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To cite this article: Stefanie Reissner & Jesper Falkheimer (13 Aug 2024): Strategy Texts as Auto-Communication: How Narrative, Language, and Visual Symbolism Exercise Discursive Control, International Journal of Strategic Communication, DOI: [10.1080/1553118X.2024.2388087](https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2388087)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2388087>



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Published online: 13 Aug 2024.



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Strategy Texts as Auto-Communication: How Narrative, Language, and Visual Symbolism Exercise Discursive Control

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ABSTRACT

Strategy texts are an important way of communicating a strategy to a range of different stakeholders, including internal audiences as the organization communicates with itself (auto-communication). In this article, we analyze two related strategy texts that were produced for auto-communicative purposes as part of a strategic change initiative in a UK organization that employed a storytelling approach to strategic communication. Our multimodal analysis shows how narrative, visual symbolism and directive lexical choices and grammatical forms used in the two strategy texts exercise discursive control using three main mechanisms: (1) encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure; (2) strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposeful selection of anecdotes from a shared stock of stories; and (3) defining desired actions and behaviours through visual symbolism and directive lexical choices and grammatical forms. Moreover, the article contributes to current debates of the nature of strategic communication by demonstrating the tension between linear and dialogic communication in practice, while also providing rare empirical insights on the use of auto-communication in contemporary strategic communication.

Introduction

Questions of how organizations communicate issues of long-term significance to multiple audiences are central to the interdisciplinary field of strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018). Yet, despite the field's intention to integrate the concepts of strategy and communication, the extant research has tended to emphasize ideas of dialogical communication over strategy and persuasion (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Werder et al., 2018). The resulting imbalance between a strategy focus and a dialogical communication focus in the field is problematic because it has led to a partial understanding of strategic communication that is conceived as being fundamentally about dialogue, engagement and participation.

Recent research has sought to challenge this issue. For example, McNamara (2022) proposes a more critical approach to strategic communication that places an increased emphasis on *the strategic* and persuasive aspects, which may collide with the more common conception of *communication* as sharing meaning through dialogue. Similarly, Palmieri and Rocci (2023) argue for closer attention to the semiotic and pragmatic processes involved in strategic communication, challenging the dichotomy between the transmission and ritual communication perspectives.

In this article, we seek to contribute to this debate by turning our attention to the study of strategy texts. Straddling the domains of strategy and communication, these texts can take the form of documents (Pälli et al., 2009) as well as visual (Comi & Whyte, 2018) and material artefacts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). On the one hand, strategy texts are fundamentally strategic

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because they set out an organization's long-term direction (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011) and "are some of the most powerful resources for making and signifying an organization's strategy" (Balogun et al., 2014, p. 176). On the other hand, strategy texts are essentially about communication because they are produced to communicate a strategy to different audiences. These audiences can be external to the organization, such as local residents (Kornberger, 2013; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Pälli et al., 2009; Vaara et al., 2010) or clients (Comi & Whyte, 2018), but also internal (Bencherki et al., 2021) consisting of managers, employees and other organizational actors.

Our specific interest in this article is in "what exactly is communicated, to whom and how" (Palmieri & Rocci, 2023, p. 346) in strategy texts. We seek to better understand how such texts may be used in a directive fashion to elicit a particular response by an internal organizational audience, which is currently an understudied category. To shine the spotlight on an internal organizational audience, we use the concept of auto-communication, which refers to transmission of information whereby the sender is simultaneously the receiver (Lotman, 1977). In this way, we aim to show how strategic issues may be communicated in ways that are more directive and controlling than currently widely assumed in the field of strategic communication.

As such, we take a critical perspective on strategic communication which recognizes that strategy texts are not neutral means of communication. Rather, we follow in the tradition of discursive studies that highlight the political aspects involved in strategy work. For example, extant studies have shown that some actors are included in the production of strategy texts, while others are excluded as strategy-makers are carefully selected (Vaara et al., 2010). Similarly, studies have found that strategy texts legitimate certain strategic decisions and delegitimize others, thereby enabling strategy-makers to rebut criticism (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011). Although strategy texts have therefore been regarded as "a mechanism of power" (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p. 251), little is known about the how they exercise discursive control through means of strategic communication, which our analysis presented in this article seeks to address.

Importantly, this article departs methodologically from a sole focus on discourse by presenting the findings of a multimodal analysis that examines the dynamic interplay between different modes of communication (Jewitt, 2017) – in our case narrative structure, visual symbolism as well as lexical choice and grammatical form. Our analysis derives from two related strategy texts that were produced by a UK organization, which we call Hazardous Waste Disposal Ltd. (HWDL, a pseudonym). These texts supported a strategic change initiative adopting a storytelling approach that sought to reinvigorate organizational actors' professionalism and co-create a brighter future for the organization. Produced primarily for auto-communicative purposes, a colourful cartoon landscape symbolically narrated the organization's past, present and envisaged future, emphasizing the key strategic messages underpinning the strategic change initiative. It was accompanied by a training guide for managers who were expected to have regular storytelling meetings with their teams. Storytelling here is employed by the organization as a communication tool that engages the audience's hearts and minds by using the organization's history and mythology as shared reference points (Denning, 2005; Love, 2008; Smith, 2012). So conceptualized, storytelling is increasingly used "in developing and legitimating future-oriented strategies" (Rindova & Martins, 2022, p. 200).

The article is guided by the question of how organizational decision-makers use the communicative modes of narrative, visual symbolism as well as directive lexical choice and grammatical form to exercise control over a strategic message in auto-communicative strategy texts. It shows how these different modes of communication jointly exercise discursive control by encouraging organizational actors' active involvement in making the strategy come true. Specifically, we identify three mechanisms: (1) encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure; (2) strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposeful selection of anecdotes from the shared stock of stories; and (3) defining desired behaviours through visual symbolism and directive lexical choices and grammatical forms as the organization sought to tightly control both communicative process and outcomes.

The article contributes to strategic communication research by (1) emphasizing the communication of strategy from a critical perspective that questions how the normative ideal of dialogical communication in organizations is manifested in actual practices of communicating strategy (see also E. Christensen & Christensen, 2022) and (2) integrating insights from the fields of organization studies and discourse studies with strategic communication research. As such, our analysis provides a more nuanced interdisciplinary understanding of how the features of strategy texts produced for auto-communicative purposes may exert discursive control, seeking to shape organizational actors' response to a strategic change initiative. Additionally, the article provides rare empirical evidence of auto-communication in a strategy context, emphasizing the practical value of the concept in studies of strategic communication.

We will now discuss the theoretical underpinnings of this article before introducing the extant research on auto-communication. Then we will explain the methodology and methods of our multimodal study before presenting and discussing the findings of our analysis. The conclusion outlines the limitations of our study, identifies fruitful areas for future research and articulates its theoretical and practical contributions.

