In the 1950s and 1960s, the two words strategy and strategic—as in corporate strategy and strategic management—entered the world of business (Kiechel, 2010). Since then, managers in the private and public sectors have lived under the rule of a new strategy paradigm, which has become more and more dominant. Today, strategy has transformed into something that almost every organization has (or ought to have) and/or perform (or ought to perform); something that everybody talks about and/or identifies with in either a positive or a negative manner.

The two words strategy and strategic have also penetrated the area under investigation in the chapters of this handbook, that is, strategic communication defined as a specific organizational practice and a specific academic discipline. Today, communication professionals are expected to produce communication strategies for their organizations; at the same time, communication is more and more often perceived as a strategic management function reporting to or represented in the dominant coalition and contributing to or participating in its decision-making processes. Likewise, an increasing number of communication scholars have started examining what strategy, strategizing and strategists are and mean.

The new strategy paradigm penetrates at two different, but interrelated levels in relationship to the strategic communication of an organization: At the level of the organizational practice it emphasizes the need for a strategic understanding and approach to the external and internal communication activities as such, and to the relationship between these activities and the mission, vision, and strategy of the organization (an instrumental or functionalist perspective); and at the level of the social status of the communication executive it is understood to be part of the strategic work of the organization that provides the communication executive with a new and more powerful status (an institutional or symbolic perspective).

The aim of this chapter is to provide a state-of-the-art review of the research on the role of communication executives in strategy and strategizing, and we will address the following issues: the role communication executives perform in strategy and strategizing; their competency in strategic thinking; their self perception (identity) of their own strategic abilities; and how organizational members serving other managing functions, such as the CEO and other executives, perceive their strategic abilities (legitimacy).

Before we start addressing these issues, we need to clarify some of the key concepts. By role we do not only understand a specific behavioral program (the behavior that a communication executive is expected to enact, or that he or she actually enacts in a specific strategic and organizational
context, as in the theory of organizational roles), but something more comprehensive transgressing the traditional boundaries of the concept (competencies, identity, and legitimacy). By communication executive (Wright, 1995) we do not only mean the highest ranking communication manager of an organization, but all types of communication managers who are involved in strategy and strategizing. Finally, by strategy we do not only mean the one-off result of rational decision-making, but also the less rational micro-level social activities whereby a strategy is produced and ‘performed’ (strategizing).

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, we give a brief account of how the study of strategy within the field of management research in general has developed since the 1960s following a series of important lines of development. This account is followed by an equally short section demonstrating how strategy has been thematized within the disciplines of public relations, corporate communication, and strategic communication. Then comes a longer section presenting the research conducted so far on the role, competencies, identity and legitimacy of communication executives in strategy and strategizing. We introduce the concept of strategic work as an overall term for this configuration of phenomena. The chapter concludes with a section on future research focusing on the insights about communication executives we have gained so far, and in particular the methods we have applied in order to do so. It answers the questions of what is it that we know something about, and which methods have we applied to get this knowledge. The chapter concludes with a discussion on whether a more contextualized approach will provide us with a new and better, that is, more realistic understanding of the strategic work of communication executives.

Understanding Strategy and Strategic Management:
From Normative Idealism to Critical Realism

Frandsen and Johansen (2010) claim that “the concepts of strategy, management, and leadership are multidimensional concepts applied, with more or less diverging meanings, within a series of different theoretical and practical contexts” (p. 298). Instead of producing a long list of schools of thought within strategic management (e.g. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel, 1998), they provide an overview by making a distinction between four important lines of development, which collectively present a shift from normative idealism to critical realism in management research. These lines of development will serve as the theoretical coordinating system for the rest of the chapter. The four lines of development are as follows.

From a Prescriptive to an Emergent Perspective on Strategic Management

According to the prescriptive perspective, strategy is the result of a linear, rational–analytical process in which a distinction is made between a series of clearly separated sequences such as situational analysis, decision making (strategy formulation), implementation, and evaluation. The prescriptive perspective is based on the idea that it is possible to define the objective of a strategy in advance and to develop its main elements, before it is implemented (Lynch, 2012, p. 35). On the contrary the emergent perspective holds that a strategy is seldom the result of such a process. Strategies do not always develop as planned or expected, but tend to emerge in organizations over time as a result of new opportunities, organizational learning or even accidental actions. Therefore, advocates of the emergent perspective claim that it is not possible to define the final goal of a strategy in advance, or to develop its main elements before it is implemented (Lynch, 2012, p. 40). This means that from an emergent perspective, it doesn’t make sense to perceive decision-making and implementation as two clearly separated sequences in the strategy formation process.

