

DEFINING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN AN ORGANIZATION –A POSSIBLE APPROACH AT CROSS ROADS

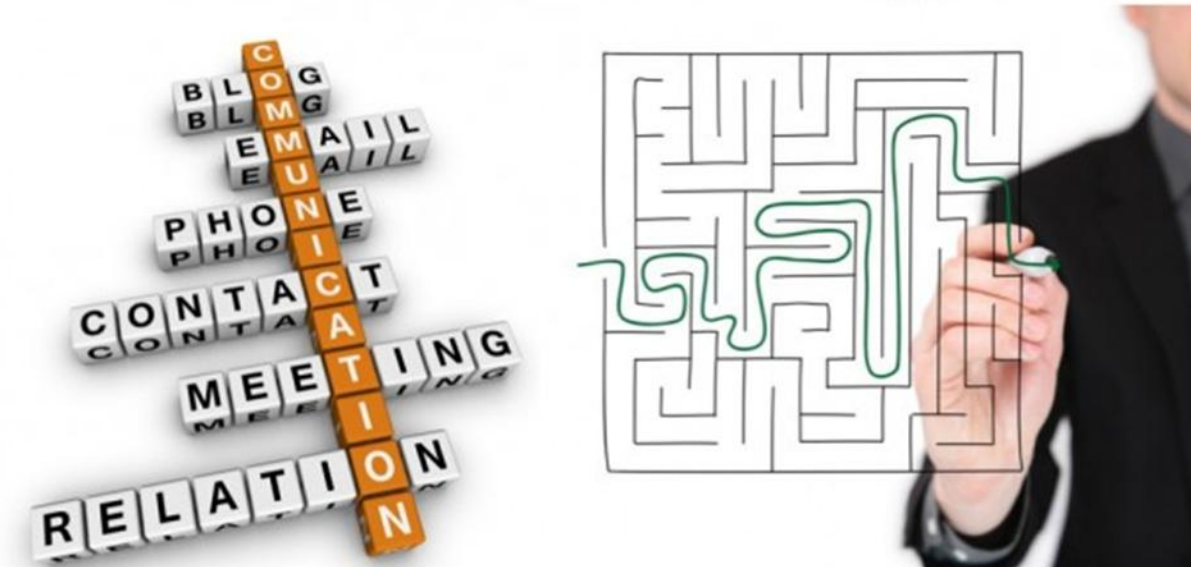
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Abstract. The starting point of the current research has as main concept strategic communication in organization for an approach in communication and public relations, answering the question: how an organization communicates with its public(s) in various situational contexts. The term strategic communication has been used in the academic literature for many years, but scholars have been in the process of coherently exploring the significance of the practices and the implications of theories of the concept in order to define it as an entity unified in a body of knowledge. In this regard, the practice of strategic communication has been the subject of the survey of European Communication Monitor (ECM) 2012 and the theoretical framework has been developed in different researches followed the survey in 2015-2017. According to these literature reviews integrating either surveys-ECM 2012-2017 or the scientific articles/chapters in the books related with the concept, the current study has as main aim to define the concept in terms of organizational studies and to argue the necessity of such a term strategic to develop as a part of the public relations paradigm - the managerial approach and/or a trans - disciplinary perspective involving different domains in an organization. In this regard, the structure of the current article has been integrated: (i) a short literature review starting from practices to theories have been explained by practitioners and academics, (ii) the possible framework from a communicative approach research and (iii) the definition of the concept in terms of public relations, media relations and organizational studies cross-roaded perspective.

Keywords: strategic communication, transdisciplinary perspective, organizational studies, public relations.

INSTEAD OF INTRODUCTION. After reading the article, the main issue to demonstrate it might be how strategic communication may be defined, analyzed, measured and evaluated in a coherent and cohesive objective for a communication in and from organization to their publics in internal or external environments for managing relationships, for fulfilling the mission, vision and values of a reputational organization.

Communication strategy



Over a third of Romanian companies do not have a Strategic Communication Department, study shows Strategic Communication is an integral part of the Romanian business for 74 percent of the companies. Only a communication strategy in line with the values and strategic objectives of the business will generate on one hand trust and involvement within and, on the other hand, credibility and notoriety without the organization, a recent research on the role of Strategic Communication and Public Affairs & Government Relations conducted by McGuire Woods Romania in partnership with Sfera Business reveals. This study aims to measure the different quantitative and qualitative aspects that could show how Romanian companies use these two functions. 64 percent of Romanian companies have a Strategic Communication department, while 34 percent do not have such a unit and 2 percent do not know if they have such a department. In 45 percent of the surveyed companies, the Strategic Communication activity is separated from Public Affairs and Government Relations. Still, in only 57 percent of these (26 percent in total) the collaboration between the two functions is efficient. In 24 percent of the companies which have the Strategic Communications separated from Public Affairs and Government Relations, the collaboration is partial and in 12 percent there is no collaboration.

