

# **Strategic Communication Found in Translation: Practices, Practitioners and Perceptions**

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**Strategic Communication Found in Translation:  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation seeks to explore how institutional, organizational and individual factors influence the development of strategic communication. The dissertation illustrates how new institutional theory can be applied to address the development of strategic communication as a process that is produced on different interrelated institutional levels. It also shows that multiple levels need to be addressed in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of strategic communication. Further, it describes how the development of strategic communication is restricted and enabled by societal and organizational discourse in processes that are not always controlled by communication professionals. The dissertation also explores how popular ideas or successful recipes for strategic communication are spread between organizations in the same field, but are adjusted or translated in order to fit organizational preconditions. The results also highlight how professionalism is understood differently by communication practitioners depending on the organizational sector they work in and how the institutional embeddedness of communication practitioners influences the ways in which practitioners commit to their occupation. Moreover, it suggests that the inhabited and perceived moral taint that is associated with communication practitioners shapes the professional discourse and hampers the development of a shared occupational identity. Finally, it is suggested that knowledge about the development of strategic communication can be found in the translations and local adaptations of new ideas and practices. Insights about the institutionalization of strategic communication might not only be found in realized structures and routines, but in micro changes that happen as the result of local circumstances.

## Svensk sammanfattning

Syftet med denna avhandling är att utforska hur institutionella, organisatoriska och individrelaterade faktorer påverkar utvecklingen av strategisk kommunikation. Avhandlingen illustrerar hur ny institutionell teori kan användas för att analysera utvecklingen av strategisk kommunikation som en process på flera sammanlänkade samhällliga nivåer. Avhandlingen belyser att flera nivåer bör analyseras parallellt för att utveckla en mer omfattande förståelse för strategisk kommunikation. Resultaten visar också hur utvecklingen av strategisk kommunikation begränsas och möjliggörs av samhällliga och organisatoriska diskurser i processer som inte alltid kontrolleras av kommunikatorerna själva. Vidare belyser avhandlingen att populära idéer eller framgångsrika recept för strategisk kommunikation sprids mellan organisationer inom samma område eller fält, men justeras eller översätts för att passa olika organisatoriska förutsättningar. Dessutom pekar resultaten på att professionalism förstås olika av kommunikatorer beroende på vilken organisatorisk sektor de arbetar inom vilket i sin tur påverkar de sätt som kommunikatorer utövar sitt yrke. Resultaten visar också att utövare inom kommunikationsområdet både uppfattas vara förknippade med – men också själva upplever – att delar av yrket är moraliskt befläckt, vilket i sin tur formar sättet man ser på och talar om yrket och hämmar utvecklingen av en gemensam yrkesidentitet. Slutligen föreslås det att kunskap om utvecklingen av strategisk kommunikation kan hittas i översättningar och lokala anpassningar av nya idéer och arbetssätt. Insikter om institutionaliseringen av strategisk kommunikation återfinns inte bara i befintliga strukturer och rutiner utan också i de mikroförändringar som sker till följd av lokala omständigheter.

## **Introduction**

Strategic Communication Practices, Practitioners and Perceptions: Found in Translation

### **Article I**

Institutionalization of communication management: A theoretical framework.

*Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 17(2), 209-227 (2012).  
(With Catrin Johansson)

### **Article II**

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

*International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Forthcoming (With Catrin Johansson)

### **Article III**

Organizational and Occupational Commitments of Communication Practitioners: Sectorial comparisons of the role of the employing organization.

*Journal of Communication Management*, Forthcoming

### **Article IV**

Pulling together and tearing apart. Tensions in the occupational branding of public relations and the management of taint.

Revision submitted to *Public Relations Inquiry*

### **Article V**

Where you lead we will follow: A longitudinal study of strategic political communication and inter-party relations in election campaigning.

Submitted to *International Journal of Press/Politics*. (With Kajsa Falasca)





## **Strategic Communication Found in Translation: Practices, Practitioners and Perceptions**

Research about strategic communication practices, practitioners and perceptions about the role strategic communication plays in society has received considerable attention and a large body of research has examined the development of the role of communication practitioners and the strategic practice of communication. As commonly suggested, strategic communication practice is institutionalizing and professionalizing (cf. Swerling & Sen 2009; Zerfass, 2009), supporting the notion that strategic communication as an occupation or as a practice is developing into a societally acknowledged and organizationally incorporated function or practice. Research within this perspective holds that there is a need for strategic communication to become institutionalized or professionalized in order to, for example, increase the societal status of practitioners, establish well-functioning routines for practice, or to find effective ways for organizations or actors to pursue their interests. Strategic communication, as well as the closely related field of public relations, are connected to this functionalist tradition which entails exploring how organizations can be more effective in their communication strategies. This tradition rests on the premise that organizations and actors have control to some extent over communication processes and that their actions are in part rational (Wehmeier, 2006).

One shortcoming of the perspectives above is the neglect of connecting the developments of strategic communication to societal processes, organizational preconditions or individual motivations. In this dissertation, I argue that research has not yet sufficiently addressed the ways in which strategic communication is shaped by and is the result of the interaction between societal developments, organizational preconditions and individual actors. This dissertation explores how strategic communication develops as a multi-faceted process characterized by interactions on societal, organizational and individual levels and bound by organizational discourse as well as by the actions of communication practitioners and general managers. It also illustrates how successful recipes for strategic communication between organizations are translated by individual actors in order to fit organizational discourses and organizational settings. This dissertation

further demonstrates that practitioners from various organizational sectors understand professionalism differently and that the inhabited and perceived moral taint of working within the communication industry interferes with the development of a shared understanding of the occupation and shapes the professionalization discourse.

