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Contextual Distortion
Strategic Communication versus the Networked Nature of Nearly Everything

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Strategic communication has been defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 4). It is “not random or unintentional” (p. 27) although unintended consequences can ensue; it is not aimed at control but takes environment into consideration through dialogue or emergent strategy. From this standpoint, strategic communication is inclusive and flexible, but still fundamentally managed, purposive, and organization-centered—at least, within its home organization. This chapter focuses on the problem of what happens after such communication enters the public arena, where it shares space with random unwanted associations that distort the original intent of the message. Ultimately this chapter poses two questions that grow out of this contextual dependence:

1. How strategic can “strategic communication” be, given the distortions imposed by the environment outside?
2. What can organizations do to maintain some semblance to the original content and intent of their message after it leaves their hands?

Control has long been a troublesome issue in strategic communication. The lone organization that commands its own fate is rare, if it ever existed, and the positivist spark that illuminated earlier writing on public relations management by objectives (e.g., Nager & Allen, 1991) has faded considerably. Starting in the late 1990s, communication scholars began to try out multiple theories—some from communication, some not—to explore the lack of control that has become such a central problem in organizational strategy, particularly in the areas of issues management, reputation, and runaway news coverage. Early on, for example, Williams and Moffitt (1997) saw organizational image-making as a shifting, repeated process whereby “one image can emerge as strong at one moment in time, and another, contrasting image can emerge as dominant at a different moment in time because of the multiple and contradictory factors involved” in the audience’s processing of organizational traits (p. 241). Botan and Soto (1998), and Berger (1999) proposed similar views of public relations as a shifting, recurrent process whereby an organization and its publics negotiate meaning through dynamic exchange between sender and receiver, organization and public.
Many scholars have tackled the problem of message management since then, but the issue remains open. For example, James (2011) recently circled back to the 1990s articles to redefine positioning in public relations as “the strategic attempt to stake out and occupy a site of intentional representation in the contested space where meanings are constructed, contested, and reconstructed” (p. 98). Molleda (2011) likewise noted the tendency of controversies involving multinational corporations to slide across national borders, to become entangled with local issues and prior coverage, and to be framed disparately by international news services that reflect their own national priorities even though organizations affected by the news have limited ability to shape it. Using the network theory of social capital, Ihlen (2005) noted that “competing interests” are “engaged in a continuous struggle to maintain or alter the distribution” of an organization’s symbolic capital, which he defined in terms of its reputation (p. 493).

Currently, managing issues and messages looks more disorderly than ever. For example, Luoma-Aho and Vos (2010) recently described issues management in terms of “a multiplicity of ‘issue arenas’” that are “comprised of organizational stakeholder networks and communication patterns” (p. 316). In this dynamic environment, the organization becomes, not a controlling force, but rather “one player among many, with the main focus on issues, not the organization” (p. 321); indeed, the content and outcomes of such issue arenas “are outside the organization’s control” (p. 322). Publics and organizations have an equal stake in these issue arenas, which are composed of “simply a heterogeneous network of aligned interests” in which “actors are defined by their relations with others in the network” as well as by such influences as “surroundings, regulations, other people, and technology” (p. 318).

These studies have a number of themes in common. All of them depict communication outcomes as unruly, dynamic, and temporary, constantly needing to be renegotiated with multiple interest groups. All the studies emphasize that even when communication originates in a strategic plan, it is prone to unpredictable influence by other information that happens to occupy the same news space or public opinion environment. In this shifting arena, the negotiation of meaning is always local; it thereby eludes management by any one party and can take on novel and unintended meanings. For example, Curtin and Gaither (2006) noted that local meanings attached to smallpox, entirely unanticipated by the World Health Organization in its campaign to eradicate the disease, ranged from expensive nuisance (developed nations) to tool of neocolonialism (developing countries), to religious symbol (India, Nigeria). As a result, smallpox eradication became a “contested area of meaning that informed how the campaign unfolded” (p. 81).

These instances suggest that many of the problems related to control have to do with context, with launching a message into an opinion environment along with other messages that may create unanticipated or unwanted associations. The key element in this type of contextual distortion is connectedness—the relationship among interest groups, distribution technologies, events, messages, and other influences that mill around in the opinion environment. Given this emphasis on unpredictability, complex systems have been proposed as an appropriate model to issue arenas (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). In this chapter, given the emphasis on interconnectedness, networks are suggested as an appropriate way to conceptualize message distortion and perhaps to suggest ways to mitigate these unwanted relationships.

