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Strategic communication as a comparative framework

Kirk Hallahan, one of the organizers of *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, argues that purposeful organizational communication is informed and improved by understanding, comparing, and borrowing ideas across functional communication units within organizations and professional disciplines. This approach follows from the idea of integrated communication. Silos that previously existed between such units and professional disciplines devoted to accomplishing particular organizational outcomes are morphing but not entirely dissolving. Yet it has become clear that organizations of various sorts have adopted strikingly similar processes for analyzing opportunities and problems, planning, implementing and controlling, and evaluating communications. This trend is readily revealed in trade publications and textbooks that address strategy related to advertising, public relations, social media, social marketing/information campaigns, and health communication.

Hallahan argues these common process elements are the essence of understanding and managing strategic communication. Processes are important concerns for professional communicators and organization managers, and are sufficient in themselves to justify systematic investigation. Acknowledging and examining similarities in the strategic processes employed by various professionals is essential to bring scholars and practitioners into the SC conversation from outside public relations.

Figure 1 identifies 12 goals-driven communications activities that commonly employ strategy and tactics. Others might be included. Some of these, such as advertising and public relations, are well developed academic disciplines informed by theory and their own corpus of research. Others are not. Each functional unit found within an entity or professional field originated and operates independently and is bound together by its own culture and conventions, and carried out by professionals and/or organizational volunteers who strongly self-identify with their work in some way ("I'm in advertising")

or “I’m a social activist”). At least for now, strategic communication is *not* its own professional practice per se, and people and organizations do not label themselves “strategic communicators” but serve as a manager of “strategic communication.”

At the center of Figure 1 are common elements in the strategic communication planning process (typically manifested in communication plans). These same ideas are commonly talked about by practitioners and found in the literatures of these various fields/disciplines:

- Analysis/research: Systematically creating a situation analysis.
- Organizational goals: Verifying, validating, or helping develop desired outcomes.
- Behavioral objectives: Specifying desirable changes in people’s knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors to achieve organizational goals.
- Audience identification/segmentation: Specifying target groups.
- Communication strategy: Determining optimal messaging, message flows, and channel schemes based on target groups.
- Communication tactics: Selecting the best tools, techniques, and vehicles consistent with message and channel strategy.
- Implementation and control: Carrying out effort to maximize effectiveness and efficiency, including elements of staffing, calendar, and budget.
- Evaluation: Impact assessment in the context of established goals and objectives and other appropriate metrics.
- Assessment/recommendations: Reflecting on results, adapting future plans, and counseling client or management.

This approach focuses on the work common to communication professionals and volunteers and makes no value judgments about the merit of one function or discipline versus another and assumes various functions will coexist. It recognizes that every organization will employ and structure its unique combination of SC functions based on its historical origins and needs. It does not call for integration or involve encroachment, although these might be outcomes as particular organizations seek efficiencies. Improved communication results are posited to be contingent upon a variety of factors, such as the communication and cooperation between communicators. These factors are themselves worthy of investigation and can be an important part of SC scholarship.

Within this practice-driven framework, SC can be examined from either modern or postmodern perspectives, directed to or involve either internal or external audiences, can rely on positivist or critical methods, and can draw from management, communication, social scientific, or humanistic theories. The only normative assertions are: (i) effective strategic communication is well planned, executed, and evaluated and thus contribute to entities achieving their mission or goals; and (ii) effective purposeful organizational and professional achievements can be enhanced by better cross-fertilization, understanding, appreciation, and possibly coordination across functions. This bottom-up, inductive approach strives to avoid reification of the concept, that is turning SC into a concrete object when it is not.

Strategic Communication as a Comparative Framework



Figure 1 Strategic communication functions and common elements.

Table 1 Four alternative conceptualizations of strategic communication.

| | <i>As public relations/corporate communication</i> | <i>As comparative framework</i> | <i>As organization scheme</i> | <i>As meta-process</i> |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| Level for analysis | Narrow function/discipline | Program planning, implementation, and evaluation processes | Organizational structures and functions | Organization-wide communication |
| Outcomes of interest | Program/campaign success | Program/planning effectiveness | Organizational effectiveness and efficiency | Communication effectiveness |
| Emphasis on individual functions or disciplines | High | Moderate | Moderate | Low |
| Integration across functions or disciplines | None, minimal | Limited, indirect | Coordinated | Full |
| Theoretical foundations | Discipline-specific theory/research; Professional conventions and best practices | Communication management | Organizational management | Critical; rhetorical |
| People studied | Practitioners; audiences | Communication managers/staffs | Communication and organizational managers | Organization-wide managers, staffs; audiences |