McGee (2003) introduces a similar distinction between two worldviews: the programmatic view is “a mindset where the world is largely ‘anticipated’ and ‘planned for’” (p. 150) and the...
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emergent view is “a mindset where the world is viewed as uncertain and ‘shaping’ but also ‘shapable’” (p. 150).

The prescriptive approach is much more widespread than the emergent perspective. It represents what we might call the *archetype* of strategic management. This is also the case in public relations, corporate communication and strategic communication, where one seldom meets the emergent perspective. Even in recent publications such as Moss and DeSanto (2011), who promote a managerial perspective on public relations, the authors claim that “much of the writing about communication/public relations shows little recognition of how thinking about management and managerial practice has evolved in recent years” (p. XV) and end up with a model based on the prescriptive perspective. Moss and DeSanto propose the C-MACIE framework consisting of four stages: communication management analysis, communication management choice, communication management implementation, and communication management evaluation (p. 41).

*From an Intuitive to a Scientific Approach to Strategic Communication*

Until the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, strategic management was based on intuitive understanding, and not on scientific investigation, often with a reference to Fayol’s (1916/1918) distinction between five managerial functions: to plan, to organize, to coordinate, to command, and to control. However, in 1973, Henry Mintzberg formulated his famous question: *What do managers really do when they manage?* It was the first in a series of empirical studies of what managers do or are expected to do (their behavior and activities, their functions and responsibilities), how they do what they do, whom they interact and communicate with, and what else they are doing (the informal aspects of managerial work). In his study, Mintzberg (1973) identified 10 basic management working roles, which he divided into three categories: interpersonal roles (the manager as figurehead, leader and liaison), informational roles (the manager as monitor, disseminator and spokesperson), and decisional roles (the manager as entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator). Subsequently, other management scholars such as Hales (1986, 2001) and Stewart (1983, 1988)—including Mintzberg himself (see Mintzberg, 2009)—have discussed, not only the empirical results, but also the theoretical and methodological issues that are linked to the study of what managers really do when they manage.

Mintzberg (1973) represents a major breakthrough. However, as we will see in the second part of this chapter, the study of the role of communication executives that scholars in public relations, corporate communication and strategic communication have conducted has only to a very limited extent been inspired by this type of empirical management research.

*From a Functionalist to a Critical Approach to Strategic Management*

A third line of development is the shift from a functionalist to a critical approach to strategic management. Inspired among others by Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School), social constructivism, feminist theory, poststructuralism and “French Theory” (e.g., Foucault and Derrida), the critical approach questions the dominant management principles of organizing (such as efficiency, rationality, homogeneity, and masculinity), bringing new meanings to the concept of strategy.

Shrivastava (1986) reached the conclusion that strategic management was an *ideology* and that the discourse on strategy helped legitimize existing power structures and resource inequalities. Knights and Morgan (1991) draw a similar conclusion, defining corporate strategy as a “set of discourses and practices which transform managers and employees alike into subjects who secure their sense of purpose and reality by formulating, evaluating and conducting strategy” (p. 252).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, and the publication of Alvesson and Willmott (1992), critical management studies (CMS) has established itself as a subdiscipline adding a new and provocative
dimension to the agenda of management studies. According to Alvesson and Deetz (2000), critical management research includes three tasks: an insight task demonstrating a commitment to “the hermeneutic, interpretive and ethnographic goals of local understandings closely connected to and appreciative of the lives of real people in real situations” (p. 17), a critique task counteracting the “dominance of taken-for-granted goals, ideas, ideologies and discourses which put their imprints on management and organization idea” (p. 17), and a transformative redefinition task demonstrating a commitment to the pragmatic aspects of a critical approach, “recognizing that insight and critique without support for social action leaves research detached and sterile” (p. 17).

