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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Grandien, C., Johansson, C. (2016)

Organizing and disorganizing strategic communication: Discursive institutional change in dynamics in two communication departments.

International Journal of Strategic Communication, 10(4): 332-351

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2016.1196692>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:miun:diva-28575>

Organizing and disorganizing strategic communication:

Discursive institutional change dynamics in two communication departments

Christina Grandien and Catrin Johansson

Mid Sweden University

Abstract

This article explores the institutionalization of strategic communication as a dynamic interplay between macro and meso-level discourses. The change processes in the two cases of this study involved both a re-orientation of the purpose of the communication function, but also a physical relocation of the professionals to a centralized department. In both organizations, the transformation toward a strategic management function failed and the communication professionals are now working in similar ways as before the change was initiated. The analysis illustrates that the institutionalization of strategic communication is affected by organizational level processes and mechanisms that are not always controlled by communication professionals. The institutionalization of strategic communication is bound by organizational discourses as well as by the actions of communication practitioners and general managers. The study also shows that macro and meso-level discourses influence the ways in which change initiatives are translated and strategic communication affected on an organizational level. Hence, institutionalization processes of strategic communication will comply with management trends but can change direction when these trends are challenged. Our results suggest that new ideas or practices of strategic communication are translated discursively within organizations in processes of recontextualization, reinterpretation, and reframing. Consequently, new ideas and practices of strategic communication are adjusted to organizational discourses, and organizational settings. The translation of a new idea or practice will therefore change the initial meaning of that same idea or practice. For that reason, institutionalization of strategic communication should not be reduced to a uni-directional process, but function as a dynamic interplay between discourses on different levels that moves institutionalization in multiple directions.

Keywords:

Discourse, Organizational change, Institutionalization theory, Management process, Organization of communication, In-depth interviews

Institutionalization of strategic communication has been a topic of growing importance during recent years and scholars as well as practitioners are interested in practitioners' efforts to gain legitimacy for the communication function, to serve organizational needs and participate in strategic decision-making. Such processes are however dynamic and ongoing, and the objectives are not always realized (Zilber 2008).

In research, the concept of institutionalization has been used to explore and describe how strategic communication is in the process of becoming a structured and well established function in organizations (Moreno, Verhoeven, Tench, & Zerfass, 2010; Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011). Researchers have highlighted environmental factors such as the societal or business environment developments (Swerling & Sen, 2009); and introduced ways in which these factors drive the institutionalization of strategic communication towards greater business strategy orientation (Tench, Verhoeven, & Zerfass, 2009), strategic and change management (Grunig, 2006; Luo & Jiang, 2014), increased advisory services (Zerfass & Franke 2013) and evaluation as a key indicator and support in the process of institutionalization of communication (Invernizzi & Romenti 2009). There is however limited research about factors constraining institutionalization of strategic communication and questions of unintended and unwanted directions of institutionalization remain and deserve more attention.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to explore how and why change initiatives can lead the process of institutionalization of strategic communication in a different direction to that intended. This study draws on research from the field of organizational theory, particularly institutionalization theory, as well as literature on organizational discourse to develop the understanding of the dynamic institutionalization processes of strategic communication. We apply a discursive perspective, which "highlights the processual and temporal aspects of organizational change," and perceives change as "a

social accomplishment occurring in iterative ongoing fashion over time” (Grant & Marshak, 2011, p. 206). Accordingly, discourses on micro (individual), meso (organizational) and macro (societal level) are influencing and constituting change processes. Meso-level research typically links micro and macro concepts across levels of analysis (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) and analyzes how features of organizations are linked between macro and micro, or how contextual elements affect the individual functioning within an organization (Smith, Schneider & Dickson 2006).

The dynamic process of institutionalization is seen as dependent on meso-level discourses evoked in the organizations that counterbalance the influence of macro discourses which are embedded at the macro societal level. We study the meso-level change dynamics of two organizations and the centralization and reorientation of their communication departments, which first seemed to succeed and accomplish the goals, but later reverted back to being a support function in both organizations. By attending to the organizational meso-level, we can discover more about the ways in which the implementation of planned change is adjusted to fit the organizational context, and influences institutionalization of strategic communication in the long-term.

The study aims to contribute to strategic communication research in three ways: First, we study the dynamic process of institutionalization of strategic communication in two organizations that centralized their communication departments and implemented a strategic reorientation, which later failed. Second, we contribute a discourse perspective to study how institutionalization of strategic communication takes place in the interplay between meso- and macro/mega discourses (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Third, the study illustrates ways in which the dynamic interplay between discourses can affect institutionalization and explores the reasons behind the outcomes.

Institutionalization of strategic communication

Institutions (or institutional arrangements) are enduring social structures that both enable and constrain human behavior (Van de Ven & Hargrave, 2004). Institutionalization has two defining elements according to Zucker (1987): a rule-like, social fact quality of an organized pattern of action, and an embedding in formal structures, such as formal aspects of organizations that are not tied to particular actors or situations. According to this view, the institutionalization of strategic communication would be a taken for granted position as a strategic management function, which is structured and implemented across organizations. Further, three principles guide institutionalization: “(a) Institutional elements arise primarily from small group or organization-level processes; (b) formalized organizational structure and process tend to be both highly institutionalized and a source of new institutionalization; and (c) institutionalization increases stability, creating routines that enhance organizational performance except when more efficient alternatives are ignored” (Zucker, 1987, p. 446f.) In this article, institutionalization of strategic communication is seen as a permanently ongoing interaction between individuals and organizations that reflect on and strategically operate within the institutional context in which they are embedded (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013).