**Intersection of Theories of Social Networks and Complex Systems**

Conceptually, the two bodies of theory—complex systems and social networks—intersect in many respects. Complex systems are composed of multiple actors, who interact locally and myopically to improve their immediate lot. However, these local interactions link together in a widening network of associations that quickly eludes control. The resulting pattern can have little resemblance to the original situation and can defy change by strategic communication (see Gilpin & Murphy, 2008).
As for networks, Borgatti and Foster (2003) defined a network as “a set of actors connected by a set of ties” (p. 992). The actors might be persons, teams, organizations, concepts, technologies—human or non-human, occupying any scale. Ties are inherently local and dyadic, although—like the local negotiations that characterize complex systems—each link between two actors ultimately adds up to elaborate social communication patterns. Network ties can be bidirectional (that is, shared) or unidirectional (going one way); the intensity of the relationship can be measured on a scale or the ties can simply be noted as present or absent. Actors are members of many different networks simultaneously—work, job, family—opening the possibility that information can spill over from one network to another. Conversely, actors can also reside in tight cliques where they have minimal awareness of what happens outside their own opinion environment.

In the past, social network analysis has often been discussed simply in terms of a methodological approach to data. In truth, however, social networks are much more than this: they propose a novel way of looking at the world, one that is very different from traditional substantialist perspectives. Network theory has not often been applied to strategic communication; in the communication discipline, most prior research has focused on organizational communication. Emphasizing the communication perspective, Monge and Contractor (2003) defined social networks as “patterns of contact that are created by the flow of messages among communicators through time and space” (p. 3). They cited personal networks, flows of messages between groups, strategic alliances, and globally networked organizations such as multinational corporations as examples of social networks.

In an effort to bring together complexity and network theories, Morçöl and Wachhaus (2009) defined a network as “a relatively stable and complex pattern of relationships among multiple interdependent and self-organizing elements (e.g., social, political, economic actors), which also constitutes a self-organizing system as a whole” (p. 45) They viewed the main differences between complexity and networks in terms of the perspective of scholars who study them: network scholars emphasize stability, whereas complexity scholars emphasize change.

The two bodies of theory are indeed similar. While emphasizing the dynamic nature of networks more than most traditional network theorists do, Morçöl and Wachhaus (2009) usefully summarized overlaps between social networks and complex systems. First, both have the ability to self-organize, although networks “self-organize in a manner that is constricted or guided by institutional rules” to a greater extent than complex systems do (p. 48). Second, when self-organizing, both networks and complex systems are “unpredictable (or predictable only in qualitative terms)” (p. 49)—that is, the relationship between cause and effect is not necessarily proportional but nonlinear. Third, both are dissipative: they tend not to settle in an equilibrium but rather lean toward an unstable state. Fourth, both networks and complex systems are best understood by observing the macro-level patterns that emerge as their agents interact, often through computerized simulations. Fifth, those who study networks or complex systems must accept a high level of uncertainty because of the radical nonlinearity fundamental to both networks and complex systems. Because a number of recent articles have applied complexity theory to communication (e.g., Gilpin, 2010, Murphy, 2000, 2010), this chapter will concentrate on network theories, drawing in complexity theory less frequently.

The evolution of both complexity theory and network theory reflects broader paradigm shifts within the social sciences in which they are grounded. Both express the decline of modernist, linear, reductionist ways of seeing the world; both show the shift, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, away from individualist and structuralist assumptions and toward a relational, contextual, systems-oriented perspective (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). Knox, Savage, and Harvey (2006) described network theory development in terms of three stages that parallel shifts in social science perspectives. First came an emphasis on individualism typified by the work of Granovetter (1973), whose work on weak ties will be discussed later in this chapter. Next, in the 1980s, came a reaction against individualism typified by the early work of White and others at Harvard (1970), described as “a thoroughgoing structuralism, where social networks became a means of mapping social structure”
that “marks the apogee of the modernist project” (Knox et al., 2006, pp. 117, 119). More recently, social network theorists have recognized problems with excessive structuralism and have tried to develop the idea of a dynamic, culture-based approach to social networks. (See Freeman [2004] for an in-depth history of social network analysis; see Gilpin and Murphy [2008] for an overview of the parallel development of complexity theory.) This disciplinary evolution has left its mark on network theories in that they still maintain a tension between culture and structure, between agency to shape one’s own network and determinism based on network position (e.g., Emirbayer, 1997). A similar tension, discussed throughout this chapter, manifests itself as a conflict in strategic communication between the management of messages and targeting of audiences on the one hand, and on the other hand the haphazard reception of messages by groups that share the same communication arena as equals.

