
Moving forward through the mist: *Reimagining strategic communication in the digital age*

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Despite integrating theories from multiple disciplines to expand its knowledge base, strategic communication, interchangeably called public relations, corporate communication or communication management, continues to face an identity problem. In the very first journal dedicated to this field, the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic and Sriramesh (2007) defined “strategic communication” as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (p. 3). Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) extended this concept to cover a range of contexts where set goals (e.g. business growth, reputation) are pursued, including for-profits, non-profits, government, activism, sports and entertainment. Nonetheless, the mainstream strategic communication literature has been criticised for three interrelated deficiencies. Firstly, its management discourse and organisation-centricity perpetuate narrow elite interest as a top priority and “control” as a “troublesome issue” (Murphy, 2011, p. 3). Secondly, the stabilised organisational *interest* is reinforced by a predominant research focus on the organisational *site*, especially large corporations, with poor attention to publics, communities and wider societies (Smith, 2010). The third resulting deficiency lies in the field’s lack of explanatory power in the informal, and sometimes discursive, role of strategic communication outside the ‘organisational box’ but embedded in everyday practice.

Ever-changing digital technologies and social media proliferation, ranging from big data, crowd-sourcing, mobile apps and social networking sites (SNS), have not only transformed the environment where strategic communication is practised, but also require a re-imagination of robust theory building. In the era of digital and social media, the traditional top-down, well-planned ‘command-and-

control’ (Hemp & Stewart, 2004) approach to strategy is no longer viable or acceptable. Instead, strategy should be conceived of as an emerging phenomenon which largely depends on circumstances. To name a few, King’s (2009) ‘emergent strategy’ (strategies arising from interaction between audience, contexts and discursive patterns), Falkheimer and Heide’s (2011, May) ‘participatory strategy’ (strategies out of public participation), and Murphy’s (2011) ‘networked strategy’ (forming strategies through network analysis) are among typical attempts to refute the ‘control’ discourse, and redefine strategic communication to adapt to the new digital and social media environment.

A further overview of recent scholarly research reveals four patterns that situate strategic communication in the digital age at a crossroad, each with a different vision of future development. One prevailing theme is *cyber optimism*, which portrays a bright picture of strategic communication advanced by various digital technologies offering immediacy, openness and interactivity. These digital features are believed to contribute to the building of public sphere and democratisation of societies (van Osch & Coursaris, 2014). Another popular view is *technology determinism*, which positions digital and social media as cost-effective and key drivers to organisational success and societal progress. Those who possess and master the latest technologies are bound to thrive in the globalised competitive world (Harkaway, 2012). The third noticeable trend is termed by Formenti as *digital capitalism* (as cited in Valentini, 2015), and reflects contemporary strategic communication’s tendency to exploit or colonise digital and social platforms for commercial purpose and profit making. A final emerging sign is the postmodern criticism *Internet dystopia* (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt,

2015), which belies the optimistic narrative and shines a light on how technologies, if dominated by well-resourced strategic communicators, could lead to destructive social outcomes such as the digital divide, imperialism, and disillusion of a truly participative public sphere.

The prospect of strategic communication in the digital age is, to continue Heath's (2006) analogy, surrounded by a thick mist, given the many uncertainties and risks as well as opportunities afforded by rapidly changing technologies. In an attempt to identify markers in this mist, this special issue of *Strategic Communication in the Digital Age* invited scholars to re-examine and re-imagine strategic communication theories, practices and research in diverse contexts, at multiple levels, and from different perspectives. At the centre of our guiding critical reflection and philosophical inquiry is: what does it mean to be 'strategic' in the digital age, and to whom should strategic communication add value? The nine articles collected in this edition are selected from the papers presented at the 2016 International Public Relations and Advertising (PRAD) Conference in Wellington, New Zealand where scholars from different parts of the world had a fruitful discussion of the theme. Taken individually, each article tackles a focal issue of strategic communication and tells a uniquely interesting story; together, they form a mosaic of interconnecting ideas, identify areas of common concern, and collectively shed light on future research directions, innovation in practice, and policy making.

