In contemporary literature in strategic communication, public relations, and corporate communication, co-creation of meaning is often claimed to be a core objective (e.g., Coombs & Heath, 2006). The aim of this chapter is to review the literature on social media and strategic communication and develop arguments for why we believe the new communication structure is challenging old concepts and perspectives. The chapter discusses social media as technologies woven into a social and cultural communication structure, defined through participatory communication. It also addresses some of the challenges, opportunities, threats and changed practices that an organization’s approach to participatory communication, through use of social media, can cause. The chapter is, as mentioned, a literature review and it also contains a conceptual analysis, using different examples. The theoretical approach is to a certain extent founded in the cocreational tradition, but it follows a social constructivist perspective where communication is viewed as constitutive of reality. This approach may be interpreted as a current example of a paradigm struggle, forecast by Botan and Taylor (2004, p. 659):

We expect the period starting in the early 2000s and extending into the next decade to be characterized by a paradigm struggle away from symmetrical research. The future state of the field of public relations lies with whichever cocreationist model emerges as the most useful, the most theoretically valuable, and perhaps, the one that situates public relations theory as a foundational member of the field of communication.

From a contextual and societal level our perspective is linked to the postmodern critique of public relations theory (Holtzhausen, 2012), where strategic communication is viewed as a more relevant concept than public relations for understanding the transboundary communication processes taking place in contemporary liquid organizations and society.

Pointing to great change and its consequences are quite risky. On the one hand, such attempts may lead to simplification of history. On the other hand, there are reasons for research to point to contemporary trends and change when they have the support of theory and empirical research. Discussion of new and social media is a good example of how difficult the distinction is. From a historical perspective, all media were new at some point and it is possible to see media development as a long and continuous development process. While one can argue that technology itself is quite
unexciting, what is interesting is how the forms of communication, that is, how we create common meaning, are reformed or renewed. In the popular context consultants and analysts tell us about how the new media have transformed our entire social, cultural, political and economic communications structure over the past few years. This is undoubtedly a grave simplification. We believe it may be true that the new media, and forms of communication they provide, may be interpreted as a paradigm shift, but note that this is something that happens over a long period of time.

*Paradigm shift* is a difficult and grandiose concept. When it was launched in the philosophy of science (Kuhn, 1962) it led to much debate. Put simply, as Kuhn stated, the paradigm denotes the dominant approach to what is considered as normal during a certain era—or the pattern of science within which scientists subsume themselves. Discrepancies or anomalies emerge gradually and if they get enough support there is a scientific revolution. Kuhn’s perspective is grand, approaches centuries rather than decades, and focuses primarily on natural science. But it is possible to translate the paradigm theory also to the history of communications. In strategic communication research, which has a relatively short history, it may be difficult to analyze the trend in the field, but there is reason to believe that in recent decades a possible paradigm shift and new pattern in scientific thought is emerging. This new pattern is forming in conjunction with practice, since strategic communication as a research field is based on studies of a practice.

In this chapter we aim to describe how technological innovation interacts with social and communication forms, without resorting to technological determinism. Initially we discuss the historical context, and then we embody what new forms of communication are emerging. Next, we discuss participatory orientation as the most important feature of the new forms of communication and link this with examples from corporate branding, the media industry, and strategic communication. We also summarize past and current research on new media and strategic communication.

**The Third Industrial Revolution**

From a historical perspective, the emergence of new media is seen as a development of the third industrial revolution, which can be linked to the breakthrough development of the micro-electronics or micro-processor, which took place in the 1970s. This is in accordance with the analysis of the economic historian Schön (2006), who highlighted three industrial revolutions in the development of modern society. The first revolution was connected to the steam turbine, and the second revolution to the electric motor and combustion engine. The three revolutions have led to innovations in technology and organization, and have had implications for all areas of society.

Within social theory the division above is usually described as the development phases of modernity, beginning with the specific characteristics of the Enlightenment in the 1700s, which encompassed the first industrial revolution. The Enlightenment characteristics of rationality, individualism, mechanization, progress, and science are taking new forms in postmodern or late modern thinking. There are social scientists who believe that we now live in late modernity, characterized by risk, networks, globalization, media saturation and increased uncertainty (Bauman, 2000). There are also those who argue that our contemporary modernity can be seen as a break with the previous form of society and that we have entered a postmodern society where truth and reason are no longer relevant, but instead highlight increasing relativism and the crisis of modern values and authorities. In this postmodern world there is no longer any link between the existing world and the symbols that represent it; instead we find ourselves in a hyper-reality where the characters communicate with each other and create an imaginary reality (Baudrillard, 1988).

