Part II

Institutional and Organizational Dimensions
Strategic Communication as Institutional Work

Magnus Fredriksson and Josef Pallas

Contemporary organizations operate in environments that require and expect strategic action in almost every sense. Recruitment, finance, product development, organizing, as well as communication, are expected to be strategic in the sense of being governed by rationality. Being strategic is not only commonly seen as crucial for an organization’s ability to act autonomously in relation to its own objectives and expectations, but also as important for signaling security, sustainability, predictability and control to organizational constituents. The notion of strategy is thus strong in major theories about managerial practices as in strategic communication.

In short, strategic communication could be defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). It is a straightforward definition resting on the concepts of management, organization, and mission or goal, and in line with these the ideas of rationality, predictability, and free agency (Argenti, 1996; Cornelissen, 2008; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Hallahan et al., 2007; Harlow, 1976; Long & Hazleton, 1987; Zerfass, 2009). Collectively these scholars described the activities of an organization as the result of the ideas, resources, and skills of the communicator, and those of her colleagues, along with organizational conditions. They also ascribed the communicator and the organization she works for decisive influence over the communication process. The goals, means and outcomes are predominantly seen as results of the organization’s consideration, strategies and abilities and as such each organization is seen as exclusive (Argenti, 1996; Cutlip, Broom, & Center, 2006; Gregory & White, 2008; L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Heath, 2001).

However, taking a step backward and observing how organizations communicate, the exclusivity tends to disappear, as the activities in one organization are basically the same as those in another. Similar to the result from organizational research concerning the standardization and harmonization of business strategies or models (procedural conformity), organizational structures (structural conformity) as well as employment of individuals with certain competences or professional profile (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995), the practice of strategic communication is characterized by conformity. Some examples are the establishment of communication departments in organizations; the establishment of recommended educational paths; the demarcation of relevant competences; the production of communication policies, communication strategies and communication plans; the staging of press conferences; the distribution of press releases; media coaching, and the production of annual reports. All together most communication activities and communication products in organizational contexts are performed and produced without reflection over their actual benefits,
relevance or purpose. It is activities and products that are expected to be performed or produced in an organization and as such they have become—more or less—self-evident.

These observations fit nicely with a sociological perspective on strategic communication where there is an ambition to analyze practice from macro, as well as meso and micro level (Edwards, 2012; Fredriksson, 2013; Ihlen, Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). One line of thought in this stream of research is inspired by neo-institutional theory (Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011, 2013; Sandhu, 2009; Wehmeier, 2006), a tradition with its roots in political science, sociology and economics (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The institutionalization of practice is a central theme in neo-institutional theory pointing toward social structures as the major force of organizational governance. Rather than the individual, and the organizational, neo-institutional theory stresses the social in its explanations of why organizations function as they do and therefore resemble each other (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Major arguments in these writings rest on recognizing regulative, normative, as well as cognitive structures as governing mechanisms for organizational performances (Scott, 2008).

Despite its strong exploratory power scholars in the field of strategic communication have used the neo-institutional perspective only sporadically and where such efforts are made (e.g. Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007; Sandhu, 2009; Wehmeier, 2006) the texts tend to turn over to a deterministic view of organizations. The analyses offered are inclined to see strategic communication as a result of regulative, normative and cognitive structures where communicators are more or less passively conforming to the requirements that the social context they are a part of generated and promoted. Thus the analyses usually end up in a rather deterministic interpretation of institutions and their influence on individuals and organizations.

This is a reaction to the dominant paradigm where the individual and the organizational are paramount. However, the insights from neo-institutional theory cannot be reduced to perceiving an organization’s communication as mainly derived from prevailing institutional constraints. Institutions are not static or deterministic in the way they influence organizations and their behavior. On the contrary, institutions—in their coercive, normative and cognitive forms—are open for innovations and interpretations (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; DiMaggio, 1988; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009b; Oliver, 1991; Rövik, 2002). Thus, this chapter returns to and pays attention to the analysis of strategic communication as determined and conditioned by the institutional conditions. We argue that the dominant static view of institutions is unsatisfactory, and does not provide for a deeper understanding of the way organizations perform and handle their communication activities (Fredriksson et al., 2013). In view of this inadequacy, the chapter addresses the concept and mechanisms of institutional work through which organizations act to create, maintain and disrupt institutions (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). In this context institutions are to be understood as taken-for-granted socially constructed templates that give meaning to actions and social exchange with democracy, market, and family as three concrete examples (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). The aim here is therefore to (a) confirm previous arguments about the constraining role of institutions; (b) argue that such conformity is neither holistic nor passive and that organizations have skills, knowledge and resources to take an active part in shaping and constructing their institutional environment; and (c) re-address strategic communication both as bounded by and constitutive of institutional structures.