In Romania, 73 percent of the companies think that the most important role of Strategic Communication is reputation management, so the notoriety of the firm. On second place, 10 percent behind, is client relations (63 percent), and on third place with 57 percent is company promotion. Only 47 percent of respondents consider the role of Strategic Communication as being the growth of the business, 36 percent say that the main role is gaining a competitive edge, and 33 percent consider it being risk management. Just like in the case of Strategic Communication, the first place of the top three roles of actions of Public Affairs and Government Relations is reputation management with 55 percent of the answers, followed by second place with legislative changes with 53 percent of the answers and on third place there is the improvement of the business environment. The relationship with political decision makers is on the last place with 32 percent. The 3 most important activities in the field of Public Affairs and Government Relations as total shares are: participating in events (65 percent), meetings with the central authorities (62 percent) and meetings with the local authorities (58 percent). The next places are occupied by counseling top management (57 percent), monitoring of the relevant legislative environment for the business (48 percent) and meetings with the European Union authorities. The study is based on a questionnaire dated February 24th – April 9th 2016. In the rapport, the analysis is based on the answers gathered through applying an online 24 questions CAWI (computer assisted web interview) style questionnaire from 141 respondents – top executives and marketing from companies.¹

Traditionally, organizational communication activities have been separated and managed by different departments: either by human resources for internal communication, or by marketing one which has focused on communication with customers, and communication and public relations department having the mission to build legitimacy and maintain good relations between organization and their public(s). After 2000, there has been an increased focus on a mixed organizational communication activities based on a strategic and all-embracing approach. Thus, the necessity for defining strategic communication from organizational perspective could

¹ This article has shown the actuality in debating the issue of the strategic communication from academic perspective. Accesed on 23 iulie 2017 in <http://www.romaniajournal.ro/over-a-third-of-romanian-companies-do-not-have-a-strategic-communication-dep-study-shows/mmunication-specialists-from-the-local-business-environment>

become operational and functional approach for any organization-public, corporate or nonprofit. The starting point for this concept strategic communication has been integrated in the conclusions of my PhD thesis about Dialogue as modality of communication in mass-media² - the Romanian case, where the debate has focused on the press institution as producer, transmitter and intermediary of messages produced, transmitted and intermediated by the organizations to create trust, reputation or image by media messages. The social institution, namely press institution, has created a contract of communication between the public/commercial service and the consumer, the strategies anticipated in relationships and roles in the contract of communication for the goal/goals, modalities and impact for the targeted publics as audiences becoming material practices for the discourses in media messages, and, also, offering the formats in a creative industry made and branded by media content marketing, for public and /or commercial services. Extending the area for the research – any organization could have such a contract of communication direct with the clients or by media tools. The researchers have been focused on dialogue as advertising, dialogue as blog, thus the extension could be structured as definitions, interpretations, evaluated critical observations as discourse organization as dialogue, namely communicative contractual agreement between organization and the possible public(s).

According a current research the strategic communication has become an alternative framework with rather a short conceptual history as a research field and a professional practice. Two perspectives have been implied in this social process. In this regard, first, it has become a point of interest as a consequence of modernity: “In circumstances of uncertainty and multiple choice, the notion of trust and risk have particular applications” [Giddens, 1991:3]. And, second, the strategic communication has been interpreted as a rapid development process in organization as a consequence of increased organizational uncertainty due to the global economic crisis of 2008/2009, according to Mahoney’s research in 2011.

The current approach has as main goal to offer the new paradigm, Grunig has created for the new media – the co-existence of the interpretative one with the strategic management paradigm. The

² Teodorescu, A., M., (2012), **Dialogul ca modalitate discursivă mediatică - privire sintetică**, Editura Universității din București.

structure of the current article has been integrated: (i) a short literature review starting from practices to theories have been explained by practitioners and academics, (ii) the possible framework from a communicative approach research and (iii) the definition of the concept in terms of public relations, media relations and organizational studies cross-road perspective.

