Social Theories for Strategic Communication

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Scholars have increasingly turned to social theory to study the practice and the consequences that strategic communication has in society. Important questions have been raised concerning issues such as trust and legitimacy, power and behavior. Using social theory, including sociological and culturally oriented approaches, practitioners and scholars focus on how organizations relate themselves to the public arena or society at large. This body of work often moves beyond the applied to discuss ethical and political consequences drawing on empirical data.

It must be said, however, that the approaches are widely disparate concerning most aspects. Some scholars have condemned the practice of forms of corporate strategic communication, in particular using critical theory (e.g., L’Etang & Pieczka, 1996, 2006) and postcolonial theory (e.g., Dutta-Bergman, 2005; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Munshi & Kurian, 2005). But the literature has also grown to include work that draws on other forms of social theory, like postmodernism (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2012; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Radford, 2012), feminism (e.g., Aldoory, 1998; Grunig & Hon, 2001; O’Neil, 2003; Toth, 2001), constructivism (e.g., Merten, 2004), communitarianism (e.g., Hallahan, 2004; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Leeper, 2001; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001), cultural theory (e.g., Banks, 1995; Leichty, 2003; Ristino, 2008, Hatch & Schultz, 2002), structuration theory (e.g., Durham, 2005), social constructionism (Tsutsura, 2010), systems theory (Holmström, 2010), complexity theory (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010), intersectionality theory (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010), agenda-setting and agenda building theory (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Meijer & Kleinijenhuis, 2006; Schultz, Kleinijenhuis, Oegema, Utz & van Atteveldt, 2012) and framing (see Lim & Jones, 2010 for an overview in the field of public relations).

When talking about individual social theorists and strategic communication, it is particularly the work of Habermas that has received attention (e.g., Burkart, 2004; Jensen, 2001; Leeper, 1996; Maier, 2005; Meisenbach, 2005; Olasky, 1989; Pearson, 1989a, 1989b, 1990; Self, 2010), with Niklas Luhmann (e.g., Geist, 2001; Holmström, 1997, 2003; Merten, 2004; Ronnebeger & Rühl, 1992), Michel Foucault (e.g., Livesey, 2002; Motion, 1997; Motion & Weaver, 2005) and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., Edwards, 2006, 2007; Ihlen, 2004, 2005) in tow. The use of social theory to analyze public relations in particular has been discussed in the edited volume Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures and Concepts (Ihlen, van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009), whereas cultural approaches have been explored more fully in other volumes (e.g., Edwards & Hodges, 2011).
This chapter somewhat boldly draws some general conclusions based on this multifaceted literature. We argue that to choose a social theoretical approach by implication means that:

1. the domain of research includes the social level;
2. a description of society is sought;
3. key concepts like legitimacy and reflection come to the fore;
4. key issues for research concern power and language; and
5. an empirical program based in social constructionism propels communication studies to the forefront (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009, 2012).

We will proceed to discuss these points accordingly.

**Compass: Research Domain**

Starting with the simple definition of strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3), we argue that social theoretical approaches will study this “use of communication” in relation to the social level. That is, we maintain that a focus on consequences and not only effectiveness is implied (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). Research is not only focused on the organizational level, but supplements, also, the administrative perspectives with approaches that take a step back and evaluate the social and political influence. What place does the corporation or organization have in the social structure, in what the Germans call Öffentlichkeit (“in public”) (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007)? Öffentlichkeit is an outcome and a quality of the public communication system in a society (Ronnebeger & Rühl, 1992). All forms of strategic communication, as well as journalism, can help develop or destroy this public communication system in creating a symbolic reality. Research of strategic communication will therefore focus on organizational behavior, including meaning creation.

In an early study, Boorstin (1962/1992) wrote about how the communication industry created a “menace of unreality” through its staging of “pseudo events” that sought publicity (p. 247). The German theorist Jürgen Habermas, for his part, originally denounced strategic communication for undermining the critical public sphere: “For the criteria of rationality are completely lacking in a consensus created by sophisticated opinion-molding services under the aegis of a sham public interest” (Habermas, 1989, pp. 193–195). A similar criticism was voiced by Mayhew (1997) who argued that what we call public opinion is increasingly the result of marketing research that allows professional communicators to push the right buttons. Furthermore, a whole strand of books have been published that are critical of how the communication industry furthers corporate goals at the expense of the public interest (Dinan & Miller, 2007; Miller & Dinan, 2008).

