Cultural Influences on Strategic Communication

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Strategic communication is a central device organizations use to respond to environmental uncertainty. The inherent nature of the strategic response is premised on two key internal activities. The first requires management to monitor and interpret environmental conditions. The second requires the formulation of an appropriate response to that interpretation. Both are open to influences from features operating within the internal organizational environment.

Scholars studying strategy development have recognized the need to take a cultural perspective (Volberda & Elfring, 2001) to understand the internal organizational processes and influences on decision making (Craig-Lees, 2001; Weick, 2001). However, there has been little progress exploring these factors from a strategic management perspective (George, Chattopadhyay, Sitkin, & Barden, 2006) or from a public relations or communication management perspective (Sriramesh, 2007).

A cultural perspective on strategy formulation is built from the view that an organization’s culture is a system of social knowledge that is shared among organizational members and transmitted by members across time (Durham, 1991; Everett, 1985, 1990; Schein, 1984). In these terms, strategy formulation requires a collaborative effort by organizational members to identify, interpret, and subsequently make decisions that create shared meaning about a complex situation in the effort to reduce environmental uncertainty (Lane, 2007; Selsky, Goes, & Baburoglu, 2007). Unpacking this collaborative effort to explore how frames of reference derived from culturally shared values and assumptions influence that process is a central conceptual challenge in strategy formulation (Bailey & Johnson, 2001).

Weick’s (1969, 1979) sociocultural concept of organizing as an adaptive response to environmental equivocality frames the basic terms of this study. It is premised on the concept that organizations seek to reduce environmental equivocality by acting on an implicit or explicit consensus of environmental meanings (Kreps, 1990; Littlejohn, 1999; Weick, 1969). Weick (1969, 1979) contends managerial worldviews influence how managers interpret the environmental equivocality and subsequent organizational responses to manage their relationship with the environment. This perspective places the formulation of strategic communication in a cultural framework and focuses the need to understand how a group’s shared and socially transmitted beliefs and values, that is, its culture, shape understanding and actions toward its environment (Dil, 1980; Milton, 1996). As a relational model, Weick’s (1969, 1979) sociocultural approach provides a substrate to examine these processes as they interact to produce organizational strategic communication.

Strategic communication is an outcome of deliberate communication practices within an organization and it encapsulates the intentional, transactional activities of the organization’s leaders,
members, and communication practitioners to respond to environmental change. This conceptualization is based on descriptions of strategic communication as a goal-focused or purposeful communication effort combining knowledge-based decision-making and action. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). Strategic communication therefore equips an organization to confront the challenges of environmental uncertainty (Zerfass & Huck, 2007) through purposeful instrumental and strategic actions (Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011).

Clampitt, DeKoch, and Cashman (2000) view the development of strategy as a series of macro-level choices as a basis for action (p. 41). In these terms, strategic communication is an outcome of a transactional social activity within the organization (Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2012; Shockley-Zalabak, 2002), or a “social activity” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007, p. 8). Although some scholars (see for example, Botan, 2006; Steyn, 2003b) have argued that strategic communication is a managerial function, this chapter emerges from a transactional perspective; with the assumption that strategic communication encompasses processes of strategy identification and implementation. These should be expected to vary from a series of highly integrated to widely distributed processes as a function of such factors as organizational history, culture, and market condition.

With these assumptions in place, strategic communication results from both planned and emergent processes (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Cornelissen, 2008). An interpretive approach to strategy formulation is based on a social contract view of strategy in which the organization is seen as “a collection of cooperative agreements entered into by individuals with free will” (Chaffee, 1985, p. 93). While other perspectives of strategic communication formulation are offered, the dominant paradigm in the literature is a rational, functional efficiency-oriented perspective (Sandhu, 2009). Similarly public relations and organizational communication literature often describe the formulation of strategic communication as a rational, linear and traditional process with a focus on the planning and tactical implementation of communication campaigns (Chia & Synnott, 2009; Seitel, 2007; Shockley-Zalabak, 2002; Steyn, 2003a; Stroh, 2007).