In fact, we can learn much about strategic communication—its characteristics, its processes, and its limitations—by looking at it as one expression of the larger domain of social network theory. Since many of the possibilities and problems that we talk about in strategic communication have also caused debate among network theorists, propositions from that body of theory are for the most part germane to strategic communication. Some of these concepts that will be discussed in this chapter are:

- contagion, or the uncontrolled dissemination of information through an opinion environment;
- networks as pipes (dynamic but poorly controlled) or girders (structurally determined and static);
- network position: centrality, subgroups, and holes;
- types of ties between actors in the network; and
- network configuration: centralized or distributed networks.

A particularly useful way to conceptualize the passage of information through a network is in terms of the temporal and substantive distortion that occurs as a message is caught by various network nodes, its content attenuated by some and augmented by others and its passage hastened, slowed, or repressed altogether. The problems posed by a self-determining environment outside the control of an organizational communicator can be thus readily seen in distortions of an organization’s public image or reputation.

Relatedly, Borgatti and Lopez-Kidwell (2011) noted that networks can be regarded in two different ways: first, as a set of “pipes” through which various resources—information, friendships, influence—pass; and second, as a set of “girders” that determine structure and establish the position of every element in relation to every other element. The first perspective—the “pipes” perspective—emphasizes problems raised by the dynamism of networks; in strategic communication, the way in which rumors elude control or pick up distortions as they pass from point to point, farther and farther away from the original source. The second perspective—the “girders” perspective—emphasizes the intransigence of an established point of view or set of relationships, making it difficult to move public opinion into an area more to an organization’s liking. This tension between agency (“pipes”) and determinism (“girders”) underlies efforts by strategic communicators to steer a course between fast-spreading news or rumors and entrenched public opinions.

**Centrality and Control**

One of the chief determinants of a communicator’s ability to control information flowing through a particular network is that person’s centrality, or the pattern of connections between an actor and others in the network. Centrality captures how important an actor can be in monitoring and manipulating network flows—something that only a network-based perspective, with its ability to portray a holistic picture and to measure relationships, can discern. Different kinds of centrality give us ways to consider the possibilities for managing information and the possibilities for message distortion, either intentionally through the offices of a maladaptive gatekeeper or through message entropy as
receivers get further away from the source. Thus, different types of centrality measure different ways in which an actor can manage or lose control of a network’s resources. They aptly illustrate the old adage, “where you stand depends on where you sit.”

The simplest type of centrality is degree centrality, which measures how many other actors are directly connected to a certain actor. An actor with high degree centrality is positioned at the center of an asterisk-like local network pattern. That actor has an advantage over less central actors in getting information, and can choose to pass on that information or repress it. A message recipient with high degree centrality looks very much like an opinion leader: an efficient conduit to pass along a message to the many others with whom the actor is connected. On the other hand, Yu and Lester (2008) pointed out that in an industry network, a highly central company so dominates the public consciousness that any scandal that touches it tends to spread easily to others that are connected to it, whether they are partners, suppliers, or competitors. In this light it is worse to be linked with a scandal-ridden company that dominates its industry than to be relegated to a link with an uninfluential company.

Somewhat more complicated is the concept of closeness centrality, which measures distances among the various actors in a network in terms of “degrees of separation” (Milgram, 1967), or how many actors one has to go through in order to reach the target. Actors who are globally central are at short distances from many others, so a central player tends to hear things first. Closeness centrality is epitomized by a quip attributed to Mark Twain to describe the provincialism of Cincinnati: “When the end of the world comes, I would like to be in Cincinnati because it’s always twenty years behind the times” (http://www.twainquotes.com/Cincinnati.html). The same problem also interferes with an organization’s ability to preserve the integrity of the messages after they leave the organization. Decreasing closeness centrality describes message entropy; control over message content and receivers’ understanding diminishes substantially as information travels through a chain of receivers. In fact, network studies suggest that the originator’s influence becomes inconsiderable after just two or three degrees of separation from the source (Kadushin, 2004). From the angle, strategic messages, the way an organization wants them, do not extend very far into public consciousness.

Another form of centrality, betweenness centrality, measures how often an actor lies along the shortest path between two others—that is, the extent to which an actor mediates between others as a gatekeeper, or a broker who can orchestrate relationships between otherwise separate groups in the network. In the role of boundary spanner, a public relations person traditionally has the highest betweenness centrality in any organization. From a network theory perspective, Burt (1992) examined the consequences of gaps in betweenness: structural holes that separated subgroups of actors in a network. He found that actors who could identify those holes, and position themselves as brokers to bridge the subgroups, held a great deal of power. However, this brokering power also signals problems with respect to communication. If an organization fails to keep its network together, it opens a structural hole that others will fill—perhaps with rumors or unfavorable frames. In fact, although he did not use network theory, this type of principle underlies Entman’s (2003) model of “cascading activation” that explains how frames are strategically manipulated to encourage certain policy agendas at the expense of others. He observed that “Strategically maladroit administrations, such as the Carter and Clinton White Houses, often found news frames spinning out of their control. Poor strategy creates a power vacuum that opposing elites and journalists may enter with their own interpretations” (p. 422).