Public relations textbooks in particular have had a tendency to present a progressive history of the profession where manipulative, self-interested practice has given way to ethical and enlightened communication forms (Duffy, 2000). When unethical practice is exposed in the media, a typical response from professional associations is that this is not representative of ‘true’ or ‘good’ strategic communication. Instead, it is pointed out that an association has defined ethical principles or a code of ethics. In the public relations literature it has been argued that the practice should be “goaded by the incentive to make society a better place in which to live and work” (Heath, 2010, p. xiv). Indeed, attempts have been made to give the practice a positive civic role: “Public relations’ role in society is to create (and re-create) the conditions that enact civil society [original italics]” (Taylor, 2010, p. 7). In Europe, the majority (58%) of communication practitioners perceive that ethical issues are much more relevant today than they were in former times, due to the internationalization of organizations, media and society, the increasing number of compliance and transparency rules and the new ethical challenges that social media creates. About 67% of European professionals report encountering
ethical challenges in their daily work and a vast majority of 93% of European professionals see a need for new ethical codes, to be provided by international and national associations of communication professionals (Zerfass, Verčić, Verhoeven, Moreno & Tench, 2012).

This heightened perception of ethics and the call for ethical reflection resonates well with what Heath (2010, p. xiii) phrased as strategic communication being less about making organizations more effective, than about making society effective. Here, research drawing on social theory has an obvious role to play, and also a role in asking the crucial question: effective for whom? In many respects, strategic communication still seems to be put to use for self-interested purposes, often tied to corporate interests where a key aim is “to achieve or resist change by persuasively advancing and potentially privileging particular meanings and actions” (Leitch & Motion, 2010, p. 103). This is of course only one side of the coin, because strategic communication is also a weapon used by those opposing corporate exploitation. Strategic communication in itself is not good or bad, but can be used for good or bad purposes. A research perspective building on social theory will recognize this.

Context: Description of Society

Social theory calls for analysis of how society works and questions the value and meaning of what we see around us. Social theory presents us with different diagnoses for social ills and social change. Society has seen several changes in its metanarratives, which have been described, for instance, as the change from a society where individuals acted in a manner that was based on tradition, to a society that is dominated by goal-oriented rationality (Wæraas, 2009, drawing upon Max Weber). Such a view, however, is contrasted by analyses that characterize society as postmodern and argue that emotional and value-oriented orders co-exist with rational ones. Pluralism, polycontextuality, and situated knowledge are defining characteristics of this situation (Lyotard, 1979). Even if truths were not always taken for granted in the pre-modern society, values and norms were concrete and fundamental and closed to reflection (Zijderveld, 2000). In modern society, an increasingly common view is the one forwarded by John Dewey in 1916 that society is not only maintained by communication, but is actually constituted by it (Kückelhaus, 1998). Strategic communication and public relations are therefore closely connected to modernity, especially in the economic context of commercial and administrative organizations.

If communication constitutes the modern society, strategic communication and public relations are important constituents of modernity. Versions of a social constructivist perspective seem to dominate the way social theorists describe the process by which modern and late modern society has come into being. Such a view necessarily also privileges a focus on language, communication and relations as when we interpret and de- and re-construct meaning. Constructing social reality is a shared process of meaning construction (Bentele & Rühl, 1993; van Nistelrooij, 2000).

During the last decade some theorists tried to bridge the theoretical and conceptual distinction between modernism and postmodernism by introducing so-called second modernity (Beck, Bonss & Lau, 2003) or hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2005). Second modernity, also called reflexive modernity, is a cosmopolitan theoretical perspective and a proposed research program that can overcome the relativism connected to postmodernism. Such a perspective suits strategic communication and public relations very well because the practical field of communication management is often accused of being relativistic and also contributing to postmodern relativism in society at large. In second modernity Beck, Bonss and Lau (2003) recognize that the modern society of the twentieth century has changed fundamentally, calling this a modernization of modernity. That is second or reflexive modernity, not signifying an “increase of mastery and consciousness, but a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible” (Latour, 2003, p. 36). Modern society becomes reflexive through “disenchancing and dissolving” (Beck et al., 2003, p. 3) its premises in the areas of, for example, the nation state, the welfare state, the legal system, the economy and governance. In second modernity boundaries
between social spheres, between nature and society, scientific and unscientific statements are not institutionally guaranteed as in modernity, nor dissolved as in postmodernity. In second modernity boundaries become multiple and at the same time fundamental. This process raises the necessity of institutionalizing new fictive or negotiable boundaries self-consciously, and solving conflicts around responsibility and decision-making in society.

