

From Public Relations to Strategic Communication in Sweden

The Emergence of a Transboundary Field of Knowledge

Jesper Falkheimer & Mats Heide

Abstract

In this conceptual article, we argue that strategic communication is a transboundary concept that captures, better than public relations does, the complex phenomenon of an organization's targeted communication processes in contemporary society. The aim of the article is twofold. First, the purpose is to describe and reflect the development and institutionalization of public relations education and research in Sweden. Second, based on the transboundary changes we see in industry, education and research, we argue that strategic communication is a conceptual and holistic framework that is more valid and relevant than public relations. Moreover, we suggest that strategic communication also integrates organizational (internal) communication as well as aspects of management theory and marketing, thus allowing us to understand, explain and criticize contemporary communication processes both inside organizations and between organizations and the surrounding society.

The article is mainly based on secondary data about the public relations industry, earlier research and a mapping of public relations education and research in Sweden.

Keywords: strategic communication, public relations, organizational communication, transboundary

Introduction

Traditionally, organizational communication activities have been separated and managed by different departments. The human resource department has primarily been responsible for internal communications. The marketing department has focused on communication to customers, and the communications or public relations department has had the mission to build legitimacy and maintain good relations between the organization and different publics. During the past two decades or so there has been an increased focus on organizational communication activities – such as branding, organizational identity, corporate reputation, corporate image, organizational crisis, change communication and legitimacy – that require a strategic and all-embracing approach. Hence, these activities are integrated and interrelated. As an example, organizational identity – the perception among organizational members of being one with and belonging to an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) – is closely related to the corporate brand. If organizational members do not “live the brand”, branding or image-building communication will only be a varnish weakly related to the social reality of the organization. This development is

also related to an understanding of the fundamental value of communication. Communication produces and reproduces organizations through texts, images and conversations (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010).

In this conceptual article, we argue that strategic communication is a transboundary concept that captures, better than public relations does, the complex phenomenon of an organization's targeted communication processes. The aim of the article is twofold. First, the purpose is to describe and reflect the development and institutionalization of public relations education and research in Sweden. Second, based on the transboundary changes we see in industry, education and research, we argue that strategic communication is a conceptual and holistic framework that is more valid and relevant than public relations. Moreover, we suggest that strategic communication also integrates organizational (internal) communication as well as aspects of management theory and marketing, thus allowing us to understand, explain and criticize contemporary communication processes both inside organizations and between organizations and the surrounding society.

The article is mainly based on secondary data on the public relations industry, communication professionals, a mapping of public relations education and research in Sweden as well as on earlier research. In the article, we first shortly describe, based on a national perspective but using some international comparisons, the public relations industry and practice in Sweden, and subsequently the development of education and research. The focus is not on historical analysis, but the contemporary development. In the final part, we argue for the need for a new conceptual framework: strategic communication. The changes in late-modern society, the tremendous growth of the public relations industry, and the rapprochement between public relations, organizational communication, management and marketing in theory and practice are highlighted. A figure that illustrates the transboundary theoretical framework is presented, and a discussion regarding the advantages, disadvantages and the academic positioning of strategic communication concludes the article.

A Short Comment on Professionalization

Professionalization is not of primary interest here, but it must be mentioned that professionalization is, of course, an important dimension. Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) point out that we often miss the multiple, ambiguous, and conflicted meanings of the term. Professionalization is mainly related to certain requirements, such as specialized theoretical knowledge, university education, professional association, codes of ethical conduct and an ability to uphold those codes. The importance and effect of codes of ethics for public relations are discussed by, for example, Bivins (1993) and Huang and Su (2009). Tobin (2004) believes professionalization can make the PR industry trustworthier. In a recent study, Sha (2011) found a clear pattern among American public relations practitioners – a bifurcation between “elites” and “non-elites.” According to Sha, the polarization of practitioners can be dangerous and undercut the professionalization of public relations as a field. Public relations industry associations claim that public relations is a profession, but there are also many examples of critics who argue that public relations has not yet achieved professional status and can only be regarded as a trade (Bowen 2009). This understanding was also valid in the early 1970s. Carr (1971) underscores that very few outside public relations accept it as a profession. Contemporary studies in different

countries (e.g., Abdullah & Threadgold 2008; de Bussy & Wolf 2008; Zerfaß, Verčič, Verhoeven, Angeles, & Tench 2012) show that most public relations practitioners are well-educated, have high management-level positions and acknowledge the importance of ethical standards. Even so, a study in Australia (de Bussy & Wolf 2008:380) comes to an interesting conclusion:

Paradoxically, it seems the more public relations becomes indispensable to the strategic management of major private and public sector organizations, the more reluctant practitioners become to use the term itself. Despite the positions of influence and comparatively high salaries, PR practitioners appear almost embarrassed to acknowledge their field of practice. Public relations, it may be said, is the profession that dare not speak its name.

The Swedish Public Relations Industry and Practice

There are definitely differences between public relations in Sweden and other countries, but we also assume that there are similarities. As in several other countries, the public relations industry in Sweden has experienced extraordinary growth since the 1980s, and interest in public relations education and research has increased in a similar way during recent decades. Public relations has become professionalized, even if public relations has never become a profession because this requires an exclusive jurisdiction and a universal standard of licensing (L'Etang 2002).