Strategic Communication and Institutions

Similar to other social activities, strategic communication is governed by rules, norms and cognitive structures. Communicators do as other communicators do not only because they are obliged or expected to according to legislation, professional norms, or predominant ideas, but also because
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the cost related to the infringement of these principles—to being different—is high in respect of monetary as well as social costs. This is not to say there is a lack of differences if we compare one organization with another but it is a way to point out that organizations tend to be different when it comes to details rather than concepts. Organizations choose different occasions for their media work (difference in detail) but all organizations carry out media work (similarity in concept) (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011, 2013).

Neo-institutional theory holds that organizations—intentionally and unintentionally—relate to requirements and expectations from their environments. Therefore, organizational structures, processes, and responsibilities can be understood as responses to these requirements and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This argument is based on an assumption that organizations try to reduce risks and disturbances in their operations by complying to norms and ideas held by individuals and collectives who constitute and represent the most important resources in the organization’s environment (Thompson, 1967). Common forms of uncertainty may include financial disturbances (i.e., a crisis in financial markets), technical transformations (i.e., development of new technologies, environmental degradation) and/or cultural or moral imperatives (i.e., decreasing expectations of corporate social responsibility). The goal of adaptation is to achieve legitimacy, credibility and authority. These are qualities necessary for the organizations’ ability to survive in a society where a number of stakeholders groups scrutinize, audit and rank them (Power, 1997, 2007; Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009). By incorporating solutions, activities, units, models, and patterns of behavior that are perceived as rational, efficient, necessary and morally correct, organizations can minimize the risk of disturbances in their core activities (Meyer, 1994; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rövik, 2002; Scott, 2008). External demands on organizations are expressed in a number of ways pointing to three principles of influence: regulative, normative, and mimetic as expressed in rules, norms, and beliefs (Scott, 2008).

Legal Structures—Regulated Communication

The present has been described as increasingly regulated (Levi-Faur & Jordana, 2005). Laws, directives, regulations and codes constitute a major part of social reality that influences a wide range of organizational activities (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Information dissemination regulations, accounting and reporting principles and regulations, and marketing and lobbying regulations are just a few examples of how such different regulative forms influence the communication activities of contemporary organizations (Sandhu, 2009). The rules and regulations are mandatory and they prescribe who has the right to demand information (journalists, the public, shareholders), the manner in which the information is to be distributed (press releases, reports, statements), what subjects it should include (new regulations, financial records, work and equality descriptions), and whom it should be addressed to (regulators, customers, shareholders, unions) (Callison, 2003; Fredriksson, 2008; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Pallas, 2007).

To ensure organizational compliance with these regulations there are various types of control and auditing mechanisms such as fines and license issuance sanctioning behavior that deviates from or violates the existing regulatory framework (Jonson, 2002; Jonsson, Greve, & Fujiwara-Greve, 2009; Power, 1997). The responsibility for designing and administering the different control and auditing mechanisms is usually ascribed to governmental agencies and authorities. But there are also other rule-makers and auditors (i.e., accreditations and rating institutes or industry associations) who are involved in the development of regulatory frameworks. These can be more or less coercive and they often gain their power through their connection to standards, memberships and/or accreditations (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; see also Scott, 2004).