Contradictory scientific camps will grow in second modernity and the recognition of extra-scientific justifications will increase. Instead of forming a postmodern recognition of the arbitrary multiplicity and downplaying the need for justification of claims, second modernists try to find ways to take into account the unexpected side effects of policies and actions and search the closure of debates through ad hoc means of decision-making (Beck et al., 2003). It is not hard to picture an important role for strategic communication here in all sides of the debates. At the same time subjectivity becomes a central notion in second modernity. The necessity of the subjective drawing of boundaries in all aspects of social life (institutional, cultural and technical) and the recognition of those subjective boundaries as positive fictions, helps to solve social problems. This is different from the “bricolage mentality in postmodernism and the acceptance of a pluralized, defoundationalizing subjectivity” (Beck et al., 2003, p. 27). A perspective of second modernity can help to solve communication problems and conflicts between organizations, because it recognizes the private interests and the fundamentally subjective character of many strategic communication messages, as opposed to modern miscommunication, because of the assumed fixed boundaries between organizations. For instance, in first modernity the non-recognized subjectivity leads to miscommunication because an objective solution is expected, for example in societal debates about social and environmental issues.

Individualization is another important aspect of second modernity. Individualization is a result of the acceptance of the multiple bases on which an individual can be defined. Therewith the self-definition of individuals has become individualized (Beck et al., 2003). The development in the direction of more individualization is also found in theories about hypermodernity with the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (2005) as its main representative. Hypermodernity is also a very suitable theoretical perspective for strategic communication because it not only recognizes the fundamental individualization and reflexivity of society, but also acknowledges the fundamental consumerist character of today’s Western or even global society. As strategic communication is often functioning within an economic environment, the recognition of consumerism as a major force in society helps in theorizing about it.

Our “hyper modern society” as Lipovetsky (2005, p. 29) called this day and age, is characterized by hyperconsumption, hypermodernity and hypernarcissism as explained by Charles (2005). Consumption, modernity and narcissism are all three in overdrive today, in a ‘hyper’ state. Consumption is central to more and more aspects of social life and consuming is put more and more in a context of emotion and hedonism. Consumption has come to be about luxury, pleasure and sensation. Hypermodernity is a state of constant motion, fluidity and flexibility. The belief in science and technology and progress is still like it was in modernity, but it has become surrounded by criticism and skepticism as well. Hypernarcissism is not only a form of individualism. It is individualism linked to the expectation that every individual behaves in a responsible way on their own account. Postmodern hedonism is replaced by hypermodern responsibility (see Charles, 2005; Lipovetsky, 2005 for an introduction on hypermodernity). It is again not difficult to picture strategic communication in the theoretical perspective of hypermodernity: the centrality of consumption, the belief in modern welfare and progress and the responsibility of the individual for their own conduct, are close to the central professional values and beliefs in the field of strategic communication and public relations. Strategic communication is part of the hypermodern organization (Roberts & Armitage, 2006) and at the same time it plays an important role in its constitution and that of the hypermodern environment where the organizations are part of a society where conflict and difference are constant.
Social theorists differ as to how conflict and difference in society is perceived. The French scholar Bourdieu (1990) described society as structured, constituted, and reproduced through individual and collective struggle. Conflict and difference was seen as a fundamental core of human existence. His countryman, Foucault (1972), harbored similar thoughts in the sense that he wrote about how certain discourse coalitions produce modern knowledge and how power is expressed through these discourses. Other authors have drawn attention to how such power relations find their expression in how risk is distributed in society and how the macro structure of gender and patriarchy work (Fredriksson, 2009; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). For instance, who has discursive control over what is accepted as a risk?