Strategic communication, strategy texts and auto-communication

Strategic communication

Strategic communication has become an institutionalized way of managing contemporary organizations where there is a constant demand of involvement of and participation from a multitude of audiences, including internal organizational actors. From a macro and social theory approach, the expansion of strategic communication may be viewed as a consequence of late modernity, defined by the expansive spread of modern institutions, information overload and an increased pace of and demand for change (Giddens, 1990). Consequently, navigating contemporary organizations is not easy, and strategies are supposed to lead the way, hence the increasing importance of communicating strategy and strategizing communication.

The field of strategic communication is, based on the most widely used definitions, underpinned by a normative logic with reference to a dialogical communication theory, opposing transmission and one-way-oriented communication. In accordance with the dialogical logic, concepts such as engagement and conversation are highlighted as means for strategic communication, defined as the "purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). In practice, this typically involves sound and planned activities for talking and communicating *with* people, not *to* people, making it a two-way process of exchanging knowledge and ideas and of co-constructing new organizational realities (e.g. Küpers et al., 2012). While engagement and participation are understandably regarded as an ideal, the question is how strategic communication is conducted in practice – balancing the persuasive strategy side with the participatory and communicative side. Strategic communication thus has a two-fold role in contemporary organizations. On the one hand, it is a professional function that is planned and exercised by communication departments. On the other hand, it is regarded as an institutionalized set of practices of how to create shared (strategic) meanings in organizational settings. It is this latter understanding of strategic communication that is relevant in our work.

In the literature on communication as a set of practices, a distinction between two approaches is widely made, although these have been conceptualized differently. For example, the public relations scholar Grunig (2001) distinguishes between asymmetrical and symmetrical communication. Asymmetrical communication is described as one-way communication with a given, linear and predetermined effect. Communication is then seen more as something an organization does *to* someone rather than *with* someone. Symmetrical communication, in contrast, occurs when the organization and its recipients have equal opportunities to engage with and influence each other. Consequently, decision-makers must be open to listening to arguments from organizational actors and

willing to change their position. The organization communication scholar Deetz (1992) distinguishes between transmission and transformation. Transmission focuses on the transport of information and knowledge between individuals, whereas transformation focuses on the importance of communication in creating knowledge, meaning and identity. The communication researcher Carey (2009) also writes about a transmission view of communication, connecting it with physical forms of transport in modern society, but contrasting it with ritual communication that is linked to sensemaking and sacred communicative forms.

The concept of strategic communication has thus been critiqued for being paradoxical since it combines contradictory concepts: goal-oriented strategy and communication as sensemaking; asymmetry and symmetry; persuasion and dialogue. In practice, the strategic focus (characterized by goal-oriented, asymmetrical and persuasive practices) may easily conquer the communication focus (characterized by sensemaking, symmetry and dialogue). McNamara (2022), for instance, argues that if the focus of strategic communication is primarily on organizational goals and not on communication as a more open-ended, dialogic process, it “renders engagement to targeting activity to extract gains for the organization. It reduces listening to gaining intelligence and insights that can be exploited by the organization for its advantage” (p. 56). The tension between persuasion and dialogue or asymmetry and symmetry is fundamentally a question of how communication is viewed and practised. E. Christensen and Christensen (2022, p. 38) posit that “rather than seeing transmission and sharing as possible alternatives that the communicator can choose between, we emphasize that transmission is a fundamental condition for all communication”.

Although the boundaries between a transmission and a reciprocal approach to communication are blurred in organizational practice, they have explanatory value when it comes to examining strategic communication as practised in organizations. They may be used to analyze, explain and understand why an organization’s communication does not always work optimally, and they also influence how managers and employees communicate and handle any communication issues. For example, there may be instances when organizational actors simply need to be informed about a new development, in which case a linear transmission model is appropriate. There may be other instances when decision-makers benefit from the use of a more dialogic, reciprocal approach to communication, giving organizational actors an opportunity to actively shape a new strategy. Yet, as we will discuss further below, there is also potential for manipulation – even in an at first glance dialogic approach.

Strategy texts

Strategy texts bring about and communicate a strategy to inform one or more audiences, influence stakeholders’ behaviour, or legitimate a decision or action (Balogun et al., 2014). They therefore have a major role in developing, communicating and implementing strategy, while also bridging the concepts of strategy and communication. The extant research on strategy texts has focused on three main strands.

The first strand examines how strategy texts are developed in social interaction. For example, Pälli and Lehtinen’s (2013) analysis of a management meeting shows how participants orient to text and talk in order to persuade others and legitimate their actions in the meeting. More recently, Bencherki et al. (2021) identify four communicative practices through which an issue of concern becomes strategic. Moreover, strategy-makers may interact in dedicated strategy workshops or away days as “forum[s] of strategic discussion” (Schwarz, 2009, p. 277) to communicate and share knowledge, coordinate their strategizing and seek consensus (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Schwarz, 2009). Johnson et al. (2010) show how ritual shapes the organization and facilitation of such events as well as decision-makers’ behaviours. Finally, the production of strategy texts can be supported by analytical tools, such as SWOT, PESTEL, stakeholder analysis and scenario planning (Hodgkinson et al., 2006), as well as visual tools, such as pictures, maps, spreadsheets and graphs (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Paroutis et al., 2015). Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) theorize that decision-makers use such tools to deal with uncertainty.

A second and for our purposes more relevant strand of research is discursive and examines strategy texts as artefacts in their own right. It is based on the assumption that “the language that we use when talking and writing about strategy issues does matter in terms of what we produce as useful, necessary, desirable or self-evident” (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998, p. 292). These studies treat strategy “as a discourse which has its own specific conditions of possibility” (Pälli et al., 2009, p. 303). In their seminal paper, Vaara et al. (2010) identify five discursive features of a strategic plan: self-authorization, special terminology, discursive innovation, forced consensus and deonticity. They establish that strategy texts communicate the purpose and aims of a strategy and that specialist strategic terminology – including new buzz words – is at the heart of such documents. Vaara et al. further show that strategy texts portray a sense of consensus, which may not reflect the stakeholders’ varying and often competing agendas. Cornut et al. (2012) regard strategy texts as a distinct genre of writing with an optimistic, emotive, consensual and future-oriented tone to engage the audience and encourage action. Their analysis also suggests that decision-makers purposively use language in strategy texts that enables multiple interpretations but also requires orchestrated control of the message to be communicated. Koskela (2013), in contrast, posits that strategy texts have multiple genres as they may draw on different discourses, such as those of strategic management, corporate communication, stock market etc., as long-term goals are defined and the organization’s performance against them is assessed. Yet, the primary focus of these studies is solely on the language used in written strategy texts, whereas currently little is known about the use of other, non-textual communicative modes.