The existence of regulatory processes is based on the intention of the rule-makers to create rules of the game, rules that ensure predictability and stability in social contexts such as organizational fields,
networks or markets (Hoffman, 1999). The degree of uncertainty is smaller if one can predict what an organization does in a particular situation. However, compliance with the regulatory conditions is not assured. If laws, directives, rules and codes are perceived as irrelevant or obsolete, the likelihood of organizations following these regulatory procedures decreases (Jonsson, 2002; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). The same goes for organizations that are not dependent on rule-making actors in terms of different types of resources such as financial, technological or reputational assets (Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, & King, 1991; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004). The governing capacity of rules is then a direct result of the legitimacy of the rule-making actors (Suchman, 1995) and their ability to create dependency, and control and sanction mechanisms (Black, 2002; Power et al., 2009).

First and foremost political organizations locally (e.g., municipality or county), nationally (e.g., state) and internationally (e.g., EU) make up regulations. However, parallel to the globalization and the liberalization of the institutional landscape there is a trend towards new non-governmental actors getting involved in the creation, promotion and dissemination of novel or alternative rules in a variety of fields. Business and political networks, alliances, industry, and professional associations are just a few examples of soft rule makers influencing a number of different fields (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Higgott, Underhill, & Bieler, 2000; Mörth, 2004). The work of Global Alliance can be seen as an attempt to create regulative structures governing the work with strategic communication, first by the establishment of the Stockholm Accords and more recently the Melbourne Mandate. Both are documents covering the roles, responsibilities and principles Global Alliance and its members will see as mandates for communicators (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, 2012).

**Normative Structures—Adaptive Communication**

Although the field of strategic communication is not regarded as a profession there is a tendency toward increasing professionalization. Recent research has shown that a majority of practitioners in the field have similar educational backgrounds—that is, a degree in media and communication studies, business administration or political science; belong to the same industry associations; and have remarkably similar work experiences and career paths (Gregory, 2008). The significance and importance of an occupational identity is striking and it also applies to semi-professionals. In strategic communication one can identify a set of ideas, ideals, models, methods and strategies that guide the way the work of practitioners is organized and performed. These ideals and beliefs, however contested and questioned, have been proven to resist most attempts to get modified or replaced; that is, they are considered to inform the most effective, moral, ethical, established and recognized communicative behavior for communication professionals.

Here the concept of *integrated communication* is a good example of the way normative processes operate. In short, integrated communication is an idea based on a conviction that all communication in an organization ought to be integrated and consistent with the values, understanding, and interpretations that management has made and presented (Schultz & Kitchen, 2004). The underlying rationale is to create a homogeneous image of the organization and its activities whereby consistency and unity are seen as prerequisite for organizational stability, rationality and predictability (van Riel, 1992). It is an understanding derived from a modernistic view where social actors are seen as coherent subjects with a single identity. To say two different things on two different occasions or to say one thing and do another is considered a marker of unreliability, or even schizophrenia, even though the causes might be fully reasonable. Therefore it is more or less impossible for someone working with strategic communication to disregard the idea of integrated communication. Communicators are assumed to take an active stand for the concept and its practice (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008).

By way of shared ideas, models and expectations the normative elements of institutions stipulate desirable, ideal, or morally correct organizational behavior. These normative forms give rise to routines, conventions, techniques, and specific organizational forms and structures, as well as presentation
and communication policies and strategies that organizations implement and adjust to. A highly relevant example of such normative pressure is the idea of marketization in areas such as healthcare, education, research, culture, and art (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Powell, Gammal, & Simard, 2005). These sectors, together with many other parts of our society, are expected to behave and conduct their communication and activities in accordance with market principles (Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2007; Wæraas, 2008; Wæraas, Byrkjeflot, & Angell, 2011).

Norms are not binding per se and therefore they differ from laws on a number of points. First, they are not coercive in the word’s real sense. You can’t be convicted in court for using a particular communication method, and there are no formal requirements for the way communication departments should be organized, or what should be included in an organization’s communication policy. However, even if there are no formal sanctions attached to norms they are still very difficult to disregard (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Jonsson, 2002; Jonsson et al., 2009; Suchman, 1995). Standards are generally accepted beliefs and facts that “introduce a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life” (Scott, 2001, p. 54). Second, as the work of professional carriers such as management consultants, universities and media creates, proliferates and disseminates norms, it is often presented as scientifically based and justified, which further enhances its status as inevitable and obligatory (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002).

