Management Studies, 42*, 1413-1441.
- Smircich, L., & Stubbart, C. (1985). Strategic management in an enacted world. *Academy of Management Review, 10*, 724-736. doi:10.5465/AMR.1985.4279096
- Sullivan, J. (1988). Three roles of language in motivation theory. *Academy of Management Review, 13*, 104-115.
- Thomas, G. F., & Stephens, K. (2013, June). *The institutionalization of genetically modified food: A longitudinal semantic network analysis*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, London, England.
- Tompkins, P., & Wanca-Thibault, M. (2001). Organizational communication: Prelude and prospects. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. xvii-xxx). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Authors Biographies

Gail Fann Thomas (gthomas@nps.edu) is an associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. She teaches managerial communication in the MBA program and is program manager for Strategic Communication in Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Executive Education. She conducts research on interorganizational collaboration and strategic communication.

Kimberlie J. Stephens (kimberlie.stephens@usc.edu) is a clinical assistant professor at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. Her research is focused on using networks to understand interorganizational collaboration and discourse.

Copyright of Journal of Business Communication is the property of Association for Business Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.