When social theorists present a societal diagnosis, by implication they will also often propose a remedy. The proposed solution might come in the form of acceptance or a call for communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Communicative action is a form of societal dialogue and consensus building and seen as opposing strategic action that only works for the realization of private interests and which could involve using other humans strategically. As pointed out above, some have also seen strategic communication as an important civic instrument (Heath, 2011; Taylor, 2010). Others have argued that we should draw lessons from how actors and actants construct our non-modern condition from scratch (Verhoeven, 2009). Some calls have also been issued to focus on how strategic communication help perpetrate gendered, race and/or geographical dispersed social injustice. The communication practitioner is urged to become an activist on behalf of an organization’s publics, and identify and learn to respect differences (Holtzhausen, 2012). Using a Marxist-feminist-deconstructivist perspective, Spivak (as cited in Dutta, 2009) pointed to how neo-liberal transnational capitalism breeds fundamental inequities. Studying strategic communication and its role in this project then becomes a remedy in itself. In short, using social theory can help strategic communication develop an ontology, something that public relations theory has been accused of lacking (Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

**Concepts: Legitimacy and Reflection**

A profound social change mentioned above is how social authorities have lost their previous privileged position and how decisions have to be legitimized on a continuous basis. Strategic communication will thus have to focus on such “constituents of thoughts” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011) as legitimacy and reflection. These are abstract ideas that structure knowledge and are structured by knowledge, and are helpful to understand strategic communication at its most fundamental level.

Social theory has offered up several definitions of legitimacy that are useful for strategic communication. Weber, for instance, defined it as “the justified right to exist” (as cited in Wæraas, 2009, p. 282). Organizations are bound by what the environment finds acceptable. Luhmann (1993, p. 28) argued it was the “generalized preparedness to accept decisions within certain boundaries of tolerance; decisions which are still undecided as regards contents.” Habermas tied legitimacy to truth and using his work Burkart (2009) has suggested a model incorporating this aspect as a means to further understanding between organizations and their publics, which in turn might form the basis of legitimacy.

It could be argued that the most fundamental task of strategic communication is to see to it that the mission of the organization is considered legitimate (Holmström, Falkheimer, & Nielsen, 2010). With a fast changing society, organizations need to keep abreast and map their environments (Ihlen, 2008). Some would argue that strategic communication is a reflexive social expert system that assists in this endeavor (Falkheimer, 2009). Others, building on Luhmann, see strategic communication more as a functional system that has turned into a reflective practice on behalf of organizations (Holmström, 2009).
The increased demand for legitimacy is one driving factor, as is evident from the debate about corporate social responsibility (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011; May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007). Organizations have to maneuver among demands from several groups, stakeholders or publics in order to retain their “license to operate.” Taking a cue from Holmström (2000, 2003), van Ruler and Verčič (2005) stated that in order to sustain this license to operate, those responsible for the management of organizations should take a reflective view of its communication management. The reflective model of communication management sees strategic communication as “engaged in constructing society by making sense of situations, creating appropriate meanings out of them and looking for acceptable frameworks and enactments” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 266). This is a societal approach to strategic communication that takes society at large as the unit of analysis and looks at the organization from the outside, that is, from the perspective of the public sphere, the Öffentlichkeit. Communication management is defined then as being concerned with “maximizing, optimizing, or satisfying the process of meaning creation, using informational, persuasive, relational, and discursive interventions to solve managerial problems by coproducing societal (public) legitimation” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 266).

Some single out legitimacy, either as an end in itself or as a means to realizing organizational goals. A social theory perspective makes it clear that legitimacy is conferred upon an organization by different publics, and hence it cannot be managed (Wehmeier, 2006). This leads to the conclusion that strategic communication has to do with the negotiation of knowledge, meaning, and behavior. In public relations, this thought is echoed by the so-called co-creational approach that sees publics and groups as co-creators of meaning (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2010).

Legitimacy and reflection are tightly intertwined and social theory also offers up other interesting concepts, such as trust (Bentele, 1994; Bentele & Wehmeier, 2007; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009). Such concepts also articulate ideas about what strategic communication is or could be about, which in turn largely spur on or are spurred on by certain concerns connected with the practice.

**Concerns and Issues: Power and Language**

Concerns or issues can be defined as matters of discussion. Put differently, issues are facts in the making. Concerns and issues can also lead to creative and fruitful discussions, in part as a result of involving the concepts discussed in the previous section.