A cultural perspective of strategy formulation recognizes the fundamental significance of the efforts of organizational members to interpret environmental information and respond appropriately (Ansoff & Sullivan, 1993; Bourgeois, 1980; Hambrick, 1981; Mintzberg & Quinn, 2003). In this context, the effectiveness of the response relies on the ability of organizational members to interpret, understand, or translate equivocal environmental information (Beer, Voelpel, Leibold, & Tekie, 2005; Everett, 1993; O’Sullivan, 2003; Weick, 1988, 2001). This chapter explores the importance of collective influence, conceptualized as organizational culture, towards this effort.

**Importance of Organizational Culture in Strategic Communication**

In the anthropological literature, culture has traditionally been viewed as a mediating influence on human action that shapes action and meaning for members of a group and gives direction to organizing their lives (Dil, 1980; Durham, 1991; Milton, 1996; Norlin, Chess, Dale, & Smith, 2003). Following these terms, culture acts as a grounding and orienting force for interpretation that underpins human understanding, definitions, and actions towards the environment (Hatch, 1993; Milton, 1996). Culture therefore functions to give meaning and as a consequence it influences how events are viewed and interpreted (Bates, 2001). Geertz (1973) uses the analogy of a spiderweb to describe the concept of culture, arguing, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (p. 5). Analysis of these cultural webs, according to Geertz, should be interpretive and focused on meaning.

Culture is defined as a system of shared meaning, values or beliefs, socially transmitted over time among a particular social group (Bates, 2001; Durham, 1991; Geertz, 1973; Keesing, 1981; Keyton, 2005). While many definitions of culture have been offered (Chick, 1997) and applications of central
concepts differ (Sackmann, 1992), anthropologists generally agree that culture is cognitive phenomena (D’Andrade, 2001).

Key challenges remain in employing the culture concept in analysis of organizing, given the array of claims for what culture means in various literatures. Another challenge involves the existing conceptual diversity surrounding the concept of culture, making it difficult to operationalize (Sackmann, 1992). Adopting an ideational approach focuses the anthropological treatment of culture and offers “a more explicit and more analytic conceptualization of culture” (Durham, 1991, p. 3).

The view of culture as a system of social knowledge captures the role of culture in relating communities to their ecological settings (Keesing, 1974). Durham (1991) views culture as “systems of symbolically encoded conceptual phenomena that are socially and historically transmitted within and between populations” (p. 9). Culture operating as a learned system of shared knowledge assists members of a society to relate and cope with their environment (Bates, 2001). As a sociocultural system, it represents the “social realizations or enactments of ideational designs-for-living in particular environments” (Keesing, 1974, p. 82).

**Cultural Schema**

Schemes of interpretation operate as frameworks for people to make sense and understand events, actions and situations in unique ways, allowing meaning or a reality to be constructed (Chan, 2003). Weick (1979) argued that schema direct action, and have an effect of mediating or “bracketing portions of experience” (p. 154). Schema operate at an individual level as a framework for understanding the organizational way of life, or put more simply, “schemas influence individual interpretations, assumptions and expectations regarding organizational events” (Scroggins, 2006, p. 86). This view follows Pace (1988) who argued schema “consist of hypotheses or expectations about incoming information, which then provide plans for gathering, interpreting, and using this information” (p. 149). Lyles and Schwenk (1992) suggest schema held by organizational decision makers have an important influence on how environmental information is interpreted, framed and processed. This suggestion is in keeping with the perspective of this chapter, in which strategy emerges from a collective effort.

**Cultural Selection**

Cultural selection describes the capacity of an organization’s cultural system to influence the nature of its own evolution (Durham, 1991). Cultural selection is defined as “the differential social transmission of cultural variants through human decision making” or simply as “preservation by preference” (Durham, 1991, p. 199). Cultural selection preserves cultural variation between different groups by reinforcing the differences over time. Cultural selection predicts that human decision making systems promote general patterns of fitness, that is, desirability, and sustains many of the differences in that group (Durham, 1992). It is during the social process that cultural material is influential in the selection process (Everett, 2002) supporting Weick’s (1979) notion that selection pressures in organizations are the outcome of “schemes of interpretation and specific interpretations” (p. 131).