A critical approach to strategic management in public relations, corporate communication, and strategic communication is still a rare sight. L’Etang (2008) is one of the few exceptions. She describes strategic management as a “Holy Grail for some PR academics and some PR practitioners,” as an “ideological practice, focused on domination and power,” and as a “form of civilian political warfare or psyops” (pp. 29–30). In the chapter on public relations and management in her book, new topics such as the creolization of management knowledge, power and gender issues, and management fashions and gurus are introduced. However, strategic management is only mentioned once, without any attempt to clarify the new discourse on strategy. Derina Holtzhausen is another critical scholar who takes a postmodern approach defining public relations as activism (Holtzhausen, 2012).

From a Macro-Level to a Micro-Level Approach to Strategic Management

The fourth important line of development is also the most recent: the move in the 2000s towards a micro-level approach to strategic management, introduced under the name of strategy as practice (Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara, 2010). This new community of scholars is first of all inspired by the ‘practice turn’ in the social sciences (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & Savigny, 2001). Like Mintzberg (1973), they want to study what people actually do when working with strategy in organizations:

Strategy as practice attempts a fundamental inversion of dominant conceptions of strategy. Whereas strategy has traditionally been seen as something an organization has—for example, a diversification strategy or an internationalization strategy—for strategy as practice researchers, strategy is something you do.

Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p. 101

According to the archetype of strategic management, a strategy is something that an organization has; a strategy is the result of one-off decisions; a strategy is developed in specific places (e.g., the board room), at specific times (e.g., during strategy seminars), and by specific persons at the top of the organizational hierarchy (top management or the board of directors); and a strategy is always formulated before it is implemented. The strategy-as-practice researchers take a somewhat different approach. To them, strategy is first of all strategizing, something people do, an activity embedded in a specific organizational context. The result is a new focus on the complex micro-practices constituting the everyday activities of organizational life including strategy making. Viewed from this perspective, strategic management is not a disembodied and decontextualized activity, but an interactive and situated type of behavior in organizational settings.

To these four lines of development within the study of strategic management, one may perhaps add a fifth line of development, namely the shift from a leader-oriented perspective where strategy is understood as the result of the transmission of a manager’s decisions to the employees, focusing on leader identity and/or leader behavior (as in most recently the theories of transactional versus transformational leadership), to a follower-oriented perspective, where strategy is understood as an outcome of the interaction between the manager and the employees (as in most recently the theories of
shared, collective or distributed leadership, leader-member exchange, and the romance of leadership) (Shamir, Pillai, Bligh & Uhl-Bien, 2008). Thus far, Heide and Simonsson (2011) are among the very few scholars who have tried to develop a follower-oriented perspective within the field of strategic communication.

**Strategy and Disciplines**

In this section, we provide an overview of how strategy has been thematized within three important communication disciplines: public relations, corporate communication and strategic communication. These disciplines all pride themselves on their strategic approach to the communication activities between an organization and its publics or stakeholders. But what do they mean by strategy and strategic?

**Public Relations**

Public relations emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s and the 1980s. In Excellence Theory, born out of the IABC funded Excellence Study, which was led by James E. Grunig from the mid-1980s until 2002, and which for a long period of time was defining for the discipline as such, the strategic approach to public relations is highlighted repeatedly as in the concept of strategic public relations. L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig and Dozier (2002) list five keywords describing Excellence Theory: “managerial, strategic, symmetrical, diverse, and ethical” (p. 306). Throughout the years, Grunig has defined his approach to public relations as a “behavioral, strategic management paradigm that focuses on the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making to help manage the behavior of organizations” (Grunig, 2006).

In the first of the three volumes presenting the results of the Excellence Study, J. E. Grunig and Repper (1992) promote a definition of strategy as the balancing of the internal structures and processes of the organization (the mission of the organization) with the external factors (the environment of the organization). A model of strategic management is presented that is clearly based on the prescriptive perspective, and strategy is viewed as a symmetrical concept: “[I]t is in the strategic interest of organizations to change their behavior when they provoke opposition from the environment as well as to try to change the behavior of environmental stakeholders” (p. 123). Finally, the relation between strategic management and public relations is conceptualized as participation in the overall strategic management process of an organization, and as the strategic management of public relations itself (pp. 119–123).

In Dozier, L. A. Grunig and J. E. Grunig (1995), the definition of public relations as the balancing of internal structures and processes of organizations with external factors is still present. However, in the third volume, L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig and Dozier (2002) define strategic management in a more metaphorical way as “the arena in which important organizational problems are identified and decisions are made about how to address those problems” (p. 143). The theoretical references also changed in a remarkable way and the authors cite Mintzberg and Weick together with Knight’s and Morgan’s postmodern view of strategic management. What characterizes public relations in relation to strategic management is still the fact that public relations “brings a different set of problems and possible solutions into the strategic management arena. In particular, it brings the problems of stakeholder publics into decision making—publics who make up the environment of the organization” (p. 143).