According to the only academic study on Swedish public relations history, the first signs of professionalization occurred during World War II and substantial growth in the sector was seen during the 1960s (Larsson 2005). In the same study, Larsson (p. 52) described Swedish public relations development as being interwoven with two main societal characteristics: the growth of interest organizations (e.g., unions and business organizations) and development of the welfare system (local, regional and national public government). The first public relations consultant agency in Sweden, *Svenska PR-byrå* (*The Swedish PR Agency*), was founded in 1956, but most agencies were founded in 1994 or later¹.

Leaving the historical approach behind, it is obvious that the development of public relations in Sweden is mainly a contemporary phenomenon, as it is in several other countries. According to Davis (2002), the number of public relations consultants in Britain increased by approximately 1,000 percent during the 1980s and 1990s. In Sweden, the boom in the consultancy sector started in 1992–1996 and continued for at least ten years. Statistics from the Association of Public Relations Consultancies in Sweden, PRECIS (representing 80% of the consultancy sector), show rapid growth in income since the 1990s. The member organization for all public relations employees, the Swedish Public Relations Association, had 5,800 members in 2013 (in 1971, the association had 500 members, 2,000 members in 1993, and 4,000 members in 2001). According to an annual index – *Informationsindex* (Montén 2012) – Swedish organizations invested approximately EUR 4.3 billion in public relations activities in 2011.

In the early days, public relations was mainly viewed as a task for former journalists. Today, the typical practitioner has an academic degree in the social science or humanities. The trade union for communication and public relations professionals (DIK Association), with 5,400 members, has background statistics. For several years now, the trade union for

journalists (Swedish Union of Journalists) does not allow public relations practitioners to be members.

In 2010, seventy-nine percent of public relations members of the DIK association were women and the medium age was 40 years. Fifty-two percent of members worked in the private sector, 25 percent for the state, 17 percent in local or regional government and 5 percent were self-employed. The notion that most public relations practitioners have a background in journalism is not correct if one actually looks at educational background. Only five percent of DIK members have a higher academic degree in journalism. Most members, 58 percent, have a degree in media and communication studies and 18 percent have a degree in the humanities.

The concept of public relations has not been widely used in Sweden. There is an aversion to using public relations as a concept, and this was and still is for ideological reasons. In the Swedish context (as in several other countries), public relations is associated with pseudo-events, propaganda techniques and manipulation. The concept of public relations has been used occasionally, but after World War II the dominating concept has been “information” (e.g., information secretaries, information consultants). The use of “information” has been challenged since the late 1990s, and today “communication” probably dominates. During the past decade a new concept has also been established, following an international trend: strategic communication. The development of this concept is not based on an ideological aversion to public relations. Instead, the main reason is that strategic communication is a wider and more holistic concept than public relations, integrating different fields of goal-oriented communication and using a multi-disciplinary and management approach, which we will discuss later (cf. Falkheimer & Heide 2011; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh 2007; Holtzhausen 2008).

Education and Research in Sweden

Courses in public relations have been given at Swedish universities since the early 1970s. Students interested in working as public relations officers could take university courses in mass communication at the departments of political science, sociology or marketing. During this time, public relations courses were called “information technique.” Courses in information technique had a practical emphasis, but also encompassed modules in social psychology and press history. During the same decade, and especially during the 1980s, the concept of “planned communication” was used and also spread internationally through a textbook called *Using Communication Theory: An Introduction to Planned Communication* (Windahl & Signitzer 1992, 2009). The overall goal of planned communication is to alter a target group’s understanding, attitude or knowledge, and thereby change its behavior. Planned communication is typically on a tactical level and the communication action in itself is the predominant goal. Most examples of planned communication were linked to public communication (i.e., stop-smoking campaigns, health and traffic safety campaigns). The means to reach this goal were well-formulated and target-group-adapted information. Thus, during the 1960s and until the 1980s, a general blind faith existed in information *per se*. If the audience received information with good arguments and facts, it was expected that they would follow the suggestions presented. In Sweden, the 1970s was the era of social marketing campaigns. Different public organizations cried out their messages through billboards and advertisements: “Eat

7–9 slices of bread everyday!”, “Use a condom!”, “*Don’t drink too much!*” etc. Another characteristic, which is connected to the transmission view of communication, was the great confidence in the efficacy of different mass media such as TV, radio and newspapers (Axley 1984; Carey 2009; Varey 2000). The transmission view on communication may still predominate in the Western world, and it mainly focuses on the process of delivering information from a sender via adequate media to recipients. A consequence of this understanding of communication is an overestimation of the effect of information *per se* and neglect of interpretations as well as contextual, cultural or situational aspects. Even if today’s alternative – the sense-making view – is acknowledged, the transmission view probably still predominates.