Norms and standards define, but are also defined, by relations and interactions between actors in terms of their responsibilities towards each other and the surrounding community. As such they constitute a more or less explicit frame of reference for achieving a desirable position in a given social context (Boström, Forsell, Jacobsson, & Tamm Hallström, 2004). In other words, standards and norms not only describe social obligations, they also create opportunities and privileges (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). Declining or violating the prescriptive requirements may lead organizations to social isolation or punishment (Jonsson et al., 2009; Suchman, 1995). Damaged reputation, low ranking and missed accreditation are some examples of sanctions that often pose a greater threat than a fine or ban. The reverse is true when organizations display a sufficient convergence with the normative expectations such as those concerning organizational compliance with corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards or ethical marketing codes (Bartlett, Frostenson, & Pallas, 2013; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Neo-institutional theorists refer to such adjustment to the normative pressures as based in logic of appropriateness; that is, logic that makes organizations strive for what is perceived as appropriate and desirable, rather than rational and most effective (Olsen & March, 2004; Sevón, 1996).

One example of the application of logic of appropriateness in the context of communication is ISO 10 668, which is a standard for valuation of brands, or professional ethical standards and guidelines industry associations create and proliferate. Communicators need to carry out their work in accordance with these standards in order to retain their membership in a professional body. Most of these associations have adopted the Code of Athens and the Code of Venice, leading towards new rules and norms stipulating the professional conduct of PR-practitioners vis-à-vis their organizations. Being able to show that organizations follow these norms and rules provides a basis for legitimacy and reputation not only for practitioners but also for their organizations and their entire professional field.

Another example of a practice with a strong normative force is industry awards and honors. These are clearly designed to highlight and recognize desirable and valued communication efforts and activities. In addition to the different awards there is also a large number of professional conferences, seminars and symposia that together create a strong normative environment that defines how individuals and organizations should organize and carry out their communication activities.

Cognitive Structures—Making Sense of Communication

Rules and norms are deliberate and explicit, as communicators are expected to know the laws and regulations they are supposed to follow. They are also expected to use the knowledge and skills they
have gained in their education and experience, as well as take part in professional bodies, trainings and conferences. But instinctual and implicit assumptions about the work and its preconditions and accomplishments also govern the work they perform. These assumptions are more or less taken for granted, and they function as a frame of reference when the communicator sets her goal, chooses her aspirations and evaluates her results. The assumptions dictate what she will define as important, how she will create meaning and how she will act in different contexts. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described these assumptions and patterns of actions using the concept **habitus** (Bourdieu, 1990).

One example of assumptions governing organizations’ use of communication is how communication in itself is conceptualized. As Reddy (1979) pointed out we tend to think and talk about communication as transportation of meaning where information is more or less given physical properties and seen as moved from one place to another (see also Deetz, 1992; Krippendorff, 1993). Communication is then captured in the metaphor of a pipeline, depicting the communicator as a constructor of the right messages, transmitting them via the right medium to the right receiver to reach the desired effect(s) (Spicer, 1997). As with all metaphors it functions as a system of thought whereby one concept, that is, communication, is constructed in relation to other concepts such as knowledge, organization, society, and so forth. As a system of thought, a metaphor gives certain aspects precedence over others, and therefore it creates zones of meanings, legitimating certain goals and the acts used to reach them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Certain communication methods and strategies thus become perceived as obvious and incorporated in the ideas of what kind of problems one could solve using communication, what means of communication one should use, and what results one could expect (Deetz, 1992).

To be able to understand the power of cognitive structures we need to understand the significance of sense-making and its frames. Sometimes sense-making is used in support of the subjective and individual; that is to say, our sense-making of the world is constructed around subjective and individual interpretations. This is a fallacy. Rather, the reasoning about cognitive structures has to be understood as an argument for the inter-subjective and collective. Our interpretations are made in interaction with others and in tune with rules and systems. Therefore there is little scope for individual interpretations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This is captured by the notions of “bounded rationality” and “embedded agency” suggesting that individual action (including interpretations and evaluations of the context in which the action is situated) is not autonomous. Individuals are always a part of collectively accepted norms, rules and values permeating a given social environment (March & Simon 1958; DiMaggio & Powell 1983). The significance of rules and systems is also amplified by the interaction between sense-making and practice, as those same rules and systems restrict and shape the preconditions for our acts. We do what we do simply because we don’t see any alternatives. We have internalized our social systems (Bourdieu, 1984).