**Corporate Communication**

Corporate communication makes its appearance as an academic discipline in the 1990s defining itself as a strategic management discipline that examines how the external and internal communication
activities of an organization can be integrated, and how relationships to key stakeholders can be built with the purpose of creating a favourable reputation (for definitions of corporate communication, see Frandsen & Johansen, 2014).

In one of the most popular textbooks on corporate communication, strategy is defined briefly as “[t]he ways or means in which the corporate objectives are to be achieved and put into effect” (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 7). In the very same book, however, two approaches to strategy formation are presented in more detail. In the one approach it is described as a deliberate, planned, analytical top-down process, and in the other as a spontaneous, emergent, visionary bottom-up process (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 83). In other words, we rediscover the first of the five lines of development presented in the previous section.

It must be emphasized that in contrast to the majority of textbooks on corporate communication, Cornelissen (2011) takes a rather progressive approach to strategy and strategizing. Most other textbooks either refrain from defining what they understand by strategy and strategic, or they support, explicitly, but mostly implicitly, the prescriptive perspective on strategy. Van Riel (1995) uses the term corporate strategy, but without defining it. Argenti (1994) prefers the term organization strategy which embraces three subsets: determining the objectives, deciding what resources are available, and diagnosing the organization’s image credibility.

More recently Goodman and Hirsch (2010) talk about leadership defined either from a leader identity or from a leader behavior approach. The aim of these two authors is to establish normative guidelines putting corporate communication strategy into action in a global context—again, unfortunately, without specifying what they mean by strategy.

**Strategic Communication**

The last of the three disciplines, strategic communication, emerges as an academic discipline after the year 2000 defining its field of study as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3; see also Holtzhausen, 2008). The concept of organization has a very broad meaning in this context, including not only private and public organizations, but also advertising agencies and political parties (Hallahan, 2004). Strategic communication is the only discipline in which the word strategic forms part of the name itself. It is also a discipline that right from the beginning reflected on the meaning of strategy and strategic in a more sophisticated way.

Hallahan et al. (2007) make a distinction between a modernist and a postmodernist approach to strategy and strategic management. The modernist approach corresponds to what we labelled the prescriptive perspective in the previous section. The strategy formation process is viewed as rational and objective; that is, as a process detached from its political and cultural context. The critics of the modernist approach claim that this approach only takes into account the interests and goals of top management, thereby reducing strategic communication to asymmetrical, top-down communication from top management to employees. Strategy is therefor conceived as something negative. The postmodernist approach corresponds to what we called the emergent perspective in the previous section, but it also includes elements from what we have described as the shift to a critical or practice-oriented approach (comprising the issues of power and agency). Concerning the emergent perspective, it is emphasized that the strategy-making process always will be based on prior experience and actions, and that it also always will include actions and decisions made by employees at all levels of the organization. Thus, the postmodernist approach entails a critique of the traditional distinction, introduced by public relations scholars, between two roles: communication managers who take decisions or contribute to the decision-making process, and communication technicians who implement these decisions.

To summarize, then: the understanding of strategy and strategic management within the disciplines of public relations, corporate communication, and strategic communication has developed
over a period of more than 30 years. Strategic orientation was already prominent as a topic of
discussion in the 1980s, but it remained within the scope of the prescriptive perspective, without
being very explicit about this. Since that time, and especially since the year 2000, the under-
standing of strategy and strategic management among communication scholars has clearly become more
explicit and sophisticated. However, when compared to the research conducted within the field of
management research, there still seems to be a gap that needs to be addressed. Among the scholars
who have contributed to reducing this gap are Steyn (2007) and Raupp and Hoffjann (2010).

The Strategic Role of Communication Executives

Equipped with this understanding of how the study of strategy and strategic management has devel-
oped within the field of management research in general, and in the disciplines of public relations,
corporate communication and strategic communication specifically, it is now possible to discuss
the major concern of this chapter: the role of communication executives in strategy and strategiz-
ing. In order to conduct a state-of-the-art review, we have screen the most important journals
in public relations, corporate communication, and strategic communication (such as Public Relations
of Communication Management, and International Journal of Strategic Communication), as well as some of
the most important research monographs and handbooks published between 1990 and 2013. The
literature on the role of communication executives in strategy and strategizing is small but growing.