During the 1970–1990s, higher education in public relations was generally very national, fragmented and media-centric. Another problem related to media-centrism was that many lecturers in information techniques were not active researchers and consequently did not have sufficient knowledge about international developments within research fields such as marketing, public relations and organizational communication. Still, the media professors were internationally active and successful scholars at, for example, the Universities of Lund, Gothenburg and Stockholm. There are, however, examples of Swedish public relations scholars (using the concept of planned communication) during this time period, but it was not until the mid-1990s that the first few doctoral theses in this field were published (Linderholm 1997; Palm 1994).

In 1992, the subject *Media and Communication Studies* was launched at universities in Sweden – a multi-disciplinary subject merging mass communication theory (with a strong research base) and information techniques (with mainly an educational base). Lecturers with a mass communication background had a higher status because they were active scholars and also had better institutional positions, allowing them to control course content. The educational focus was primarily on mass media and research methods, while courses in, for example, planned communication, organization and management theories were more or less absent. Courses in organizational communication, planned communication and public relations had a lower status compared to courses, and professors, in media studies. This cleavage has been negative for the development of courses and programs, and has, at several institutions, tied public relations to the tactical level. When it comes to the students, the opposite relationship is true. Most of the students are interested in public relations, marketing communication and organizational communication, and many Bachelor’s theses are written within these fields. The Swedish Public Relations Association has also criticized the curriculum for media and communication studies for being too removed from practice and not including courses in marketing and communication management (Högskoleverket 2001).

A new phase started in the early 2000s. “Strategic communication” is now a growing educational and research area at Swedish universities and colleges. From around 2003 onward, the names of courses in public relations, planned communication and organizational communication at several institutions were changed to strategic communication. It is not clear why this change evolved, but one explanation is that strategic communication became more and more common within the industry and that some books and articles (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide 2003, 2007; Hallahan et al. 2007) emphasized strategic communication as a modern concept for communication professionals and researchers. At Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, a new Master’s program in strategic communication was

introduced during autumn semester 2007 and consequently a new major in the Swedish university system was born. The academic programs related to strategic communication that are offered at Swedish universities usually have media and communication studies as a major. Two Bachelor's programs later followed the Master's program in strategic communication, and an additional international joint Master's program, together with the University of Stirling, was launched in 2012.

Today at least twenty-four academic programs with some sort of connection to strategic communications are offered at Swedish universities or colleges, according to one mapping (Falkheimer & Heide 2011). Most programs are based in media and communication studies, with strategic communication as a possible direction concentration or as elective courses.

Research in public relations and strategic communication in Sweden is growing but still remains a minor field. The number of senior researchers that identify themselves with the field or concept is approximately 20–30, and there are several PhD candidates (Falkheimer & Heide 2011). But if one includes research that is actually about strategic communication issues, the number would be much higher (including researchers in business administration, political science, rhetoric and other related fields).

In Sweden, public relations or strategic communication as an academic subject has traditionally been a minor sub-discipline in media and communications studies. In other Nordic countries, research and education in public relations and strategic communication is, in several cases, based in business administration. The increased focus on organizational and management theory in strategic communication makes the academic positioning difficult. It is not self-evident that strategic communication is a media and communications discipline *or* a business administration discipline. We wish to emphasize that it is important not to restrict research and education in strategic communication to any single academic field or subject. Instead we should accept that different subjects and disciplines help to broaden and deepen the aggregated knowledge of strategic communications, which may gradually develop into a separate field.

Strategic Communication as an Alternative Framework

The concept of strategic communication was originally used in military theory and international relations (Stenberg 2012). The first academic work using the concept, "Strategic Communication in the Middle East," was published in *Foreign Affairs* during World War II (de Bussy & Wolf 2008), where strategic communication was understood as a kind of transport system during warfare. Two decades later, the concept was used in a *Journal of Peace Research* article about communication strategies for achieving nuclear stability during the Cold War (Pitman 1966). Although the concept does have pre-twentieth-century origins, strategic communication has a rather short history as a research field and a professional practice. From a social theoretical perspective, the increased interest in strategic communication may be interpreted as a consequence of modernity: "In circumstances of uncertainty and multiple choice, the notions of trust and risk have particular application" (Giddens 1991:3). In line with this thinking, strategic communication is an expert system used by organizations and individuals to achieve or enforce legitimacy in relation to different publics, institutions or stakeholders. Mahoney (2011), who looks at a shorter time-span, interprets the contemporary rapid development

of strategic communication as a consequence of increased organizational uncertainty due to the global economic crisis of 2008/2009.

Strategic communication offers new possibilities for both researchers and practitioners, and is more encompassing than traditional fields such as public relations and marketing communications. There are at least three different research fields that focus on organizational communication: public relations (PR), organizational communication (OC) and marketing communication (MC). Although they concentrate on the same area in general, they deal with different topics: epistemology, methodology and virtue (cf. Wehmeier & Winkler 2013). The three fields originate from different academic traditions. Public relations originates from mass communication studies and journalism (Heath 2001), while organizational communication originates from speech and communication studies (Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault 2001), and marketing communication from business administration (Dahlén, Lange, & Smith 2010). Accordingly, the fields emphasize different topics. Public relations and marketing have traditionally been oriented toward external communication, and organizational communication toward internal communication. Both public relations and marketing communication concentrate on functions and communication where stakeholders, publics or consumers are treated as segments. These two research fields mainly have a managerial perspective with the intention of making communication function more effectively (cf. Moss & DeSanto 2011). Correspondingly, the lion's share of research within PR and MC has a realist epistemology and mainly uses quantitative methods such as surveys. McKie (2001), among others, has criticized public relations researchers for being stuck in a traditional understanding of science, where the goal is to produce value-free and "objective" knowledge that mirrors reality "out there."

