

Strategic communication practices, practitioners and perceptions: Lost and found in translation

Christina Grandien

Abstract

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 covers the developments of the role of communication practitioners and the strategic practice of communication. It is commonly suggested that the practice of strategic communication is institutionalizing and professionalizing (cf. Swerling & Sen 2009; Zerfass, 2009) which vouches the fact 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 to professionalize in order to for example increase the societal status of practitioners, establish well functioning routines for practicing, or to find effective ways for organizations or actors to pursue their interests with the help of strategic communication. Strategic communication, as well as the antecedent field of public relations, are connected to this functionalist tradition which involves exploring how organizations can be more effective in their communication strategies. This tradition is linked to the premise that organizations and actors have some extent of control over communication processes and that their actions are in part rational. (Wehmeier, 2006).

One shortcoming of the perspectives described above is that they attach little attention to 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 as the result of the interaction between societal developments, organizational preconditions and individual actors. This dissertation shows that strategic communication develops in a process that is characterized by interaction 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 and that successful recipes for strategic communication spread between organization and are translated in order to fit organizational discourses and organizational settings. The dissertation further demonstrates that practitioners understand professionalism differently depending on which organizational sector they work within and that the inhabited and perceived moral taint that working within the communication industry entails 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 good and bad purposes (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012) and the practice and role of strategic communication in society is debated and criticized on the account of for example 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

pursuing their interests and accomplishing their goals is considerable and the market is competitive. This dissertation however highlights that these ideas and recipes do not come into existence out of nowhere, nor are they the explicit result of the ambitions 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 the translations that organizational and individual actors make 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.