In a general sense, strategic communication can be used for both good and bad purposes (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). The practice and role of strategic communication in society is debated and criticized, including furthering special interests or increasing the influence of large corporations (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). Nevertheless, the supply and demand for strategic communication ideas and recipes that can help organizations and actors pursue their interests and accomplish their goals are considerable and the market is competitive. These ideas and recipes do not emerge out of thin air, nor are they the explicit product of innovative individual actors. This dissertation considers the interaction between societal structures, organizational settings and individual actors as an explanation for the development (or institutionalization or professionalization) of strategic communication.

This dissertation attends to organizational and individual actors' translations of what strategic communication is, how it works and how it should be practiced. Whenever a new idea or recipe for strategic communication is picked up by one organization from another, or moves from one context to another, some of its original meaning gets lost, but the translation process can also create new insights about the development of strategic communication. Accordingly, the meaning of strategic communication for organizations and for individual practitioners is shaped by ideas or recipes of how organizations should work, societal expectations and the norms that guide practice.

## **Overview**

This introduction consists of five parts. First, I will address the purpose of this dissertation and the associated research questions addressed in the five articles in this dissertation. Secondly, I will provide an overview of the emerging research field of strategic communication and address some of the historical influences on the development of this field that are of interest to this dissertation. Third, I will present a theoretical foundation for addressing organizational, institutional and individual dimensions of strategic communication. Fourth, I will reflect on my scientific perspective, methodological approach and the results of the studies on a

more general level but also critically reflect on the methods I have used and the consequences of the results. Fifth, I will discuss and reflect on the contribution that the dissertation makes to strategic communication research. Finally, I will provide a brief summary of the enclosed articles.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This dissertation seeks to explore how institutional, organizational and individual factors influence the development of strategic communication. The following research questions, addressed in the five articles enclosed in this dissertation, will be used to fulfill the objectives of this dissertation.

Article 1: How can the institutionalization of strategic communication be theorized?

Article 2: What organizational level factors influence the institutionalization of strategic communication?

Article 3: What role does the organizational sector play in mediating professionalism for practitioners within the field of strategic communication?

Article 4: What role does occupational branding play in the professionalization of strategic communication?

Article 5: How do ideas and practices of strategic communication travel between organizations and develop over time?

### **Strategic communication: definition and theory**

Strategic communication research has received extensive interest in recent years and is often seen as an umbrella concept that encompasses goal directed communication activities within fields of research like public relations, marketing, management, crisis communication, public diplomacy and so forth (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014b). Strategic communication has been studied from a number of theoretical perspectives, by researchers within diverse research fields and from diverse epistemological and ontological backgrounds (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Holzhausen and Zerfass (2014) described strategic communication as an approach that opens up new fields for interdisciplinary research. Strategic communication hence includes the study of communication practices in a general sense, including those of public relations, advertising and marketing (Hallahan et al., 2007). It is however important to clarify that many of the developments within

strategic communication have emerged from public relations scholars (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014b). In a widely recognized definition, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) conceptualized strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). However, this definition is problematic since it assumes that an organization is something concrete or objective with thoughts and actions of its own which thus “reifies” the organization. Another definition of strategic communication holds that it is “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 74). This conceptualization does not limit communicative action to specific contexts or to the action of a specific group of practitioners. While the concept of a “communication agent” can refer to a person employed as a communication practitioner, it also acknowledges the agency of any person’s deliberate and purposive communication on behalf of a communicative entity. Further, the concept of a “communicative entity” (Holtzhausen, 2008) covers a broad spectrum of sectors and types of organizations. I find this conceptualization well suited for my purposes since it does not limit communicative action to specific contexts or to the action of a specific group of practitioners. This definition however views communication as enacted in the public sphere, which then excludes communication enacted in other spheres, such as for example internal communication, business to business communication or communication in business organizations. Further, strategic communication is seen as embedded within social structures which set the rules that frame interactions in and between organizations (Zerfass, 2008). The ways in which an actor pursues a mission through strategic communication is governed by societal regulations, norms and individual perceptions and attitudes. By acknowledging the fact that all actors are embedded within social structures that both enable and restrain action, new insights about the ways in which strategic communication develops can be discerned.

To identify these insights, this predominantly exploratory dissertation draws on a research tradition within institutional theory called new institutionalism or organizational institutionalism. New institutional theory offers an opportunity to address the ways in which organizations and actors are embedded in and are influenced by their environments, which leads to for example similar practices or structures of strategic

communication in organizations in the same field. This dissertation also focuses on how organizations have the capacity to interpret, translate the broader social systems that they are embedded in, which highlights the notion that organizations understand and manage institutional pressures in different ways (Suddaby, 2010). Within the field of strategic communication, this theoretical perspective has already received some attention. Several scholars within strategic communication as well as public relations suggest that institutional perspectives can provide a wider lens for understanding communication processes and can integrate more levels of analysis (Sandhu, 2009). In that sense, an institutional perspective can further highlight the ways in which social and communicative mechanisms influence the establishment of new organizational practices. Fredriksson, Pallas, and Wehmeier (2013) argued that public relations “could be analyzed as an institutionalized practice with certain set of governing mechanisms including taken-for-granted activities, rules, norms and ideas” (p. 183). According to Sandhu (2009), strategic communication research has not yet integrated institutional thought, but it “offers a detour from a rational-choice or managerial perspective and stresses the influence of institutional frameworks on organizations” (p. 73). Strategic communication can be viewed as both a practice and an academic discipline (Frandsen & Johansen, 2014) governed by rules, norms and cognitive structures (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014). The practice of strategic communication is highly situational and dependent on culture, economic, political and media systems, and organizational variables, for example (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014b). New institutionalism is an extensive research field with traditions based on the works of Meyer and Rowan (1977). The field has since developed greatly, and today is one of the most dominant approaches for understanding organizations (Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin-Andersson, 2008). Within this tradition, one main focus is to understand why organizations behave as they do and the consequences (Greenwood et al., 2008).