Until the mid-1980s, organizational communication had the same functionalist approach as PR and MC, i.e., making communication between managers and employees more effective; however, OC has since then experienced several "turns," such as the interpretive turn (Cheney 2000; Putnam 1983), the critical turn (Mumby 1988, 2013) and the discourse turn (Fairclough 1995; Grant 2004). As a consequence, there are several alternative ways to study organizational communication, and the majority of research today focuses on understanding organizational communication as a phenomenon rather than on helping practitioners become more effective. There has also been an epistemological development within PR and MC. The editor of the latest *Handbook of Public Relations*, Robert Heath (2010), sees a more varied orientation, with such concepts as meaning, discourse, dialogue and rhetoric, which have as their prerequisite a social constructionist epistemology. An equivalent development can be observed in MC, where there has been a shift from short-spanned, tactical communication campaigns to interactive, strategic, and relationship-building communication. One of the latest trends within marketing communication is conversational marketing (Jaffe 2007), which is a development of relationship marketing (Gummesson 2002). Grönroos (2006) argues that the relationship should be reciprocal, creating loyalty between organizations and customers. This has implications for communication activities that can no longer be limited to communication campaigns and commercial ads, but must also involve customer interactions and critical dialogue. At the same time, there is still a strong functionalist emphasis within PR (Wehmeier & Winkler 2013) as well as a strong applied nature (Ihlen & Verhoeven 2012). The same tendency is true for marketing communication. Media and advertising

are still emphasized in modern textbooks on marketing communication (e.g., Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Bergh 2010).

Scholars within the fields of PR, OC and MC have long had no interest in cooperating, but rather continue to maintain the walls that exist between the fields. However there have been some exhortations to increase cooperation between, for example, organizational communication and public relations. Cheney and Christensen (2001) claim that the artificial boundary between internal and external communication is problematic, as there is a mutual relationship and integration between the two forms of communication. When it comes to communication activities that aim to reinforce or change the organizational identity through branding or image management programs, it is not possible to draw a clear boundary between internal and external communication. Organizational members will definitely notice external communication in the form of commercial ads, and conversely, internal communication will not stay within the “walls” of an organization. Organizational members, who collectively have a large network, will talk about internal issues with friends and discuss organizational problems in social media. There is also the effect of auto-communication, which blurs the borders of internal and external communication. Auto-communication is an external communication whose message has a more important meaning to organizational members than to external publics (Broms & Gahmberg 1983; Cheney & Christensen 2001). The function of auto-communication is not the message per se, but the self-referential and self-reinforcement effect. Hence, there is a close relationship between internal and external communication, and cooperation across field boundaries would increase possibilities for generating new knowledge on the phenomenon of organization communication.

Cheney and Christensen (2001) remind us that there is also an epistemological aspect of this reasoning. The traditional metaphors of organizations are problematic. The container metaphor of organizations indicates that an organization is understood as an object, a phenomenon existing “out there,” independent of organizational members, and different forms of “human” metaphors suggest that an organization is a subject that acts, learns, makes decisions and so forth (Czarniawska-Joerges 1993). In these essentialist metaphors, communication is understood as something that exists and flows in an organization and as an exchange process between an organization (as a subject) and different receivers (i.e., internal and external target groups). In a contemporary, social, constructionist understanding of organizations, communication is not only a process for information dissemination, but also the very process of constructing and maintaining an organization. The American organizational psychologist Karl E. Weick (1979) underlined early on that organizations should not be understood as stable objects. Instead, Weick explained that organizations are caught up in everlasting processes of becoming, where communication enacts temporary and fluid social structures (i.e., organizations). Weick has a process orientation and believes that use of the verb “to organize” prevents us from being captured in the traditional realist epistemology (cf. Hernes 2008).

Since the beginning of 2000, there has been a strong trend toward integrating communication functions in organizations, where different units, e.g., the departments of human resources, IT, public relations and marketing, emerge as one large communication department. One rationale behind this development is that a large communication department has enhanced possibilities to influence the organizational agenda and to add a communicative perspective to organizational decisions and actions. Furthermore,

an understanding has also grown among practitioners that internal and external communication are closely related.

As a consequence of the development described above, the boundaries between traditional research fields interested in organization communications (i.e., marketing, organizational communication and public relations) are artificial. There have been several attempts from different directions to increase the integration of the fields, and these have led to new concepts, such as total communication (Grönroos & Rubinstein 1986; Åberg 1990), integrated communication (Grönstedt 2000), integrated marketing communication (Holm 2006; Proctor & Kitchen 2002), internal public relations (Gill 2011) and internal marketing (Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, & Saunders 2008). In the current marketing communication literature, there is an obvious integration trend, as issues like reputation and branding are discussed in relation to identity and internal communication processes (Fill 2009).