Research on the institutionalization of strategic communication

Within the field of strategic communication, research on institutionalization has received wide scholarly interest over the past years. Institutionalization of strategic communication can be studied from several perspectives, from the individual micro level to the societal macro level (Grandien & Johansson, 2012). Sandhu (2009) proposes that institutional theory enables a link between micro, meso and macro perspectives, which would acknowledge the social and cultural embeddedness of organizations. Fredriksson, Pallas and Wehmeier (2013) address ways in which neo-institutional theory opens up for a wider understanding of strategic communication in a sense that it can help in describing, explaining

and understanding the activities, processes and dynamics of communication practice. Some elements within neo-institutional theory that address how discursive and communicative activities are involved in change when managerial ideas and models are introduced and translated within organizations, are particularly relevant for strategic communication research. Also Frandsen and Johansen (2013) advocate that neo-institutional organizational theory is useful for the empirical study of how strategic communication has been institutionalized over time in private and public organizations. It can help us answer questions like, for example, how homogeneous or heterogeneous the process is within an organization and across organizational fields.

There are also empirical studies on the ways in which strategic communication institutionalizes. Tench et al. (2009) argue that strategic communication is institutionalized both as a collective pattern of behavior and as an institutionalized thought structure. Moreno et al. (2010) suggest that the institutionalization of strategic communication varies along the lines of personal characteristics, experience, hierarchical position, age and gender. Swerling and Sen (2009) state that strategic communication in the USA has come far in the process of institutionalization in terms of access to the CEO/C-Suite and of perceptions of the function within the organization but that there is more work to be done in terms of the adoption and use of effective evaluation methods and degree of integration with other disciplines. Invernizzi and Romenti (2009) suggest that evaluation is a key indicator and support in the process of institutionalization of communication.

Researchers note a gap between the advisory influence of practitioners and their executive power to influence strategic decision-making (Moreno et al., 2010). For example, in the US, the communication function is seen as moving toward becoming fully institutionalized, although cross functional cooperation is essential to optimize the communication function's own performance (Swerling & Sen, 2009). These changes are

integrated with the practice, role-enactment, and legitimacy of strategic communication professionals in organizations (Tench et al., 2009; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009). In a study by Verhoeven, Zerfass and Tench (2011), based on a survey of European professionals, the authors conclude that a majority of the participants describe themselves as strategic facilitators involved in defining and implementing business goals. However, practice is also embedded in social structures and influenced by professional norms (Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Fredriksson et al., 2013; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Sandhu, 2009; Swerling & Sen, 2009; Zerfass, 2009) and the societal and organizational structures influence the ways the practice is institutionalized.

Institutionalization dynamics in the organizational setting

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the social constructivist nature of the process of institutionalization, i.e. the “doing” of institutionalization; moving away from the view that institutions are fixed cognitive mental models (Phillips & Malhotra 2008). According to Phillips et al. (2004), institutionalization occurs when as actors interact and come to accept shared definitions of reality. Institutionalization occurs in relation to the ways it is socially and discursively contextualized within systems of meaning, and to understand institutionalization we thus need to explore its contextualization at the organizational level. While knowledge about how field or societal level dynamics influence institutionalization, an organizational level analysis can show how these dynamics affect life within organizations. The ways in which for example goals are set, strategic plans are defined, and how decisions are interpreted to make sense are embedded within wider institutional dynamics of meaning (Zilber 2008).

Institutionalization processes in which structures, ideas and practices are spread across organizations have been addressed by organizational scholars through the metaphor of “translation”. The concept describes how isomorphic practices, where organizations imitate

each other, are responded to and attended to locally (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). It illustrates that ideas, practices or organizational structures that are spread are not unchangeable goods, but rather subject to multiple translations and eventually become institutionalized (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), which can explain local variations in institutionalization processes concerning the use and outcome of isomorphic practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Ideas, to which organizational actors ascribe new meanings, are combined with existing working models and “edited” in order to fit the organizational context (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011).

The process of translation as described above is further explored by organizational discourse scholars that use the concept of “discourse” to investigate the role of language in theory and empirical studies analyzing organizational change. A discourse analytic approach demonstrates how the meaning attached to change is produced discursively by key actors (Grant, Michelson, Oswick, & Wailes, 2005). In the following section we will discuss the key tenets and implications of a discourse perspective on institutionalization at the organizational meso-level.

A discourse-based approach to institutionalization

In this study, the institutionalization of strategic communication will be analyzed as a dynamic change process where discourse and discursive practices provide the means and constraints for the accomplishment of organizing and change (Doolin, Grant, & Thomas, 2013). A process should in this article be interpreted as the progression of events in an organization over time, which thus entails change. Organizational change implies an alteration in existing organizational arrangements (Grant & Marshak, 2011) and a change process can be seen as the order and sequence of organizational events over time in terms of empirical observation of differences in, for example, individuals’ jobs, work groups, organizational strategies, programs or the overall organization (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

However, a discursive perspective on institutionalization of strategic communication does not only involve physical or material changes but also discursive “accounts” of these things. Discourses shape how individuals think about organizational change events and how they act and, consequently, how people think and act about events shapes their discourses. (Grant & Marshak, 2011). In the process where organizational members think and talk about organizational change, they formulate and reformulate practices in the setting of the organization (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and participate in the discursive construction of boundaries between roles and of the organizations they are part of. Individuals within organizations engage in discursive activity to generate new meanings that can help – or hinder – the enactment of particular strategies, ideas or practices. They also reflect upon and challenge socially ascribed roles (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996) and discursively negotiate these roles or even multiple roles (Larson & Pepper, 2003).

Discourse can be described as being constituted by three elements (Fairclough, 1992): texts (in the form of written or spoken words), discursive practices (processes of distribution and consumption), and social practices (institutional and societal processes, including leadership and domination across economic, political, cultural, and ideological domains). Further, discourses bring objects and ideas into being – they constitute reality since they produce rules, identity, context, values, and procedures (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Thus, a discursive approach “highlights the ways in which language constructs organizational reality, rather than simply reflecting it” (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005, p. 59). Moreover, discursive studies show how discourses are socially constructed and negotiated, and how they produce emerging meanings that may become an accepted or privileged discourse (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Often discourse researchers adopt a critical perspective to examine how such dominant meanings and discourses emerge. Certain ways of talking about a particular phenomenon may either be “ruled in,” – deemed as acceptable and legitimate, or “ruled out,”

– and accordingly limiting, and restricting the ways key actors talk about or conduct themselves in relation to the phenomenon. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the role of power in establishing or challenging prevailing discourses in order to understand factors impacting change in organizations (Grant & Marshak, 2011).