A third and closely related strand of research foregrounds the mechanisms by which strategy texts may exercise discursive control as they “enable certain ways of acting while at the same time they restrict other actions” (Pälli et al., 2009, p. 303). In an early study, Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001) show how the rhetoric used in strategy texts is indicative of traditional hierarchical power structures, despite attempts to render strategizing more cooperative. The five discursive features identified by Vaara et al. (2010) further elucidate issues of power. On the one hand, the use of specialist strategic terminology “affected the power positions of the various decision-makers” (p. 692), while on the other the urgent and important nature of strategy texts seeks to shape stakeholders’ responses to the strategy. Similarly, Kornberger and Clegg’s (2011) analysis of the Sydney 2030 strategy report echoes the importance of “speaking strategically” (p. 143), that is decision-makers learning the vocabulary of strategic decision-making and then using it when formulating and communicating a new strategy. They further show how language can be used to bring together different perspectives and agendas in a shared discourse (in their case, an economic discourse), whilst navigating potentially contentious issues. Kornberger (2013, p. 105) further posits that strategy reports may be “framed . . . as [deriving from] a transparent, technocratic mechanism that would produce the right answers to the challenges ahead”, thereby depoliticizing any controversy. As such, strategy texts can create and/or exacerbate unequal power relationships in the strategy domain (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Laine & Vaara, 2007).

Despite these pertinent insights into strategy texts as important artefacts in their own right as well as their potential to exercise discursive power, there is currently little knowledge about strategy texts aimed specifically at internal audiences. This is problematic because such strategy texts might be expected to use different communicative practices than externally focused strategic communication (e.g. Cornut et al., 2012; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Vaara et al., 2010). Specifically, in internally focused communication, both decision-makers and organizational actors draw on a shared organizational memory and mythology (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983) and typically have a prime role in making a new strategy happen. Moreover, we posit that when communicating with an internal audience decision-makers may attempt to control the strategic message more closely to enlist organizational actors’ support of a strategy. To better understand the features and communicative functions of strategy texts aimed at an internal audience, we draw on the concept of auto-communication as discussed next.

Strategic communication as auto-communication

Auto-communication, according to the semiotist Yuri Lotman (1977), refers to a mode of communication whereby the sender is simultaneously the receiver. Put differently, auto-communication

means that an individual, group or organization communicates with itself alongside more conventional forms of communication in which sender and receiver are different entities. In the context of this article, we regard auto-communication as a distinct form of internal organizational communication, which is characterized by a focus on the collective and self-referential aspects of organizational communication rather than communication between different groups of organizational actors (e.g. managers and staff) whereby sender and receiver differ.¹

Specifically, in contrast to other forms of internal communication, auto-communication has been closely linked to sensemaking (Weick, 1977) as well as identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and identification in organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The “quest for identity” in contemporary organizations and “a growing need among organizational members for identification and belongingness” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 19) are well known as is the role of auto-communication “as a catalyst for identity construction within the organization” (Kjærgaard & Morsing, 2010, p. 93). Hence, by engaging in auto-communication, organizations can achieve greater clarity of the central, distinctive and enduring features that makes up their identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Simultaneously, auto-communication can help organizational actors to understand how the membership of an organization affects their sense of belonging (A. D. Brown, 2017), which have become central concerns in strategy research (Ravasi et al., 2020).

In an early study of auto-communication, Broms and Gahmberg (1983) demonstrate that although strategic planning documents and annual reports seek to communicate with external audiences, they are also auto-communicative due to their “self-enhancing and self-confirming potential” (p. 2). Their discussion explores specifically the mythical and symbolic aspects of organizations (Westerlund & Sjöstrand, 1979) that are captured in narratives and imagery which “open up a channel to the forgotten side of man [sic] and adds to creativity and social activity” (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983, p. 488).

Other studies indicate that auto-communication may be a by-product of external communication in situations when the main impact happens to be internal. Using such self-referential communication as conscious strategic communication is not unusual in marketing communication (L. T. Christensen, 1997), for instance, when a member of the organization is used as an outward-facing communicator in advertising campaigns with a dual effect. First, it has an intended external effect, attempting to persuade an external audience about something, while second, simultaneously having an internal and auto-communicative effect in the form of increased pride, engagement and identity among organizational actors that are made visible in this way.

In other words, auto-communication may be used purposively by organizational decision-makers to foster sensemaking and identity work (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983), for instance in the context of strategic change. Yet, it may also be used to exercise discursive control as decision-makers seek to “determine and redefine the power and subjectivity of various social actors” (Vaara et al., 2010, p. 699) within an organization. However, these pertinent insights on discursive control have yet to inform the extant research as to date little attention has been given to how auto-communicative messages are constructed specifically for strategic communication. In this article, we therefore also respond to calls for empirical studies of power in auto-communication (e.g. L. T. Christensen, 2018; Kjærgaard & Morsing, 2010; Morsing, 2006) by applying the concept to HWDL’s strategic change initiative, which we will now introduce.

Materials and methods

Methodology

This article is situated in the constructionist tradition of strategy research (e.g. Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998) with a particular focus on how organizational decision-makers use narrative, visual symbolism

¹We recognize that in other communicative contexts managers or groups of staff might also engage in auto-communication when the focus is on internal, collective-focused and self-referential communication, but these are beyond the scope of this article.

as well as directive lexical choice and grammatical form to exercise control over a strategic message in auto-communicative strategy texts. It takes a discursive approach that is interested in the actual practices of language use (Gee, 1999) and specifically how “specific features of language contribute to the interpretation of texts in their various contexts” (Barton, 2004, p. 57). Our specific interest is the functions that different modes of communication (e.g. textual or visual representations) have in communicating a strategic message (see Barton, 2004). The value of such an approach lies in understanding such practices of language use in their specific social context.

We mobilize the empirical case of a UK organization we call HWDL (a pseudonym) that specializes in the safe disposal of some of the world’s most hazardous substances. The organization had been the industry flagship for decades before serious accidents affected its reputation, future prosperity and survival. Decision-makers therefore sought to inspire organizational actors to make HWDL an industry flagship once again through a strategic change initiative entitled ‘Towards an Excellent Future’ (TAEF, a pseudonym), which sought to “articulate [the] firm’s preferred future and [the audience’s] role in creating it” (Rindova & Martins, 2022, p. 201). The strategic communication tool chosen by HWDL was storytelling, an approach using narrative to shape organizational actors’ perceptions in accordance with a pre-defined ideal. Storytelling in this sense is widely advocated among management practitioners and consultants (e.g. Denning, 2005; Love, 2008; Smith, 2012) as a natural and intuitive way of communicating complex and abstract information (e.g. Allan et al., 2002; J. S. Brown et al., 2005). It is important to note here that we, as analysts, followed the case organization’s lead in labelling their communicative approach as storytelling rather than imposing a narrative framework onto the data.