The concept of corporate communication is closely related to strategic communication. The basic idea behind applied corporate communications and the concepts mentioned above is that an organization should speak to many publics simultaneously and using consistent messages (cf. Cornelissen 2011). The core of corporate communications is corporate identity – the desire for different stakeholder groups to have a certain, positive image of an organization. Christensen, Morsing and Cheney (2008) argue that corporate communications is based on a metaphor of holism, meaning that everything is embraced within one framework. An organization within corporate communication is implicitly understood as being a body that can include and integrate all variations and perspectives into one amalgamated message. It is further assumed that the expressions of an organization can be managed from the top level of an organization. In other words, these concepts have a clear functionalist approach, where it is believed that a strong message transmitted to all publics will have a strong impact. Corporate communications also has a holistic approach to organization communication, but it has a predominantly instrumental and functionalist view based in management and marketing research (Christensen et al. 2008). The integration of the communication approach has been very successful among practitioners, but there are now signs of decreasing belief in the very idea behind corporate communication. The recently published *European Communication Monitor 2012* shows that the idea of shaping a consistent message and image for all stakeholders is supported by fewer respondents than was the case in earlier monitors². Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) criticize the majority of textbooks on corporate communication for not explicitly defining the concept. Corporate communication is most often regarded as an umbrella term for different forms of communication practices in organizations. Another frequent criticism of corporate communication is the fact that a distinct perspective has dominated the majority of previous research in corporate communication – functionalism with its overconfidence in information *per se* (i.e., the transmission view of communication) (Christensen & Cornelissen 2011; Ihlen & Verhoeven 2012).

Corporate communication and strategic communication are cousins. While corporate communication has its origins in the management and marketing fields, strategic communication originates from media and communication studies and public relations. Strategic communication also adopts a holistic approach to organizations in regard to their communication. This means that the dichotomy that exists between public relations (focus on external communications) and organizational communication (internal com-

munication) is rejected. Marketing's focus on customer and sales relationships is also an important aspect, but as part of a whole. Strategic communication permeates the entire organization, thus affecting not only the traditional function that handles communication issues, but also those that handle marketing. Further, strategic communication integrates knowledge from other disciplines such as organization theory, social theory, media theory and communication theory. The type of communication theory that is most relevant to strategic communication, in turn, is clearly linked to sociology, social psychology and rhetoric. This is because strategic communication in general has its origins in communication at the group, organizational and societal levels.

In 2013, strategic communication may be viewed as a minor but established international field of research with academic units and departments, professors, programs, courses, conferences and a journal. The launching of *The International Journal of Strategic Communication* by the publishing house Routledge in 2007 marks an important phase in the field's development.

We define strategic communication as an organization's conscious communication efforts to reach its goals. In the broadest possible sense of the term, organization in this context refers to private companies, public authorities and organizations, associations and interest groups. A definition of strategic communication can be found in the first issue of *The International Journal of Strategic Communication* (Hallahan et al. 2007:7):

The purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission [...].
It further implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements.

The latter definition, similar to a definition in a Swedish textbook (Falkheimer & Heide 2007), has some shortcomings. Foremost, the vital function of communication for the production and reproduction of organizations is neglected. A fundamental starting point in strategic communication is that communication is not a simple tool for transmitting information and knowledge between people in an objectified world, but is the very means for producing and a resource that produces the social world (cf. Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld 2005). In other words, communication is understood as a sense-making process. As a consequence of this reasoning, it is not only communication professionals who practice strategic communication, which is typically assumed within public relations research (cf. Wehmeier & Winkler 2013). We believe that strategic communication practice is something that many actors – such as managers, leaders, politicians, marketers, lawyers and human resources people and volunteers – are performing in more or less formalized social groupings. They all act and communicate strategically and contribute to the production and reproduction of an organization.

Furthermore, the definition only directs attention to the practices of strategic communication and not to strategic communication research. Strategic communication is firstly a research field where researchers are interested in the phenomenon of strategic communication, i.e., they seek to describe, explain, criticize and understand the practice of strategic communication and its impact on society, organizations and individuals. The vital aspect of strategic communication is the epistemological interests (Ger. *erkenntnisinteresse* coined by Habermas, 1968) of an organization's communication.

Discussion and Remarks

The first aim of this article is to describe and reflect on the development and institutionalization of public relations education and research in Sweden. The mapping and description, based on secondary data, reveal some strong trends. First, the public relations industry in Sweden has grown considerably since the 1980s, experiencing a boom during the 1990s. The Swedish public relations development has its main origins in the government (or the welfare state) and a will to educate and inform citizens. But the major increase (number of communication officers, consultants as well as investments) during recent decades may be interpreted as a consequence of the modern social development, with increased deregulation and market liberalism that have gradually challenged the traditional welfare state.

