

ARGUMENT FOR A STRATEGY OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The current approaches to strategic communication only refer to the most obvious aspects: the instruments of strategic communication. However, strategic communication is so much more than a simple toolkit which must be used for a specific purpose. Strategic communication must be linked to security interests and must itself have a strategy establishes the frame of perception, comprehension and signification for the target audience. The strategy of strategic communication thus becomes the vector for projecting and developing security strategies and the endgoal of strategic communication becomes security culture.

Keywords: strategy, strategic communication, security, security culture

Strategic communication is an increasingly present topic of debate in communication studies. It can be noticed in the actions and activities of corporations and organizations, in the operations and missions of international and transnational bodies, in the policies and strategies of states and governments. The analysis that we shall undertake will show that each of the aforementioned structures has its own conception with respect to strategic communication, its goal and its area of applicability. Strategic communication is either an integrative concept with respect to a series of complementary communication processes, or a concept employed to impress and astound due to the resonance it carries. In our opinion, strategic communication should satisfy the definition criteria of a strategy, namely, it should encompass a subject field different from that of other communication processes, it should present an area of applicability distinct from that of other communication processes, and it should pursue endgoals diverse from those of other communication processes.

In the literature, strategic communication is mainly placed in the context of organizational communication and it is connected to it. The following are a few relevant examples of this: Kjerstin Thorson, in Oxford Bibliographies¹, presents a definition of strategic communication which is based on the makeup structure and the complementarity of communication processes: "Strategic communication is an umbrella term to describe the activities of disciplines including public relations, management communication, and advertising." This definition reflects the understanding that communication processes function on the basis of a relation of complementarity, that they complete and supplement each other. Even if the author only mentions three communication processes, this makeup can be extended to other processes that are specific to an organization. Actually, according to such a definition, strategic communication does not refer to a distinct process, but it subsumes a series of other processes and simply gives this collection an umbrella, generic term. However, what does not result from the use of strategic communication as an umbrella term is that there is an actual connection, an underlying coordination among the subsumed processes by virtue of a unitary action plan. And this connection is precisely what strategic communication presupposes, this is what is currently missing from studies focusing on this conjugated type of communication.

¹ Kjerstin Thorson, Strategic Communication, Oxford Index, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0007.xml>, accessed 05.10.2018.

Other authors² consider that communication practices and processes and the goals they envisage are what gives a strategic characteristic to communication: “[strategic communication is] ...the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”. According to these authors, the process as such is not the defining characteristic of strategic communication, but the focus of communication processes towards the fulfillment of the organizations mission. For these authors, analyzing the target audience profile, writing messages and coordinating communication processes become the determining elements for strategic communication. In this light, a communication process is strategic if the endgoals it pursues are correlated to the mission and the aim of the organization. Thus, strategic communication gains a landmark: the mission of the organization, but it does not become a distinct process, since any communication form or action could be considered “strategic” if it is in keeping with the mission of the organization. From this characteristic, we can deduce the correlation and dependence of strategic communication on the organizational management activity, which it simply accompanies and reflects. It should also be mentioned that the six components that the authors subscribe to strategic communication – management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns – only come to strengthen the idea of a summary representation of certain processes that have all come to bear a common name: strategic communication.

A. Zerfass și S. Huck³ consider that a communication process becomes strategic if it is innovative, if it surpasses the boundaries of the current states of affairs, if it generates and explores new avenues, forms or horizons of communication. At the same time, the authors consider that such innovations can mostly appear in leadership communication. Undoubtedly, strategic communication must strive to surpass the aim of solving concrete issues.

Another author, B. Steyn⁴ formulates a defining condition for strategic communication: “[strategic] communicators provide input to, but not take part in, corporate strategy formulation. Corporate communication strategy should be linked to corporate strategy.” In the author’s opinion, strategic communication is not an umbrella term, it does not represent the practice of tailoring messages to the target audience or to the organizational mission. B. Steyn remarks that an organization’s strategy and strategic communication must work hand in hand. Strategic communication will thus contribute to the organization’s strategy: it determines in strategy “what” and “how” the organization will communicate. Thus, strategic communication can become a process distinct from the other organizational communication processes, with its own agenda and mission. Our concern with respect to this theory refers to the fact that in the organization’s strategy this “what” and “how” are no more than the communication component or function of that strategy, and to consider this component as a process of strategic communication seems to oversimplify the situation and use too complex a term for an extremely restricted area of applicability.

The Financial Times Lexicon (FTL)⁵ provides a distinct meaning, as it puts forth a definition for strategic communication which highlights the qualitative character of communication: “Communication is strategic when it is completely consistent with a corporation’s mission, vision, values and is able to enhance the strategic positioning and competitiveness of the organization.” Moreover, in the examples it provides, it seems that the strategic communication process that FTL takes under consideration is actually corporate social responsibility communication. However, strategic communication cannot be social responsibility communication, even if the latter focuses on strategic objectives. Even so, one idea is worth retaining: in order to succeed and attain a

² Hallahan, K., D. Holtzhausen, B. van Ruler, D. Vercic, and K. Sriramesh. 2007. Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1:3–35.

³ Zerfass, A., and S. Huck. 2007. Innovation, communication, and leadership: New developments in strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1.2: 107–122.