### *Developments in the Field*

Strategic communication research has evolved over the past years and, according to Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2014b), these developments are not to be seen as a counter reaction or a counter movement to the closely related discipline of public relations. Rather they are a way of opening up a multidisciplinary perspective for scholars within different fields of

research interested in issues involving the strategic management of communication. Furthermore, the concept of strategic communication is a “transboundary concept that captures, better than public relations does, the complex phenomenon of an organization's targeted communication processes in contemporary society” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, p. 124).

In 2007, the first issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* was published. This journal seeks to facilitate the emergence of strategic communication as a domain of study and to integrate various communication disciplines into a coherent body of knowledge. The most read as well as most cited article in this journal is an article from the first issue entitled “Defining Strategic Communication” (Hallahan et al., 2007). This journal published a special issue published in 2009 where the value of institutional theory for researching strategic communication was highlighted (Zerfass, 2009). A great deal of inspiration for the articles in this dissertation can be attributed to this special issue.

At least two more comprehensive reviews of research within the field of strategic communication have been published over the past few years. First, the *Sage Benchmarks in Communication: Strategic Communication* (Heath & Gregory, 2014) is a four-volume set in which a collection of seminal papers on strategic communication addresses definitions, key developments and the future of the field. This set of books clearly shows the multidisciplinary and theoretically diverse character of strategic communication and comprises research grounded in public relations theory, organizational theory, management literature, as well as political science and institutional theory. Article number 1 in this dissertation is included in this set of books. The *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014a) is the first comprehensive review of research that builds on this emergent body of knowledge. In one section of the book, institutional and organizational dimensions of strategic communication are addressed through institutional work, communication capital, institutional entrepreneurs, strategy and culture. These two books show a field still in its infancy, but with some more general theoretical underpinnings. First, the concept of strategy lies at the heart of the discipline. Strategy research can be found within several research fields including management research, institutional theory, organizational theory and public relations. Strategic communication can thus be seen as a point of convergence for research that focuses on the communicative aspects of strategy. The words

strategic and strategy are often negatively associated with asymmetrical top-down communication and rational decision-making (Hallahan et al., 2007). Strategy is often viewed as something that organizations have, but another perspective is that strategy is something that people do. In this dissertation strategy and strategic communication are connected to how strategies are translated and put into action. Further, the focus on how society, the public, and culture restrain and enable strategic communication directs research away from the functionalistic perspective of the role of communication as making organizations more effective.

### *Organizational, Institutional, and Individual Perspectives on Strategic Communication.*

One main assumption underlying this dissertation is that institutional, organizational and individual factors influence the development of strategic communication and it takes its point of departure mainly within new institutional and organizational theory to explore factors that influence the development of strategic communication. In this section I will define key concepts and present the theoretical foundation for this dissertation.

Professionalism and occupational identity. Strategic communication can be seen as a practice in general, but also as the practice of a specific occupational group. Research has defined specific roles and tasks that practitioners perform in different organizational and national contexts (Dozier, 1992; Dozier & Broom, 2006; Gregory, 2008; Hazelton, 2006; Pfau & Wan, 2009) as well as the prerequisites for how or under which circumstances the occupational group practices. In this vein, researchers have been interested in professional ethics (Barney & Black, 1994; Berg, 2012; Bivins, 1989; Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Edgett, 2002; Fawkes, 2007, 2012; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Lieber, 2005; Marsh, 2001; Porter, 2010; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2004), the power that the practice entails (Berger, 2005; Edwards, 2006, 2009; Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004) as well as the institutionalization of practices and practitioners (Chen, 2009; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Swerling & Sen, 2009; Valentini, 2009).

Communication practitioners belong to an occupational domain not traditionally seen as a profession per se, but that has made use of the discourse of professionalism as a framework for occupational and self-identity (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003). The label of professionalism is now

used in ever more diverse domains, and it is not only communication practitioners that set out to professionalize the occupation, not least as a strategy to manage increasingly vague and elastic work identities (Fournier, 1999). The question concerning professionalism is studied and discussed in two articles included in this dissertation: "Organizational and Occupational Commitments of Communication Practitioners" (article 3) and "Pulling Together and Tearing Apart" (Article 4). Based on the results from these articles, there are three important points about professionalism that I would like to further address. First, the discourse of professionalism is characterized by national and historical factors (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). In Sweden, the occupation was first established within the public sector (Larsson, 2005) and higher education has historically been mass media focused (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). The communication industry came into existence in the 1940s, which is much later than in for example the USA and Great Britain, but over the past few decades, the communication industry in Sweden has grown with increasing rapidity where consultants now constitute a fair share of the sector (Larsson, 2006). Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that professionalism in the Swedish communication industry is shaped by history in terms of its roots in the public sector and the educational focus on mass media. Secondly, professionalism in the communication industry needs to be addressed in light of the public's perception of the occupation. The discourse of professionalism can be drawn upon in order to increase the perception of legitimacy or status in the eyes of the public. Third, professionalism is constructed differently depending on sectorial, organizational and contextual factors. In that sense, communication practitioners construct their identities differently depending on where they work, who they work for and under which circumstances they work.