Jim Macnamara uses a space metaphor in his article *Illuminating and addressing two 'black holes' in public communication* to point out two flaws inherent in most strategic communication practices. Based on a two year, three-country study of 36 organisations in the UK, US, and Australia, he identifies one 'black hole' as the lack of listening by many organisations, without which public voices disappear without trace. This implosion of energy and pent up forces could lead to destructive outcomes. The other 'black hole' is a narrowly defined, organisation-centric strategic communication that centres on fulfilling organisational interests. In response,

Macnamara proposes a new framework, an 'Architecture of Listening', supported by culture, policy, politics, systems, technologies, resources, skills and articulation of voices, to counterbalance the 'Architecture of Speaking' (e.g. publicity, promotion, advertisements) that dominates contemporary online spaces. He also argues that an Architecture of Listening helps realise normative strategic communication theories such as two-way communication, dialogue, and engagement.

In contrast to the large, formal organisations in Macnamara's study, **Susan Fontaine's** *Small business, shifting boundaries: A case study of strategic communication in the digital age* examines entrepreneurial strategic communication and a small organisation's half-life at a New Zealand eco-driven fashion label, Starfish. Her findings present a fresh understanding that, in addition to established and professionalised practice in formal corporate settings, entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) might also enact strategic communication in an informal, instinct-based, and socially responsible way. Through documenting the existence of Starfish's half-life, she further argues that the increasingly volatile and fast-changing digital technologies push the traditional clearly defined organisational boundaries into new, shifting territory. The digital age provides the ideal timing to extend strategic communication scholarship from a fixed corporate managerial view, to encompass a broader range of entrepreneurial and/or small business contexts.

In her study *Managing social media for strategic communication in a New Zealand university: Implications from a case study*, **Jenny Hou** shares Macnamara and Fontaine's concern with organisational centricity and dominant corporate interests. Hou investigates how a non-profit university implements strategic communication on social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) to address the tension between marketing imperatives and social mission in the wake of commercialisation of higher education. She reports that, although communication professionals tend to interpret strategic communication in line with normative theories (e.g. engagement, audience-oriented), gaps

exist in practice, with marketing dominance online, one-way content production, and restricted public interaction. Hence, she cautions strategic communicators to be aware of the fundamental clash between the promotional tendency of online communication and the open, participatory social media norms. To reconstruct and advance strategic communication practice in digital space, it is essential to change the communication starting point from organisational aims to social media culture.

While the previous three articles focus on illustrating strategic communication from a communicator's perspective (e.g. large organisations, entrepreneurs, tertiary education institutions), **Catherine Archer** and **Paul Harrigan**'s *Prosumers with passion: Learning what motivates bloggers as digital influencer stakeholders* offers an interesting narrative of how strategic communicators should deal with one important digital public – mum bloggers. Archer and Harrigan invoke the term 'prosumers' to describe the dual identity of mum bloggers, who are both vulnerable consumers of maternal and infant products and empowered producers, whose single blog post could boost or defeat a brand. They reveal six motivations of Australian mum blogging, with moneymaking, through paid posts, brand ambassadorships and sponsorship deals, appearing as a major reason. This finding reveals the colonisation of commercialism in blogging spaces instead of digital democratisation as touted by cyber optimists. Archer and Harrigan's research provides useful implications for digital influencer strategists to better serve not only big brands but also paradoxical vulnerable and empowered prosumers as a whole.