Power is frequently discussed in the literature (e.g., B. K. Berger, 2005; Cottle, 2003; Courtright & Smudde, 2007; Edwards, 2006; Leitch & Motion, 2010; Plowman, 1998; Weaver, Motion, & Roper, 2006). Smudde and Courtright (2010) define power as having three dimensions: hierarchical, rhetorical, and social. Hierarchical power is based on a person’s rank and position in an organization. Hierarchical power in an organization is still an issue because results from research on the power of communication professionals in organizations and how well they are connected to the dominant coalition (Grunig, 1992) are mixed. European research shows that not all practitioners are seated at the management table (Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič, & Moreno, 2010). Furthermore, European research also shows that female professionals perceive their influence to have less impact on the strategic decision making and planning of their organization than do male professionals (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010). Issues such as salary inequity and a lack of women in higher management have far from disappeared (Wrigley, 2010).

Rhetorical power concerns the skills that are necessary to be effective with language and symbols. Rhetorical power relates to social theory also in the sense that it describes ability to influence the issues and values that are under public debate, in other words, issues that relate to the public sphere (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010; Holtzhausen, 2010; Jensen, 2001). The public sphere is seen as a social construction of mankind. Ihlen (2002, 2004), for example, combines the rhetorical approach with the sociological approach and shows how strategic communication constitutes the struggle of actors in a
public battlefield of meanings, thereby contributing to the public meaning and as such, to social reality. Meaning creation is at the heart of public relations and closely related to the concepts of organizational sense giving and sense making (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). With sense giving, organizations try to impose their interpretation of a phenomenon on others, often by means of one-way communication such as propaganda or public information. Combining sense giving and sense making in two-way communication processes makes room for multiple interpretations of and negotiation about the meaning that is produced in the communication process.

Social power binds the other two forms of power together: people acting together through communication to produce organizations, and to produce societies (Smudde & Courtright, 2010). To this could also be added mastery of the technological and social development of the media environment on a global level since the 1990s (see, e.g., Catalano, 2007). The rise of digital and social media and its use raises questions about their consequences for strategic communication. This is also recognizable in the top five most important issues for the profession in 2013, according to European communication professionals (Zerfass et al., 2010). Coping with digital evolution and the social web is seen as the most important issue.

The notion of social constructivism has already been alluded to. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that reality is a social construction and as such truth is inseparable from the way in which we use communication to interact with one another. This view is seen as opposing that of realists who think that objective knowledge is obtainable. To gain a better understanding of strategic communication in society, we have to look behind it and inquire into how strategic communication functions as the producer of certain dominating realities in society (B. K. Berger, 1999; Heide, 2009). Such processes have enormous implications for issues of power. They make strategic communication political as it establishes and/or reinforces particular truths (Motion & Leitch, 2009).

The articulation of all these particular truths from individuals, groups and organizations has become increasingly mediated, first since the rise of mass media in the twentieth century and secondly in the last few decades with the rise of computer mediated forms of (social) communication. Meaning construction nowadays increasingly takes place and materializes in the interplay between traditional mass media and the new social media systems, often on a global scale. Apart from the intentions of the communicating actors, all these messages and communications get a dynamic of their own that influences the meaning construction process and the meaning that is constructed about an issue. New research methods are called for to study this complex process of meaning construction and the dynamics of the communication in the field of strategic communication. New research methods should show a higher order structure in the discourses and allow for comparisons across time and across discourses. A higher order structure shows for example the structural characteristics of the language used and the structural characteristics of the communication or, in other words of the discourses. Also, next order analyses reveal the contextualization that is constructed in a domain by analyzing so-called implicit frames (Hellsten et al., 2010). Implicit frames show the latent dimension of communication content and the meaning that is created in those implicit frames. Such second order analyses that show meaning construction processes can be done with so-called semantic mapping methods that are used in information sciences and science and technology studies (see Leydesdorff, 2001; Leydesdorff & Hellsten, 2006). In the field of strategic communication such semantic mapping methods can show the different meanings constructed about an organization or issue by strategic communicators, journalists in the media and members of the active public on the Internet (Jonkman & Verhoeven, 2013; Verhoeven, Jonkman & Boumans, 2012) and the interplay between the different discourses (van der Meer & Verhoeven, in press).