Materials

At the heart of our analysis were two related strategy texts – a colourful cartoon landscape and the accompanying 36-page training guide prepared for managers, which HWDL decision-makers commissioned from a specialist management consultancy to support their strategic change initiative. In accordance with the conceptualization of auto-communication employed in this article, TAEF told the story of the organization’s successful past, its present difficulties and its desire to become successful again with the main audience being organizational actors. It was structured into six chapters, which the cartoon landscape told visually and symbolically to encourage dialogue between managers and their teams about who HWDL was, how it operated and where it was going. In this spirit, decision-makers sought to involve all managers – predominantly scientists and engineers – in storytelling meetings with their teams to reach all 10,000 HWDL staff. The accompanying training guide was devised to orchestrate these communication efforts, replicating the key strategic messages and visual features of the cartoon landscape. A copy of the cartoon landscape and the training guide were given to the first author as part of a larger, related research project² (Reissner & Pagan, 2013). Importantly, we did not regard these two strategy texts as stories in their own right. Rather, as designed by the organization, we regarded them as forming an integral part of HWDL’s chosen storytelling approach that focused on mobilizing organizational actors collectively to create a prosperous future for the firm, which will be detailed below.

Multimodal data analysis

Given the unusual nature of the cartoon landscape as a strategy text, our analysis had to go beyond written discourse and instead take into account different communicational modes (e.g. imagery), which is known as ‘multimodality’ (Kress, 2010). Our multimodal analysis sought to “understand the principles of use and modal resources available in . . . a multimodal text” (Jewitt, 2017, p. 23). It comprised of the following three elements in accordance with the features of the two strategy texts: (1) the structure, plot and storyline of HWDL’s strategic narrative as defined by the organization; (2) the visual symbolism in

²Financial support by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under Award No. RES-061-25-0144-A is gratefully acknowledged.

the cartoon landscape telling the strategic narrative; and (3) the lexical choices and grammatical forms used in the accompanying training guide through which HWDL managers were instructed in the adopted storytelling approach. The analysis proceeded through the following five steps.

First, we analyzed HWDL's strategic narrative because it was at the heart of the organization's storytelling approach and defined its past, present and future. Our focus was on the key narrative features of structure, plot and storyline (Browning, 1991; Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 1998; see also Reissner, 2023) to understand their purpose in seeking to 'make the story come true' (Rindova & Martins, 2022). We paid particular attention to the structure (Daiute, 2014) of the strategic narrative as defined by organizational decision-makers, its plot (Bruner, 1986) and storyline (Browning, 1991) as well as the interplay between the structure of the narrative and its content (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Second, we analyzed the visual symbolism of the cartoon landscape (Prosser, 1998) as the organization's strategic narrative unfolded. Examining visual and symbolic features is valuable because human beings "think and feel in pictures, and pictorial symbolism expresses our most basic ideas, emotions, and judgments" (Austin, 1977, p. 307). Given the features of the cartoon landscape, we paid particular attention to the portrayal of organizational actors and their behaviours (both desirable and undesirable as defined by organizational decision-makers) as well as those elements of the organization's metaphorical journey into the future that were foregrounded as the composition of these elements "perform persuasive work" (Wysocki, 2004, p. 124). We also drew on common visual metaphors such as mountains representing challenge, groups of people walking together representing cohesion or collaboration, or managers carrying placards with key strategic messages who were followed by groups of people representing leadership.

Third, using a 'bottom-up' approach (Barton, 2004), we analyzed the language in the training guide through which HWDL managers were instructed to facilitate storytelling meetings with their teams. A holistic reading of the text made us note the marked contrast between the creative and symbolic 'tone' of the cartoon landscape and the more directive language used in the training guide. Then, following Fairclough (2015), we paid particular attention to the structure and content of the training guide as well as the lexical choices and grammatical forms by which HWDL managers were told how to approach these meetings.

Fourth, in the spirit of multimodality, which considers different communicative modes as complementary (Kress, 2017), we brought the three analyses together by considering what function these features were designed to perform in the organization's stated aim of generating an 'excellent future'. Following Barton (2004), by 'function' we mean the ways in which the communicative modes contribute to constructing the strategy texts. The outcomes of these analyses are summarized in Table 1.

In a fifth and final step, we critically interrogated the exercise of discursive control through the narrative, visual symbolic and linguistic features of the two strategy texts. Despite the dialogic potential of the chosen storytelling approach and the suggested playfulness of the cartoon landscape, organizational decision-makers sought to tightly control communication of the new strategy by prescribing a detailed structure for the storytelling meetings that defined often minute timings and instructions. We therefore considered the mechanisms by which the narrative, visual symbolic and linguistic features of the two strategy texts exercise discursive control and identified three such mechanisms: (1) encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure; (2) strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposeful selection of anecdotes from a shared stock of stories; and (3) defining desired actions and behaviours through visual symbolism and directive lexical choices and grammatical forms. It is worth noting that the dataset does not permit us to draw any conclusions about how HWDL enacted the storytelling approach or about the outcome (for example, if the organization benefitted from the chosen storytelling approach). Yet, we believe that our findings help to further the debate of how linear and dialogic communication may be used together in strategic communication practice.

Table 1. Outcomes of multimodal analysis (drawing on Jewitt, 2017, p. 15).

Representational mode	Construction of text	Functions
Narrative	Traditional story structure of beginning, middle/ climax, end Ascending storyline	Mapping strategic direction, providing coherence across past, present, and future Positive tone, implying progress and success
Visual symbolism	Colourful and playful Detailed, situated imagery (e.g. organizational logos) Common symbolism (e.g. mountain = challenge)	Generating critical dialogue around incidents depicted in cartoon landscape Situating strategy texts in organizational memory and mythology Strengthening strategic message
Lexical choice and grammatical forms	Structure and timings Anecdotes to share in storytelling meetings Prescriptions, commands, and suggestions regarding the delivery of the storytelling meetings	Explaining the rationale and storytelling approach and instructing managers to employ storytelling with team Invoking shared organizational memory and mythology Orchestrating large-scale internal strategic communication initiative

Results: Strategic storytelling ‘towards an excellent future’

The cartoon landscape: Narrative structure and visual symbolism

HWDL’s strategic narrative telling the organization’s prospective journey ‘towards an excellent future’ (TAEF) was structured into six chapters in which organizational actors were collectively portrayed as protagonists. Each chapter contained specific strategic messages that were represented symbolically in the cartoon landscape.