Strategic communication as a research field or practice cannot be isolated from this historical and social theoretical context, but should be viewed both as a contributing force and a consequence of the development. In a historical sense strategic communication grew as a practice parallel to the second industrial revolution, as a tool to manage the new relationships that emerged between
organizations and society. Conflicts between different organizations and groups created a need for professionals who could handle them, not least in relation to the increasingly independent media. The same trend was creating a need for theories on organizations’ internal communication, as relations between management and employees were becoming more complex and sometimes conflicting. This trend gained momentum mainly in the United States while many European countries, including Sweden, put more emphasis on the need for agencies to inform or enlighten their surroundings. Despite differences between the U.S. and Europe, the basic purpose was quite similar. It was about building consensus among organizations, their employees, and various external stakeholders, primarily in order to legitimate those organizations. A pioneer of public relations, Edward Bernays (1955), termed this mission as the *engineering of consent*. Bernays, who had an elitist view of the general public, meant that the general public was irrational, and for this reason propaganda was needed to manage public opinion. Paradoxically, Bernays also believed that the primary purpose of propaganda was to defend democracy. Although Bernays’s approach to the public or those whom he did not count as society’s elite was extreme, there are similarities with the approach that dominated strategic communications during this period. Strategic communicators considered the masses as passive recipients of messages, not as participants in the communication process.

**From Centralization to Decentralization**

During the 1900s a solid communication structure was established with professional owners of media technology, centralized communication organizations, and professional communicators, such as public relations or communication officers, journalists, graphic designers, and advertising professionals. Research and education were established in different times in different nations, but in most cases communication theories gathered from previous research on mass communication were used. *Transmitter, receiver, feedback* and *target* were concepts that dominated, all in accordance with the forms of communication made possible by the second industrial revolution.

From the 1960s, oppositional expressions toward the dominant social order became common in society and journalism also became more professionalized. It became increasingly clear that the communication professional had one main purpose: to create, strengthen or defend the legitimacy of organizations both internally in relations between management and employees and externally to various stakeholders. The power of media technology and distribution were, however, still in the hands of the professionals. When the personal computer became popular in the 1980s the tools for creating information became more accessible to ordinary people. Now everyone could design his or her own magazine or brochure. Internet penetration in the 1990s and its development during the 2000s challenged the communication infrastructure and power distribution. Decentralized networks disseminated through new technologies to a wider audience challenged the established ownership of media technologies and former professional communicators were joined by everyone who wanted to communicate to a wider group of people: “[A]nyone in the developed world can publish anything anytime, and the instant it is published, it is globally available and readily findable” (Shirky, 2009, p. 71). The 1990s were marked by the question whether state or market actors would have responsibility for different tasks in society. The new technologies have created new opportunities for collective organization beyond the established players and organizations, Shirky argued.

In the same vein, Jenkins (2006) pointed to three key characteristics of the new communications structure, which all have high relevance for strategic communication. First, he noted that we live in a convergent media culture, where old and new media interact and new forms of communication open up. The forms and genres that were established during the modern era are still here, but are influenced and are slowly being changed by new media. Limit overrun occurs in all areas: private confluences with public ones, entertainment with information; media move into each other (see, for example, how newspapers have brought out iPad versions). Second, Jenkins pointed to the
emergence of participatory culture. This culture follows the collapse of the one-way communication culture. Through the new media direct feedback is made possible and collective processes are set in motion beyond the domains of professional actors. In future, strategic communication between organizations and stakeholders will be less relevant to how common meaning is created and will be comparable with the communication that takes place between stakeholders, that is, between participant to participant. Third, the developments strengthen the creation of collective intelligence: problems are resolved through communication with various partners who contribute different parts to a whole. One question in a digital network gets answers from different people, and gradually an answer or a discussion is created.

Convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence are all highly relevant for contemporary and future strategic communications. Basically, this challenges traditional power relations between management and employees and between organizations and its stakeholders.