The theoretical importance of organizational culture in communication management has been articulated for nearly two decades with little advancement (Everett, 1993; Sriramesh, 2007). Grunig (1992a, 1992b) identified authoritarian and participative culture as the two key influencing concepts in organizational culture, and argued that these variables directly affected both the communication function of the organization and the success in achieving organizational outcomes. Cameron and McCollum’s (1993) study of the relationship between organizational culture and the producers of communication highlighted the importance of alignment of beliefs (shared reality) about the organization by all levels of staff. More recent studies of organizational culture have continued to note...
culture’s influence in ethical decision making (Bowen, 2004), and on practitioners in many different practice contexts (see for example, Diaz, Abratt, Clarke, & Bendixen, 2009; Rhee & Moon, 2009). More importantly, Kersten (2005) argued for the need to challenge assumed singular rationalities that exist in organizations’ perceptions of reality.

These studies collectively document the significant interaction of organizational culture with the problems of strategic communication as they play out in organizational contexts, and the understanding of the nature of organizational communication more generally. The consistency of the findings of the studies confirms the significance of the culture of an organization as the lens through which the challenges of developing and implementing strategic communication should be observed and interpreted. Research exploring organizational culture in organizational and corporate communication practice has recognized that meaning and interpretation are central processes (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Leichty & Warner, 2001). Cultural discourse conditions that influence these practices however, are not fully understood (Leichty & Warner, 2001).

Research

The central research problem reflects a core proposition that strategic communication emerges less as a direct, rational response by organizational members to objectively given environmental factors than as an outcome to cultural selection (Durham, 1992) acting on the processes of environmental enactment by organizational members. This perspective informs this chapter as it examines cultural influences on organizational processes of environmental interpretation and expectations by organizational members in a leading humanitarian organization in Australia in response to a key event. Two research questions guide this study:

1. What are the cultural influences on organizational processes of environmental interpretation and expectations?
2. What are the implications of these cultural influences for the identification and implementation of strategic communication?

According to Rabinow (1977), exploring culture is an interpretive act. As this study is attentive to issues of interpretation, ethnography is well suited to efforts to understand the process by which actors construct meaning out of collective experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This study employs an organizational ethnography to allow for deeper understanding and accommodate multiple perspectives of organizational processes (Fine, Morrill, & Surianarain, 2009). The value of ethnography as a method in such disciplines responsible for strategic communication (including public relations, marketing and organizational communication) centers on the ability to gain critical insights into the value of practice and discourse surrounding practice and its contribution to new theoretical directions (Daymon & Hodges, 2009; Everett & Johnston, 2012; Sriramesh, 1992).

An organizational ethnography is defined as an ethnographic study of an organization and their organizing processes (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). It differs from traditional ethnography as people in a setting are organized around prescriptive goals and formalized rules governing status, relationships and behaviors within the context of the setting (Rosen, 1991).

The primary setting for this research is a major humanitarian organization and one of Australia’s leading humanitarian and disaster response organizations. Employing nearly 2,000 staff nationally, the organization operated as a decentralized organizational structure through state based divisions. The focus on strategic communication centered the ethnography on organizational members involved in the enactment, selection and retention of environmental cues. As strategizing is often undertaken in group settings or communities of practice (Balogun, Huff, & Johnson, 2003), observation focused on scenes where the researcher anticipated decision- and sense-making would occur (Hammersley &
Atkinson, 1995) for strategic communication processes and outcomes. This included unit and senior management meetings, team leader and staff meetings, and workshops or project-specific meetings.

Qualitative research traditions offer three major approaches for data collection: “participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying materials prepared by others (examining)” (Wolcott, 1994, p.10). The prime sources of data for this work can focus on the words and actions of the members organized around direct experience, social action, talk and supplementary data (Loftland, Snow, Anderson, & Loftland, 2006). Data for this study included observation (approximately 787 hours) and 51 depth interviews. Interviews sought rich and complex data suited for exploratory and descriptive research (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2000), using semi-structured questions to stimulate the participant to talk about key topics (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The study derived from ethnoecological approaches to research that seek to understand how people perceive their environment and how they organize these perceptions (Frake, 1962). Through exploring the relationships between an organization and its environment, ethnoecology “seeks to provide an understanding of the systems of knowledge that local people have” (Gragson & Blount, 1999, p. ix). Ethnoecology therefore focuses on what local people know, classify, and how they use the knowledge of their environment (Sutton & Anderson, 2010). Iterative coupling of data collection, analysis and theory generation was applied to an inductive analysis of the data to generate an exploratory theory and explore the origins and nature of strategic communication as an organizational response to enacted environments (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The progressive contextualization (Vayda, 1983) of the case setting looked for “systematic relationships among diverse phenomena, not for substantive identities among similar ones” (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). Data reduction followed the iterative stages of transforming data through description, analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994, 2009).