The analysis yielded several variations on the theme, namely, how communication executives per-
ceive themselves as strategists, how others perceive them, their strategic thinking, their view of social
media and text genres such as the press release, and the role of communication executives in specific
types of organizations (such as universities) and in specific countries (such as the United Kingdom).

Behind all these variations lies the key question of the institutionalization of communication manage-
ment in organizations (Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Frandsen & Johansen, 2013).

Space limitations preclude a review of all these research contributions. In this section, therefore,
we will concentrate on the role, competencies, identity and legitimacy of communication executives as
strategists, as explained earlier.

The Role of Communication Executives as Strategists

In the previous section, we claimed that so far public relations scholars have not approached the
concept of strategy and strategic management in a very explicit or sophisticated way. However, this
doesn’t mean that the discipline of public relations has not contributed insights that are of interest to
the study of the role of communication executives in strategy and strategizing. There are two areas
in particular where public relations scholars have conducted relevant research regarding communica-
tion executives. The first area is the research on public relations practitioner roles. The second area is
the research on the access to and membership in the dominant coalition.

Concerning the first line of research it seems possible to draw a rough distinction between a first
generation of research on public relations practitioner roles, represented first of all by Broom and
Dozier, which runs from the late 1970s until the beginning of the 2000s; and a second generation
of research (represented, among others, by Moss, Steyn and Holtzhausen), which starts after the year
2000 (see the most recent literature review in Dozier & Broom, 2006). It is characteristic of the first
generation that it is not very explicit regarding the practitioners’ role as strategists and participants in
the strategic work of organizations, whereas the second generation seems to be more aware of this role.

Broom and Smith (1979) established the first typology of practitioner roles based on the literature
on organizational and consulting roles. Organizational role is defined as “abstractions, conceptual
maps that summarize the most salient features of day-to-day behaviors of organizational members”
Broom and Smith (1979) identified four conceptual roles: the expert prescriber (the practitioner as the authority on public relations), the communication facilitator (the practitioner as the mediator between the organization and its publics), the problem-solving process facilitator (the practitioner as the rational problem-solver collaborating with line management), and the communication technician (the practitioner as the producer of communication materials).

Subsequently, Dozier (1983, 1984) discovered that the first three types could be collapsed into a single role, thus creating the well-known role dichotomy that was dominant until the beginning of the 2000s: namely, the role of the communication manager versus the role of the communication technician. Regarding the content of the role of the communication manager, Dozier refers to decision-making and strategic planning, but seldom, and only in an indirect way, does he refer to strategy and strategizing as such, or to the practitioner’s role as strategist.

In a series of articles, Moss and Green (2001), DeSanto and Moss (2004) and Moss, Newman and DeSanto (2005) highlighted some of the limitations of previous practitioner roles research, including Broom and Dozier’s pioneering research in the 1980s and 1990s. First, the majority of the studies of practitioner roles had only provided a one-sided perspective of role enactment, “rather than examining the role-making process as a product of the interaction between ‘role senders’ and ‘role receivers’” (Moss & Green, 2001, p. 122). This is a criticism that reflects the micro-level perspective of the strategy as practice research tradition presented above. Second, there had been a strong focus on the issue of gender discrimination. Third, there was also a strong focus on a US context. And finally, with an implicit reference to Mintzberg, “insufficient attention has been paid to examining critically how the nature of ‘managerial work’ in the public relations context has been defined” (p. 122); that is, “what public relations ‘managers’ do” (p. 127). According to Moss and his colleagues, the explanation is methodological: whereas public relations researchers have adopted a deductive approach to examine the validity of the conceptual role types identified by Broom and Dozier, management researchers have adopted an inductive approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as participant observation, interviews and diaries.

Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) were among the first scholars to conceptualize the communication executive’s role of strategist. Inspired by Steyn (2002, 2007), they tested and measured public relations roles theory, conducting an online survey among 782 South African advertising, public relations, and government practitioners. It must be emphasized that the purpose of the study was not to test the existence of these roles per se but to contribute to theory building in strategic communication as defined by Hallahan et al. (2007).