**Participatory Strategic Communications**

The reverse communication structure that is emerging, in which the roles of transmitter and receiver becomes less clear, challenges the boundaries between strategic communication and marketing, particularly branding. In their research on corporate branding, Hatch and Schultz (2009, 2010) tried to apply a participatory approach. The catchword in their studies is co-creation, a concept collected from research in product innovation. The leading innovation researchers Prahalad and Krishnan (2008) described the value of co-creation, based on both participatory orientation and an individual focus:

The way in which the principle N = 1 goes beyond mass customization is that it is about understanding the behavior, needs, and skills of individual customers and co-creating with them a value proposition that is unique to them. Customers play an active role in co-creating value, and firms leverage a broader resource base to deliver value.

A first, fairly trivial, but clear example of participatory orientation is the Build-A-Bear toy stores (www.buildabear.dk) where children themselves may determine how their teddy bear should look. They co-create the product and thereby increase its value to themselves.

Another example is the art exhibition “The Fifth Floor: Ideas Taking Place” at Tate Modern in Liverpool during 2008. Traditionally exhibitions are planned inside and out; experts come together and decide what the audience should take part in. This time the museum chose to send out artists and art educators to schools, clubs, workplaces and other places in the city. Nearly 1,000 people were asked the question: If you had the chance to put on an exhibition at Tate Liverpool, what would you do? The next step was to invite 12 international artists or artist groups to process all the ideas. The exhibition program was a success and drew a large crowd of visitors, many of whom had not previously been in an art museum (Kultur Skåne, 2009).

A third example can be gathered from the newspaper industry, which is doing everything it can to create new forms of participation from readers and establish itself as a necessary actor in the new structure. So far this has mainly entailed opportunities to write comments after news articles, and readers’ blogs, photos, and reports from the scene of action. A Swedish study (Hedman, 2009) showed that the players behind the online magazine publishers were convinced that the importance of user-created content would increase each year. The reasons for investing in user-created content were twofold, they concluded: first, the belief that it increased the loyalty of users, and second, the belief that the material attracted new readers. The same study also noted that there were problems with opening the content creation of online magazines to all readers because they might lack an
understanding of media ethics and legal constraints. Reader comments tended to be rather extreme and polarized.

Within marketing, there are historical examples of how users are getting involved. When it comes to product innovation, consumers have increasingly been given an important role to play. Traditional market research survives but is supplemented with qualitative participation in the actual innovation processes. Hatch and Schultz (2009, 2010) studied the LEGO Group in Denmark. This privately owned company, founded in 1932, had major problems in the market at the beginning of the 2000s. Since then the company has undergone a renaissance, based on clear participatory orientation. LEGO Group bases its business on a corporate brand platform and cherishes transparency. What has happened is that the company has gone from

[p]olitely responding to customers’ letters of gratitude and complaints, to finding themselves in need of a more public response to enthusiastic consumers who, within hours of its launch on the website, hacked into the software that runs mindstorms, the company’s highly successful robotics product.

Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 596

The self-interest groups around Lego have been invited to participate in various events and their ideas for new products are taken seriously in the production process. The company also introduced the LEGO Ambassador Program, which each year invites Lego enthusiasts from all over the world to participate in the innovation process.

Social Media and Strategic Communication

Social media is widely used by people to expand human knowledge and to find information. As mentioned earlier, Jenkins (2006, p. 4) emphasized that collective intelligence is created and made possible with the help of social media: “[N]one of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills.” A typical example is when people interact through social media to ask questions and get answers from others. In other words, social media provides a new way of communicating that is intimately associated with their interactive elements. The major breakthrough of social media has led to talk of a new media revolution (e.g. Cooke & Buckley, 2008). Cooke and Buckley have identified factors that explain the social importance of the media. First, there is the emergence of user-generated content that blurs the traditional boundaries between professional and user-produced content. Second, the use of social media is based on how users themselves retrieve the information they are interested in, instead of information being pushed out to different audiences through traditional media. Third, users have the freedom to produce their own story. For example, viewers can choose the images or videos they want to see on Flickr and YouTube. Social media offers micro parts that consumers can use and put together to form their own narrative, rather than being limited to the only composition and narrative that a publisher dictates. Fourth, the social interactions that are developed around the content are a key to understanding the importance of user-generated content. Many interactions arise through users’ abilities to rate, comment and review, and these opportunities can also be seen as important keys to social media success. Cooke and Buckley described social media as a media revolution that has had and will have significant impact on how people act, think and understand our age:

In short, we are witnessing the emergence of a population that is ever more willing to record, and share, their experiences: mash them up and submit them to their friends and other community members for evaluation, and allow their ‘reputations’ to be built via these assessments.