Closely connected to professionalism is the concept of a common occupational identity. While the discourse of professionalism can be dismissed as merely varnish for an occupational group attempting to increase status or legitimacy, the concept of an occupational identity can be used to address the perceived commonalities among a group of practitioners, or the way in which work is organized. A common identity implies a sense of common experiences, understandings and expertise as well as shared ways of perceiving problems and their possible solutions (Evetts, 2006). Through for example education and memberships in professional associations this shared identity is produced and reproduced (Evetts, 2006). The development of occupational identities is a research



topic within organizational theory, where occupational identity can be seen as a main mechanism for organizing work (Ashcraft, 2007). According to the work of Ashcraft and others (Ashcraft, 2007, 2012; Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam, & Sullivan, 2012), occupational identities function as carriers of narratives about what constitutes legitimate work, what tasks matter and who belongs within a specific occupation. Further, occupational identities are created in different types of locations such as for example workplaces, labor associations, regulatory agencies and popular culture. Occupational identities also span across societal, institutional and interactional levels of organizing (Ashcraft, 2007).

If professionalism within a certain occupation is assessed by some common features or values of an occupation, then occupational identity reflects a co-construction of the nature of work. Individual practitioners construct their own personal and collective selves (“who am I or who are we as communication practitioners?”) which in turn shapes the ways in which the occupation is perceived (Ashcraft, 2012). In order to secure professional privileges or to professionalize, a strategic occupational identity project works towards convincing audiences of a specific understanding of what that line of work represents (Ashcraft et al., 2012). In this dissertation, the concept of professionalism is used in two ways. First, in article 3, I discuss how professionalism is understood differently depending on the organizational context in which practitioners work. In article 4, I explore the professionalization of strategic communication as a struggle or contest over how the meaning of work is described, contested, and framed thus forming the occupational identity of communication practitioners.

Institutions and new institutional theory. The concept of an institution plays a key role in many of the theories used in this dissertation. One main assumption within institutional theory is that organizations and institutions are produced by common understandings and shared interpretations of norms that guide collective activity (Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer, & Zilber, 2010). Consequently, strategic communication does not emerge in a vacuum but is dependent on actors with specific purposes, deliberate decision-making and strategic communication programs (Sandhu, 2009). The actions of an organization, a communication manager or a politician are governed by rules, regulations, norms and cognitive structures that enforce or restrain their behavior. In other words, actors are embedded in structures that influence

and limit choices and opportunities available, and these same structures influence the actions of individuals and organizations.

An institution is defined as a social structure with a high degree of resilience (Scott, 2008) that is characterized by taken-for granted and culturally embedded understandings that specify and justify social arrangements and behaviors (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007). The rather elusive concept and structure of an institution can consist of for example people, ideas, laws, traditions or cultural traditions that govern the behavior of individuals. Institutions then are social constructions that are not created directly by human intent, but rather by expectations of a certain behavior. New institutional theory can be described as a way of analyzing the social processes through which organizational structures develop (Scott, 2008). An institution is characterized by firmly rooted rules, norms and routines that organizations and individuals conform to, and research on institutions has often emphasized that institutional forces shape organizational processes and in turn reinforce continuity and conformity (Garud et al., 2007). Apart from rules and norms, new institutionalism emphasizes the importance of the influence of cultural-cognitive factors on institutions, which means that individuals act in certain ways due to their conceptions of how things should be done. Instead of acting in line with rules or out of obligation, individuals act because of conceptions: routines are followed because they are taken for granted or they cannot see an alternative (Scott, 2008). According to Scott (2008), compliance takes place on the basis of a shared understanding and a taken-for-grantedness about how things are done. Cultural-cognitive mechanisms can lead to imitation or mimetic behavior in organizations or within institutions and behavior needs to be comprehensible, recognizable and culturally supported in order to be seen as legitimate.

An issue to be addressed concerns the stability of institutions, or how change can come about. According to the discussion above, institutions are stable over time and actors conform to existing institutional arrangements, which in turn would mean that institutions never change or new ones are never created. But new institutions are created and existing ones change over time through tensions and contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002). Within new institutional theory, there is a focus on how individuals and organizations contribute to institutional change through strategic action and innovation (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997). This research holds that organizational processes and institutions are shaped by creative entrepreneurial forces that bring about

change. Researchers are interested in how processes are governed by both continuity and change at the same time and these processes can be influenced strategically by creative institutional entrepreneurial forces (Garud et al., 2007). This theoretical dilemma is related to “the paradox of embedded agency,” which draws attention to how actors are embedded within institutional structures at the same time as the institutional world is a humanly produced and constructed reality (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009). According to research about institutional entrepreneurship, actors can change institutions when they for example experience contradictions in their environment (Seo & Creed, 2002) or when an actor has sufficient resources, a central position within the field of social capital. Based on the results of this dissertation, I however highlight how the practice of strategic communication evolves gradually and in relation to the institutional world. Change processes are more restricted and influenced by gradual institutional change that is translated by actors into different contexts, rather than characterized by the strategic influence of creative institutional entrepreneurs. Institutional work, defined as “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009, p. 1) is an example of such a focus for institutional studies of organizations. Institutional work attends to practice and processes more closely than to outcomes. Moreover, attention is placed on how institutionalization and institutional change is enacted in the everyday life of individuals and organizations (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Both traditional institutional theory and institutional work consider all action as embedded in institutional structures (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009), but institutional work views the relation between agency and institutions as a permanently ongoing dialectic interaction in which actors reflect on and strategically operate within the institutional context in which they are embedded (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013), thus organizations are neither being dominated by their institutional arrangement nor are able to dramatically change institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Institutionalization of strategic communication. The concept of institutionalization is used in this dissertation in order to address the assumed ongoing process of establishing strategic communication as a distinct social property or state (Jepperson, 1991). In a very broad sense, institutionalization is the process through which a social order or pattern becomes accepted as a social “fact” (Zucker, 1983). If an institution

represents a social order or pattern that has already attained a certain state or property, institutionalization refers to the process where this state or property is attained (Jepperson, 1991). Whether to consider strategic communication as an institutionalized practice or an institution is however related to the context where we ask that question. For example, strategic communication might be considered as an institution by the professional associations that represent practitioners, but not among society in general.