Among the three research questions addressed by this study, RQ1 is the most relevant to this chapter: What are the roles performed by South African communication practitioners? A total of 32 items were used to measure nine different communication roles: the four roles conceptualized by Broom and Smith (1979) (cf. above), the four roles measured in a previous study (Holtzhausen, Petersen, & Tindall, 2003), and finally the new role of strategist. The four items used to measure the strategist role were

1. I am required to scan the environment for new stakeholder and societal trends that can be used in strategic planning.
2. I actively contribute to the strategic planning process of my organization/client on behalf of the communication function.
3. I am part of the strategic team that helps my organization/client adapt to the future.
4. I always consider the strategic implications of my work for my organization/client (pp. 83–84).

Interestingly, the results of Tindall and Holtzhausen’s (2011) study showed that the role of strategist was the role most commonly used in South African communication practice. In addition, a factor analysis conducted to ensure there was no overlap between the roles also revealed that the
strategist role actually included nine items, with two items from the expert prescriber role, and three items from the process facilitator role (p. 87).

Research on public relations roles now included the role of strategist (and not only communication manager), and has also been carried out in areas other than public relations, such as advertising and government communication. However, we still know very little about what respondents actually mean by strategy and strategic when they give answers to questions such as “I actively contribute to the strategic planning of my organization” and “I am part of the strategic team that helps my organization.”

**Membership in the Dominant Coalition**

The second line of research that is of interest to the study of the communication executive’s role in strategy and strategizing examines how public relations practitioners gain membership in the dominant coalition of an organization. By membership we mean a specific organizational status and a specific set of actions and reactions that manifest themselves in various forms, such as a move from temporary access to permanent membership, or from passive to active participation once inside the dominant coalition, or as attention and reliance from top management.

To define what dominant coalition means is far more challenging. Grunig (1992) defines the dominant coalition as “the powerholders of the organization” (p. 24). The prototype of a dominant coalition is still the CEO, the rest of the C-suite, or the board of directors who possess the formal authority and the control of decision-making processes, resources and outcomes. However, public relations researchers such as Berger (2005) have emphasized the shifting nature of dominant coalitions:

> Most of the decision-making struggles occur beneath the BOD level among multiple-dominant coalitions. These are the intersecting power groups—loosely or tightly coupled—where public relations managers seek and are sometimes active in strategic roles. Some of these coalitions or power groups are relatively fixed and formal in nature, whereas others are more ad hoc and contingency based.

Berger, 2005, p. 10

Bowen (2009) conducted a major study of how communication executives obtain membership in the dominant coalition and what kind of barriers there are to such a membership. Based on data from a large survey among members of IABC, four focus groups and interviews with 32 communication executives, she identified five different routes to short-term or long-term membership of the dominant coalition of an organization: serious organizational crises, ethical dilemmas, credibility gained over time, issues high on the media agenda and leadership.

In a series of studies that adopt a critical perspective including power as an important issue, Berger (2005, 2007) and Berger and Reber (2006) made an attempt to demystify the dominant coalition by opening it up for scrutiny. What happens inside the dominant coalition when the communication executive has finally gained membership? According to Excellence Theory, we can expect the communication executive to do the “right” thing, that is, contribute to the implementation of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations balancing organizational self-interest with the interest of key publics. However, the studies conducted by Berger and Reber revealed a somewhat different picture.

Based on interviews with 21 communication executives, Berger (2005) formulated six propositions (valid for large organizations), which shed light on our lack of realism when talking about the dominant coalition:

1. There is not just one dominant coalition: power relations occur in multiple dominant coalitions.
2. It is difficult to maintain permanent membership: venues for dominant coalitions shift back and forth, from formal to informal settings.
3. The CEO, often considered a leading member of the dominant coalition, is still very much “present,” even when he or she is not there (during formal meetings): decisions still need to be ‘blessed’ by the CEO.

4. Decisions made by the dominant coalition are seldom final: the decision-making process often continues and it has multiple points of entry.

5. The dominant coalition may value the strategic advice of public relations, but it still demands a set of deliverables (texts) that highlight technical skills.

6. Public relations professionals are not immune to pressures of organizational compliance; that is, they do not always do the “right” thing.