Researchers have distinguished between different levels of discourse, such as the study of *discourse*, referring to talk and texts in social practices, and *Discourse*, referring to general and enduring systems of thought (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Another way of conceiving different discourses is to speak of levels of intra-psycho-, micro-, meso-, macro- and meta-discourses (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Individuals' beliefs and internalized stories, rooted in cognitive scripts and schemata, frames and conceptual metaphors at the *intra-psycho level* manifest themselves in individuals' discursively constructed meanings, and can be analyzed in interview discourse. Analyses at the *micro level* focus on the detail of language in use by individuals. According to Grant and Marshak, such analyses offer “a range of insights into the attitudes, orientations, motives and values of a given organizational stakeholder” (p. 214). Discourse analyses at the meso-level concern talk-in-interaction that explore the role of discourse in shaping actions and behavior of individuals within a localized context, for example, a department or a specific group who socially interact on a regular basis (ibid). Discursive activities in these settings manifest conflicts, roles, and norms; and are highly significant to effecting change since these discourses can influence whether or not a change is considered and then either impede or facilitate the implementation of change (Grant & Marshak, 2011). A study by Fiss and Zajac (2006) suggested that managers who seek to instigate strategic change become involved in meso-level interactions with a number of actors within and outside their organizations who persuade them of the value and purpose of the change. Such interactions require managers to

frame the change using a language that fits with divergent stakeholder interests, and which decouples advocacy with actual implementation of the change itself.

Macro-level discourses are formed by meso-level discursive interaction, texts and conversations, into dominant thinking, institutional practices, and collective social perspectives within organizations (Grant & Marshak, 2011, p. 214).

Finally, meta-level discourses (or mega discourses) are recognized and espoused at the broader societal level, and across institutional domains (Grant & Marshak, 2011). As such, they address standardized ways of referring to certain phenomena (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Examples are “new public management”; “the market”; “sustainability”; and organizational change itself.

A discourse approach is attuned to the interrelationships between different levels of analysis, and can show how the language of an individual draws on discourses operating at group, organizational, and societal levels (Grant & Marshak, 2011, p. 206). Ideas, talk, texts, practices, and the resulting relationships and identities are part of micro-political struggles within and between discourses, which can enhance, disrupt and transform prevailing organizational meanings and identities (Doolin et al., 2013).

To summarize, this article takes a discursive approach to analyze the institutionalization of strategic communication as a dynamic interplay between meso and macro/mega discourse in two organizations. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore how and why change initiatives can lead the process of institutionalization of strategic communication in an opposite direction to that intended. We focus on the following research questions:

RQ 1: How are macro-level discourses about organizing strategic communication discursively constructed by organizational members?

RQ2: What meso-level discourses about organizing strategic communication emerge and interact with macro-level discourses?

RQ3: Which roles do different discourses play in the dynamic process of institutionalization of strategic communication on an organizational level?

Research design, method and material

In order to answer our explorative research questions, the present study employed a case study design by analyzing interviews with organizational members from two organizations. Case study research is suitable when the purpose of study is to answer questions about organizational development, process, and action (Yin, 2013) and phenomena are complex and interrelated. We selected two Swedish organizations where the communication departments were subject to strategic change, one global business organization and one local government organization. Both cases are characterized by the objective of changing the function of the communication departments from “serving the needs” of the organization, to becoming a strategic management function. This type of change has been conceptualized as “institutionalizing” strategic communication (Zerfass, 2009).

In the two organizations, documents describing the strategic changes were collected, and managers, communication executives, and communication professionals with a profound knowledge about the change initiatives were strategically selected and interviewed. In the private organization, the communication executive, one CEO, one production manager, and two communication professionals, a total of five people were interviewed. A document entitled “Leading with communication” described the aims and working process of the change. In the local government organization, six interviews were undertaken with the communication executive, three department managers, and three communication professionals. Two documents: a formal decision protocol and an investigation report

recommending the structure and working process of the future centralized communication department were obtained (see Appendix 1 for more information about the interviews).

The change process of the private organization concerned the internal communication department and was part of a major cost saving and standardization project in 2007-2008. During this change, the internal communication function implemented a process called “Leading with communication,” which aimed at changing the communication professionals’ approach from being production oriented to working towards more of an advisory and educating role. This change also served to highlight the strategic value of communication to the organization. However, a few years later, the internal communication department had returned to working in similar ways as before.

In the case of the local government organization, the communication department had moved from a decentralized function and relatively production oriented practices towards becoming a centralized communication function working strategically with communication. The change process was initiated in 2007 and when the interviews were conducted in 2011, the communication department was still working as a centralized function. However, shortly after these interviews, the department went back to working in similar ways as before the change. In both organizations, it was important to capture the interviewees’ notions of the problems and challenges during the dynamic institutionalization process, which could help explain why the implemented changes were not sustained. Two follow-up interviews were made in 2016, with the communication executive of the private organization, and a communication professional of the government organization in order to establish a further understanding of the developments of the institutionalization processes. Since major re-organizations had been implemented in both organizations, we strategically chose individuals with the best knowledge of senior management decisions. Although the communication executive had left the private organization, she had good knowledge through her network of

managers and communication professionals still working in the organization. In the local government organization we chose to interview a communication professional remaining in the downsized core of strategic communication at the top of the organization. He had the best experience of both centralization and decentralization of strategic communication.

The interviews followed a semi-structured template including questions on the purpose of the change, the interviewees' attitudes towards the change, results of the change, and questions on their roles and work, all of which allowed follow-up questions and extended discussions on particular subjects emerging during the talk. The interviews were transcribed in full, summing up to a total of 114 single spaced pages.