Statistics from unions and interest organizations show that a large proportion of practitioners now have a higher education and have moved closer to top management. There is no doubt that the practice is undergoing a process of professionalization, even if the occupation may never become a profession in the same sense as law or medicine. The mapping of higher education shows that there are few examples of programs in public relations or strategic communication at Swedish universities. Public relations and strategic communication are often offered as minor courses in media and communication studies programs, with some exceptions. This means that there is a media-centric bias in public relations and strategic communication in higher education. But it is also clear that interest in strategic communication and public relations is growing in other disciplines, such as in political science and business administration. The research field in Sweden has been fragmented for many years, but is growing.

The second aim is to argue for the use of strategic communication as a conceptual and holistic framework that better captures the complex phenomenon of an organization's communication than do traditional, boundary-maintaining concepts. Public relations, organizational or marketing communication as concepts do not accord particularly well with the development taking place in theory and practice. The transboundary development clearly shows the need for a new concept and a holistic framework. We find strategic communication, inspired by Hallahan et al. (2007), to be a better alternative concept. In addition to the description of education and research development in Sweden, we also think that this concept is in better accordance with the contemporary social, cultural and economic structural transformation taking place in late-modern society.

Weick (2009) emphasizes that if an organization is to function successfully in a complex environment, it too must be complex. Organizations should take advantage of their internal variation, for example, individuals' different skills, views, experiences and cultural backgrounds. Organizations that use simple models to relate to a complex environment will not be able to understand and manage the environment and audiences. Strategic communication is a valid concept. Integrated marketing is too narrow a concept and gives the wrong signals to all communications that are essentially about marketing issues. It may be that integrated marketing can work in a business context, but in terms of other organizations, municipalities, hospitals and government agencies, the concept is not at all useful.

Strategic communication is multi-disciplinary, but has some clear foundations. In the model below, we show how strategic communication may be viewed as a field that is emerging at the intersection of communication and media theory, organizational and management theory and social theory.

Figure 1. Strategic Communication and its Relationship to Nearby Fields



There are, of course, practical advantages and disadvantages associated with the integration trend that research in strategic communication has and will reflect upon. If we start with the disadvantages, it is clear that the integration trend has arisen from a desire to be faster and better, and to more effectively reach different audiences with the same message. Integrated communication aims to present a clear and unambiguous image of what the organization stands for in all its messages, symbols and strategies. This leads to organizational integration of all media and messages, and thereby may seem to avoid incongruity. But because humans think and act according to their own beliefs and understandings, the idea is that a strong brand, which is the concept of an organization, should be the foundation of a successful organization. The risk of the integrated communication trend is that we will get stuck in an approach that is too simple. We believe it is easy to be blinded by a desire to integrate messages and media, and then to forget how complex the human process of interpretation is and how different all of us are. We all have different interests, experiences and knowledge, and are part of different networks, and we interpret information accordingly. In summary, it is highly questionable that an organization could practically control all communication in all forms and at all levels.

A clear example of a failed attempt to achieve integrated communication is the transparency trend. Organizations are under pressure, for example, by law and the media (annual and environmental reports, journalism, social media) to be transparent by presenting as much information as possible to various audiences. Through ICT, it is now possible for organizations to quickly and easily publish information. This means that organizations feel more transparent than before, but also more vulnerable than ever. The situation is somewhat ironic. First, there is an implicit notion that outside groups or stakeholders want or require organizational transparency. Second, communication is considered to be the same as information and it is assumed that audiences want more and more information. Third, it is assumed that more information will allow audiences to develop sophisticated notions of an organization. Research (e.g., Christensen & Cheney 2000) has shown, however, that consumers or citizens are not always interested or involved in what organizations have

to say. Another factor is that while external groups may be interested in and have access to all possible forms of information, we humans have no capacity to process all of it. As early as 1956, Nobel laureate in economics Herbert Simon noted that humans are limited rational beings, that is, we are unable to treat all information and we must be content with a satisfactory result. The organization cannot be sure how a given person will interpret the information provided. In other words, it would seem to be an impossible task to try to spread uniform images of an organization. The advantage of integrated communication is that it can help to improve the status and awareness of communication issues and organization processes, such as change and organizational learning. A strong communications department makes it easier to build up extensive expertise in the field and to provide opportunities to work optimally with strategic communications issues where the boundary between internal and external communications is erased.

In the present article, we propose strategic communication as a concept that can promote interesting and relevant research and as a way to mirror the transboundary development taking place in organizations and society. In our concluding remarks, we state that this concept does focus on integration, but that this does not mean that the aim is to achieve monophony (rather the opposite), and that the idea of transparency must be handled with care.