Finally, a specialized form of betweenness centrality—eigenvector centrality—measures whether an actor is connected with others who are also well connected. Borgatti and Lopez-Kidwell (2011) considered eigenvector centrality to be an indicator of enhanced popularity, of being well connected: an indicator of eliteness. A similar concept underlies Granovetter’s (1983) propositions about the importance of bridges between groups: if one is not connected to important others, being connected is not an especially favorable position. In a communication context, eigenvector centrality helps to
explain why peripheral organizations and activist movements—such as the women’s movement in the 1960s, or more recently, the LGBTQ movement—have had trouble getting onto the media agenda. One solution is to stage newsworthy events; however, the network-driven solution would be to forge an alliance with a more central actor. Hence in order to foster an environmentalist agenda the radical Friends of the Earth forged an alliance with the mainstream Sierra Club; to forward its animal-protection agenda, the SPCA created ties with celebrity quarterback and former dog-fighter Michael Vicks.

Network Configuration

In addition to individual actors’ centrality, it is useful to consider the centralization patterns of an entire network: the degree to which a network focuses around one powerful actor or perhaps a handful of actors. Network centralization is clearly an indicator of control: For example, as Entman (2003) argued with respect to the control of media frames, if one actor, or a small number of subgroups, mediates resource flows within a network, that actor or group has a high degree of control over the information that travels through the network.

Coming at the issues from different angles, both communication professionals and network theorists have long recognized the importance of homophily, or people’s tendency to associate with others like themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Depicting the configuration patterns of an entire network can show where communication between homophilous subgroups breaks down. Indeed, the costs of not having this holistic understanding of a communication network can be very high. For example, Garner’s (2006) network analysis of internal communications at NASA leading up to the Columbia shuttle disaster clearly showed a breach between the reporting relationships depicted on NASA’s organizational chart and the actual communication patterns of the team managing the shuttle flight. As in the earlier Challenger disaster, the NASA communication network showed a split between management and engineers so that information about the space shuttle’s vulnerability was not passed along.

Homophilous groups within a network can seem like efficient targets for communication, but members’ strong ties are also very difficult to break into. Associating with others like oneself tends to make qualities seem mainstream to group members when they might be viewed by the rest of the world as aberrant. For example, a series of studies by Christakis and Fowler (2007, 2008) showed that overweight people and smokers tend to associate with other people with the same characteristics in networks that can intensify the bad habits over time. By the same token, one might consider executive malfeasance in terms of a homophilous network. In this connection, Borgatti and Foster (2003), noted one important subset of network studies of “the so-called ‘dark side’ in which social ties imprison actors in maladaptive situations or facilitate undesirable behavior” (p. 994). One might argue that the cover-up of priestly abuse in the Catholic Church grew out of the imprisonment of Church authorities in homophilous ties they perceived as unbreakable. Similarly, financial abuses leading up to the Great Recession were fostered by a sense within the banking industry that extreme risk-taking was normal. In both cases, the densely homophilous groups were blind to the tidal wave of public opprobrium that overtook them.

Studying an overall network configuration may also expose numerous subgroups with little or no overlapping communications, and this is one sign of conflict between various audiences. Communication professionals may view these breaks in the network as one result of cultural dissonance, so that various interest groups may be debating the same phenomenon but with such different perspectives—cultural, ideological—that what they see does not coincide at all. For example, Garyantes and Murphy (2010) found that media coverage of the 2005 Iraq elections showed the origins of a cognitive split between U.S. perceptions of the war in Iraq and those of the Iraqi populace, the first sign of a growing ideological conflict that intensified in subsequent years. However,
structural holes may also signal ways in which parties in conflict can be brought together. For instance, Pachucki and Breiger (2010) showed “how strikingly different narrative deployments of conflicting groups, each with their own understanding of self and others, create a hole in the discursive space that nonetheless manifests some common elements around its edges, creating possibilities for bridging in the stories told by individuals” (p. 216). Thus, studying the semantic networks of interest groups—a process akin to social network analysis but using words as actors—can show how strategic communication is advanced within an issue arena, and how it is received by various groups according to their own interests. (See Gilpin, 2010, and Murphy, 2010, for more examples of this type of study.)