In the first stage of description, fieldwork observation data were documented in journals and interviews transcribed. Observations were further reduced by memo writing in three contexts: in the field after directly witnessing an event, after a series of observations, and at the end of each observation day. Concept maps were also developed and refined as themes emerged and shifted. Memo and data sorting (reduction) were guided by the data’s key emergent properties (Glaser, 1998). In all of these steps, the analytical goal was to allow the unique patterns of the case to emerge (Denzin, 2002). The first stage of enactment occurred at the individual level; therefore, categories, themes and patterns were identified to describe enacted events at the individual level and presented as cultural knowledge structures. The individual enacted environment represented what was going on that impacted on the organization. Variation at this level was captured in this analytical stage.

The role of culture at the collective group level was described as memes that represented patterns in the selection processes: that is, cultural data—schemas representing collective cultural material, or patterns of how collective beliefs of organizational members operated as cultural criteria. The analytical goal for this stage was to identify concepts that represent the cultural subsystems acting as selection biases collectively on enacted materials.

Description, topic, and analytical coding differentiate the purposes of each coding stage (Richards, 2005). At this first level of analysis, descriptive coding identified the cases and attributes of the data, including position, department, location, gender, age, qualifications, and length of time employed. Topic coding initially labelled expressions, sentences, and paragraphs into topics and categories that emerged from the data (Richards, 2005) and generated to build conceptual theory and clarify relationships.

The first research question seeks to identify the cultural influences on organizational processes of environmental interpretation by organizational members and their associated expectations. Knowledge structures and schemas representing participants’ shared cultural knowledge in the case organization were identified to provide a conceptual foundation to explore the role of cultural influences in the development of strategic communication. The identification of classificatory schemas...
derived from observations rather than preordained models is viewed as an important step in theory development (Pratt, 1994). Five schemas (Figure 10.1) emerged from the data, as core themes of coherent knowledge systems that were mapped to collectively act as criteria to guide selection in the selection process (Weick, 1979). Selection criteria were identified as units that are socially transmitted, had historical presence, and acted to inform or guide behavior (Durham, 1991). These criteria illustrate the five coherent systems the data yielded (see Figure 10.1): criterion around avoiding blame; criterion around tolerance; criterion around internal focus; criterion around being iconic, and finally, criterion around being flexible and fluid. According to Durham (1991), these units are learned and shared systems of knowledge and beliefs, and are socially transmitted over time.

Cultural schema depicted in Figure 10.1 operated to organize other cultural knowledge structures into a coherent selection system, and therefore are fundamental to identification of a cultural selection system operating in the selection process (Everett, 2003).

The second research question seeks to identify the implications of these cultural influences for the identification and implementation of strategic communication. Strategic communication is recognized as a multidisciplinary endeavor (Sandhu, 2009) and aligns with the management of communication on behalf of an organization (Heath, 2005). The formulation of strategic communication requires organizational members to interpret, understand or translate equivocal environmental information (Beer et al., 2005; Everett, 1993; O’Shannassy, 2003; Weick, 1979, 1995) and make decisions based on information available (Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2008). The findings as they related to each cultural selection criterion are discussed in the following sections.

**Cultural Selection Criterion: Five Schemas**

1. **Avoiding Blame**

The cultural criterion of avoiding blame influenced the development of strategic communication in a number of ways. The avoiding blame criteria were instrumental in influencing the timing of communication responses. The stifled nature of contemplating communication actions and time spent on deliberating to get the response ‘right’ to avoid being blamed meant that workload was increased and responses were slowed. Time was spent on redefining the problem several times.
Organizational members followed precedents or scripts of action that had been historically established as acceptable. Members opted for replicating what had been done, or what they thought had been done previously, and therefore avoided taking risks. Cultural selection influenced the endorsement of a workplace that effectively avoided documentation of communication programs, activities or actions. This included a lack of planning in the form of written documents and evaluation of activities. The confluence of fluidity in these criteria rationalized the lack of documentation and planning with the need to be flexible and open to change because they argued they were a ‘crisis’ organization. For strategic communication this meant actions were reserved for reactive or directed items, leaving opportunities for exploring other options or communication actions unattended.