Some research within the field of strategic communication has sought evidence of the ongoing institutionalization of strategic communication (cf. Swerling & Sen, 2009; Tench, Verhoeven & Zeffass, 2009). The results from a survey of European communication practitioners showed that strategic communication is institutionalized as a collective pattern of behavior and as a thought structure that links communication to decision-making and strategic planning (Tench et al., 2009). In article 1 "Institutionalization of Communication Management" (Grandien & Johansson, 2012), we discuss institutionalization as a process influenced by factors from societal, field, organizational and individual levels. I will not challenge the fact that patterns of strategic communication practices have collective elements or that in some contexts communication practices have achieved both status and legitimacy. I however believe that some assumptions underlying this perspective of strategic communication need to be further questioned and discussed. Strategic communication is defined by institutional(ized) norms of how management or leadership should work, of how an organization should be structured, of the influence of technology in a sense that it provides an "organizational recipe" that organizations translate into practice (Kjeldsen, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Røvik, 2008). In that sense, the institutionalization of strategic communication is bound by societal developments and trends that are translated in different cultural, sectorial and organizational contexts. This perspective is also connected to the argument that institutionalization is not the result of individual action. Institutionalized social patterns are linked to other institutional practices that constitute a social system, and institutionalized practices require little action for their sustenance since they are the result of routine reproductive procedures (Jepperson, 1991). For the institutionalization of strategic communication, this implies that the ways strategic communication develops and is institutionalized in different contexts and organizations are highly dependent on other supporting and reproducing

practices. If upholding practices of strategic communication is dependent on a large degree of mobilization and intervention for the sustenance, it might suggest that this is not an institutionalized pattern in itself. In the articles "Where You Lead, We will Follow" and "Organizing and Disorganizing Strategic Communication" included in this dissertation, we discuss the relationship between social structures and action on the institutionalization of strategic communication. One conclusion is that strategic communication practices are sustained and reinforced by social structures. New ideas and practices of strategic communication are introduced by individual and collective actors, and the employment of these ideas and practices depend on mobilization or intervention from these actors.

Intra-organizational dynamics and processes – Scandinavian institutionalism. In order to address the question of what causes organizations to deviate from the mainstream practice of strategic communication, or how organizational responses can lead to institutional change, I have used theories from an emerging field within institutional theory called Scandinavian institutionalism. In contrast to institutional theory that emphasizes processes of isomorphism and the primacy of social structures, Scandinavian institutionalism focuses on organizational variation and distinctiveness and deals with how organizations respond to institutional pressures and how these pressures influence organizational practice (Boxenbaum & Pederson, 2009). Scandinavian institutionalism is an approach within the new institutional theory, first coined by Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) in the book *Translating Organizational Change*. According to Boxenbaum and Pedersen (2009), at least two lines of research can be identified within Scandinavian institutionalism: loose coupling and sense-making/translation. The concept of loose coupling in this context refers to organizations where actors couple and decouple organizational elements and activities in order to best fit the situation. Examples of organizational elements can be formal structure, policies, managerial decisions, external communication and practices (Boxenbaum & Pederson, 2009). In tightly coupled organizations, the coordination of activities, departments and employees is done according to a central strategy. One of the main contributors to the literature on loose coupling is Karl Weick, who writes about how loose coupling makes it possible for ontologically different entities to exist and act without shattering (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). Weick

argued that loosely coupled systems can preserve for example identity and uniqueness, and then also create more and new solutions compared to a tightly coupled system (Weick, 1976). Secondly, sense-making and translation also take inspiration from Weick's work (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The main point of departure within this perspective is that ideas or practices can be diffused with one label, but when implemented in different organizational contexts the actual meaning of that idea or practice changes. Within Scandinavian institutionalism, this process is also referred to as translation: ideas and practices undergo changes every time they are applied in a new organizational context since meaning is created in relation to other elements in the organizational context. This process occurs whenever a practice or idea travels to a new context, and translation starts when an organization views an idea as promising for solving an organizational problem (Boxenbaum & Pederson, 2009; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). According to Wæraas and Nielsen (2016), a translation perspective is used by scholars coming mainly from three different theoretical traditions: institutional theory, actor-network theory and knowledge management; each perspective emphasizes different aspects of translations. The translation perspective within institutional theory is inspired by actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005), where the concept of translation is used to describe how a network is formed in a process that involves negotiation among both human and material actors, where the outcome is aligned interests (Callon, 1986). Scandinavian institutionalism however holds that what may seem like differentiations across organizations may in the end turn out to be different variations of the same idea or practice that have been translated in different organizational contexts. In this line of argument, Sahlin-Andersson (1996) proposed that there is little point in making a strict distinction between processes of imitation and innovation because imitation cannot happen without translations that have some innovative aspects. Furthermore, innovation cannot happen without imitation since there needs to be a reference to something that already exists and how this is translated to a new circumstance. Scandinavian institutionalism is focused on organizational processes and research usually has a qualitative approach. This intensive and process oriented approach however displays a weakness when it comes to how the actors' translations are embedded in social structures and systemically conditioned in terms of the positioning in the social system, resource

dependencies and power relations, for example (Becker-Ritterspach, 2006).

Within the scope of this dissertation, Scandinavian institutionalism highlights the ways in which knowledge about strategic communication is transferable between organizational contexts through the objectification of ideas and practices. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) held that knowledge that is objectified can travel between contexts without the actors who carry it, but tacit knowledge and not yet objectified knowledge can only travel via humans. In a sense, this encompasses the expanding and professionalizing field of strategic communication, where practical knowledge and professionalism to a large extent are carried out by individuals, since there is for example no consistent knowledgebase or rules of practice. New ideas and practices of strategic communication are spread through interaction or knowledge exchange between humans, more than by objectified templates. Also, the organizational contexts where strategic communication is practiced vary extensively, which makes the objectification of knowledge thus very complicated and exposed to major elements of translation and editing. In that sense, Scandinavian institutionalism views every translation as unique and leading to heterogeneity within organizational fields. Recent developments within Scandinavian institutionalism however have focused on homogeneity as the outcomes of translation processes, emphasizing that translations to local contexts vary, but translations also share some regularities and patterns or homogenizing forces (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016).