2008, p. 274
In a similar fashion, Hart (2011) proposed five roughly defined attributes of social media: authenticity, transparency, emphasis on a decentralization of authority, rapid and consistent release of information, and engagement of users in a collaborative effort. This means that if organizations were to take full advantage of social media, they would have to engage in genuine two-way communication with different stakeholders and not use social media as an additional venue for one-way information delivery. Stakeholders would instantly recognize standardized responses, and leave the platform. Hart argued that social media users expect organizations they follow or communicate with to be transparent. Social media also give possibilities for decentralizing communication responsibility, meaning increasing communication between groups and individuals on a horizontal level inside and outside an organization, instead of traditional top-down communication. While social media offers possibilities to maintain relationships with different stakeholders, it also makes it easier to quickly respond with information in different situations, for example during a crisis. Finally, organizations that put a lot of energy into maintaining a durable communication with stakeholders and engage them in collaborations have clear advantages in building and upholding long-term relationships.

Marken (2005) asserted that social media has a great potential for strategic communication, since they promote both one- and two-way communication and can be used for both interpersonal and mass communication. Hence, the border between interpersonal and mass communication seems to be erased with social media (Cho & Huh, 2010). The enhanced opportunities for interactivity make it more realistic for communication professionals to reach the ideal of symmetric communication (J. E. Grunig, L. A. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006) and joint decision-making (Coombs & Heath, 2006). Research indicates that interactive blogs can produce personal relations between organizations and users, which often facilitate positive attitudes towards the organization (Yang & Kang, 2009). Also, Aula (2011) maintained that communication online can foster a stronger relationship between organizations and their stakeholders, and even increase an organization’s social capital.

Social media is unique in the sense that communication professionals have never before had access to a medium where it is fairly easy to create and maintain dialogue with a large number of people in different audiences (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). However, it is an open question whether dialogic opportunities in social media are actually used to any great extent. There are not many examples of research on how social media is used within strategic communication (some exceptions are Briones et al., 2011; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Kent, 2008; Steyn, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2010). A comparative study of Australian and European organizations’ use of social media for strategic communication reveals that the practice is still rather experimental and ad hoc (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Besides the great potential for dialogue with a large number of people, social media has another major advantage. It is reasonably easy to identify, observe and map different stakeholders, their activities and opinions. Hence, issues management is significantly improved through the use of social media.

Thus, social media offers other possibilities than the conventional media and can be regarded as more open and democratic media. These media create and promote the emergence of numerous social networks whose objectives may be to promote knowledge about a particular topic or interest, strengthen a public’s special interest, or create and consolidate people’s social identity. At the same time, research shows that many organizations still do not use the dialogic or interactive side of websites (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) or social media (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). All too often social media is only used to place user-friendly information at different groups’ disposal (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Bortree and Seltzer (2009) underlined that organizations must stick to Kent and Taylor’s (1998) principles—by always responding to stakeholders’ questions, for example, and by keeping their information updated, and publishing useful information. And of course, as Kent and Taylor emphasized, if a relationship built on online communication were to survive in the long run, the goal of the relationship would have to be that communication actually took place. Hence, one can question whether organizations really are interested in communicative actions the way Habermas
Participatory Culture

(1984) saw it (co-operative action performed by individuals, based upon mutual deliberation and argumentation) or if they are only interested in strategic communication (attempting as efficiently as possible to distribute information in order to affect receivers). This critical view may be interpreted as extreme: valid, perhaps, in the second stage of the industrial revolution, but not taking into account current developments in society and organizations.

Are Organizations Losing Control?

Historically, organizations have had fairly good control over the information that was available, through strategically placed press releases and skilled practitioners’ work (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Since the mid-1990s there has been an extraordinary diffusion, adoption and development of Internet technology, and consequently prerequisites for communication have changed dramatically (González-Herrero & S. Smith, 2010). Strategic communication that earlier was characterized by a single source diffusing information to many has now been displaced by communication where many communicate with many. Accordingly, there has been a change from a push culture, with traditional analogue mass media where publics had little influence on the content, to a pull culture, where publics are expected to search for and collect the information they are interested in (González-Herrero & S. Smith, 2008; Telleen, 1997).