Data analysis

We employed a qualitative discourse analysis of documents and interview transcripts (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014). The aim of the analysis was to identify discourses related to the change of the two communication departments. Discourses are following Fairclough (2003) seen as “ways of representing aspects of the world” (p. 124) – processes, relations and structures of the material world, the “mental” world of thoughts, feelings and beliefs; and the social world. Different discourses imply different perspectives associated with people's different relations, positions, social and personal identities. They can be identified at different levels of abstraction. For the empirical analysis we employed the approach of Hardy (2001), who defines a discourse as “a system of texts that brings objects into being” (p. 26). Discourses produce a material reality in the practices that they invoke. They are embodied in texts (spoken and written) but exist beyond the individual texts that compose them. Thus, to analyze discourse is a “highly labor-intensive task, and because discourse analysts are interested in interpreting multiple meanings, there is no shortcut way of applying systematized content analysis” (Hardy, 2001, p. 36), rather, the coding and interpretation is

an iterative process, which more resembles the idea of ‘craft’, refining the analysis step by step.

The analysis began by identifying and mapping discourses on a general, macro level that described the change. In this first step we consulted documents a) describing the purpose of the decision to change the communication department in the local government, and b) describing the new way of working of the internal communication department in the business organization. We also read the transcripts of the interviews to investigate what macro discourses interviewees drew upon. Discourses that we found on this level centered on “centralization” and “strategic reorientation”.

The second step of the analysis entailed a closer analysis of the interview transcripts. In this step we particularly looked for discourses related to challenges and problems described by the interviewees. Problematic situations are most intriguing for communication researchers, because it is in situations where social actors experience dilemmas and tensions and answer questions in different ways, that conversational choices give clues to the interpretations of events and processes (Tracy, 2001). We compared the representation of perspectives from actors with different positions and roles: managers, communication professionals and communication executives, and gradually, patterns of how different actors perceived the changes emerged.

The third and final step of the analysis was to sort the different discourses into levels of abstraction, and compare them to each other. We present these findings as the meso-level discourses of “communicative responsibility”, and “intra-organizational relationships”. During this step we tried to understand why organizational members made sense of the change differently, and how the discourses related to past and future actions. We identified diverging organizational sense making processes, when interviewees’ representations were *recontextualizing* events and messages (incorporating them within the context of another

social event) (Fairclough, 2003, p. 139). The researchers discussed the interpretations of what the discourses signified during all three steps. Finally, quotes were chosen to illustrate the findings.

Case description

Strategic communication in the Swedish context

Over the past few decades, the landscape of strategic communication practice in Sweden has changed significantly. Up until the eighties, most communication professionals worked within organizations. A distinctive feature of the Swedish communication practitioners is that their work started within state authorities, and the occupation grew in line with the development of the governmental sector (Larsson, 2006). Larsson acknowledges that in Sweden many organizations have still not understood the importance of having the communication executive at the top of the management hierarchy, which has slowed down the progress of professionalization (Larsson, 2005). One study of Swedish communication executives in private and public organizations concludes that although the status and formal position among the executives were found to be both dynamic and subject to negotiation within the organizations, they had a distinct strategic managerial role within their organizations (Johansson & Ottestig, 2011). The executive role involved three different performances: the organizational leader and the communication leader, both members of the senior management team, and the communication manager, without a seat in the senior management team. Only a few executives were found to enact the organizational leader role, and thus carry responsibility for the overall organizational strategic objectives. Most, however, were responsible for the communication department or function and communication objectives.

The two cases

The local government organization

The local government organization is located in one of Sweden's 20 largest municipalities, which has 90 – 100, 000 inhabitants. The organization has about 8,000 employees and the organizational structure comprises nine different units. Prior to 2007, all units had their own small communication departments, sometimes with only one employee. Some professionals have communication educations while some have other backgrounds. Some of them worked according to a traditional “technician” role (Dozier, 1992): writing newsletters, taking photos, designing layouts for newsletters, folders, and brochures; whereas others tended to work in a more strategic way, with communication analyses and planning.

The results from a public investigation suggested the communication function should be centralized in order to reinforce the communications strategy of the organization. The decision to change the organization and centralize the communication department, i.e. move all communication professionals into a new integrated office of their own, was taken by the politicians in the municipal council. The change process started in 2008, and at the same time a new communication executive was employed to implement the change. The strategic objectives for the change included that the local government should be viewed as responsive, powerful, and more attractive for both visitors and inhabitants. This would be accomplished through effective internal and external communication with tools for internal communication that would create more participatory and responsible employees within the municipality. The new communication function should be proactive and transparent, with strategic communication integrated in all operations. Further, it should educate “communicative” leaders, be a strategic support function, competent in crisis management and responsible for the visual identity of the municipality.

The business organization

The business organization is a Swedish unit of a global pharmaceutical company formed through a merger in the 1990s. The group has over 60,000 employees and operates in over 100 countries around the world. The organization in this study is a production and supply unit manufacturing medicines, and it has around 3,500 employees. The focus of this study is on the internal communication department of this organization. The organization was formed in 2003, out of a need to strengthen coordination, business focus and find synergies to increase efficiency. Support functions, such as communications, quality, human relations and finance were centralized and a communication executive was appointed to lead and develop work in the new organization. Following the reorganization, further work towards better efficiency was carried out and the need for uniform and integrated communications was recognized. One result of this increased focus on strategic communication resulted in an allocation of 20 percent of the working hours within the internal communication department on professional development and on communicative support of organizational leaders and managers. The goal of the professional development was to transform the department from a tactical orientation into providing a more general role as communication coaches. This approach was called “Leading through Communication”, which was developed through the results of a communication audit in 2005 where the findings indicated a number of issues regarding the need for more strategic communication and better communication competence among organizational leaders. The objectives for “Leading through Communication” were to help leaders to understand what effective communication looks like, recognize its value as a strategic leadership tool and know how it should be used to achieve business objectives.