In addition, the overall network configuration—especially centrality versus dispersion—profoundly influences what other actors are affected by a news event, even when they lack any ability to shape circumstances. For example, Yu and Lester (2008) showed that network position strongly determines whether or not an organization suffers harm when a similar company commits a malfeasance. Central organizations are associated with more stakeholders, are more easily able to influence others in the network, and receive more public scrutiny than less central ones so that news about them travels faster. Thus, being connected with a highly central organization can pose hazards for the other actors in a highly centralized network. They lose autonomy in establishing their own messages that might differentiate them from their maleficient competition. As explained previously, if a crisis involves a central company, the blame is likelier to spread to innocent others simply because they are directly connected to the culpable organization. Molleda (2011), for example, pointed out that Mattel’s involvement with lead-contaminated toys made in China became more intense and more difficult to limit because of prior news coverage about other Chinese products with life-threatening defects. Thus, highly centralized networks with strong ties carry both privileges and penalties.

Yu and Lester (2008) also examined the ramifications of less centralized networks. For example, a second kind of network configuration, termed a scale-free network, is less centralized, with a few disproportionately important (that is, highly connected) members who constitute hubs, although most other network members have very few connections at all. Examples of scale-free networks include Internet giants such as Google, through which websites essentially must be routed in order to communicate with Internet users at all. The near-monopoly on connections possessed by these hubs gives them disproportionate influence. They are free to impose their own standards and norms, much as important media outlets set the agenda and tone for coverage by less influential media.

However, these “aristocratic” networks are prone to failure from their own success: web sites with too many links become sluggish; public figures with too many connections lose their adaptiveness. Krackhart (1999) referred a similar phenomenon in terms of “ties that torture”—an excessive number of ties that attach an actor to issues or people in ways that create dissonance. This type of network arrangement causes strategic problems for organizations that wish to communicate different messages to different constituencies. One prototypical example is the dilemma faced by NASA supplier Morton Thiokol: The year after its defective O-rings contributed to the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986, the company’s profits hit a new record; shareholders wanted to hear the good news about its earnings success but most other audiences wanted to see the company’s penance continue. A similar problem afflicts public figures whose past ties can be used by competitors to manipulate public opinion: Barack Obama’s prior associations with the radical Reverend Jeremiah Wright, or Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s inability to shake off prior liberal positions, illustrate the power of these “ties that torture.”

What happens in a network where no one is central, where there is no leader? That pattern, termed a distributed network, is said to characterize terrorist cells set up to minimize key figures who might reveal information if captured, or rupture communications between other parts of the network if killed (Pedahzur & Perlinger, 2006). More important to most strategic communicators, emerging popular movements tend to follow a distributed pattern. The Egyptian revolution of Spring 2011 appeared to emerge in the form of a distributed network; similarly, protest movements such as the anti-World...
Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations have used the Internet to organize a distributed network of mass protests. Such networks evade control because there is no central leverage point but rather a diffused locus of control where resources are spread somewhat equally throughout the system. Messages therefore take more time to travel through a distributed network, and there is more potential for message distortion than there is when a central actor, or small group of influential actors, can be targeted. The WTO’s inability to cope with the earliest Internet-organized diffused mass protests of 1999 in Seattle offers ample evidence of the difficulties in managing communications with distributed networks, as well as the strategic advantages conferred by anonymity on their key members.

**Strong and Weak Ties**

Network configurations are substantially influenced by the strength and character of relationship ties, which also tend to shape a network’s mindset and its possibilities for change. One of the earliest and most persistent network theories involved the distinction between strong ties and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). Strong ties arise when interactions are frequent, or emotionally intense, or both; when the parties involved are closely related, whether literally by blood or less literally by outlook; and generally when the actors closely resemble each other, as in opinions, profession, or relationships to others. In contrast, weak ties characterize less frequent, intense, or complicated interactions such as those with friends-of-friends or acquaintances, all of whom may have different mindsets and backgrounds.

Strong ties create a kind of close coupling that can facilitate the spread of information throughout a system, and—for better or for worse—also connect different organizations in the public mind. In particular, similar industries often appear to the public as strongly tied. Those ties present advantages when a focal organization has done a good deed. However, Yu and Lester (2008) pointed out that strong ties between organizations can imperil an entire industry’s reputation after one of the member organizations has suffered a crisis. They applied network principles to explain why “stakeholders may evaluate the impact of a reputational crisis on a set of organizations based on their perceived relatedness to the damaged organization” (pp. 97–98). They focused primarily on two concepts taken from network theory. The first is the existence of direct ties (proximity, in network terms). For example, a company’s reputation may suffer if its supplier has committed a malfeasance, as was the case when faulty auto tires affected the reputation not only of Japanese tire manufacturer Bridgestone but also the U.S. auto industry that bought the tires.