Social media brought about a power shift from organizations to stakeholders, which have a greater potential to influence than they used to have. The low admission barriers to get access to new media contribute to the great diffusion of social media. Information traditional mass media previously censured is accessible today for most people, and is not limited by time and space (Mei, Bansal, & Pang, 2010). This also means that social media challenges the traditional journalistic channels, while stakeholders quite easily can produce an alternative agenda (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). Traditional mass media’s gatekeeping function is not applicable on the Internet. Internet technology and social media allow laypeople to act as journalists and produce news. Long before the introduction of social media, Chaffee and Metzger (2001, p. 375) wrote “the key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about.” Consequently the power position of the public has changed with social media.

Solis and Breakenridge (2009) suggested that social media challenges the traditional understanding of public relations (which is the concept they use) in that the users themselves can create strategic messages and make them publicly available. The use of social media has also made journalists and communication professionals confused, when ‘ordinary’ people can fairly easily make a strategic message publicly available. B. G. Smith (2010) similarly talked about a social model for strategic communications, with communication professionals’ traditional responsibilities transferred to the users of social media. This applies to both internal and external stakeholders. Organizational members, who are dedicated and committed, talk about and discuss their work and organization in different blogs. They are hence important ambassadors who have new opportunities to spread the message of the organization. The organizational image co-workers spread is naturally more differentiated than the official image communication professionals mediate, but on the other hand it is probably many times more in line with employees’ organizational identity. When it comes to marketing there is a tendency for users to act on behalf of an organization. Hast (2010) stresses that on YouTube there is a wide variety of movies—everything from amateur videos to professional commercials that companies are trying to spread through viral marketing. The idea is that individuals should flag films that somehow raise others’ interest within their network. Hast and Osiannsson (2008) maintain that the emergence of user-generated content has increasingly blurred the boundary between materials amateurs and professionals create. Consumers have become transmitters instead of passive recipients. In their view, the reason that social media has become so popular is the medium’s potential to let
individuals rate, comment and interact with others. In other words, there is no longer a clear and
given border between communication professionals and laymen. Through social networks, consum-
ers can act as marketers promoting various products they like. For instance, Dhar and Chang (2008)
show that artists’ albums that were mentioned 40 times on different blogs increased their sale by three
times compared to the average.

B. G. Smith (2010) studied how various external stakeholders used Twitter during the earthquake
that hit Haiti’s capital Port-Au-Prince in January 2010, and how those publics thereby become active
strategic communicators. Twitter, Smith argued, is more than just a message platform; it is a platform
for social connections between people and for marketing. In Smith’s social model an audience using
social media initiates strategic communication-related activities based on user interactivity. Smith’s
study confirmed previous studies that people’s online interactivity is based on interest in a topic. This
stands in contrast to the common notion that people only use social media for self-fulfillment and to
construct and shape their own identity (Rettberg, 2009). People often seem to be more interested
in focusing on an issue and on belonging to a community, than in expressing personal opinions
(B. G. Smith, 2010). Searching, retrieving and distributing information through social media is
included in this interactivity. The messages distributed through Twitter comprise many retweets,
a retweet being a message that is sent with a reference to the person who originally wrote it. The
forwarded message usually begins with RT or Retweet. Smith saw this as proof that people do not
only use social media as a tool for self-realization. Furthermore, Smith stated that the presence of the
hashtag was further proof that people were using social media to disseminate messages. A hashtag is
a way to find information about a topic on Twitter, using a common tagging. For example, if you
want to know what has been written about the iPhone, you write #iPhone.

We argue that professional communicators do not lose control over information to social media.
J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (2010) pointed out that communications professionals have never
been able to define who is part of a public and almost never have been able to influence them to
do what the organization wishes. With social media, the dreams that many practitioners have about
controlling publics become even more illusionary.

**Deleted Borders and Transparency**

It has been claimed that the border between internal and external communication is difficult, or even
impossible, to draw (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008; Falkheimer & Heide, 2007). Internal
communication does not stop within organizational boundaries without reaching out to other stake-
holders, and external communications that are primarily meant to affect actors outside the organiza-
tion also greatly affect the employees. For example, it is a fairly high probability that employees who
read a newspaper article about their organization will be affected in some way. If the article describes
the organization’s success, it will probably strengthen the employees’ perception of the organization’s
excellence and the organizational identity is, in most cases, strengthened. And, vice versa, if the article
is more negative or critical to the organization and its activities, the employee’s attitude toward
the organization would not be improved: rather the contrary.