Results: Dynamics of organizing and disorganizing strategic communication

In both organizations, the change involved centralization of the communication departments. Also, the change involved a new approach to how the communication professionals would work. These two processes are interrelated, but are interpreted or translated differently within the organizations. First, we analyze how macro-level discourses about organizing strategic communication in the two organizations were discursively constructed by the organizational members that we interviewed. Secondly, we identify meso-level discourses that emerged and interacted with the macro-level discourses. Third, we discuss how these different discourses interact and what roles they play in the dynamic process of institutionalization of strategic communication in these two organizations.

Macro discourses of Centralization and Strategic reorientation

Centralization

In both organizations, centralization was interpreted as something inevitable or part of the changing times. The centralization of the communication department was part of a more thorough review of all departments and functions, and consequently the communication department would follow down the same line. There were however also some major differences between the two organizations in terms of how the centralization was discursively constructed by the members. In the local government organization, a political decision about the need for centralization of the communication department was taken as part of a larger review of all municipal services. The interviewees are well aware that the centralization of the communication department is part of a larger change program.

The reason they did it was that the local government reviewed all the joint municipal services, like finance, communication, /.../ the registry, everyone had to do it. (Communication professional, local government)

Further, some of the interviewees in the local government expressed discouragement about not being able to influence the decision to centralize the communication department. One communication professional talked about how the communication department, previous to the change, identified a need for working closer together and as a result formed a network of communication professionals within the local government. An investigator appointed by the local government to process the change put forward two suggestions for how the communication function could be organized in the future. One suggestion was to strengthen the network of communication professionals and the other was to centralize the whole department. In the interviews, the respondents expressed an understanding that the local government had already decided on a centralized communication department, despite disagreements within the organization.

He (the investigator appointed by the local government) went forward with two proposals, either you have a centralized communication department, or you can keep it the way it is but strengthen the core so that the network works better. And that was basically what most people wanted. But as I understood it, he was told by the politicians that he had to redo his homework. “No, we just want to have one proposal and we only want to have a proposal with a centralized communication department.” I have interpreted it as a very clear political mission to have a centralized communication department.

(Communication professional, local government)

Accordingly, the decision taken by the local government was in conflict with how the interviewed communication professionals wanted to organize the communication function and the decision to centralize is seen as part of a managerial decision that was never really negotiable. In summary, the effort to centralize the communication department is mainly translated as a top-down decision that needs to be carried out. The communication professionals were however cautiously positive about working closer together and achieving more coherence in communication related matters, even if centralization is not the solution they would have preferred.

In the business organization, the decision to centralize the communication department was also part of a larger organizational change program that sought to create more efficiency and better use of resources for the whole organization.

Everything was centralized, to make more efficient use of resources. /.../ this was a way of making a lot of inefficiency and overstaffing visible. And then actually begin a long-term effort to cut back and streamline. Expansion had in fact prevailed over the 90s, back then it was more important than efficiency.

(Production manager, business organization)

In the business organization, the change initiative was also taken at top management level, but interpreted in a positive way within the organization. The communication department had an active role in implementing the larger change of the whole organization at the same time as they changed their own structure and direction of work. The decision to centralize the communication department does not seem to be a process that is questioned by the interviewees, rather a way of saving an organization in a downward trend. The change

was well anchored in the organization as a necessity for survival and also seen as something that could potentially generate positive effects for both the communication department and for the department managers and ultimately the organization.

In both organizations, the centralization is translated as something inevitable, part of the changing times. However, in the business organization, the discourse is about saving an organization in a downward spiral, and hence something that has to be done for the organization to survive. In the local government, the translation of the centralization draws from a discourse of individuals not being listened to or not having the power to influence the change in any direction.

Strategic reorientation

In both organizations, a reorientation of work towards a more strategic focus was implemented. The changes also implied that the communication professionals were to work more like communication coaches to the management and to the organization.

In the local government, the reorientation of work was understood as something related to a bigger picture or a prevailing management philosophy that called upon a reorientation of work.

Partly it feels like, /.../, you had to work in a more structured and professional way because there were few resources and a great need, so to start working differently was absolutely necessary. (Communication professional, local government)

The local government recruited a new communication executive for the new communication department with a clear agenda of changing the orientation of work of the communication department:

I have been very explicit, I know what I want and what I want us to work with. So I think that they also have to comply with it and change their professional orientation. (Communication executive, local government)

The communication executive emphasizes the need for the communication professionals to let go of production and become more strategically oriented:

Some rapidly took the leap from letting go of all this production into being focused on strategic activities. (Communication executive, local government)

In terms of reorientation of work, the production oriented services that the professionals provided to the organization, like writing for the internet sites or producing press releases, is interpreted as something that does not fit within the new organization, whereas effective communication is described as strategic, coaching and management oriented. In the follow-up interview, it was clear that the strategic reorientation was enacted through a change in the discourse.

It even became an internal joke that “we’ll do a brochure” /.../ it was a lot of talk on minimizing that and work differently, more advisory /.../ think forward, what you call strategic, it was quite a big change (Communication professional, local government)

By starting to talk and construct the strategic reorientation discursively, the communication professionals knew how to change their way of working.

In the business organization, the change was understood as an opportunity to reorient towards more strategic management oriented work tasks. The reorientation was supposed to enhance efficiency and professionalism, and to allow the communication

professionals to make a difference in terms of contributing to the strategic goals of the organization. In the business organization, the professionals were set out to work as “communication coaches,” with the objective of making other managers and executives in the organization aware of their own communicative responsibilities.

One objective in the business organization for the new centralized strategic communication department was the strategic communication support it could offer managers in their efforts for making their own units more effective.