The translation of strategic communication recipes. In this dissertation I sought to further discuss how the translation and recipe metaphors provide a lens to explore the ways in which strategic communication ideas and practices develop as a result of a powerful stream of contemporary ideas of thinking about organization and leadership. One conclusion from this dissertation is that communication practitioners are not always understood and appreciated in the way they desire and attempts to change the approach to strategic communication within organizations and in the media has proven difficult. Strategic communication ideas and recipes are derived from institutional levels in society and translated to organizational settings. Whether these recipes come to be accepted is hence connected to the accomplishment of a translator – an individual who interprets the recipe. By highlighting a translation perspective, I suggest that the ways in which the meaning of strategic communication is

translated can be important for its accommodation to organizational processes and furthering the understanding of the role of strategic communication in society. Article number 2 shows that the introduction of new ways of working strategically as well as the centralization of the communication departments fell through partly because of the failure to accommodate and align these new ways of working with existing organizational processes. The results thus highlights the need for translator skills among communication practitioners in order to adjust and align strategic communication recipes with organizational preconditions.

I suggest that practices of strategic communication are derived from macro trends and recipes for organizations, which demonstrates why the same recipes for strategic communication tend to surface about the same time in different organizations. An institutionalized organizational recipe is according to Røvik (2000) a legitimate way for how parts of an organization should be designed. Concepts such as balanced scorecard, lean management, and branding are examples of institutionalized organization recipes. Røvik (2008) discussed how widespread and popular organization recipes characterize the design of today's organizations. By "institutionalized", Røvik (2002) described that the recipe is perceived and talked about as the efficient, effective, modern or even the natural way to organize (Røvik, 2000). According to Røvik (2008), one main trend in contemporary organizational thinking relates to an interest in reputation management, which entails, and is reinforced by, an increasing demand for and the professionalization of communication practitioners. Accordingly, societal trends that contain recipes for contemporary strategic communication thinking are adapted by organizations in order to mirror institutionalized norms, values and beliefs that prevail in the environment. When a certain practice, like a recipe for strategic communication, is understood as a distinct field of activity within organizations, professionalization occurs and is reinforced by networks and arenas, such as for example professional associations, that tie people within the same field of work together (Røvik, 2008).

The translation and implementation of organizational recipes is often characterized by resistance and conflict that activates and challenges actors who have an interest in preserving existing arrangements and solutions (Røvik, 2008). Translation is consequently not a rational process, but influenced by special interests, power games, negotiations and conflict. The competence of the translator of organizational recipes thus



become especially important. When considering communication practitioners as translators of strategic communication recipes, occupational identity issues can be extended by involving their skills and capacities as translators. All organizations are different, and the transfer of ideas and recipes between different organizational contexts requires thorough knowledge about the specific context and how to transform the ideas and recipes in order for them to fit the context. Translator competence (or the lack thereof) for strategic communication recipes are accordingly important both as a way of understanding strategic communication as a social phenomenon but also for advancing the practice.

### **Scientific Theory Perspective, Method and Material**

Strategic communication research is characterized by its multidisciplinary approach to issues involving the strategic management of communication. The multi-disciplinary orientation of strategic communication entails both great opportunities but also complexities in terms of philosophical, theoretical and methodological underpinnings. This dissertation has been a process of both solving puzzles and understanding mysteries. Some research is similar to arranging all the pieces of a puzzle in the right order (Treverton, 2003) by finding facts, collecting information and solving a problem with a quantifiable answer. Research is also about mysteries: exploring unstructured already available information and putting it together in a way that makes the most sense. A mystery is however rarely solved due to high levels of uncertainty but patterns are discovered that can help us make better sense of the information already at hand. One philosophical assumption in this dissertation is that social structures enable and constrain human agency and that human agency produces and reproduces social structures (Layder, 1993). Accordingly, communication practitioners and strategic communication play different social and cultural roles that are enacted through interactions between people. These roles or practices are not static but emerge in processes and are shaped by many factors such as traditions, values, working conditions, organizational conditions and culture. I thus recognize that the social reality as we know it through research, the media, reports, etc., is largely socially constructed, and influenced by power relations, discourses, and language and thus fallible.

The five different articles in this dissertation are pieces in this puzzle and this introduction is a way of making sense of the information I have

at hand and to analyze the information in a broader perspective, or an attempt at connecting the dots with the pieces of information contained in this thesis. Since this is a compilation thesis, the individual articles have a narrower scope and purpose but they each provide knowledge that essentially say something about the the institutional, organizational and individual factors that influence the development of strategic communication.

Article number 1 is a conceptual article that explores the applicability of institutional theory for understanding strategic communication (or communication management). This article was written in the initial stages of my doctoral studies and should not be understood as a theoretical framework for the dissertation. The view on institutionalization and communication has been expanding during my time as a doctoral student. In this article, we propose a theoretical framework for analyzing strategic communication on different levels. This article consists of a literature review and a compilation of factors that influence the institutionalization process. These factors were attributed to three main theoretical areas and four different levels of analysis, using institutional theory as a guiding framework. The theoretical areas and analysis levels were proposed as mutually interdependent, were compiled in a theoretical framework and illustrated in a model.