The second way in which strong network ties create problems for companies involves public perception that a culpable company is connected to others in the same way (structural equivalence, in network terms). For example, after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, media coverage of the Japanese nuclear power industry frequently invoked the Chernobyl accident and ascribed dangers to nuclear power plants worldwide, even though the Japanese plants were unlike both the Russian plant and the more modern designs of nuclear plants elsewhere. Nuclear plant coverage illustrates the power of network relationships to exert a gravitational pull that brings entities together by reinforcing one characteristic while attenuating or ignoring other mitigating factors.

Furthermore, message control also fluctuates when variation in the strength of ties constrains or facilitates actors’ ability to adapt to a changing environment. One of the most difficult problems in strategic communication is to dislodge entrenched ideas, regardless of whether or not those ideas have any connection to reality. The difficulty of breaking strong associations may be one important driver of recurring crises. For example, as discussed earlier, China has had to deal repeatedly with perceptions that its consumer products are not safe, as succeeding waves of media coverage recount and reinforce prior incidents. A further example of the imperviousness to change of historical patterns in complex systems is the continuing reputational woes of the powdered drink mix, Kool Aid. Since 1978, the mix has been linked to the mass suicide, through cyanide, of more than 900 members of
a religious cult in Jonestown, Guyana. Even though the actual medium for the cyanide was a less well-known competitor named Flavor Aid, the Kool Aid/Jonestown link has remained so strong that decades later it has solidified into aphoristic advice for dealing with mistrusted groups: “Don’t drink the Kool Aid” (Murphy & Gilpin, 2013).

In other ways, weak ties offer positive opportunities for strategic communication, particularly as they bridge separate groups. Through bridging, weak ties offer a low-risk way to test the waters, to explore commonalities with strangers without the deep commitment that strong ties express. Using the example of offering a cigarette to a stranger, Schultz & Breiger (2010) pointed out that weak ties “may be used strategically to reach outward” (p. 613). Many of those efforts take the form of what they call “weak culture,” mutually shared taste in popular culture that often “binds together social actors so they can work together to accomplish instrumental aims” (p. 622).

Like frames, ties are important not only because they define members of a group but also because they define who is not in the group. This strategy has been used by U.S. cigarette manufacturers in a powerful strategic campaign to establish strong ties with working-class smokers. Some of the ties involved shared language; others involved pro-smoking membership groups created by tobacco companies. One of the strongest ways in which the tobacco companies created bonds with smokers was to exclude—to define as “other”—the public health actors in the network that tried to curtail smoking. Speaking for the common man, the average American, tobacco companies adopted the voice of the underdog, “‘othering’ the tobacco control community by making them ‘appear in the public’s mind as elitists (and even racists) who use ‘social engineering’ to impose their values on the vast middle and lower classes’” (Katz, 2005, p. 35, quoted in Murphy, 2011, p. 11).

Strong and weak ties may also help to explain the differences in velocity with which a message spreads. Actors tend to develop strong ties with those most like themselves (Granovetter, 1983). If the target audience is excessively homophilous—a closed society—it will be hard for a new message to penetrate. If the target audience is sparsely connected, or lacks a strong center, the message may peter out before reaching many audience members. These problems led Granovetter (1983) to recommend a “division of labor” between strong and weak ties (p. 219). Weak ties lead to “a common cultural consciousness . . . in transmitting information and influences on stylistic matters, political judgments, and broad social trends” from group to group (Schultz & Breiger, 2010, p. 227). However, strong ties are effective in getting the new ideas actually adopted, because decision makers are influenced mainly by their strong relationships within their own group. The need to balance strong and weak ties was summarized by Granovetter (1983) in describing successful activist groups: “the initiators of successful groups were marginal individuals in the community . . . [who] were able to recruit people who had occupied leadership positions and were linked to a dense network of . . . activists” (p. 225). That suggests that “where innovations are controversial, a mobilization strategy based on the activation of weak ties is more likely to facilitate adoption of the goal” (p. 225).