With social media the unclear border between internal and external communication is accentu-
ated ever further, since the external public’s opinions are much more accessible to organization
members, who also have great potential to disseminate information about the internal situation in the
organization. Published information can have a major impact, and negative writings can definitely
damage an organization’s reputation. One example comes from the police in southern Sweden,
where a police officer mocked people through a private blog. Among other things, the policeman
wrote about how he shook a deceased person’s hand, as he and his colleagues had learned to shake
hands at a first meeting, in an ethics course, and that the police officers present then laughed at the
situation (Mattsson, 2010). The Swedish Police decided to give the blogging police officer a warning.
Such talk and actions have always existed, but with social media the dissemination and transparency of communication is much more apparent. This example shows how the boundary between internal and external, and private and professional communication is removed. Another example comes from Danish DSB First, a large train operator in Denmark and southern Sweden, where two employees were suspended from their jobs after they had posted pictures of trains, railway and a signal-man on Facebook (Nylund, 2010). The employees had taken the pictures during work and published them on Facebook in their spare time; the employer found this action very inappropriate. Other organizations have gone even further and given notice of termination to employees who have published negative or damaging information about an organization.

There seems to be a fear that organization members spend too much time communicating through social media. A special report on social networking in *The Economist* (2010) noted that staff's use of social media cost 14 billion USD annually in lost productivity. The same article reported that the U.S. firm Nucleus Research estimated that their productivity would increase by 1.5% if their staff did not use Facebook during work time. A survey by the consulting firm Blue Coat showed that Facebook, among other sites, took up most of an organizations’ network capacity (Lindström, 2010). However, it should be noted that this exercise in math was based on the assumption that employees do not do anything else during their workday than work. After all there are many other activities staff might engage in, such as a smoking break, drinking water, and talking to colleagues in the hallway. In addition, many people have their own mobile phone or smart phones where they can surf the Internet. In other words, the criteria for the study were warped. The fact that staff members are engaged in private communication by e-mail, phone calls and Facebook will in most cases, if not abused, not affect their work or productivity.

**The Double-Edged Sword**

"From a public relations standpoint, blogs can be a blessing and a curse" (Smudde, 2005, p. 35). Organizations can effectively use social media to establish good and long-term relationships with various stakeholders, and as a tool for environmental scanning and issues management. Different stakeholders can also use this media in a negative way against the organization, cause major damage and be a primary source of an organizational crisis. Social media can also be dangerous for organizations, due to the high speed with which material can be published and spread over the Internet and thereby become accessible to large numbers of people. Mei, Bansal and Pang (2010) underlined that social media is a double-edged sword. One example is the U.S. carrier JetBlue Airways, whose passengers on Valentine’s Day 2007 on Flight 751 stood on the runway at the John F. Kennedy International Airport for eight hours (CNN Travel, 2007). It was a very cold winter and when the plane was on its way to the runway, the captain had orders to stop because of a sudden weather change. While they were waiting for a change in weather, the wheels froze to the ground and were fixed. Because the airplane was already loaded, there was no available gate. During the wait passengers had no information about what was happening and no food or drinks were served. Two days later the first passengers started to publish pictures and video footage from inside the plane on YouTube, and discussed JetBlue on various blogs. For this company the crisis escalated when the passengers began to upload videos on the Internet (Mei et al., 2010).

In market research, scholars emphasize the danger of not putting enough resources into communicating with different stakeholders, not least when it comes to consumers. In the same way that consumers are able to act for an organization and in their networks discuss and market different products, services and organizations, they are also able to spread negative messages about an organization. This applies to commercial businesses, as well as public authorities and universities. In the worst cases such messages can have an incredibly fast and wide dissemination. Research has shown that consumer websites dedicated to complaints, so-called sucks.com sites, always get listed
at the top when an online search for an organization is conducted (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Ward and Ostrom’s analysis shows that consumers are spreading negative information to demonstrate their power and possibilities to influence and take revenge on an organization, and to urge others to do the same thing. Consumers create websites for support of other consumers, while encouraging others to oppose a certain organization. Hence, a community of discontent can be produced through which both individual and social identities are created and confirmed when participants interact. This is another example of how social media has led to a power shift from organizations to stakeholders.