Article number 2 is based on a discourse analysis of interviews with communication practitioners and managers within two different organizations in order to analyze the reorientation and reorganization of work. The interviews were collected in a research project led by my supervisor at the department. I participated in the project and wrote a book chapter about communication departments and their role in change management. After the project was completed, more interviews were conducted and another organization was included in order to address how organizations seek to work increasingly with strategic communication and my co-author and I conducted additional follow-up interviews in 2016. The interviews were conducted subsequently to the change and hence reflect discursive constructions of what took place. These discursive constructions of what happened in the past can be seen as the ways in which individuals produce and reproduce social structures that in turn enable and constrain action. Narratives form the discourses about strategic communication which in turn forms the ways in which strategic communication is practiced and organized.

Article number 3 is a quantitative study based on a survey of members of the Swedish Association of Communication Professionals. In this article, I use both factor analysis and regression analysis to explore correlations between different types of organizations and the ways in which communication practitioners commit to their occupation. One methodological strength of this article is the relatively high response rate of approximately 50%. The sample, however, is not without its limitations. First, it was difficult to assess if the composition of the sample was representative of the communication industry in Sweden. About 80% of the respondents were women, which reflects the composition of the association, where 80% of the members are female. This can however be compared to the fact that in the 1990s, there were approximately 50/50 men and women in the association. Second, there was an underrepresentation of members of the associations that work within the consultancy sector which clearly prevents generalization. One other methodological reflection is that the underlying assumption that practitioners identify or commit more or less to their occupation or to their organization does not take into consideration the fact that practitioners frequently move between organizations or organizational sectors.

Article 4 uses a qualitative content analysis to explore the ways in which communication practitioners in Sweden describe themselves in op-eds in different media outlets. The premise of the article is that communication practitioners often are portrayed in unflattering ways, in some cases due to bad practice or the suspicion of bad practice. The discourse of the communication practitioner as dealing with "dirty tasks" is reinforced over and over again in the media. A counter discourse is however present in terms of the ways in which professional associations, educational institutions and practitioners themselves want strategic communication to be understood as an ethical and professional practice. One outlet for this counter discourse can be in op-eds, where representatives get to address the issues they feel are important in their own words. This approach can be criticized since the op-eds reflect the logic of the market, where individual actors, such as communication consultants, see this as an opportunity to promote their own practice. On the other hand, the overrepresentation of communication consultants in the op-ed material also supports the notion that certain roles within the occupation are more morally stigmatized than others and hence in need of further efforts to brand the practice. Nevertheless, the article analyzes

nearly 100 op-eds and discerns themes that recur over time in terms of topics that are discussed. The op-eds symbolize the production and reproduction of social structures, but in which individual actors attempt to influence the direction of the development.

Article number 5 is a qualitative study of interviews with party secretaries of Swedish political parties represented in the Swedish government. Colleagues at the department conducted interviews subsequent to elections with party secretaries, starting in 2002. The interviews are broad in terms of questions asked and parts of the material have been used by colleagues in for example books evaluating each election. In the case of this article, my co-author and I however saw the opportunity to use the interviews to analyze the development of strategic communication over time, in the election context. One problem with this material is that the questions asked were not specifically designed to assess the development of strategic communication ideas and practices, but, as we experienced, the material is very rich and appropriate for this empirical question. One other disadvantage with this methodological approach is that the interviews also reflect how each party secretary perceives the party as a winner or a loser in the election. The interviews were conducted shortly after the elections, and the results thus also reflect different unprocessed explanations for winning or losing the election. Further, the interview as a method might be seen as a disadvantage in this context since it reflects the viewpoints of one person, in this case a party secretary, and not the whole party. The party secretary is however an appropriate person to interview in this context since he or she is ultimately responsible for the planning and execution of the election campaign.

### **Contribution to Strategic Communication Research**

On a general level, this dissertation contributes knowledge about how institutional, organizational and individual factors influence the development of strategic communication practices, practitioners and perspectives. The dissertation also highlights how strategic communications develop as a process where different translations of ideas and practices contribute to both organizational homogeneity and heterogeneity. More specifically, the results of this dissertation contribute to strategic communication research in five ways. First, it illustrates how new institutional theory can be applied to address the development of strategic communication as a process that is produced on different

interrelated institutional levels. It also shows that multiple levels need to be addressed in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of strategic communication. Secondly, it describes how the development of strategic communication is restricted and enabled by societal and organizational discourse in processes that are not always controlled by communication professionals. Third, it shows that popular ideas or successful recipes for strategic communication are spread between organizations in the same field, but are adjusted or translated in order to fit organizational preconditions. Fourth, it reveals how professionalism is understood differently by communication practitioners depending on the organizational sector they work in and how the institutional embeddedness of communication practitioners influences the ways in which practitioners commit to their occupation. Fifth, it suggests that the inhabited and perceived moral taint that is associated with communication practitioners shapes the professional discourse and hampers the development of a shared occupational identity.

One final reflection about the contribution to research is that the development of strategic communication can be seen as an incremental process where individual actors interact with the outside world and broader societal rules and resources, at the same time as they adjust and accommodate new ideas, experiences in the local context. Accordingly, organizations are seen both as “quasi-stable structures and as sites of human action in which, through the ongoing agency of organizational members, organization emerges” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 580). Returning to the title of this dissertation, I argue that knowledge about the development of strategic communication can be found in the translations and local adaptations of new ideas and practices. Insights about the institutionalization of strategic communication might not only be found in realized structures and routines, but in micro changes that happen as the result of local circumstances.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Writing this dissertation has been a journey as revealed in the different articles. The articles play out in different organizational contexts and different methods have been used to answer the research questions. They are however tied together by an institutional and organizational approach for different cases of strategic communication and contribute original perspectives on different factors that add to the knowledge about the

development of strategic communication practices, practitioners and perceptions.