Note

1. <http://www.precis.se>
2. See <http://www.communicationmonitor.eu/>

References

- Abdullah, Z., and Threadgold, T.T. (2008) 'The Professionalisation of Public Relations in Malaysia: Perception Management and Strategy Development'. *Public Relations Review*, 34(3), 285–287.
- Ashforth, B.E. and Mael, F. (1989) 'Social identity theory and the organization'. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20–39.
- Axley, S. R. (1984) 'Managerial and Organizational Communication in Terms of the Conduit Metaphor'. *Academy of Management Review*, 9(3), 428–437.
- Bentele, G., and Wehmeier, S. (2003) 'From "Literary Bureaus" to a Modern Profession: The Development and Current Structure of Public Relations in Germany, in Sriramesh, K. and Verčič, D. (eds.), *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research and Practice* (pp. 199–221). London: Routledge.
- Bivins, T.H. (1993) 'Public Relations, Professionalism, and the Public Interest'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12(2), 117–126.
- Bowen, S.A. (2009) 'What Communication Professionals Tell Us Regarding Dominant Coalition Access and Gaining Membership'. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37(4), 418–443.
- Broms, H., and Gahmberg, H. (1983) 'Communication to Self in Organizations and Cultures'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28(3), 482–495.
- de Bussy, N.M., and Wolf, K. (2008) 'The State of Australian Public Relations: Professionalisation and Paradox'. *Public Relations Review*, 35(4), 376–381.
- Carey, J. (2009) *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carr, P. (1971) 'Public Relations Professionalism'. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 15(4), 6.
- Cheney, G. (2000) 'Interpreting Interpretive Research: Toward Perspectivism without Relativism, in Corman, S. and Poole, M. S. (eds.), *Perspectives on Organizational Communication: Finding Common Ground* (pp. 3–45). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Cheney, G., and Christensen, L.T. (2001) 'Organizational Identity: Linkages between Internal and External Communication, in Jablin, F.M. and Putnam, L.L. (eds.), *Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods* (pp. 231–269). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Cheney, G., and Lee Ashcraft, K. (2007) 'Considering "the Professional" in Communication Studies: Implications for Theory and Research within and Beyond the Boundaries of Organizational Communication'. *Communication Theory*, 17(2), 146–175.
- Christensen, L.T., and Cheney, G. (2000) 'Self-Absorption and Self-Seduction in the Corporate Identity Game, in Schultz, M., Hatch, M.J. and Larsen, M.H. (eds.), *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation, and the Corporate Brand* (pp. 246–270). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Christensen, L.T., and Cornelissen, J. (2011) 'Bridging Corporate and Organizational Communication: Review, Development and a Look to the Future'. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 25(3), 383–414.
- Christensen, L.T., Morsing, M., and Cheney, G. (2008) *Corporate Communications: Convention, Complexity, and Critique*. London: Sage.
- Cornelissen, J. (2011) *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Cutlip, S.M., Center, A.H., and Broom, G.M. (2006) *Effective Public Relations* (8. ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1993) *The Three-Dimensional Organization: A Constructionist View*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Dahlén, M., Lange, F., and Smith, T. (2010) *Marketing Communications: A Brand Narrative Approach*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Davis, A. (2002) *Public Relations Democracy: Public Relations, Politics and the Mass Media in Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ewen, S. (1996) *PR! The Social History of Spin*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Falkheimer, J., and Heide, M. (2003) *Reflexiv kommunikation: Nya tankar för strategiska kommunikatörer*. Malmö: Liber.
- Falkheimer, J., and Heide, M. (2007) *Strategisk kommunikation: En bok om organisationers relationer*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Falkheimer, J., and Heide, M. (Eds.) (2011) *Strategisk kommunikation: Forskning och praktik*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Fill, C. (2009) *Marketing Communications: Interactivity, Communities and Content*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity press.
- Gill, R. (2011) 'Corporate Storytelling as an Effective Internal Public Relations Strategy'. *International Business and Management*, 3(1), 17–25.
- Grant, D. (2004) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage.
- Grönroos, C. (2006) 'On Defining Marketing: Finding a New Roadmap for Marketing'. *Marketing Theory*, 6(4), 395–417.
- Grönroos, C., and Rubinstein, D. (1986) *Totalkommunikation: Analys Och Planering Av Företags Marknads-kommunikation*. Malmö: Liber.
- Grönstedt, A. (2000) *The Customer Century: Lessons from World Class Companies in Integrated Marketing and Communications*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gummesson, E. (2002) *Relationsmarknadföring: Från 4P Till 30R* (3 ed.). Malmö: Liber.
- Habermas, J. (1968/1987) *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., and Sriramesh, K. (2007) 'Defining Strategic Communication'. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 3–35.
- Heath, R.L. (2001) 'Defining the Discipline, in Heath, R.L. (ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 1–9). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heath, R.L. (2010) 'Preface, in Heath, R.L. (ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. xi–xv). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hernes, T. (2008) *Understanding Organization as Process: Theory for a Tangled World*. London: Routledge.
- Holm, O. (2006) 'Integrated Marketing Communication: From Tactics to Strategy'. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 11(1), 23–33.
- Holtzhausen, D.R. (2008) Strategic Communication. In Donsbach, W. (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication* (Vol. X, pp. 4848–4855). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Huang, Y.H., and Su, S.H. (2009) 'Public Relations Autonomy, Legal Dominance, and Strategic Orientation as Predictors of Crisis Communicative Strategies'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 86(1), 29–41.
- Högskoleverket. (2001) *Utvärdering av medie- och kommunikationsvetenskapliga utbildningar vid svenska universitet och högskolor*. Stockholm: Högskoleverket.
- Ihlen, O., and Verhoeven, P. (2012) 'A Public Relations Identity for the 2010s'. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 1(2), 159–176.