Chapter 1 described the organization’s successful past as an industry flagship, which was depicted in the cartoon landscape as the plant in a landscape that was typical for the region in which HWDL was based with technical and clerical staff outside. Chapter 2 emphasized the organization’s present difficulties by referring to a loss of trust, to condoning poor performance and to reputational damage. The cartoon landscape depicted a mountain that groups of technical and clerical staff climbed in apparent disarray. Chapter 3 was about the imperative that HWDL staff “must demonstrate that we are professionals” to create a more prosperous future for the organization and, due to its status as the biggest employer in an otherwise relatively deprived area, the wider community. This message was depicted in the cartoon landscape through a cliff edge and a bridge under construction over a gorge, in front of which staff studied a placard, which seemed to portray their interest in the new strategy.

The focus of the narrative then shifted towards the future. Chapter 4 encapsulated the improvements that HWDL’s strategic change initiative was expected to achieve in terms of the three key indicators of safety, reliability and predictability. This was visually depicted in the cartoon landscape by the end of the bridge started in Chapter 3 and another mountain with staff carrying banners stating TAEF as well as the three key indicators. The message, we argue, is clear: decision-makers foresaw challenges in their journey towards an excellent future that organizational actors could only muster collectively. Chapter 5 then emphasized the behaviours through which decision-makers envisaged HWDL becoming “the workforce of choice” for industry stakeholders, specifically, excellence, teamwork, reliability, continuing improvement and ongoing skill development. These desired behaviours were depicted by the end of the mountain by staff descending in an orderly fashion and by senior staff carrying banners at the foot of the mountain, signalling leadership and collective action. In Chapter 6, HWDL was portrayed as having arrived at their “excellent future”, which was depicted by a bigger, brighter and modernized plant. A schematic representation of the cartoon landscape is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

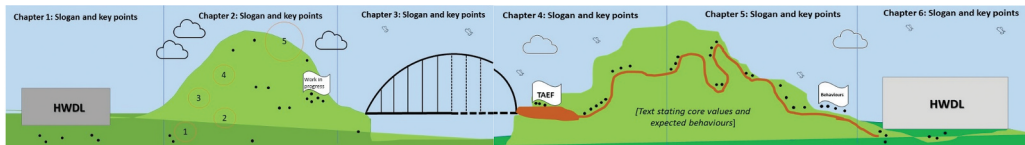


Figure 1. Schematic representation of cartoon landscape.

HWDL's strategic narrative followed the traditional narrative structure of beginning (Chapter 1), middle (Chapter 2) and end (Chapters 3–6). The middle of a story typically depicts “conflicts, predicaments, trials and crisis which call for choices, decisions, actions and interactions, whose actual outcomes are often at odds with the characters’ intentions and purposes” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 283). It is notable that three of the six chapters of HWDL's strategic narrative are devoted to the future, which has also been called ‘prospective storytelling’ that enables social actors to “formulate a joint medium- and long-term vision” (Kryger, 2017, p. 4). In HWDL's strategic narrative, Chapters 3 to 6 were designed to define how organizational actors were expected to achieve the envisaged “excellent future”, which resonates with Rindova and Martins's (2022) notion of ‘futurescape’. The storyline can be characterized as ‘ascending’ (Browning, 1991), encompassing an upward trajectory and leading to a positive outcome – a brighter future for the organization, their staff and community.

These elements of HWDL's strategic narrative were underlined by the visual and symbolic features of the cartoon landscape, drawing on widely used metaphors. The stable state at the beginning and end of the traditional narrative structure was depicted by a relatively flat and uneventful landscape in Chapters 1 and 6. The organization's present difficulties, depicted in Chapter 2, were symbolized by staff climbing a mountain, and the gap between current and required/envisaged behaviours were symbolized by a cliff edge and gorge in Chapter 3. The expected challenges en route to creating a more prosperous future for HWDL were depicted by another mountain, straddling Chapters 4 and 5.

The detail included in the cartoon landscape (which is not adequately represented in the schematic representation in Figure 1) provides insights into the communicative actions of these narrative and visual features. For example, HWDL's present difficulties were depicted through a variety of undesirable behaviours: by two staff members worshipping an idol (item 1 in Figure 1), four staff members being evidently lost (item 2 in Figure 1), two staff members being busy firefighting (item 3 in Figure 1), and two workers lying idly in the sun (item 4 in Figure 1). A balloon bears the slogan “effort without result is nothing” (item 5 in Figure 1). We interpret these messages as seeking to instil both repentance among organizational actors for a lack of care at work and encouragement to amend their ways by increasing their professionalism and ensuring safety, reliability and predictability of HWDL operations. It is notable that as the narrative progressed, staff were portrayed in a more orderly fashion, walking in groups and talking to each other, which we interpret as representing enhanced communication and collaboration. Senior managers carrying placards appear to symbolize leadership and are dutifully followed by organizational actors, reproducing traditional conceptions of strategy as a hierarchical exercise (e.g. Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 2001).

Together, the coordinated interplay between these elements indicates that decision-makers took great care in compiling these texts to ensure that they transmit the same strategic message in a way that seeks to engage the audience and supports dialogue and collective meaning-making (see Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). The playful storytelling approach and the colourful cartoon landscape seeks to persuade organizational actors to make HWDL's strategic story come true by working together towards what is communicated as a shared goal.

However, our more critical and discursive analysis of the functions of these communicative modes indicates that organizational decision-makers sought to control the strategic message by shaping organizational actors' interpretations of the organization's current difficult situation and encouraging them to join the metaphoric journey ‘Towards an Excellent Future’. Put differently, while the cartoon

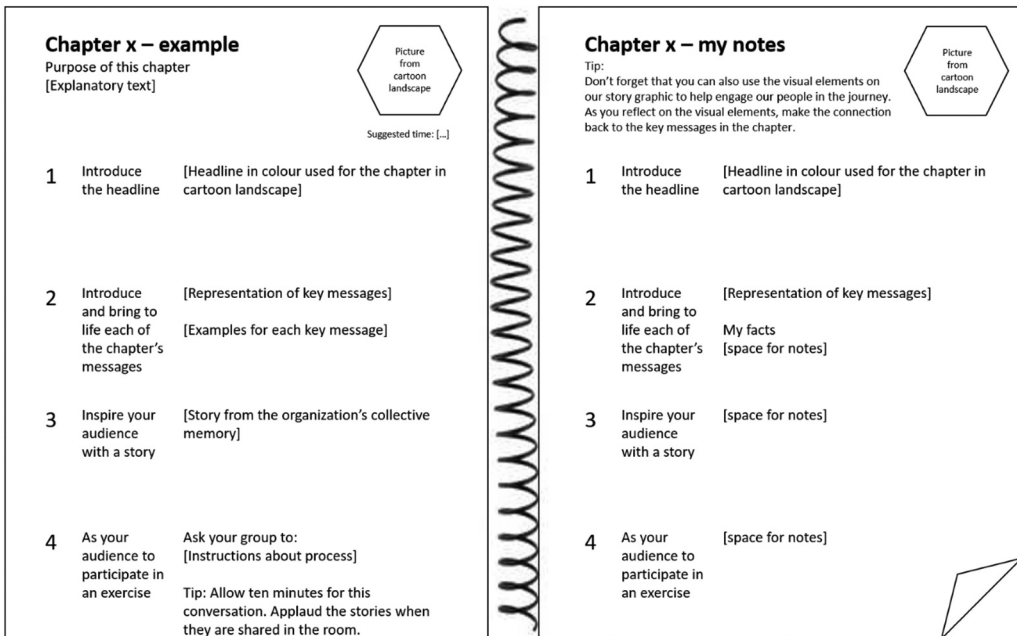
landscape at first glance appears to be about what Grunig (2001) calls symmetrical communication, organizational decision-makers do not seem to expect any form of what Deetz (1992) calls ‘transformation’. These efforts to exercise discursive control are further apparent in the lexical choices and grammatical forms used in the training guide, which we will discuss next.