As sense-making is a collective process performed in relationship to other people as well as to social systems, individual interpretations could be aggregated to an organizational level. Organizations do also interpret and make sense of the world by the creation of collective interpretations of internal and external processes as well as the interaction between these two. Some of these interpretations are internalized in procedures, structures and distribution of responsibilities, creating standardization between organizations with similar preconditions. Driving this behavior is the actor’s aversion toward insecurity and the sense of being the only one applying certain procedures, structures or competences.

Ideas are strong forces but they are not determinant. They do not prescribe a certain behavior but limit the alternatives to a very small number of conscious options. They do, however, create frames and internalize structures limiting the space of action for organizations. Therefore, particularly in times of insecurity, organizations tend to do as other successful organizations do with more or less consideration. By adopting what they see as functional solutions, such as creating particular structures
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or recruiting professionals with certain competences, organizations search for stability, control and legitimacy. By implementing the concept of integrated communication, creating a communication department, and appointing communicators with a background in journalism, organizations strive for security on a conscious as well as subconscious level (Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2007; Engwall, 2009).

But it is not only the strengthening of self-esteem that is amplifying assimilation and standardization. It should also be seen as a maneuver to meet expectations from stakeholders and reduce their insecurity. Stakeholders expect certain structures, distribution of responsibilities, and procedures. A small business organization is expected to be run and organized in one manner and a large hospital in another. Therefore, to gain acceptance and legitimacy and appear as successful and moral, organizations adopt and assimilate what others do. Being the only organization doing things in a specific manner is often difficult as many resources have to be dedicated to convince stakeholders of its functionality (DiMaggio, 1983; Sevón, 1996). The internalization is rarely conscious or deliberate, or done after an evaluation of different alternatives. To a large extent it is a form of social learning, imitation or translation of successful concepts where organizations adapt, reshape, or add whole or parts of the concepts they find attractive (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996, 2005).

Rules, norms and cognitive structures are strong forces with extensive significance for the practice of strategic communication, as summarized in Figure 9.1.

### Strategic Communication and Alternation of Institutions

The preceding section has, by drawing upon lessons from classical neo-institutional analysis, illustrated how the concept of strategic communication can be contested. By adhering to regulative, normative and cognitive structures communicators are conforming to the requirements that the social context of which they are part generate and promote. The neo-institutional analysis thus serves to describe the underlying components of strategic communication more as a myth rather than factual practice, thus criticizing “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). But as we have argued initially, we should be careful in treating institutions as static or totalitarian in the way they influence organizations. Their behavior as social actors is not the behavior of cultural dopes. Neither should we understand the institutionally bounded notion of strategic communication as categorically disregarding or rejecting planned and intentional communication activities. Rather, we need to direct our attention to strategic communication as an organizational tool for alternation of the regulative, normative and cognitive pillars of institutions.

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<th>Communication</th>
<th>Regulative</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Cultural–cognitive</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The principle of public access to official documents</td>
<td>Integrated communication</td>
<td>Pipe-line metaphor</td>
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<th>Expression</th>
<th>Formal laws, rules, prescriptions</th>
<th>Norms, standards, models</th>
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<th>Basis of legitimacy</th>
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<th>Basis of compliance and legitimacy</th>
<th>Coercive—juridical/financial sanctions</th>
<th>Normative—social sanctions and pressure</th>
<th>Mimetic—uncertainty, complexity, cultural support</th>
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Figure 9.1 Regulative, Normative and Cultural–Cognitive Conditions for Organizations
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(Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011, 2013). The following section develops this claim by connecting to the literature on institutional work and the neo-institutional understanding of communication as being placed at the heart of institutional processes (Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011).