Cultural selection influenced the group to work in a way that avoided evaluation of performance and thus blame. Environmental scanning, such as media monitoring, was avoided as it challenged the status quo, and responsiveness was reduced as members struggled with high levels of bureaucracy in having communication tactics approved by senior management. Member efforts to avoid blame fractured sensitivity to the external environment. Decision making about external events and communication responses revealed members actively sought to avoid situations that challenged the status quo within the organization. For example, they ignored—did not see, or hear—external signals if what they saw challenged the current accepted view of the situation within the organization. Members were therefore unlikely to acknowledge the equivocality, or would actively avoid or ignore equivocality if it conflicted with internal dynamics. The criteria of avoiding blame meant that members sought direction and followed instructions without necessarily analyzing what they were told. Avoiding blame as criteria also influenced member avoidance of challenging power relations. For members this meant that even if the group felt the interpretation or action being taken was not correct, they avoided challenging or questioning this to maintain the status quo. This action was also acceptable to the group, being justified as the way the organization worked.

2. Tolerance
The cultural criteria of tolerance influenced the development of strategic communication in a number of ways. The strength of traditions and history in the organization, combined with the traditions of the federated structure and traditional roles of boards and community representatives, meant members were not inclined to embrace opportunities. The tendency to follow established precedent influenced members to keep to the routine, keep to the traditional ways of doing things, reduce or avoid risks and not try anything new. This also translated to other components of strategic communication including messaging and channel selection. In this case, messaging and channels were identified in ways that met expectations and satisfied ‘old ways’ of working. Old conceptualizations of communication problems propagated by ageing board members were accepted and unchallenged by more youthful members. Questioning or challenging board members’ interpretation was viewed as disrespectful and not something that was done at [the organization].

The tolerance criterion was powerful in influencing performance and acceptance expectations of the group. The impact of this criterion on the development of strategic communication meant that members were not sensitive or responsive to the environment, but rather, were risk-averse, wanting to stay with or tolerate what was familiar. While it is not unexpected to find an organization to be risk-averse, collectively cultural selection affected communicative action. Selection criteria guided actions to avoid putting the individual or group at risk. As a way of working, this meant little was realized in terms of opportunities—only reactive responses to emergent issues and a general reluctance to embrace opportunity.
3. **Internal focus**

Cultural selection acted to influence a dominant internal focus for attention and response. First, organizational members did not view information from the external environment as important. This included identifying, analyzing and prioritizing information from the media or opinion leaders, and integrating stakeholder views for decisions. Members relied on power-holders in the organization to identify and interpret ecological change for meaning. The reliance on power-holders to define the environment delegated middle and lower members to a technician role. This reduced risk for team members through allowing power holders to define strategic communication problems and identify communication responses.

Second, members’ high prioritization of internal relationships and low prioritization of external issues and external publics, created a lack of perspective of any influence or consequences caused by organizational actions on external publics. The dominance of power relationships in the organization meant that for members this was not a safe environment to take risks to challenge the internal focus. For members this meant that there were often conflicting directives from the different hierarchies.

Third, the internal focus created missed strategic communication opportunities for the organization. This, coupled with the avoiding blame criteria, meant the organization was not proactive, but remained reactive to issues.

4. **We Are Iconic**

The cultural criterion “we are iconic” was influential in the development of strategic communication in the organization through creating haughtiness or a sense of organizational superiority, particularly when exploring potential sponsorships or corporate partnerships. The linkages of being an iconic, large, globally important humanitarian organization meant potential relationships were assessed on criteria of whether the other party was worthy of partnering with the organization, rather than on other financially based criteria, such as return on investment or tangible strategic communication outcomes.

This schema was instrumental in directing a tendency to conceptualize communication problems historically, based on previous experiences. For example, because there was a cultural expectation that the organization was an iconic humanitarian organization that stakeholders held in high regard, members viewed local marketing, communication or public relations efforts as ineffectual. For them this meant their actions had little effect on influencing the reputation of the organization. In addition, old or traditional ways of working meant existing practices were left unchallenged or were accepted as the way of approaching stakeholder communication.

5. **Flexible and Fluid**

The cultural criterion of “flexible and fluid” encouraged a somewhat unstructured approach to communication in the organization, evidenced through minimal planning and documentation. This had four key influences on strategic communications.