Both Bowen (2009) and Berger (2005) emphasize the importance of gaining membership in the dominant coalition. Yet, they approach the topic from two different perspectives. Like most representatives of the Excellence Theory, Bowen views strategic management as a decision-making process to which communication executives may have access in specific situations and/or due to specific competencies, but does not discuss strategy as such. Berger, who presents himself as a critical scholar, is far more pragmatic in his approach, but sheds light neither on how communication executives understand and perform strategy, nor on what it means to them to be strategic.

**Competencies**

Much research has focused on the distinction between communication technicians and communication managers and on the idea that participation in strategic decision making and membership in the dominant coalition depends on the capability of the communication executive to enact the managerial role (Brønn, 2001). Brønn argues that because enacting the managerial role can be just the same as “performing high-level technical activities” (p. 313), what communication executives need is competencies in *strategic thinking*. Based on a review of literature and on models of strategic planning, issues management, and issues life cycle, Brønn identifies three major attributes associated with strategic thinking: using research-based information (generated from environmental scanning or information gathering); working from a plan (managerial planning: strategic and tactical plans); and being a member of the top management team with a boundary spanning role: that is, to communicate stakeholder views to senior managers and vice versa, and to participate in the decision-making process.

**The Communication Executive as Perceived by Others**

Whereas the vast majority of studies of the roles and competencies of communication executives are based on the practitioners’ self-perception, only a few studies have examined how CEOs and managers of other departments such as marketing and HR departments perceive communication executives. Steyn (1999), Brønn (2001), and, especially, Brønn and Dahlen (2012) have tried to shed some light on this important aspect.

Steyn (1999) conducted a survey among 103 South African CEOs from public and private companies to determine the expectations of the CEO of public relations roles. The CEO expectations were assessed according to 25 statements that formed the index for measuring the roles of the PR technician, the PR manager and the PR strategist. According to the findings, the historical manager role could be split into the role of PR strategist and PR manager. In smaller organizations, one person might perform both roles, whereas these roles often are enacted by two different people at different organizational levels in larger organisations. The study also described the activities the CEO expected the PR strategist to perform: to provide the organization’s strategy...
formulation processes with strategic information about strategic stakeholders, publics and activists and their concerns, and about the consequences of organizational policies and strategies for these groups.

In a study conducted among a large sample of private and public sector leaders in Norway to examine how they perceived the communication executive and the communication function, Brønn and Dahlen (2012) identified several gaps between the views of leaders and the views of communication practitioners in Norway. The leaders rated the communication executives’ competencies regarding strategic thinking only as above average, and worse in the public sector than in the private sector. The competencies related to information collection, problem analysis, creativity, planning, organizational and external awareness, and change orientation. The leaders participating in the survey looked for competencies that mirrored activities performed by top management. If they found that the communication executive was able to make strategic contributions, they were more likely to value the communication executive and the communication department. This implies that having the right competencies, and also the support of top management, is critical if communication executives want to have more influence on strategic decision making, and to be invited to strategic meetings at the top level. It means that communication executives should have an “understanding of the appropriate external environment, the capabilities and objectives of the organisation, connections between loosely connected events, influencers, new opportunities and the seeing of strategies and solutions” (Hayes, as cited in Brønn & Dahlen, 2012). However, only 3% of the Norwegian communication practitioners indicated that their department was responsible for environmental scanning and issues management.

**Legitimacy of Communication Executives**

The legitimacy of the communication executive inside an organization, or in society at large, has been investigated by Johansson and Ottestig (2011). These two researchers were inspired by a survey the Swedish Public Relations Association conducted in 2009 among 200 CEOs about the future work of public relations practitioners. The survey showed that almost 80% of the communication executives were members of the senior management group, and that they were working chiefly with activities such as brand issues, relationship management, development of communication strategies, and coaching of managers in communication. The survey also showed that many communication executives are recruited without possessing any formal education in public relations or communication science.