A SHORT LITERATURE REVIEW. “Strategic communication is defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission. Six relevant disciplines are involved in the development, implementation, and assessment of communications by organizations: management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns”³. The definition and the context for a successful analyses have been integrated to another author Sandra Oliver (2009) who has offered six meanings of the concept plan, for an intentional action, a tactic, for a mechanism typical in competition, a pattern, a successive sequences in activities involving an objective, a position, for a tool implying action for an organization in an environment, a perspective. Each of the meanings has as main dimension the model for integrating public relations as a social process in eight factors.

- the information management, monitoring and evaluating the messages in the internal and external environment, focusing on surveys, access to mass-media and the owned media – web design page and the evaluation of content analysis, **research and development strategy**
- the reputation management-management according mission, vision and values, the current evaluation of leadership and the leaders image-institutional and personal, the yearly reports as discourses researched by the organization and the audit of communication –depending on internal resources to be elaborated by an authority, **reputation management**
- the event management –monitoring the events as artefacts for hot-issue publics, the endorsement of celebrities or leaders, the social organizational responsibilities

³ Hallahan, Kirk, Holtzhausen, Derina, van Ruler, Betteke, Verčič, Dejan and Sriramesh, Krishnamurthy (2007) 'Defining Strategic Communication', International Journal of Strategic Communication, 1: pp. 13–35. To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15531180701285244.

for external environment –communities, education, health, social marketing for public institutions, corporate or nonprofit, **event management**

- media management-the role and importance of mass-media for the organization for communication, mediation and intermediation – negotiation, the research of the cooperation between traditional media, owned media and social media for a trust and legitimate entity, **the impact of all publics upon organization management**
- the current affairs publics implied in the organization according mission, vision and values, the discourses in external environment according stakeholders, legislation, governance code for procedures-global and glocal, lobby, current affairs activism in the society, **public affairs issues**
- the management by objectives a possible effort for planning the issues management, the crisis or any other communicative situations which have implications in current affairs activities, risks, crisis, social responsibilities, environmental issues, **crisis management**
- the modalities or techniques for branding /re-branding /positioning the products of the organization defined, interpreted and evaluated in the strategic marketing public relations management, embodied the data represented by yearly reports, owned media, paid media, other modalities in mass-media, organizational discourses for internal publics and for the external environment, computer mediated interactions, namely **advertising and publicity**
- one of the important area in an organization is the zone of costumer's services including different significances for the customer, namely client, as targeted public. The process of communication is very complex requesting research for needs and expectations embodied in the messages the organization has to send the public and the impact in surveys and focus groups researches. These services and/or products for the client/customer have included sellings for profit, public affairs for public products in public organizations, entrepreneurship for the social marketing; all these have as main topics the branding process, marketing public

relations, represented by discourses in marketing integrated communication strategies - **marketing public relations management**.⁴

In other terminology, Sandra Oliver has redefined the same factors Hallahan explained in 2004: management communication, marketing communication, public relations, technical communication, political communication and information /social marketing campaigns. Whereas academic bibliography has focused on researching how people interact in organization according their culture, the practitioners has focused on strategic communication as a social phenomenon in which organization presents and promotes itself according its mission, vision and values and throughout its leaders, employees and communication practitioners.

The strategic communication has established two new possibilities for the researchers and practitioners – an approach at cross-roads - at least, different three fields: public relations (PR), organizational communication (OC) and marketing communication (MC). The three fields have different origins in the academic traditions: while PR have come from communication studies and journalism (Heath 2001), OC originates from speech and communication studies (Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault 2001) and MC from business administration (Dahlen, Lange & Smith 2010). The fields have been focused on external communication like PR and MC, or on internal communication in organization like OC.

The current researchers for the organizational discourse, according the literature review, have been focused either on the consequences of discourse analysis in the organization and management, or on the implications of the discourse in the organization for a strategic planning namely campaign in public relations, a marketing public relations strategic planning doubled the campaigning for advertising and publicity, using the digital means in an coherent and cohesive strategic communication. Thus the strategic communication as a possible approach being at cross-roads. As Putnam and Fairhurst (2001, 2006) illustrated in their studies, organizational discourse analysis crosses many areas in linguistics, applied linguistics, pragmatics,

⁴ Oliver Sandra, (2009), **Strategii de relații publice**, Editura Polirom, Iași, The Romanian translation of “Public Relations Strategy”(2001, 2007) pp. 35–42.

communication studies. But the most important orientations have involved the view of the organization-discourse relationships with their public(s). The contract of communication has defined organization as

- an *already formed object* or entity with characteristics required by the discourse analysis;
- a *constant state of becoming* according the discourse properties and interactions between the organization and the internal and/or external publics working in practices for a specific environment;
- as *grounded in action*, regarding social practices and discursive forms, intended in good practices applied by the organization as a social entity with a good code of practice in a social environment⁵.