**Institutional Work—The Creation, Maintenance and Disruption of Institutions**

Departing from recent neo-institutional re-conceptualizations of strategic behavior, this section seeks to offer and develop the notion of strategic communication as an intentional and knowledgeable capacity of organizations to innovate and alter **institutional structures** (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1984). By connecting to the research on **institutional entrepreneurship** in general (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; DiMaggio, 1988; Hoffman, 1999; Hwang & Powell, 2005; Oliver, 1991) and **institutional work** in particular (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009b, 2011; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009) we address strategic communication as a means actors use to take active part in formation and transformation of institutional rules, norms and practices. Thus, we tie strategic communication to the reproductive and collaborative actions of organizations as they seek to maintain, disturb or change the regulative, normative and cognitive constraints permeating their activities (Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011).

Institutional entrepreneurship is a conceptualization whereby actors are given a central position in effecting, transforming and maintaining institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Hoffman, 1999; Hwang & Powell, 2005). Here agency is seen as essential. However, in the effort to restore agency the concept tends to magnify the strategic realms and the liberties of actors’ actions, leading to a con-ceited idea of actors as **heroes on steroids** (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009a; Lawrence et al., 2011). To balance and to offer a more complete view of the interplay between institutions, actors and agency, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) coined the term institutional work, defined as “*the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions*” (p. 215). Hereby the notion of institutional work emphasizes not only the formation and transformation of institutions in terms of new rules, norms, ideas and practices, but also the entire process of institutional ecology including persistence and de-institutionalization (Hwang & Colyvas, 2012). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) argued that despite the acknowledgment of the intentional and knowledgeable capacity of actors to alter their institutional environments, these actors are not autonomous or independent of the very context that constrains their activities; neither are their intentions always accomplished (Lawrence et al., 2009a, 2011). This embeddedness of actors and the unintended consequences of their efforts underscore the importance of upholding the distinction between creating and creation, maintaining and maintenance, and disrupting and disruption of institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009a). Moreover, as institutions and the processes of de-institutionalization are complex and interrelated it is difficult to foresee and isolate the effects of individual intentions (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). This is amplified by the fact that other actors who defend the existing institutional orders or promote competing ones, often contest these efforts.

Keeping such limitations in mind the literature suggests that three sets of activities enhance institutional innovation: collaborative arrangements; well-developed interactions; and extensive information flows. These are essential in institutionalization as well as in deinstitutionalization processes as they help actors to support or hinder new and old institutional forms to become legitimate and to spread (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009; Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002). The neo-institutional theorists suggest and describe a number of different forms and ways in which actors seek to create new or alter existing institutions (see Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, for an overview). These can be ascribed three different aims. First, through changes in abstract categories of meaning (norms) and introduction of new coercive structures (rules), actors can actively and intentionally contribute to **creation** of new institutions. Examples of such work include advocacy, mimicry, changes in...
normative associations, theorizing, and educating. Second, as institutions are not self-reproducing even though persistent mechanisms such as laws, regulations and norm systems protect them, they are open for interpretations and adaptation (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009; Zilber, 2009). Thus maintenance of institutions is connected to active strategies such as embedding, routinizing, ritualizing, policing and mythologizing. The third form of institutional work includes activities where institutions are disrupted by being disconnected and disassociated from normative, regulative and moral foundations and values (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009).

**Strategic Communication and Institutional Work**

With support from the conceptualization of institutional work, strategic communication can be understood as a means actors use to reach beyond particular organizational aims and missions (Fredriksson et al., 2013). From this perspective, strategic communication has to be viewed as a practice used to embed values and preferences into collaborative structures that help them to become widely spread and institutionalized, or to challenge and disrupt competing ones. This is an idea supported by the renewed view on social orders as constructed and imposed on actors through symbolic and communicative means and activities (Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011). Strategic communication can then be used as a carrier and translator of these institutional elements, as well as their maintainer and creator.

With this as a starting point and with additional support from earlier work on the different ways in which organizations enact media (Pallas, 2010; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011) an understanding of strategic communication as having three general functions is possible:

1. **providing** signals of organizational adaptation to institutional values, norms and rules
2. **promoting** its own take on these institutional forms and
3. **co-opting** other organizations in their own work on institutions.