The empirical material for all studies in this dissertation were limited to the case of Sweden. Future research should include and compare these results with other national contexts and institutional structures that are different from those in Sweden. Also, comparative research can shed more light on the origin or nature of national differences in the development of strategic communication. Another limitation of the studies in this dissertation was only using research methods to assess individual perceptions, self-assessments and narratives. Future research could apply observational and shadowing methods in order to gain a richer understanding of individual motivation and to capture what individuals do and not only what they say they do.

Results from article number 2 showed that the centralization of the communication function and the reorientation towards working more strategically did not work out since it was difficult to integrate into practice. The results also showed that communication practitioners and organizational leaders experienced that the distance created between them hindered their work. For future studies it would be interesting to investigate organizations with a centralized strategic communication department in order to find out whether or how this distance can be overcome.

In article number 4, I investigated strategic communication as a morally tainted occupation and as an example of dirty work. Exploring this question with different methods and materials would shed more light on their perception of work as morally tainted and how they deal with the stigma associated with dirty work.

For future research I also suggest that the translation and recipe metaphors can be further explored when it comes to strategic communication. Tracing the origin of popular strategic communication recipes will shed more light on the mechanisms that influence the development of strategic communication. I also suggest that research should focus on the ways in which individual actors translate strategic communication recipes. This can be accomplished by investigating public talks or courses held by practitioners or popular books written by practitioners. Also, I suggest further studying the ways in which new ideas or recipes of strategic communication are localized to organizations. When for example a new way of working is introduced, observational and ethnographical studies of the translations that organizations make to

a recipe would contribute knowledge about how organizational level processes influence the development of strategic communication.

Further, the results from this dissertation highlighted that not all local adaptations of new ideas and practices become institutionalized. For future research, attention could be devoted to things that do not become institutionalized in order to not miss the smaller changes that happen within organizations (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Also, a focus on what is going on in organizations can expand our knowledge about how translations, adaptations and local adjustments affect the gradual development of strategic communication.

## **Article Summaries**

### *Article 1: Institutionalization of Communication Management: A Theoretical Framework.*

This article explored the development and expansion of the communication management function in organizations in relation to the concept of institutionalization. The article conceptualized institutionalization of communication management as a process and developed a theoretical framework that integrated important factors that influence and regulate this process. A literature review resulted in a number of factors potentially influencing the institutionalization process. These factors were attributed to three main theoretical areas and four different levels of analysis, using institutional theory as a guiding framework. The three main areas were: organizational structure, social capital, and perceptions of the profession; and the four levels of analysis were: the societal, the organizational field, the organizational and the individual levels. The article contributes to the study of institutionalization of communication management in organizations by providing a theoretical framework, which can be used to further investigate the development of the communication function and the role of communication executives and communication managers in organizations.

### *Article 2: Organizing and Disorganizing Strategic Communication: Discursive Institutional Change Dynamics in Two Communication Departments.*

This article explored 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. The article showed that the institutionalization of strategic communication is influenced by organizational level processes and mechanisms that are not always controlled by communication professionals. The institutionalization of strategic communication is bound by organizational discourse as well as by the actions of communication practitioners and general managers. The article also showed that macro- and meso-level discourses influence the ways in which change initiatives are translated and strategic communication are influenced on an organizational level. Hence, the institutionalization process of strategic communication will move over time with management trends and can move in the opposite direction when certain trends are challenged. We also 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.

*Article 3: Organizational and Professional Commitments of Public Relations Professionals: Sectorial Comparisons of the Role of the Employing Organization.*

This study investigated public relations professionals' commitments across different organizational sectors to map patterns of professionalism. Using data collected from a survey of public relations professionals in Sweden, this study measured expressed commitments to the profession, the employing organization and to clients. The findings pointed toward the significance of organizational sectorial belonging on how public relations professionals perceive commitments to the profession, the employing organization and to the clients. In sectors where market-orientation was high, high commitment to the employing organizations was manifest and in sectors with a tradition of service to the public, commitment to the profession was more apparent. The findings reinforced the institutional embeddedness of public relations professionals and illustrated how the notion of professionalism is understood differently across organizational sectors.



*Article 4: Pulling Together and Tearing Apart – The Occupational Branding of Public Relations and the Management of Tainted Work*

This article is a critical exploration of the professionalization of public relations as a struggle or contest over the meaning of work (Ashcraft, 2012; Ashcraft, et al., 2012) exploring the driving forces behind the long-standing professional project (Larson, 1979) of public relations. The article used the concepts of “dirty work” (Hughes, 1951, 1958, 1962) and “occupational branding” (Ashcraft et al., 2012) to address the relation between the role actually performed, normative ideals, and the image of the occupation. The article analyzed op-eds authored by public relations practitioners, scholars, and representatives from professional organizations in newspapers and trade media in order to explore the ways in which the meaning of public relations work was described, contested, and framed, and, consequently, the occupational brand of public relations was formed.

*Article 5: Where You Lead We will Follow: A Longitudinal Study of Strategic Political Communication and Inter-Party Relations in Election Campaigning.*

This article explored the importance of party agency and inter-party influence for the development of strategic political communication in election campaigning. The empirical material of this study covered the 2002, 2006, 2010 Swedish national election campaigns. The different ways in which political parties handled environmental changes and challenges they faced were often seen as a process of adaptation where political parties were under pressure to adapt in order to keep up with developments because it can render strategic advantages. Hence, research has predominantly focused on explaining developments of strategic political communication as shaped by macro environmental factors in processes of adoption. However, political parties do not operate in a vacuum and have to relate to meso- and micro environmental factors as well when developing and conducting election campaigns. Nevertheless, there is little research that focuses on if and how party level and inter-party level factors influence the development of strategic political communication. In other words, we know little about if and how political parties reflect on and strategically operate within the institutional context that they are embedded in.

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