⁴ Steyn, B. 2003. From strategy to corporate communication strategy: A conceptualization. *Journal of Communication Management* 8.2: 168–183

⁵ <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=strategic-communication>

competitive positioning compared to other organizations, strategic communication is the vehicle for the vision and values of the organization.

It can be noticed from the above presented theories that, in the organizational, corporate context, strategic communication is more often than not a particular aspect or a specific instance of organizational or corporate communication. It does not represent a specific process in and of itself, nor does it have a specific object. In this context, the strategic aspect of communication is given solely by the manner in which the organization projects its messages, by the extent to which they are correlated to its strategy, of which it is an integral part. Consequently, in organizational communication, one cannot identify a strategy for strategic communication, only several disparate elements – orientation according to the organization’s mission and the link to the organization’s strategy – insufficient for a strategic-level outlook and conception.

In order to pertinently discuss strategic communication so it does not overlap with any of the afore-mentioned situations, a clearer development and analysis of the area of applicability is required, as well as of the context and goals of such communication. In what follows, we shall look at NATO’s and the US government view on strategic communication.

NATO has a specific and well-structured approach to the phenomenon. NATO has developed its own approach with respect to strategic communication, which represents a very important area of interest and research (there is a NATO StratCom Center of Excellence in Riga), as well as an area of operations for the Alliance. NATO’s attitude towards strategic communication denotes interest and commitment. The vision NATO holds is very similar to the theoretical and practical one used by private organizations and corporations. Thus, for NATO, strategic communication is firstly a common denominator for a number of activities that the Alliance had also previously undertaken: “NATO Strategic Communications is the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims”. These activities and capabilities are:

1) Public Diplomacy: NATO civilian communications and outreach efforts responsible for promoting awareness of and building understanding and support for NATO's policies, operations and activities, in complement to the national efforts of Allies; 2) Public Affairs: NATO civilian engagement through the media to inform the public of NATO policies, operations and activities in a timely, accurate, responsive, and proactive manner; 3) Military Public Affairs: promoting NATO's military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the Alliance; 4) Information Operations: NATO military advice and coordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding, and capabilities of adversaries and other NAC-approved parties in support of Alliance operations, missions and objectives; 5) Psychological Operations: planned psychological activities using methods of communications and other means directed to approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behavior, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives.⁶

It can be noticed that NATO is preoccupied by the correlation of communication processes with the Alliance’s strategy. Thus, Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations are integrated in the operational planning process for military operations, being considered military capabilities and force generators. However, this does not account for the strategic nature of communication. But, at the same time, NATO is also focused on promoting its values and objectives through strategic communication. Its communication campaigns, WeAreNATO being one of the most recent, fully reflect its intent to transmit the Alliance’s values and to position itself in the public sphere with respect to other military actors. Although it manages to combine in all their complexity and particularity its own communication characteristics and practices, NATO does not surpass the paradigm in which other organizations operate with respect to strategic communication as it does not manage to define an area of applicability that is specific solely to strategic communication. Its areas of interest and applicability are restricted to the

⁶<https://www.stratcomcoe.org/about-strategic-communications>, accessed 07.10.2018.

respective communication processes that make up NATO's particular brand of strategic communication, which means that NATO has not, as of yet, identified a specific domain of applicability for strategic communication.

A more complex and detailed approach can be found when analyzing the same process and concept at the level of the United States' government. For the US government, strategic communication represents the "focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power"⁷. This definition already has the elements that we have been looking for. The area of applicability for strategic communication becomes evident and distinct from other similar ones: promoting the interests, policies and objectives of the US government, coordinating the communication capabilities and synchronizing the actions of national actors, in other words of the political arena. The context in which strategic communication operates is also distinguishable: it generates a partnership between the government and various target audiences. And last, but not least, the goal of strategic communication becomes synergic at the national level, which means that it encompasses the processes we have discussed before and it is coordinated because all these processes work together flawlessly to promote the government's values and interests.

Strategic communication can only be truly manifest at the level of state government. Strategic communication is correlated to the government's strategy and its objectives are to promote the government's interests (political, economic, diplomatic, military, cultural, etc.) by cultivating at the same time the social and political values of the government. Strategic communication can also be correlated to the national security strategy, in which case, strategic communication becomes the vector for security culture, promoting security values and interests. As previously shown, a wide array of procedures and techniques does not encompass the essence of strategic communication. Strategic communication treats the communication means, media, channels and infrastructures as instruments through which it becomes manifest, but it is not their complexity that conveys its strategic nature. This strategic character is determined by its ability to coordinate the processes and infrastructures that it uses, and this ability can only come as a result of a well-developed and clear strategy.

In conclusion, strategic communication cannot simply be an umbrella term, cannot simply express a characteristic of the intensity and focus of a process or be just a name for already existing and operating processes. Strategic communication cannot be the mere action of coordinating operational capabilities deployed during a political and military mission.

Strategic communication must be a distinct communication process, associated to governance strategies and security strategies. In this stance, strategic communication must have its own strategy, since it cannot be based on a simple model, as it is not repetitive and routine-like, but rather it needs to adapt to the ever-changing and complex context of governing. Strategic communication must be innovative and must have the ability to explore new communication horizons. Moreover, the strategy of strategic communication must be competitive because this type of communication takes place in a competitive environment where more actors compete for the attention and the minds of the target audiences. Strategic communication must be able to face up to other such processes, and the only means by which it can do so is if it based on a well-thought out and clear strategy, meant to coordinate and guide it.

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