Burt (1999) described a similar dynamic in terms of the “social capital of opinion leaders.” He viewed opinion leaders as brokers who—perhaps contrary to normal expectations—“are not people at the top so much as at the edge, not leaders within groups so much as brokers between groups” (p. 47). Opinion leaders therefore use their weak ties to help new ideas gain a foothold in a group, whereupon their role ends as members of that group are motivated by their strong ties and competitive spirit to adopt the ideas. In terms of strategic communication, network balance of strong and weak ties is an important diagnostic that can identify interest groups and determine their receptivity to opinions outside of their immediate circle. For example, Adamic and Glance (2005) examined the citation patterns of 1000 liberal and conservative bloggers covering the 2004 presidential election. They discovered that the two groups linked mainly within their separate communities, “with liberal and conservative blogs focusing on different news articles, topics, and political figures” (p. 14). Conservative blogs linked to each other more frequently and more densely than did liberal blogs, but the analysis did not suggest that either group was receptive to opinions from the outside.
Finally, communication strategists should consider what types of ties exist among audience members, and should pair that assessment with the design of the message they wish to disseminate. Granovetter (1983) pointed out that in general, simple information is best passed along by weak ties, whereas more complicated or difficult information is best disseminated through strong ties. Yet, as anyone who has done media training knows, experts and upper managers often find it hard to match their messages appropriately to tie strength. For example, President Obama has clearly found it difficult to tailor messages according to tie strengths when framing communications about major policy issues such as the budget or health care, treating each as if he is dealing with a strong-tie network of policy experts and disregarding the distortions that may be passed along as the message travels among weak ties. Hence, in August 2009 a proposed provision in the health care reform sponsored by Obama that would have reimbursed doctors for discussing end-of-life issues with their patients became branded as “Death Panels” by Republican Sarah Palin. Fraught with cultural resonance, the term caught on in a process akin to the transmission of other popular culture fads that Schultz & Breiger (2010) described. The “Death Panel” sobriquet effectively shut down further discussion of the end-of-life funding provision.

Embeddedness and Multiplexity

Another influence that complicates efforts to manage message content, and control its distribution, is the network phenomenon of multiplexity. The term refers to an actor’s membership in more than one network simultaneously. Embeddedness particularly describes an actor’s shared membership in business and private networks; for instance, a golf match among friends may also be a gathering of people who share memberships on corporate boards.

Those who manage strategic communication are well aware of the positive potential of embeddedness. For example, media relations practitioners cultivate social relationships with key media sources; companies’ efforts to be active in their communities also show the effectiveness of embeddedness. Although they did not invoke network theory, Williams and Moffitt’s seminal work on reputation (1997) relies on the impact of embeddedness; they noted that after work, employees are neighbors, family members, and community volunteers; the company’s strategic communications to them are attenuated and distorted as they pass through these multiplex networks.

Finally, multiplexity offers a new perspective on the phenomenon of cross-border conflict shifting noted by Molleda (2011) and his associates. A single crisis precipitated by the lead content of paint in children’s toys brought together Chinese factories that manufactured the toys, the American company (Mattel) that distributed them, the Chinese and American governments that regulated toy safety differently, and media coverage that established a web of invidious connections to prior publicity about defective products made in China: toothpaste, milk powder, pet food, and others. Yu, Sengul, and Lester (2008) noted that companies have few options to avoid becoming entangled in other companies’ crises to which stakeholders perceive them to be tied. One way would be to break the association altogether in a process termed “preferential detachment” (p. 463). That was Mattel’s first impulse as it sought to place the blame for the defective toys solely on the Chinese manufacturer. However, Yu et al. acknowledged that public opinion often resists such efforts and in fact, Molleda showed that Mattel found it difficult to detach itself from the network of unwanted associations. It therefore chose to apologize to the people of China for its attempts to extricate itself from the negative associations; the U.S. government, meanwhile, worked to improve safety regulations. Yu and Lester (2008) described this fallback strategy as another attempt to weaken ties with the “stricken organization” by making “changes that fall within the range of legitimated features of their organizational form without being penalized or devalued for fully dissociating themselves from that original form” (p. 646). Thus, reinforcing ties with well-regarded actors can take the edge off associations with less well-regarded ones.
Contagion

Another side effect of multiplexity is contagion, the process by which ideas flow through a network—or from one network to another—regardless of their basis in fact, let alone their desirability to strategic communicators. Popularized by Gladwell (2000), the concept of contagion considers the speed with which ideas spread and tries to predict the threshold at which all the actors in a network can be expected to join in. Hence Burt (1999) founded his discussion of opinion leaders’ machinations in part upon the operation of contagion between networks. He viewed “opinion brokers” as “network entrepreneurs” who connect otherwise disconnected groups and ascribed to them a “competitive advantage” because they move fast and adapt quickly. Nonetheless, Burt pointed out that contagion operates less through the brokers than through competition between actors in a network who hasten to adopt ideas because they see their neighbors reaping advantages.

The contagion process is related to the network concept of preferential attachment, according to which certain actors in a network who appear more attractive than others gradually acquire more and more connections as other actors seek to be associated with the attractive traits. Thus, the more well-connected an actor is, the more connections the actor acquires. Popular network writers (e.g., Buchanan, 2002) describe the trend as “the rich get richer”; the principle has been used to explain such phenomena as interlocking boards of directors (a director selected for one board appears more attractive to another) and the dominance of Google on the Internet.