The training guide: Careful orchestration and tight prescriptions

The training guide consisted of two parts. Part 1 explained the rationale of the storytelling approach to strategic change chosen by organizational decision-makers and the envisaged outcomes. A key feature of the text was a focus on “engaging and connecting our people to this story” (p. 3). Managers were specifically told to “personalise the key messages”, “illustrate the key messages with stories”, and “include supporting facts” (p. 4). The training guide also stated specific steps that managers were to follow in the storytelling meetings together with the expected outcomes and duration for each. For example, in relation to Step 2 of the storytelling process, “the connection conversation” in which managers and their teams were expected to discuss the cartoon landscape, the outcome for organizational actors was defined as follows: “I understand that I have a part to play in our journey”; duration: 30 mins (p. 6). The emphasis here seems to be on dialogue, collective sense-making and creating a sense of belonging to the organization.

There was also more detailed guidance about how much time in the storytelling meetings managers were expected to spend on each chapter of HWDL’s strategic narrative (p. 10) and for answering any questions that organizational actors may have prepared (p. 12). As such, Part 1 of the training guide seems to have been written for an audience unfamiliar with storytelling as an organizational communication tool, providing guidance about the content, structure and objectives of the storytelling meetings.

Part 2 of the training guide consisted of a workbook, in which two pages were dedicated to each chapter of HWDL’s strategic narrative and linked to the cartoon landscape as depicted schematically in Figure 2.



Chapter x – example		Picture from cartoon landscape
Purpose of this chapter [Explanatory text]		
Suggested time: [...]		
1	Introduce the headline [Headline in colour used for the chapter in cartoon landscape]	
2	Introduce and bring to life each of the chapter’s messages [Representation of key messages] [Examples for each key message]	
3	Inspire your audience with a story [Story from the organization’s collective memory]	
4	As your audience to participate in an exercise Ask your group to: [Instructions about process] Tip: Allow ten minutes for this conversation. Applaud the stories when they are shared in the room.	

Chapter x – my notes		Picture from cartoon landscape
Tip: Don’t forget that you can also use the visual elements on our story graphic to help engage our people in the journey. As you reflect on the visual elements, make the connection back to the key messages in the chapter.		
1	Introduce the headline [Headline in colour used for the chapter in cartoon landscape]	
2	Introduce and bring to life each of the chapter’s messages My facts [space for notes]	
3	Inspire your audience with a story [space for notes]	
4	As your audience to participate in an exercise [space for notes]	

Figure 2. Schematic representation of workbook part of training guide.

In keeping with HWDL's chosen storytelling approach, managers were expected to relate anecdotes from the organization's stock of stories in the storytelling meetings to draw on shared organizational memory and mythology (see also Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). On the left-hand page for each chapter, an anecdote from the organization's central stock of stories was provided, and on the right-hand page, there was space for managers to note down team-specific stories that they could use to replace the given example. Although the use of anecdotes from the past to illustrate the future seems strange, the selected incidents focused on how the desired behaviours of excellence, teamwork, reliability, continuing improvement and ongoing skill development had been employed previously. Following Reissner and Pagan (2013), we propose that these anecdotes were purposively selected to emphasize that the required changes were within organizational actors' capabilities, thereby providing encouragement and motivation for the challenges in the journey ahead.

It is possible that 'typical' HWDL managers – predominantly scientists and engineers – may not have been naturally skilled storytellers and therefore may have benefitted from the content of the training guide. However, the level of detail prescribed for the delivery of the storytelling meetings is surprising, nevertheless. For each step of the storytelling meeting, exact timings were imposed, sometimes down to the level of two minutes, limiting managers' autonomy to respond to the needs of their team in a truly dialogic fashion. Although some of the grammatical forms used in the training guide could be regarded as suggestions (e.g. "you may wish"), we were struck by the widespread use of commands (e.g. "personalise key messages") and prescribed outcomes (e.g. "people should leave this meeting understanding . . ."). Illustrative examples are provided in Table 2.

Some content in the training guide seemed particularly odd: HWDL managers were specifically instructed to "applaud the stories when they are shared in the room" (Chapter 1 and 6) and "don't forget to thank your audience for their contribution. Ensure they are clear on the role they play in making our journey a success." The prescriptions of such mundane social practices associated with polite acknowledgement (applauding and thanking) imply an assumption that HWDL managers needed to be told how to behave politely in social interaction – even though they are likely to be highly trained professionals and experienced managers. As such, we posit that the training guide was produced to facilitate a tightly controlled and carefully orchestrated approach to transmitting the strategic message in a largely one-directional manner, which challenges the creative and dialogic potential of narrative and visual symbolism of the two strategy texts discussed above. We will now turn to discussing our findings.

Discussion

Our multimodal analysis presented above furthers the current understanding of strategic communication through strategy texts. By considering strategy texts as artefact in their own right and by going beyond a sole focus on (written) language and discourse, it provides novel insights into different communicative modes and their functions in auto-communicative strategy texts. We have specifically shown how narrative and visual symbolism seek to produce a convincing strategic message, while at the same time exercising discursive control. The use of directive lexical choice and grammatical forms further highlight that auto-communicative strategy texts are not neutral means of communication. To further the current understanding of how such texts exercise discursive control, we have identified the following three mechanisms behind the dynamic interplay of narrative, visual symbolism and directive language (specifically lexical choices and grammatical forms) used in the cartoon landscape and training guide.