The flexible criterion influenced fluidity in decision-making processes around strategic communication, resulting in little or no formal planning processes being developed around key programs or projects. The outcome of this meant there was little to no resource allocation for projects, and more critically, no evaluation of any communication outcomes.

While some members claimed they formally planned communication activities (strategically), no formal documentation (record) of strategic communication activities took place. The “flexible and fluid” criterion encouraged members to be variable in their approaches to communication tasks and functions. For some members this allowed them to work with little structure, resulting in a more
reactive approach to prioritizing communication actions, but it provided little support for members to “push back” on projects, due to a lack of documentation of program priorities and goals.

Being flexible and fluid also hindered the progression of any developing campaigns as members felt they needed to attend to other priorities. For some members, this meant they were just “treading water until the next crisis”—meaning it was acceptable for programs to be left in a state of limbo. Finally, the criterion of flexible and fluid created additional pressure for members as there was a lack of performance benchmarks or structures around milestones. In response to these criteria, members would revert to old ways of doing things driven by a sense of security that comes from following historical precedents, and by reassurance from providing something to senior management that was familiar.

In summary, the preceding discussion presented an analysis of the role of cultural criteria, drawn from the five identified collective schema emerging from the data, acting in the selection process (Weick, 1969, 1979) to influence strategic communication in the organization. Each cultural selection criterion was found to influence strategic communication and was shown to be present both during free choice and imposition-based decision making (Durham, 1992) as members negotiated meanings and actions in their efforts to respond to environmental equivocality. This finding contributes to understanding how the internal organizational environment influences strategic decision making (Nutt & Wilson, 2010; Papadakis, Thanos, & Barwise, 2010) and more specifically for strategic communication (Johnston, 2011).

Culturally Derived Strategic Communication

Social ecology describes the relationships between parts of a system and reflects organizational needs in responding to a changing social environment (Emery & Trist, 1973). Ecology recognizes the interaction of the system, while social ecology highlights the interdependent relationship of the social environment and the organization. Set within an ecological context, strategic communication represents the organizational response to the social elements of an organization’s operating environment, such as public opinion and the actions of stakeholder and special interest groups (Broom & Sha, 2012; Everett, 1993). Everett (2001) argues that the challenge of an organization to adapt to changes in its social environment is a problem central to organizational efforts to build and maintain relationships with its social environment. This adaptive challenge also highlights one of the most important considerations in assessing the effectiveness of strategic communication by an organization. Since all organizations seek the best adaptive outcomes to strategy, then an essential challenge for strategic communication is to identify and facilitate such outcomes in the social ecology of organizations.

The central task of strategic communication is to assist an organization in responding to the uncertainty that ultimately helps the organization achieve its needs for adaptation (Argenti, Howell, & Beck, 2005; Hallahan et al., 2007; Steyn, 2003b; Xavier, Johnston, & Patel, 2006). Clampitt et al. (2000) highlight the role of choice by management based on judgment. Culturally derived strategic communication reflects the influence of cultural selection on social cognition within organizations in their effort to formulate an adaptive response to the environment (Johnston, 2011), as illustrated in Figure 10.2. Culturally derived strategic communication, through the action of cultural criteria and cultural selection, is centrally placed in the ecological relationship of an organization and its efforts to adapt to its social environment. The centrality of cultural criteria at the collective group level is found to conservatively influence the core roles and functions undertaken by members to formulate strategic communication (Johnston, 2011).

Environmental scanning of factors in an organization’s social environment including public opinion, media, and stakeholder groups, with subsequent interpretation and judgment about environmental equivocality, follows Alvesson’s (2002) cultural view of strategy. This view highlights the reality of the external environment as a social construction by the group. He argues, “the consequences
of the environment for the organization and the actions of organizational participants are revealed in the interpretations, frames of reference, perceptions and forms of understanding which characterize the strategic actors as a collective” (p. 77). He cautions the need to understand how the group collectively attributed meaning and content to the environment. This understanding is provided through examining knowledge structures in organizations, and identifying cultural criteria operating in selection processes (Durham, 1991). Culturally derived strategic communication will therefore reflect the internal imperatives of the organization as much as it does the external. Therefore, the stronger the organizational culture (Geertz, 1973), the more likely that culture, rather than environmental variables, will be the dominant influence in the development of strategic communication. The outcome of this influence will eventually produce substantive differences between organizational groups, even though they may face similar environmental challenges. These implications are discussed in the next section.