With social media, consumers and other groups have an effective tool to make their voices heard and exert the ability to influence others’ thinking and behavior (Hast & Ossiansson, 2008).

On the Internet there are plenty of examples where activities in various social media have had negative consequences for organizations. One example is the door lock Evo, which the Swedish company Assa Abloy manufactured. During 2008 videos were published on YouTube, where different people, such as a six-year-old boy with various tools, such as a popsicle stick, quickly lock-picked Assa Abloy locks. These videos attracted the attention of many journalists, who wrote numerous articles, and even Swedish television reported on the case. In sum, this resulted in a substantial weakening of the brand, reputation and goodwill of Assa Abloy, especially given that people felt their security threatened.

A phenomenon that has had a renaissance—it has a long history in the PR industry—is “astroturfing,” which means a campaign that is planned by an organization and masked to create the impression of being spontaneous and carried out at grass roots level (AstroTurf is a brand of synthetic turf—designed to look like the genuine, living lawn). An example of contemporary astroturfing (through a viral video) is a controversial social media campaign by the Danish tourism organization Visit Denmark, launched in September 2009. In the YouTube video a Danish mother, named Karen, asked the audience to help her find the foreign father of her newborn baby. The heartbreaking story, which later turned out to be a fake, created huge interest and was spread all over the world. Astroturfing as a communication method is obviously very risky for an organization. If the campaign gets revealed, it will damage the organization’s reputation considerably. For example, Mazda’s reputation has deteriorated significantly since their astroturfing campaign for the car model M3 was revealed in 2004 (Cox, Martinez, & Quinlan, 2008). It is therefore vital that organizations allocate adequate resources to respond to various stakeholders, enter into dialogue, and exploit the potential of dialogue that social media provide.

Communication Professionals and Participatory Strategic Communication

J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (2010) suggested the capabilities and benefits of social media rarely are fully exploited. Often social media are used primarily as a platform to spread organizational messages. There seems to be a widespread assumption that social media per se will reach expected outcomes automatically and that published information also will be read and interpreted in a certain way. This is wishful thinking among many communication professionals and is likely derived from a desire to gain access to an effective medium in which the results are obvious and predictable. Media history verifies that new technologies and media always initially bring forth a technological determinism.

Recently, a number of more critical articles on blogs have been published (e.g., Kent, 2008), which stressed that many authors are too one-sidedly positive toward blogs and that more research is needed before it is possible to comment on their different effects. A master’s thesis (Sternvad & Wendel, 2009), showed that organizations primarily used blogs to monitor the surrounding society, while many organizations wanted more dialogue with different audiences. The dialogue that took place tended to be asymmetrical and organizations were listening to audiences in order to adjust their strategies and then more efficiently affect beneficiaries.
Is a paradigm shift taking place? With reference to the historical description in this chapter and the overview of social media’s role for strategic communication, there is little doubt that a shift is taking place. This shift affects many sectors of society, but strategic communication is in a key position to experience it. The earlier models on which strategic communication is based come mainly from mass communication research. The concepts from this field, such as transmitter, target groups and beneficiaries, are of doubtful relevance for strategic communications in the third industrial revolution. There are optimistic case studies, such as Briones et al. (2011) who claimed that the communication professional must update strategies and practices if they want to build relationships through social media. Their research on the American Red Cross’s usage of social media showed that an organization can give faster service to different stakeholders, get more media coverage and obtain more feedback, both positive and negative, which they can use to improve their work. Further, they concluded that social media is an ideal communication platform, when an organization and its stakeholders share similar values, beliefs and interests. Still, it is important to avoid technological determinism. If corporations and governments are serious about listening more and being more democratic, a focus on media technologies and communication distribution are not enough. Deetz and Brown (2004) concluded that what was really needed was new forms of management, leadership and organizational culture.

While there is reason not to exaggerate what is happening right now, progress should be viewed over the long term. It is important to realize that a paradigm shift in communications could take place over a longer timeline—in decades rather than in particular years. Even if there is available technology, it takes time to change the dominant approach to strategic communications. What is clear is that social media’s emergence has highlighted the fact that communication rarely can be controlled in the way that organizations wish.

References