**Providing**

Organizations operating in strong normative and regulative regimes such as industries or organizational fields are expected, due to legal and legitimacy reasons (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995), to explicitly and clearly declare they follow the “rules of the game” in those particular settings. Strategic communication can in such a context function as a protective activity since it might serve an organization by providing the relevant audience with evidence of being a recognized and legitimate actor. A major aim of such communicative efforts is to ensure stability and predictability. A systematic flow of formal and standardized information on which organizations can be evaluated in relation to, for instance, industry standards, prevailing market regulation, or professional expectations, can achieve this. By way of providing, organizations—mainly those that benefit from the prevailing conditions—contribute to the maintenance and protection of institutional structures (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011).

**Promoting**

Organizations that find themselves threatened by existing rules, norms and values, for example, in the case of re-regulation of markets, or organizations that define these institutional forms as insufficient or malfunctioning, are more likely to use strategic communication as a promoting activity (Ihlen, 2009; Maguire et al., 2004). In this case promoting includes well-adjusted communicative efforts—regarding time, opportunity, form, channel, target group—which aim at introducing innovative ideas, norms and rules by way of making these interesting, or connected to or derived
from legitimate models used in other contexts, as well as theoretically substantiated and rational (Fredriksson, 2009; Suddaby, 2011). These activities require a mixture of formal activities seeking to gain general acceptance of the alternatives offered, and highly informal interactions where the symbolic and rhetorical means serve in attracting resourceful and elite actors for support.

**Co-Opting**

Co-opting as a communication strategy focuses on establishing common platforms that reflect and integrate interests and needs of a variety of societal actors rather than communication efforts based on a pre-defined set of aims and goals (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2011). Here communication is mostly focused on creating strong collaborative contexts and issues and topics where relevance and importance are given priority to guide the work performed.

By addressing long-term effects and consequences and by appealing to values and common challenges, organizations seek to communicate with their audiences on the basis of collective good rather than self-interest. It is a general strategy, but used mainly by those who are dependent on long-term stability and predictability and those who are operating in areas that are generally questioned or criticized, such as the energy sector or tobacco industry (cf. Fredriksson, 2008; Pallas, 2007). Such communicative efforts are often conducted indirectly via involvement of third parties such as industry associations, expert groups, or PR consultants (Larsson, 2005).

The concepts of providing, promoting and co-opting bring to the fore the complex and multilevel institutional settings of organizations, which impose different and often conflicting requirements and expectations, as summarized in Figure 9.2.

**Conclusion**

Organizations are embedded in social webs. This is in itself rather an obvious assertion, but one that is still often overlooked when organizational practices are subjected to academic inquiry or empirical testing. In this chapter we have shown under what conditions strategic communication is performed and how legal, normative and cognitive structures govern these practices. With a number of illustrative examples this chapter has argued for a perspective whereby organizations’ communication activities are characterized by structural and procedural conformity, where the use of communication is much more a search for security and predictability rather than distinction and uniqueness. In other words, it is a practice performed under the influence of social structures that define and constrain what to communicate, how, when and to whom.

However, the chapter also points to the limitations of such structural determinism, arguing individuals and organizations cannot be treated as cultural dopes. Rather, actors possess resources, intentions and skills, especially communicative ones, helping them to protect, challenge and re-shape the very context of which they are a part.
Institutional Work

Thereby strategic communication is an essential means for organizations when they attempt to alter the institutional properties in which they are embedded. Such a perspective questions the traditional conceptualization of strategic communication on two accounts:

- **Purpose**: with focus on the determined and skilful enactment of institutional structures this reverses the traditional purpose of strategic communication arguing that communication activities often serve organizations in constituting these structures rather than acting upon them.

- **Dynamics**: strategic communication is nested in ongoing multi-level interactions and collaborations rather than being defined in relation to these interactions.

In general, this means strategic communication as concept and practice needs to relate to the structures of social life where organizations’ communicative activities are both subordinated to and constitutive of commonly shared rules, norms and ideas.

References