**Understanding Influences on Strategic Communication**

This chapter has explored the important and significant role an organization’s culture plays in the formulation of strategic communication. We argue that the action of cultural selection criteria operating on the collective knowledge system, that is, the culture of an organization, mediates strategic communication. When an organization’s culture is seen as a constellation of collective knowledge structures, including beliefs and values, the guiding influence of cultural selection criteria on that knowledge system can create a significant influence on the communicative actions and messages used in the strategic communication process the organization developed. The identification of the influence of these cultural selection criteria supports criticism of the received view in communication management disciplines that strategic communication is principally driven by responses to external drivers in the social environment of an organization. In contrast to this management-centric maxim, this study provides evidence that strategic communication may reflect outcomes to the action of
cultural selection in the culture of an organization, as much as it reflects imperatives of the external social environment. More importantly, we argue that the culture of an organization should be recognized as a potentially significant influence on an organization’s identification of strategic communication imperatives. Underpinning this central claim and a key theoretical perspective around which this chapter is organized is Weick’s (1969, 1979) foundational perspective on organizational communication generally—organizations are first and foremost sociocultural systems.

**Implications for the Management of Strategic Communication**

Ecological perspectives to understand the efforts of organizations to meet adaptive requirements in their social environments through strategic communication have been most explicitly formulated in the public relations textbook tradition set by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000). Building on this perspective, the study and findings presented in this chapter contribute to understanding the significance of the cultural ecology of organizing by their identification and description of the role of culture and cultural selection in mediating the organization–environment relationship and the influence of organizational culture on responses to environmental change.

Astley and Fombrun (1983) emphasized the importance of “collective” forms of organizational adaptation to the environment. Exertion toward organizational adaptation is a key claim in public relations (Broom & Sha, 2012), organizational communication (Conrad & Poole, 2012) and strategic marketing (Drummond, Ensor, & Ashford, 2012) literatures. While Mintzberg and Lampel (1999) argued that strategy formulation is intuitive and judgmental, this approach is not reflected in the textbook traditions of core strategic communication (Steyn, 2007; Stroh, 2007).

Traditional conceptualizations of the organization–environment relationship reinforce the dominant role the environment has on choices made for organizational action (Astley & Fombrun, 1983). Following this tradition, student education in strategic communication focuses on the task of environmental scanning and analysis, with rational approaches remaining dominant (Steyn, 2007). However, a key imperative drawn from this study is that practitioners should also be trained in the analysis and description of an organization’s culture to understand an essential context for the development of strategic communication. While senior management provide stewardship in strategy formulation and senior leaders provide the discipline and perspective for strategy (Porter, 1996), practitioners need to be better equipped for the task of understanding and describing how their work is influenced by an organization’s culture. The significance of cultural selection to the development of strategic communication reinforces this view.

Everett’s (1985, 1990) early work on the challenges of integrating the perspective of organizations as sociocultural systems identified the theoretical implications for organizational communication of organizational culture as an evolving system of social knowledge. This study extends Everett’s perspective by identifying the role of cultural selection operating in the selection processes of organizing (Weick, 1969, 1979) as a key driver to understanding the social ecology of organizations. Weick’s (1979) notion that the creation of causal maps from past organizational experiences creates templates to guide interpretations of equivocal information is extended in the culturally derived strategic communication model (Johnston, 2011), which model illustrates that the mechanism that creates these templates is the action of cultural selection in organizing (Weick, 1969, 1979).

The foundation of this chapter has set the context of understanding the role of cultural selection in organizing processes, and more specifically, in terms of organizations’ development of strategic communication. At the organizational level, we should expect that over time the action of cultural selection would create increasing variation between similar types of organizations in a population, in terms of how they look at, understand, and react to environmental features. This process will eventually produce substantive differences between organizations even though they face similar environmental challenges. This macro level outcome is tightly coupled with the operation of selection...
criteria within organizations. In this context, there is an essential role for the action of cultural selection criteria within organizations when they engage with the problem of assessing significant imperatives of their social environment and determining what to do about those imperatives.

References

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