**Empirical Avenues: a Research Program**

Drawing on social theory to analyze strategic communication opens up a wealth of possibilities for formulating empirical questions and hypotheses. Social theory is necessary to describe, understand,
and explain what happens to whom in the realm of strategic communication and with what consequences (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009). The most fundamental and shared premise would be that an empirical research program incorporates insights from what has been called the communicative, linguistic, or discursive turn. A fundamental constructivist starting point would entail micro studies of individual action to macro perspectives of system theory (Holmström, 2010; van Ruler & Vercić, 2005). A social theory perspective in this vein can help fill the gap between the descriptive and normative studies in the managerial paradigms and the individualistic psychological studies in the behavioral paradigm. Strategic communication can be seen as different forms of communication, ranging from symbolic, interpersonal and social communication to the non-personal communication function in system theory. It is possible to distinguish between mediated and non-mediated communication on the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Some of the questions raised by social theory would stem from the discussion in the previous sections and relate to the effects of strategic communication: what are the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on different publics? Such studies can be conducted with the help of, for instance, theoretical perspectives of framing (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999), agenda setting and priming (Scheufele, 2000), uses and gratifications (Ketelaar & van der Laan, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000), public opinion dynamics and formation (van Ginneken, 2003), cultural indicators (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994), the spiral of cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), the reception gap (Zaller, 1996), or new media theories about computer mediated communication (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011), to name a few. A first step could be to conduct meta-studies about the effects of the numerous studies that have been conducted on this in the last 25 years.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented some key conclusions regarding social theory perspectives on strategic communication. First of all, we have argued that such a perspective addresses negative as well as positive effects of the practice of strategic communication. A social theory perspective studies all aspects, warts and all, and cannot only be judged as to whether or not it improves practice. A whole range of different descriptions of society is on offer in social theory. We have in particular discussed the notions of second modernity or hypermodernity, where communication is seen as an important constituting factor. One important contribution from such a perspective is the recognition of consumerism as a major force that strategic communication is related to. The function of strategic communication is occupied with creating legitimacy for organizations, something that might be achieved by reflecting on what demands society poses. Social theory calls attention to the negotiation around knowledge, meaning, and behavior in this sense. That is, issues of power and language follow. Social theory helps to see how strategic communication is influenced by and influences power structures in society through communication, i.e., symbol use. Finally, we have made some suggestions for how such processes can be studied empirically.

Strategic communication is used to help all kinds of organizations, and social theory calls attention to how this influences society. A good expression of this is how the corporation has become the dominant institution in modern society, and many studies have centered on the powerful role of the modern corporation and its (negative) impact on the public sphere and politics (e.g., Bakan, 2004; Boggs, 2000; Carey, 1995; Korten, 2001). Simple searches demonstrate how the revenue of many corporations surpasses the Gross Domestic Product of entire counties. For instance, the 2010 revenue of Walmart made this corporation the 25th largest economy in the world (Trivett, 2011). Using social theory to examine strategic communication can help to understand how such a position is legitimized. Such an undertaking goes beyond the administrative approaches found in many of the communication journals. Elsewhere (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009) we have posited a critical realist framework (Contu & Willmott, 2005; Reed, 2005) for this purpose. It is considered a perspective
that can offer a solution for moving beyond the deadlock between positivists (or realists) and social constructionists in the social sciences. It is a realistic philosophical alternative for modern and post-modern analyses because it acknowledges the social construction of reality on the one hand and the existence of a reality independent of our interpretations on the other hand. Critical realism proposes to explain social phenomena at the real/deep level of the structures and mechanisms that underlie them (see, e.g., Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1986). In a critical realist framework all the elements proposed in this chapter can be combined in an effort to explain strategic communication as a social phenomenon. A research agenda for strategic communication in a critical realist framework does not impose a particular methodology or aim to produce one general theory of strategic communication. It opens up questions on different levels of analyses: from impressions, perceptions and sensations, events and states of affairs to the real/deep structures and mechanisms in the field. It can also account for the role of culture. This, however, is just one of the many possibilities on offer drawing from the indeed vast literature in the territory of social theory.

Note
1 This chapter is a development of Ihlen & Verhoeven (2009; 2012).

References
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