First, paraphrasing L. T. Christensen (1997, p. 199), the two texts were designed to generate collective engagement with a prospective organizational narrative about a prosperous future and anecdotes from the organization's collective memory to rediscover, reorganize and reapply the processes and behaviours that had made HWDL successful in the past and that were expected to make them successful again. Although there is a future-oriented aspect in other strategy texts (Rindova & Martins, 2022), we posit that in auto-communicative strategy texts different mechanisms are used to

Table 2. Illustrative examples of instructions (verbatim excerpts from training guide).

Four-step process	Explanation	Instructions
1. Make the story of our journey your own	'Using the [workbook] [. . .], prepare how you will personalise the story of our [journey into the future] with your own illustrative stories and facts. This will help our teams to connect with our story, and understand the role they can play in making our journey a success.'	<p>'For each chapter think about the unique messages and stories you want to share with our people, making them relevant to their roles. You can do this in three ways:</p> <p>'Personalise the key messages: Talk about each chapter from the perspective of your audience. We have provided some additional messages and suggestions that you can also use to help personalise your presentation. You can also use the visual elements on the [cartoon landscape] to help you bring our journey to life.</p> <p>'Illustrate the key messages with stories: Using real stories will help us to engage the hearts and minds of our people; help our people connect the principles of our journey to their everyday lives; challenge and shape our people's beliefs and behaviours; demonstrate that our people are the heroes of our journey, and that all have a part of play in its success.</p> <p>'Include supporting facts: Facts will support the key messages and rationally shape our people's beliefs.'</p>
2. Set up your story meeting	'We'll be working with you to determine how best to connect our people to the story through face to face meetings. [. . .]'	<p>'Designing the meetings: The story meeting agenda is made of up to three steps. Each step has a clear outcome and supporting tool(s):</p> <p>'A. Presenting the story of our journey – outcome: I understand and believe in our journey (80 mins)</p> <p>'B. The connection conversation – outcome: I understand that I have a part of play in our journey (30 mins)</p> <p>'C. Making the story your own – outcome: I understand my role in engaging others in our journey, and I have prepared my own facts and illustrative stories to help our teams understand what our journey means for them (60 mins)</p> <p>'The steps can be combined in a single meeting, or run as separate meetings. [. . .]</p> <p>'All colleagues should experience Steps A and B. Only colleagues who need to bring the story to life for others will need to experience Step C.'</p> <p><i>Author comment: These instructions were followed by a page on 'principles for planning your meetings' and a page detailing the 'meeting toolkit' (including the cartoon landscape, a PowerPoint presentation, story capture sheets, documents for activities and a feedback form as well as the meeting guide and planner.</i></p>
3. Deliver your story meeting	'Using the [cartoon landscape] to help you, present your personalised version of [our journey], bringing it to life for our teams with your own illustrative stories and facts. Using the connection tool, help our teams understand what the journey means for them, and the role that they can play. [. . .]'	<p>'Our people should leave this meeting:</p> <p>'Clearly understanding and believing in our journey and our destination [. . .]</p> <p>'Understanding what it means for them.</p> <p>'Understanding the role they can play to make a difference.</p> <p>'Excited and engaged in our journey.</p> <p>'Don't forget: All colleagues need to have been engaged in a story presentation and taken part in a connection conversation.'</p> <p><i>Author comment: These instructions were followed by agendas for an 80-minute story presentation (A), a 30-minute connection conversation (B) and a 60-minute making the story your own conversation that stipulated agenda items and their suggested duration.</i></p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Four-step process	Explanation	Instructions
4. Keep the story alive.	'It's important that after the meeting we keep the messages of our journey alive. Page [...] gives examples of how you can ensure effective and ongoing dialogue about our [journey].'	'How might you keep the story of our journey alive for your teams? Here are some suggestions: 'Find ways of displaying the [cartoon landscape] in your work area. 'Refer to our journey and the key messages in your meetings. As decisions are being made, test them to make sure they're in support of our journey. 'Ask for feedback on our journey. 'Plan for some visible improvements or quick wins locally that will demonstrate to your team that our journey is real. 'Find opportunities to share stories of how colleagues are making a difference to our journey. Celebrate these stories as "the way we do things around here".'

engage internal audiences than in externally focused texts. The extant research has shown that strategy texts contain elements of consensus and necessity (e.g. Vaara et al., 2010) through which stakeholders might be persuaded to lend their support. In our case, it appears to be the careful selection of anecdotes from HWDL's stock of stories and managers' collective memories in Part 2 of the training guide that sought to engage organizational actors through reference to organizational memory and mythology (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Westerlund & Sjöstrand, 1979), which external audiences are unlikely to have. The first mechanism we therefore call *encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure*.

Second, HWDL's strategic change initiative was designed as an exercise of prospective collective sensemaking through storytelling with the aim to (co-)create a brighter future for the organization (Reissner & Pagan, 2013). A strategic narrative spanning the organization's past, present and future and the depiction of organizational actors as collective protagonists are key features of the cartoon landscape. The traditional narrative structure of beginning, middle and end underlines the future focus as organizational actors are encouraged to resolve the organization's current problems. Moreover, since HWDL is the largest employer in an otherwise isolated and largely deprived area, the message that 'we are in this together' might well strike a chord with organizational actors who have a personal stake in the organization's future prosperity. Such attempts at mobilizing managers and staff are understudied in the extant research with its focus on the underlying social interaction (e.g. Bencherki et al., 2021; Pälli & Lehtinen, 2013) and strategy documents generated for mainly external audiences (e.g. Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 2001; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Vaara et al., 2010). We posit that through the visual and symbolic messages communicated in the cartoon landscape decision-makers sought to strengthen organizational actors' emotional engagement with and sense of belonging to the organization and to encourage them to join in the journey 'towards an excellent future'. We therefore call the second mechanism *strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposive selection of anecdotes from the shared stock of stories*.

Third, the visual symbolism in the cartoon landscape and the directive lexical choices and grammatical forms used in the training guide indicate that the two strategy texts were designed to exercise discursive control. For example, the way in which organizational actors were depicted in the cartoon landscape indicates how organizational decision-makers defined acceptable and unacceptable actions and behaviours, thereby seeking to shape organizational actors' future behaviours at work with a focus on the former. The symbolic features seem to have been chosen purposively to depict behaviours that are generally regarded as unacceptable (e.g. lying idly in the sun during working time) and therefore may be difficult to critique or dispute by the audience (see Kornberger, 2013). Similarly, the content of the training guide indicates tight control of HWDL's strategic message, and

the directive and instructive language used in this text suggests careful orchestration of its delivery across the organization (see Cornut et al., 2012). Contrary to the traditional associations of storytelling as creative, intuitive and dialogic, our analysis indicates that the two strategy texts exercise significant discursive control. We therefore call the third mechanism *defining desired behaviours through visual symbolism and directive lexical choices and grammatical forms*.