All these three dimensions could be defined, interpreted and evaluated in a single assertion - organization is a social entity based on discourse, created in good practices by the organizational code of procedures, based on organizational governance, namely organizational literacy, which could be measured and evaluated by the intention for communicative actions and the impact for the targeted public/ audiences. The organization for various campaigns has created a good procedure for external environment, with the implications of the internal one, according to the mission and values integrated in the organizational discourse.

THE FRAMEWORK FROM A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH: DEFINING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN AN ORGANIZATION. First, the ability of communicators to differentiate between traditional communications activities and their effects is rapidly disappearing. Although integrated communication management (ICM) focused attention on the coordination of various functions, many of those functions themselves are being redefined. Public relations practitioners, for example, are increasingly relying on paid advertising to communicate critical messages on topics ranging from corporate reputation and social issues

⁵ Putman, Linda, L., Fairhurst, Gail, T., (2001), *Discourse Analysis in Organization Issues and Concern* in Putman L.L., Jablin, I. M., (eds.) **The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods**, Thousand Oaks,CA;Sage, pp. 78–160.

to events sponsorships. Meanwhile, marketers are spearheading cooperative programs and cause-related marketing programs that once were the exclusive province of public relations, focusing from glocal to global. Second, important changes in public communication are being driven by technology and by media economics. Third, organizations use an expanding variety of methods to influence the behaviors of their constituencies – what people know, how people feel, and the ways people act – relative to the organization. Thus, audiences' experiences with and impressions of organizations are the sum total of the people's experiences – and it is increasingly questionable whether the effects of any particular communication activity can be validly examined in isolation. People do not necessarily differentiate between the various forms of communications in which organizations might engage. Fourth, strategic communication recognizes that purposeful influence is the fundamental goal of communications by organizations. Whereas certain disciplines are conceptually grounded merely in providing information (e.g., technical communication) or in establishing and maintaining mutually satisfactory relationships (public relations), these foci are only necessary – but not sufficient – conditions for organizations to achieve strategically important goals.

The limitations have been adopted in the article might be evaluated from the significance for the strategic communication in an organization. The management, marketing or public relations approaches have identified the strategic dimension in management with de communicative view for integrating the mission, vision and values in a strategic communication programme for the organization. Grunig⁶ has focused on the strategic management paradigm for public relations in the digital world on multileveled relationships between organization and their publics in a mutual perspective, which has changed the clients from consumers in prosumers, active and/or reactive voices for improving the activity in an organization.

The strategic communication process as a social phenomenon has main goals: to inform about the changes in organization at any level, to promote the main information about trust, risks or changes, to advertise the products/services in a campaign for a particular profile of targeted

⁶ Grunig, L. A., (2009), **Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalization**. In PRism 6(2): http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/prism_on-line_journ.html accessed 15 june 2017

publics/audiences, to create the image as representation of any institution in the social identity, according to Berger, Luckmann perspective. The possible model for a discourse analysis in organization has three levels for

- the means and modalities used by social institution, named organization - corporate, public and/or non-profit to construct the organizational realities according to the aiming processes for targeted publics, according the contract of communication between the message producer from the organization and the targeted publics/ audiences,
- the roles and relationships of the organization anticipated in a strategic communicative constructive reality for establishing the main trends with the targeted publics in the public sphere,
- the main aspects the discourse analysis have researched as measurable principles in organization as a hybrid and complex area defined, identified and evaluated as organizational discourse.

The strategic communication's model (SC) has tried to start from an accurate definition of the term, according the overview of literature review, secondly, the landscape of SC has focused on drawing a map as a pattern for a potential model for analyzing the organizational discourse interpretation here and there, with relative evaluation implying the consequences in organizational change, and, also, typing the method for a research and thirdly, the current trends for the organization in analyzing the discourse in a strategic plan for the management. Grunig has emphasized the contribution of public relations to the strategic communication in an organization and pointed out the main idea of institutionalization the term. "I believe the public relations community must work to reinstitutionalize itself as a strategic management function. Institutionalization takes a long time and, like a ship entering a harbor, takes a long time to change course – i.e., to reinstitutionalize. We can only change our course incrementally. I think we can do this by changing the behavior of many public relations practitioners, by changing the way public relations is described in textbooks and university curricula, and by gradually showing

society that we are a responsible and valuable profession by providing an increasing number of examples of responsible practice”⁷.