Based on these findings, Johansson and Ottestig (2011) carried out in-depth interviews with communication executives from 10 organizations in order to find out if their internal and external roles enhanced the legitimacy of the communication function. The explorative study showed that the interviewees had a strategic or managerial role and that their work was clearly located at the managerial and strategic level. The external legitimacy of communication executives was perceived to be good. Externally they were considered official spokespersons on behalf of their organizations, they were treated as organizational leaders, and they had a good relationship with journalists. However, the study also showed that the internal legitimacy of communication executives was constantly negotiated inside the organization and that it differed a great deal from organization to organization. Even though internal legitimacy had increased in private as well as public organizations in Sweden (four out of five participants were members of the senior management group), a few interviewees indicated that they were not taken seriously, or that they sometimes had to legitimate their presence in the senior management group, for instance by taking initiatives and pursuing strategic organizational issues. Legitimacy varied over time, and it could be jeopardised due to the expectations of other managers. The lack of formal education in public relations or communication science among communication executives was also indicated as a contributing factor.
Shadowing Communication Executives

Inspired by Minzberg’s *The nature of managerial work* (1973), Nothaft (2010a, 2010b) conducted a shadowing study to examine what communication managers do when they manage, and why, in eight German companies. The study showed that it is possible to identify roles and functions of communication managers. However, the study also showed that there is much more to it than this. Nothaft (2010a, 2010b) introduces a distinction between *first-order* management and *second-order* management. First-order management is to influence the work of subordinates by managing it: for example by planning, organizing, and controlling. Second-order management is to influence the managing of others (peers) by institutionalizing certain concerns (of specific stakeholders or the general public) in an organization for the benefit of the organization.

The shadowing study showed that communication executives can enact at least three different roles when they perform second-order management, namely the missionary, the agent of common sense, and the buck’s stop (Nothaft (2010a, 2010b). Although the role comes close to Mintzberg’s figurehead, the missionary is not a special person. When he or she explains the company’s brand values to new employees, he or she is just behaving as a “normal person inspired by a great idea” (Nothaft, 2010b, p. 135). The agent of common sense enacts Mintzberg’s role of the disturbance handler. This type of communication manager is the diplomat trying to make parties stop quarrelling by talking some common sense into them, by using communication skills and public relations arguments. Finally, the buck’s stop is the communication executive who has to shoulder the blame when something goes wrong. It is a more passive role, and more often than not it is imposed on the communication executive rather than actively taken by himself or herself. He or she is seen as somebody that covers the back of the others in communication matters. In second-order management, it is important that communication executives operate in a soft, influential and diplomatic way by influencing, advising and counselling rather than in a hard and ‘managerial’ way. In fact, Nothaft concludes that it is important for communication executives to be careful, when using power or claiming authority, to restrain their personal ego and not to steal the limelight from others.

Future Research: Opening Up the Black Box?

For decades, it has been a declared ambition for academics as well as practitioners in public relations, corporate communication and strategic communication to apply and to promote a strategic approach to their field of study or practice. However, there is still a stretch to accomplish before we have reached a more complete understanding of the concept of strategy. One of the most frequent ways of verbalizing about this topic is to use the expression strategic decision-making, but in most cases this expression is just another black box not allowing us to see what is meant by strategic and decision-making. (See Latour, 1987 concerning the status of concepts as black boxes.)

Future research on the role of communication executives in strategy and strategizing has the opportunity to develop along two parallel tracks: a theoretical track and a methodological track.

The theoretical track will first of all materialize as a cross-disciplinary combination of communication research and management research. Although a lot of progress has been made since the 1980s, the majority of scholars, especially in public relations and corporate communication, only seem to have eyes for the prescriptive perspective on strategic management. This applies in particular to the first generation of research on practitioner roles and membership in the dominant coalition. It is time to unfold the many dimensions of the concepts of strategy and strategic management, inspired by some of the other perspectives and approaches such as the emergent perspective or the strategy-as-practice approach.

The methodological track will most probably assume the form of a stronger combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. On the one hand, surveys are still the most appropriate
method when it comes to identifying recurrent patterns and generalizing across large populations of respondents, as in the study Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) conducted. On the other hand, researchers such as Bowen (2009), Berger (2005), DeSanto and Moss (2004) and Nothhaft (2010a; 2010b) have demonstrated how both old and well-known qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, and new and perhaps less well-known research methods, such as shadowing and participant observation, can contribute with new insights concerning the roles and functions of communication executives in private and public organizations.

In response to these findings, we contend first that the increased application of qualitative methods will push us in the direction of a more contextualized approach to the study of strategic communication in general, and the roles and functions of communication executives and communication departments in particular. By contextualized we mean that strategic communication is not just a rational, instrumentalized function, but first and foremost a contextually embedded organizational practice. Second, and as an immediate consequence of the contextualized approach, a higher sense of critical realism should gradually appear in our ambitions and understanding of what strategy and strategic management are, and what they can do in organizations and to organizations.

References

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