Through these three mechanisms, our analysis has highlighted the interplay between narrative and visual symbolism in generating the content and process of auto-communication that frames – and thereby inevitably constrains – the message to be communicated (e.g. Pälli et al., 2009). In contrast to Cornut et al. (2012) findings, there was little ambiguity and limited scope for multiple interpretations in HWDL's strategy texts, which further underpins our claim that they were purposively produced to exercise discursive control in an attempt to engage organizational actors in co-creating a brighter future for the organization. Importantly, the three mechanisms of discursive control seem to be underpinned by the arguably closer relationship between organizational decision-makers and organizational actors, particularly as external audiences are likely to be less familiar with organizational memory and mythology (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Westerlund & Sjöstrand, 1979) and therefore play a less significant part in realizing strategic change.

As such, HWDL's use of a strategic storytelling initiative seems, at least from a managerial perspective, to be an example of conscious, purposive auto-communication that foregrounds the collective and self-referential aspects of organizational communication as the organization communicates with itself. The cartoon landscape and training guide were created solely for internal purposes as decision-makers sought to reinvigorate organizational actors' collective professionalism and thereby mobilize everyone to create a brighter future for the organization. This is important because although auto-communication is increasingly recognized as a communicative phenomenon, the extant literature does not yet provide empirical examples of texts that are purposively created for auto-communicative purposes.

From a strategic communication perspective, our analysis illustrates the delicate balance between dialogic communication and persuasive communication of strategy. On the one hand, HWDL's strategic change initiative used storytelling as a tool to create engagement, conversation and dialogue among organizational actors about the way ahead for the organization. This communicative mode implies that decision-makers sought to create openness, understanding and participation in making the strategy come true. On the other hand, through the way in which the two strategy texts were produced, the strategic change initiative might be interpreted more as a tightly controlled attempt to influence and persuade the participants about what had already been decided: the organization's journey 'towards an excellent future', the key strategic messages and the desired behaviours underpinning it. There is little, if any, room for different interpretations or divergent opinions that can be voiced openly and legitimately (see Kornberger, 2013; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011).

Hence, the way in which HWDL approached strategic communication in these two strategy texts is an example of the strategic-persuasive focus conquering the dialogical communication focus (McNamara, 2022). By this we mean that HWDL's strategic storytelling initiative seems to combine the contradictory elements of dialogue, symmetry and sensemaking in the strategic narrative, the colourful cartoon landscape and storytelling meetings on the one hand, and persuasion, asymmetry and goal-orientation through symbolic symbolism and directive lexical choices and grammatical forms on the other (see e.g. Deetz, 1992; Grunig, 2001). As such, our analysis contributes to developing the current understanding of how both the strategic-persuasive and dialogic communication focus of strategic communication practices may be jointly employed in organizational communication – even though a linear transmission model of communication may be disguised as a dialogic sensemaking process.

Conclusion

The guiding question for this article is how organizational decision-makers use the communicative modes of narrative, visual symbolism as well as lexical choice and grammatical form to exercise control over a strategic message in auto-communicative strategy texts. Our multimodal analysis illustrates how problematic the normative division between the transmission and reciprocity models of communication is in actual strategic communication practice. HWDL's strategic initiative using storytelling, playfulness, and conversations is at one level aligned with a reciprocal model of communication, focusing on sharing and participation (Carey, 2009). But as discursive control is exercised visually through symbolism in the cartoon landscape and linguistically in the training guide through minute timings, directive lexical choices and grammatical forms, the initiative is also an example of communication as transmission where decision-makers try to tightly control the delivery of the strategic message (McNamara, 2022). As such, this study is an example of E. Christensen's and Christensen (2022) point that there is always an element of transmission in communication, and more so in strategic communication when there is a clear intention and mission.

We recognize that our analysis of only two strategy texts is a key limitation of our analysis. Due to the extremely hazardous nature of HWDL's operations, access to the organization was largely restricted. We were therefore unable to examine the social interactions in the production of the two strategy texts, how HWDL managers facilitated the storytelling sessions with their teams and/or how organizational actors responded to the strategic messages incorporated in the two strategy texts studied here. This means that we are unable to draw conclusions about the meanings that organizational actors at HWDL might have taken from the strategic narrative, the cartoon landscape and the storytelling meetings. Similarly, due to limited news coverage available, we were unable to assess whether HWDL's strategic change initiative led to the expected results of a brighter future for the organization. Future research would therefore benefit from a more situated analysis (for example by using ethnographic methods) to enable a better understanding of the wider context in which the strategy texts were developed and applied. This could fruitfully be done longitudinally to assess the outcomes of strategic communication over time.

Despite this important limitation, our multimodal analysis of two rather unusual strategy texts contributes to discursive and critical studies in the following ways. First, it indicates that while language in strategic communication does indeed matter (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998), so do other communicative modes, such as in the case of HWDL narrative and visual symbolism. Future research could meaningfully study similar strategy texts with a focus on visual and symbolic elements. Second, it complements Vaara et al. (2010) textual analysis by providing additional examples for special terminology (here: the language of storytelling), discursive innovation (here: the use of narrative and visual symbolism) and forced consensus through the use of directive and tightly controlled lexical choice and grammatical form that to the best of our knowledge have not yet been observed in the extant research. Third, it complements Cornut et al. (2012) genre-focused analysis by showing that narrative and visual symbolism can also be used to communicate strategy in an optimistic, emotive, consensual and future-oriented manner while simultaneously maintaining orchestrated control over process and content.

Moreover, we propose that our analysis might also be relevant for communicators in organizations whose task is to develop materials communicating a new strategy or strategic change initiative in the following ways. First, it may provide them with new insights into how visual and symbolic modes might be used in strategic communication to complement written texts and foreground the collective and self-referential aspects of organizational communication through which sensemaking and identity work tend to take place (see Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Kjærgaard & Morsing, 2010). Second, in this way, it may enable organizational communicators to identify the most promising balance between a strategic and communication focus in the chosen practices, tools and artefacts, combining one-way transmission of information with opportunities for participation and dialogue (see McNamara, 2022) to respond to the organization's distinctive communicative needs.

Third, it may enable them to critically assess the extent to which their strategic communication exercises an appropriate degree of discursive control, again finding the right balance for an organization's needs between a strategy and communication focus (see Falkheimer & Heide, 2022). However, we would like to stress that the main aim of the study was not to provide concrete tools for how practitioners may develop their tactics. Rather, our intention is to draw attention to how strategic communication can be used as an instrument of power through specific discursive mechanisms, with the hope that these insights will lead to more professional reflective practice among those in charge of strategic communication in organizations.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Andrea Whittle for her contribution to developing an earlier draft of this article, the delegates at the 2023 British Academy of Management Conference for their constructive comments, and the two anonymous reviewers and editor for their feedback and constructive guidance during the review process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [RES-061-25-0144-A].

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