Edward Bernays once said that “public relations is the practice of social responsibility”. The strategic communication’s management in an organization can develop scenarios of how publics might be affected by the consequences and of how publics might organize to challenge the consequences through litigation, legislation, regulation, negative publicity, and the like – actions that have negative consequences on the organization. These scenarios can be used to help management make decisions by knowing the full consequences of those decisions, both on publics and on the organization. Public relations professionals then can organize symmetrical/asymmetrical communication programs to help management and publics negotiate the behaviors of each in a way that minimizes the consequences of the behavior of each on the other. The framework has stated the main features of the pattern – to establish the strategy according the main goal management reputation for accomplish the mission, vision, values, and to make a hierarchy for fulfilling the factors offering the good reputation in society. If it is an entrepreneurial organization to support reputation in marketing for a flexible relationship with the clients and creating communities of practices to promote and advert the information or in a public sector to focus on managing information according the public policies and events. While the nonprofit organization to develop the main reputational tactics by the resources in fundraising and donors or to gather the human resources for volunteering.

In the digital era, the public relations have a challenge in using the new media as a tool with great potential to strategic communicators. The main intention could develop the listening of the publics, the attention more focused on messaging and evaluating the message and its impact upon the publics. The European Communication Monitor in 2007 has introduced the term strategic communication, in 2015, after eight years, it has emphasized the relevance of future media.

⁷ *Idem*.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS. THE DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT IN TERMS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, MEDIA RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES CROSS-ROADED PERSPECTIVE. The definition of strategic communication has integrated two keywords: strategy meaning that it is a strategic activity with a clear intention and anticipating the consequences and the second one communication meaning sharing in a constitutive activity of the management.

“Strategic communication also includes examining how an organization presents itself in society as a social actor in the creation of public culture and in the discussion of public issues”. Studying strategic communication as a social sciences and humanistic area of research might offer a double dimension based on the co-existence of traditional communication disciplines and the modern ones. The organization is a social entity based on language in use, discourses in interaction with various publics. Grunig has defined and evaluated four categories of publics for an organization to establish a communicative contract with its social environment, according its social implication: (i) **all-issue publics**, which are active on all issues, (ii) **apathetic publics**, which are inattentive to all issues, (iii) **single-issue publics**, which are active on a small subset of the issue that only concerns them, (iv) **hot-issue publics**, which are active on a single issue that involves nearly everyone and which has received a lot of media attention. Regarding these categories, target publics are active ones, able to influence directly the activities of an organization, and the discourses in interaction with it. In the process of communication, an organization has to choose the categories of publics based on some criteria: demographic, geographic, pshihographic - life styles, leadership - the interested groups in a situational activity that has owned the power and knowledge, social status, reputation, trust, image, decision makers. The structure of a category has not been by far homogenous, so that for trust, reputation and image in an organization we need discourses in interaction for establishing contexts interrelated by norms - social rules emerged from the public behavior, positions - places in communicative action, ruling the power in communication, establishing a strategic management process in discourse, offering the authority position depending on the model of leadership, relationships and

roles in the interaction for evaluating the impact, and identities - especially organizational identities indicated by the management procedure for reputation, trust and image.

Strategic communication is about spreading the information about organization, listening the publics and messaging them in order to promote, to change attitudes, to persuade the consumers, in discursive practices for communities, as well as relational communication when used in a context of the achievement of an organization's mission. In this regard, it is a metaphor for strategy and communication in a global world. But, it is necessary to take into consideration the glocal/global perspective in the organization in a dynamic market, the management communication by traditional and new media, and the networked society where consumers have become prosumers, active members of communities where preserve reputation in a virtual world, more real instead. The strategic communication is a better alternative concept⁸, but it is a valid one. Also, it is a multi-disciplinary, but with some clear foundations, being viewed as a field that is emerging at the intersection of communication and media theory, organizational and management theory, and social theory. There are, of course, practical advantages and disadvantages associated with integration trend. In summary, the organization could practically control all communication in all forms and all levels, depending to the way to mirror the transboundary development taking place in organization and society.

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⁸ Falkheimer, J., Heide, M.,(2014), **From Public Relations to Strategic Communication in Sweden**. *The Emergence of Transboundary Field of Knowledge*, in Nordicom Review 35 (2014) 2, pp.123-138

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