And they (the managers) realized that these were tools and knowledge that they could use that could make them better managers. (Communication professional, business organization)

In the business organization, time was set aside for professional development, and in-house training was organized for people who needed it. Also, the aim of the communication department was to shift the responsibility for communication over to the managers and to coach them in communication related issues.

I would say that most people worked more with information than communication and very little with management support. So the journey involved moving from working with information production into coaching managers in their communication. (Communication professional, business organization)

Meso-level discourses of communicative responsibility and intra-organizational relationships

Two meso-level discourses related to the macro discourses of centralization and strategic reorientation emerged in the interviews: the discourse of communicative responsibility and the discourse of intra-organizational relationships.

The discourse of communicative responsibility

Resistance or doubt about the change in both organizations can be related to how communicative responsibility was constructed in the interviews. The centralization and reorientation of work meant that the communication professionals would act as coaches or “internal communication consultants” (Zerfass & Franke, 2013) to organizational managers and departments, who were expected to take larger communicative responsibility than they used to.

Before the change, communication professionals belonged to a decentralized communication function and worked closely with the department managers at the departments where they were physically located. In the local government, the department managers understood the centralization and the new way of working as potentially affecting their departments negatively.

If you have a communication professional working close to you, then he or she can pick things up, hear things in the corridor and take note of things. /.../And the way it is now, /.../ I and my staff have to contact the communication department and tell them that we should do something. I think that communication professionals, based on their professionalism, should be able to seize things and take the initiative. (Department manager, local government)

This quote illustrates how communicative responsibilities are being shifted from the communication professionals to the department managers. However, the discussion about communicative responsibility also concerns the interaction between departments and

communication professionals. This manager further detailed the tension between her need for help with more practical (technical) issues and the change towards more strategic work:

What we won was access to people who could think more strategically around communication, at a more academic level. But the practical work, and to actually get help with fixing these information related things is where we felt really lost. (Department manager, local government)

In the local government, the need for help with practical issues that department managers expressed, led to their resisting the change, and creating special arrangements, where communication professionals worked operatively in the departments a couple of days a week.

In the business organization, the department managers, as well as the communication professionals, appeared to positively interpret the benefits of both the relocation and reorientation of work. Nevertheless, organizational managers describe concerns they have about losing competence and taking on communicative responsibility before the change had been fully implemented. The void was gradually filled when the managers were educated on how to take responsibility for communication themselves.

Initially, I thought there were already too many people in the communication department /.../ At the same time, I thought, actually now my own resource is disappearing, what do I use instead? I had this kind of suspicion that I would not be able to get the support I needed /.../ this is about balancing between the whole and its part. And of course, one must consider both. (Production manager, business organization)

The quote illustrates that this manager acknowledges both the communicative needs

of the organization as well as the needs of the department but lacks knowledge about what communication needs the communication professionals in the central communication department actually serve.

In the case of the business organization, both managers and communication professionals had greater consistency in their understanding of the benefits of the change. . Both managers and communication professionals perceived that change would be beneficial to the organization at large and to the individual actors as well.

In both organizations, the centralization and reorientation is discursively constructed as concerns about who has the responsibility for communicating. In the business organization, the talk is about shifting communicative responsibility as something that will increase quality, efficiency, and legitimacy for all. In the local government, the department managers fear losing communicative competence, and somebody actually being in charge of and advancing matters related to communication. The communication professionals express feelings about how they are letting the departments down by not working closely with the operations, and thereby not fulfilling their obligations. In effect, this leads to communication professionals working operatively coupled to the departments and the change initiative being restrained. Regardless of what the communication professionals think about shifting communicative responsibility, the agenda of the department managers will affect the way they interpret the change. Managers from both organizations express worries about losing more individual services, since this is an institutionalized part of their operations, and by changing the orientation of communication work, a void occurs that hinders the managers from seeing the advantages of the change. According to research about organizational communication, middle managers possess a complex role in organizations. For employees, the most important leader is the one closest in rank (Johansson & Heide, 2008). Hereby, the middle managers (in this study, for example, department managers) play an important role for

the communication professionals due to their former close affiliations to the departments when working as a de-centralized function.

The discourse of intra-organizational relationships

Previous to the change, the communication professionals had tight relations with people from the departments that they worked for. The change implied that the communication professionals were expected to take on communication related tasks for any part of the organization, and hence forsake the ties to the departments. This initiative was designed to increase efficiency, quality and, in time, increase the visibility and legitimacy of the communication department as a whole. However, organizational managers in the local government, when asked about trust and legitimacy of the communication professionals, discuss how they experienced the loss of working closely with the communication professional that used to belong to their department.

I can see the benefits of the increasing accessibility [to communication professionals] /.../ but the void created by not having access to my own professional feels significant, though it is a very emotional issue. And there were those who were in favor of this, those who did not have their own resources, and who saw the opportunity in that they would gain access to skilled communication professionals. (Department manager, local government)

Thus this quote highlights the delicate nature of the issue within the organizations, the departments who had their “own” communication professional experienced a loss, while other departments gained from the change since they got access to a shared resource that they did not previously have. The change meant that the departments had to contact the communication department as a specialist function with their problems, and seek help from a

professional, rather than from “their own” professional. In that sense, communication expertise is perceived to be highly valued but also attached to the specific organizational departments and specific people.

There were some department managers, including me, that were a bit skeptical of the change. Because we thought we were doing well, our departments worked well/.../, and I thought it was important to keep communication expertise close to the department and the operations. (Department manager, local government)

Also, the communication professionals experienced these tensions. One of them explicitly expressed worries about her own role in relation to the department she used to work for.

I mean, I had worked with these people for many, many years. /.../ I have a long history with many of them. They knew they could just call me directly on their mobile. And then, having to explain that: No, I do not work like that anymore. It was challenging /.../ It is probably easier if you are new, and do not have these relationships, perhaps, to work in a completely different way. /.../ At the same time, it’s a great privilege to have this relationship with these people because then you are really close to the core problems too. You can really make a difference if you have a relationship with them. So that’s really paradoxical. A major challenge. (Communication professional, local government)

This communication professional experienced a paradoxical situation, which can be associated with what Putnam, Myers and Gailliard (2014) describe as a double bind, or a situation where a person feels trapped between two or more unreasonable alternatives.