Network studies show that contagion works toward homogenizing a network. As Borgatti and Foster (2003) described it, at the holistic network level, “actors are mutually influencing and informing each other in a process that creates increasing homogeneity within structural subgroups,” whereas at the level of an individual actor, “adoption of a practice is determined by the proportion of nodes surrounding her that have adopted, while the timing of adoption is a function of the lengths of paths connecting her to other adoptees” (p. 1005). Borgatti and Lopez-Kidwell (2011) described this process as the “production of consensus through social influence” (p. 15). Once these messages or beliefs take root, strategic communication may find it very hard to manage a targeted change. For example, Hellsten (2003) traced the “rapid circulation and conventionalization of the metaphor of Frankenfood” during the decade from 1992 to 2002 through its adoption by various consumer groups on the Internet that saw genetic modification of food as “monstrous.” Monsanto attempted to repair the damage through a strategic communication campaign that linked the Frankenstein story with a more positive view of genetic modification: scientific aspirations toward beneficial development and knowledge. Although its own version did not prevail, Monsanto was at least able to be active in the same issue arena defined by the consumerist propagators of the Frankenfood myth.

Even though contagion generally encourages homogeneity, it is important to keep in mind that networks are inherently unstable and therefore the patterns created by contagion are certain to change over time. In this respect, the concept of contagion in social networks comes particularly close to complexity theory’s view that local interactions eventually lead to macro patterns in a society as a whole. The dynamism of the opinion environment can be modeled in terms of a fitness landscape, originally proposed by a complexity theorist (Kauffman, 1993) to model the process of evolution within complex biological systems. Species were viewed as populating a “landscape,” or environment, alongside competing species. Each species’ attempts to maximize its fitness—its survivability—“shift the fitness landscape shared by others, who likewise respond, creating an ongoing series of interactions and adaptations interspersed with temporary periods of stability” (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 171). Kauffman extended this network-based fitness landscape to model organizations’ success within their own environments. The model illustrates one way in which communicators can exert some pressure to shape messages, by developing multiple contingent ways to communicate their points that depend on the network configuration at the time. Luoma-Aho and Vos (2010) made a similar point in their discussion of issue arenas: “Because various stakeholder interests are
often competing, one strategy might no longer be the best alternative; instead different strategies should be applied depending on the need of each issues arena. . . The result should be a dynamic mosaic of multiple strategies for multiple publics moved by multiple issues” (p. 323). Described thus, issue arenas offer alternative versions of Kauffman’s network-based “fitness landscape”: unstable opinion environments where everyone’s strategy depends on everyone else’s strategy.

Conclusion

Returning to the questions with which this chapter began, a network view of strategic communication tends to confirm the highly contingent characterization of “strategic” by Hallahan et al. (2007). In a complex, tightly linked opinion environment, strategic communication can be purposeful and mindful, but it cannot control. Organizations that operate in an older paradigm of “target” audiences and communication “objectives” need to be more aware of the limitations and even the dangers that such attempts pose in a networked context.

For strategic communication, the primary observation derived from social network analysis is that ties count. Communication professionals have long known that it is important to cultivate ties with important audiences. However, network theory leads us in a different direction from relationships as they have traditionally been defined, particularly in public relations. Network ties are more volatile and perilous than those envisioned by theorists who have viewed relationships as a process of building rapport with key audiences (e.g., Ledingham & Bruning, 2006). In addition, although directionality—whether communication is symmetric or nonsymmetric—tells us something about the nature of a relationship (e.g., Grunig, 2001), in network theory, equally important is the strength of the tie compared to all the other ties that exist in the network. It is that strength that determines whose message will prevail in the constantly negotiated fitness landscape.

A network perspective also shows us that “target” audiences are not clear-cut. They are intermixed with other groups and cannot be singled out for targeting any more than street fighters, intermixed with civilian populations, can be “targeted.” As repeatedly pointed out above, network theory is attuned to a marketplace of ideas where multiple actors meet to construct public opinion. Thus, cultivating desired relationships entails accepting all the other relationships that are connected to that audience, whether we want to deal with them or not.

In this respect, network approaches are uniquely useful in giving a holistic view of the opinion arena in which communication takes place. As explained earlier, connections with certain key players are important, and can be cultivated purposefully; but the overall pattern of links among issues, communicators, and distribution technologies—all haphazardly stirred by unpredictable news developments—presents a challenge that lies well beyond anyone’s control. In this environment, “management” means finding a way for strategic communicators to play a continuing role—not control, but a role—in shaping their messages, so they can at least participate in issue arenas that determine public opinion. Participating in an issue arena means accepting the dark side of networks that has been described throughout this chapter: ties that could constrain an organization’s options later on, or force innocent actors to share the malfeasance of associates in the same space. It seems, then, that organizations have no choice but to attempt to communicate strategically, but the successful outcomes of these attempts will be as uncertain as the environment in which they take place.

References

Contextual Distortion