- Jaffe, J. (2007) *Join the Conversation: How to Engage Marketing-Wearied Consumers with the Power of Community, Dialogue, and Partnership*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.
- Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., Wong, V., and Saunders, J. (2008) *Principles of Marketing: Fifth European Edition*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- L'Etang, J. (2002) 'Public Relations Education in Britain: A Review at the Outset of the Millennium and Thoughts for a Different Research Agenda'. *Journal of Communication Management*, 7(1), 43–53.
- L'Etang, J. (2004) *Public Relations in Britain: A History of the Professional Practice in the 20th Century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Larsson, L. (2005) *Upplysning och propaganda. Utvecklingen av svensk PR och information*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Linderholm, I. (1997) *Målgruppen och budskapet: En modell för målgruppsanalys och utformning av budskap om trafiksäkerhet till unga manliga trafikanter*. Lund: Lund University.
- Mahoney, J. (2011) 'Horizons in Strategic Communication: Theorising a Paradigm Shift'. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 5(3), 143–153.
- McKie, D. (2001) 'Updating Public Relations: "New Science", Research Paradigms, and Uneven Developments, in Heath, R.L. (ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 75–91). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Montén, R. (2012). *Informationsindex 2011: informationsbranschens Tillväxt Och Utveckling under 2011* Stockholm: Sveriges Informationsförening och Preciis.
- Moss, D., and DeSanto, B. (2011) *Public Relations: A Managerial Perspective*. London: Sage.
- Mumby, D.K. (1988) *Communication and Power in Organizations: Discourse, Ideology and Domination*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Mumby, D. K. (2013) *Organizational Communication: An Critical Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Palm, L. (1994) *Övertalningsstrategier: Att Välja Budskap Efter Utgångsläge*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Pelsmacker, P. d., Geuens, M., and Bergh, J. v. d. (2010) *Marketing Communications: A European Perspective*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Pitman, G.R. (1966) 'A Calculus of Military Stability'. *Journal of Peace Research*, 3(4), 349.
- Proctor, T., and Kitchen, P. (2002) 'Communication in Postmodern Integrated Marketing'. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 7(3), 144–154.
- Putnam, L.L. (1983) 'The Interpretive Perspective: An Alternative to Functionalism, in Putnam, L. L. and Pacanowsky, M. E. (eds.), *Communication and Organization: An Interpretive Approach* (pp. 31–54). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Putnam, L.L., and Nicotera, A. M. (2010) 'Communicative Constitution of Organization is a Question: Critical Issues for Addressing It'. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(1), 158–165.
- Sha, B.-L. (2011) 'Accredited Vs. Non-Accredited: The Polarization of Practitioners in the Public Relations Profession'. *Public Relations Review*, 37(2), 121–128.
- Stenberg, J. (2012) *On Strategic Communication*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University.
- Tobin, N. (2004) 'Can the Professionalisation of the UK Public Relations Industry Make It More Trustworthy?'. *Journal of Communication Management*, 9(1), 56–64.
- Tompkins, P.K., and Wanca-Thibault, M. (2001) 'Organizational Communication: Prelude and Prospects, in Jablin, F.M. and Putnam, L.L. (eds.), *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods* (pp. xvii–xxx). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Varey, R.J. (2000) 'A Critical Review of Conceptions of Communication Evident in Contemporary Business and Management Literature'. *Journal of Communication Management*, 4(4), 328–340.
- Wehmeier, S., and Winkler, P. (2013) 'Expanding the Bridge, Minimizing the Gaps: Public Relations, Organizational Communication, and the Idea That Communication Constitutes Organization'. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 27(2), 280–290.
- Weick, K.E. (1979) *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (2 ed.) Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Weick, K.E. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weick, K.E. (2009) *Making Sense of the Organization: The Impermanent Organization*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K. M., and Obstfeld, D. (2005) 'Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking'. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409–422.
- Wehmeier, S., and Winkler, P. (2013) 'Expanding the Bridge, Minimizing the Gaps: Public Relations, Organizational Communication, and the Idea That Communication Constitutes Organization'. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 27(2), 280–290.
- Windahl, S., and Signitzer, B. (1992) *Using Communication Theory: An Introduction to Planned Communication*. London: Sage.

- Windahl, S., and Signitzer, B. (2009) *Using Communication Theory: An Introduction to Planned Communication* (2 ed.) London: Sage.
- Zerfaß, A., Verčič, D., Verhoeven, P., Angeles, M., and Tench, R. (2012) *European Communication Monitor 2012: Challenges and Competencies for Strategic*.
- Åberg, L. (1990) 'Theoretical Model and Praxis of Total Communication.' *International public relations review*, 13(2), 13–16.

JESPER FALKHEIMER, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, jesper.falkheimer@isk.lu.se

MATS HEIDE, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, mats.heide@isk.lu.se