In the business organization, the department managers do not express fear of losing competence or cutting the ties to specific communication professionals. One communication professional describes that the problem she experienced was to convince her colleagues in the communication department of this new way of working rather than convincing department managers.

I thought the most difficult thing was to convince our own group. Or the fear that existed is some people who felt; Can I actually cope with this? Can I really do it this way? Can we work this way? That was probably the most difficult part. There were also some managers, who /.../, made me feel like, how will we manage to convince these people? (Communication professional, business organization)

The change also resulted in top leadership roles for the communication executives, and the importance of being in close contact with the core operations of the organization as well as being a communication expert was emphasized. One communication executive refers to how the CEO justified the communication executive as a member of the top management team:

I can't sit there and talk only about things related to communication, because then I have no place being there. But if I can show that I can discuss rationalizations, recruitments, employee problems in the factories I have a place there, and it was the same for everyone (in the management team).
(Communication executive, business organization)

The communication executive talks about the organizational leader role as being part of a broad spectrum of responsibilities, not always related to communication (cf. Johansson

& Ottestig, 2011). This quote illustrates that professional communication knowledge is highly valued when combined with organizational knowledge.

Discussion: Organizing and disorganizing strategic communication

Before further discussing the implications of the findings, we want to detail what happened to the two organizations after the change initiatives had been implemented. The communication executive of the business organization described in a follow-up interview that along with another reorganization came a new internally recruited CEO who did not have the same perspective on communication as the former CEO, and decided not to invest in communication in the same profound way as before. The communication executive was no longer included in the top management team, and eventually left the organization. In the following period of time, several employees from the communication department also left the organization. The new organization of the communication department slowly dissolved and disorganized without the support from top management.

Similarly, in the local government organization, according to one communication professional, a reorganization officially declared as an economy measure, made the communication executive take up a departmental management position within the organization, and a new communication executive was recruited internally. Employees of the communication department were laid off, leaving a core staff of communication strategists in a central function, and some communication professionals with responsibility for two or more departments were decentralized. In turn, for some this created an untenable work situation with sick leaves as a result. Gradually, department managers hired more communication professionals, with the result that the total number of communication professionals now is larger than before the centralization.

These changes illustrate that the institutionalization process reverted and both communication departments disorganized from what was intended. The legitimacy of communication executives is a basic foundation for leading institutional change in strategic communication. However, looking beyond the crucial importance of the communication executive, we want to discuss some other empirical and theoretical contributions of how change initiatives can move in other directions than intended due to individual perspectives of the change.

The interaction of discourses in the institutionalization of strategic communication

In this section we respond to research question 3, i.e. which roles the different discourses play in the dynamic process of institutionalization of strategic communication on an organizational level. In both organizations, the reorientation towards working more strategically with communication was translated as something positive in relation to the changing times. In response to research question 1, the findings indicate that the change initiative was related to a macro discourse of organizational centralization or strategic management and a macro discourse of strategic reorientation. In the local setting of the two different organizations, the initiatives were, however, translated differently. As detailed above, in response to research question 2, these macro discourses were translated into lower level, meso discourses on communication responsibility and intra-organizational relationships, which also were embraced differently in the two organizations. So how come the organizing of the “new” strategic communication functions started to disorganize and go back to the decentralized and production-oriented way of working? We believe that the development of institutionalization of strategic change can be traced in the discourse. As general managers and communication professionals relate to the changes, the analysis of the discourse during the interviews reveals their positions and past and future actions.

In the case of the business organization, centralization is interpreted as something inevitable that the organization has to do in order to survive and something that is part of a more general discourse of organizational development. However, both communication responsibility and intra-organizational relationships are dependent on individual managers' and communication professionals' understanding of their work and the purpose of strategic communication. Thus, the actual implementation of the change is dependent on these individuals' voice and legitimacy in the organization (Reber & Berger, 2006; Johansson & Ottestig, 2011).

In the local government, centralization is translated as a top-down decision that is neither in line with the expectations and needs of the department managers, nor preferred by the communication professionals. The outcome is communication professionals working in a loosely coupled department, where the professionals sit together but still actually work closely connected to departments and specific projects. The skepticism towards the top-down decision of the local government results in an organizationally translated and adjusted solution according to a problem solving logic (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), which is eventually abandoned and reverted. Thus, the change in this organization is an example of reforms that make public sector organizations act more like business organizations in terms of, for example, branding and measurable objectives or results (Christensen & Lægreid, 2002; Eshuis & Klijn, 2012).

The translation of the reorientation of work towards the communication professionals working more strategically has some resemblance with the somewhat oversimplified perspective of the strategic/technician dichotomy (Dozier & Broom, 2006) or managerial, operational, reflexive and educational roles (Vercic, van Ruler, Butschi & Flodin, 2001) that professionals enact. The communication executives talk about how technician oriented, operational roles should be completely abandoned on behalf of strategic,

managerial, and educational roles. However, they acknowledge the presence of all roles, but see the future of their communication departments as purely dedicated to strategic, managerial, and educational work. The strategic imperative as understood by the communication executives in the study, polarizes the strategic and technician role as the good and the bad, or the right and the wrong, which puts some communication professionals in a limbo where the organization still wants their services but the communication department tells them to act and perform differently. In this way, the discourse of the interviewees, both the general managers and the communication professionals reveal the tensions they experience during the change.

Recontextualization, reinterpretation, and reframing of change affecting the institutionalization of strategic communication on an organizational level

One key question of this article concerns the ways in which discursive translations can restrain or enable change. By introducing the three concepts of recontextualization, reinterpretation, and reframing, we will address this question discussing how different translations of the change will affect the institutionalization of strategic communication.

According to Linell (2009), expressions, ideas, and messages often travel between texts and contexts and bring along some aspects but also new meaning from the original sources or contexts. The concept of recontextualization “identifies the principles according to which ‘external’ discourses (and practices) are internalized within particular organizations” (Fairclough, 2005, p. 933). Accordingly, expressions, ideas, and messages are being recontextualized as they travel to new contexts. *Recontextualization* implies some degree of alteration of meaning as content is moved from one context to another. This means that when the content of, for example, a change initiative or a political decision is moved into another context, for example a staff meeting, meaning will be altered. Hence, content can

evoke a variety of interpretations of the change depending on individual agendas, previous knowledge and backgrounds or whether an individual is personally affected by the change or not (Linell, 2009). We define this as a process of *reinterpretation* in which organizational members are trying to make sense of and share understandings about what the change implies, what the organization does well and poorly and what the problems are and how they should be resolved (Weick, 1995). Accordingly, the ways in which for example management frames a change might not simply be adopted by organizational members, but rather *reframed* in accordance with the individuals' own thoughts, reflexivity, individual and collective experiences (Chreim, 2006).

The perspective we want to highlight is that different organizational members contribute to the meaning of change initiatives. The initial meaning or essence of the change is recontextualized, reinterpreted, and reframed in a process that can influence the ways in which strategic communication institutionalizes. Research on the institutionalization of strategic communication recognizes a process where the communication function is developing towards becoming fully institutionalized within organizations and that the legitimacy of practitioners is increasing over time (cf. Swerling & Sen, 2009). However, our findings indicate that the process of institutionalization is also affected by organizationally bound contextual elements, that it is multi-directional and dependent on organizational translations of the change that are discursively constructed. Hence, strategic communication institutionalized as a collective pattern of behavior and a thought structure (Tench et al., 2009) might be valid for some organizations or in some contexts, but may not be valid on a more general level. In the cases studied in this article, recontextualization, reinterpretation, and reframing of the change highlights the importance of organizational contexts as clearly influential on the ways in which strategic communication institutionalizes. We suggest that in order to understand the mechanisms driving change in different directions, individual

translations need to be analyzed as a dialectic process of recontextualization, reinterpretation, and reframing that affects institutionalization. This study highlights that discursively constructed meso level-discourses about the meaning of the change are shaped by recontextualizations, reinterpretations, and reframings that in turn affect the ways in which strategic communication institutionalizes on the organizational level.

Further, adding to Moreno et al. (2010) who assert that the institutionalization of strategic communication varies along the lines of personal characteristics, experience, hierarchal position, age, and gender, we suggest that the organizational context at a more general level is highly influential on the ways in which strategic communication institutionalizes. In our study we see examples where organizational middle managers control the process more than the communication professionals themselves.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted at two discrete points in time. Since institutionalization processes evolve and change over time, interviews would preferably be conducted with intervals to track reactions as the change is actually taking place. This is an exploratory study and we suggest for future research to use a longitudinal approach, in order to more fully understand institutionalization of strategic communication.

Moreover, this explorative study is limited to two cases, representing one public organization and one private organization. For future studies, we suggest scholars engage in research that furthers the understanding of the specific mechanisms that govern private organizations and public organizations respectively.

Conclusions

This article explored the institutionalization of strategic communication as a dynamic interplay between macro and meso-level discourses. The findings provide three contributions to the field of strategic communication.

First, we conceive the institutionalization of strategic communication as affected by organizational level processes and mechanisms that are not always controlled by communication professionals. Meso-level discourses about organizing in general will arguably affect the institutionalization of strategic communication. The institutionalization of strategic communication is bound by organizational discourse as well as by the actions of communication practitioners and general managers.

Secondly, macro and meso-level discourses influence the ways in which change initiatives are translated and strategic communication affected on an organizational level. The institutionalization of strategic communication within organizations is affected by societal fashions or trends on how to organize or streamline organizations. Hence, the institutionalization process of strategic communication will move in time with management trends and can move in the opposite direction when certain management trends are challenged.

Third, we suggest that new ideas or practices of strategic communication are translated discursively within organizations in processes of recontextualization, reinterpretation, and reframing. Consequently, new ideas and practices of strategic communication are adjusted to organizational discourses, and organizational settings. The translation of a new idea or practice will therefore change the initial meaning of that same idea or practice. For that reason, institutionalization of strategic communication should not be reduced to a uni-directional process, but function as a dynamic interplay between discourses on different levels that moves institutionalization in multiple directions.

We believe discourse to be a fruitful theory as well as a method for further understanding the processes of institutionalization. More research dedicated to this perspective could further our understanding of strategic communication. Fundamental to discourse analysis is the concept of texts, which introduces numerous applications within strategic communication in general, and when it comes to institutionalization of strategic communication specifically. For example, meetings about change, documents about change and news texts about change can be useful objects of inquiry for understanding planned and unplanned changes of strategic communication.

One practical implication of this study is the need to further acknowledge the empirical evidence that institutionalization and change take time. We can see in this study that the impatience of the organization seeking immediate results can hinder change. Also, to firmly establish the strategy of the change broadly throughout the organization and well in advance can further increase a shared understanding of the process and the goal.

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Appendix 1. Interviews

Local government organization

	Date	Length of interview
Communication executive	12-05-2011	67 min
Manager Culture and Leisure department	13-05-2011	29 min
Manager Children and Education department	19-05-2011	47 min
Communication manager Social department	11-05-2011	54 min
Communication manager Culture and Leisure department	11-05-2011	65 min
Communication manager Children and Education department	29-01-2011	50 min
Communication manager Employment, Adult Education and Integration department	16-2-2016	26 min

Business organization

	Date	Length of interview
Communication executive	25-03-2011 11-02-2016	55 min 36 min
CEO Business unit	15-08-2011	35 min
Production manager	11-05-2011	33 min
Communication strategist	13-05-2011	40 min
Communication manager	11-05-2011	29 min