Catherine Strong and **Norman Zafra**'s *Natural disaster strategic communication: Drone, data and backpack journalism trends* adds additional insight into how strategic communicators should build relationships with another important public – digital journalists – for effective media relations in natural disasters. Using the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines as an ethnographic case study, they summarise three emerging and technology-driven trends in digital reporting: 1)

backpack technology (using light digital equipment to report and humanise a disaster story; 2) drone cameras (using pilotless aerial cameras to video a disaster); and 3) data infographics (e.g. images, figures, statistics). Accordingly, the authors urge both government and non-government communicators to recognise the impacts of emerging reporting technologies, and deftly address the needs of new style journalists by providing up-to-date information, adequate facilities and policy briefings. Strong and Zafra claim that only by cooperating with digital journalists can strategic communicators achieve successful crisis communication to keep global publics informed and mobilise foreign agencies and international aid in natural disasters.

To keep abreast of the latest industrial demands of practitioners' digital competencies, articles by both **Katharina Wolf** and **Catherine Archer**, and **Donald Alexander** discuss strategic communication education in a digital time. Reporting from a student's perspective, Wolf and Archer's *Teaching strategic communication in precarious times: First-hand insights into a digital, global learning experience* documents a global communication project where students from 15 different universities, across six continents, collaborate in multinational, cross-cultural virtual teams to pitch a strategic communication plan to an international real-life client. Wolf and Archer highlight the emergence of the 'Precariat' – a new social class consisting of (often) well-educated young people, who face career uncertainties and insecure workplaces as the 'new normal' due to globalisation and the rise of the digital workplace. In response to the increasingly challenging employment market, higher education institutions need to embed global learning experience in curriculums to equip students with soft/generic skills, while the individual learner's responsibility is to embrace the digital opportunities, address skill gaps, take charge of their own 'career narrative', and venture beyond the limitation of Precariats.

From the educator and academy's perspective, **Donald Alexander**'s *What digital skills are required by future public relations practitioners and can the academy deliver*

them? is a timely inquiry to address the divide between the purpose of strategic communication education and the needs of industry practice. Through reporting on a final-year student study tour of seven public relations agencies and a major bank's communication group in Sydney, Alexander highlights the significant trend toward digital as a core element across all public relations subjects. Beyond providing technical training, as he suggests, strategic communication educators should also aim to introduce the philosophical foundation, ethical standards, and measurement tools of digital and social platforms to students. In doing so, he proposes that academics need to upskill themselves in order to provide hands-on, applied experiences while discussing key conceptual issues and theoretical principles in relation to the real world.

This special issue has also collected two commentaries that help practitioners to better navigate the unique ecosystem of digital and social media for optimal strategic communication benefits. **Sharon Schoenmaker's** *Connecting, responding and engaging, not yet relating online* differentiates three ladders of interaction online – connection (e.g. like, share), response (e.g. comments, enquiries) and engagement (e.g. generating new content, attending offline events). Drawing data from the Australian anti-drinking campaign BTI (Be the Influencer), Schoenmaker documents how these steps are not necessarily leading to relating online, which should be relationship-centred and based on dialogic communication. To create relating online, strategic communicators need to use language, discourse, image and visual systems that embody and identify with the social structures, realities and identities conveyed by online participants. Finally, **Taolian Yang's** commentary *Privacy breaches and crisis management in the Uniqlo event in China* depicts an online crisis arising from the public sharing of an individual's sexual video on Chinese popular social media *Weibo*. Her study showcases the intricacy of technology risks, cyber security, privacy disclosure and ethical issues on digital platforms in a developing country where legal systems are still immature. To create a healthy digital environment, Yang

calls for not only strategic communicators but also digital publics, network providers, IT companies and government legislators to make collective efforts to prevent unnecessary human-made crises online.

Taken together, while each contributor to this special edition applies a different research framework to unpack strategic communication in the digital age, the conclusion remains the same. The rapidly changing and turbulent digital environment affords unlimited opportunities, possibilities and challenges to re-imagine and refresh the strategic communication discipline, theories and practices. Imagining the future of strategic communication is like exploring through the mist. Although there may be more than one path and every path could perhaps (or not) lead to the destination, a core marker present in all articles in this issue is the desire to move the current focus of strategic communication from an organisational level to embrace a broader horizon of social significance and community influence. As Heath (2006) suggested a decade ago, the prospects of strategic communication (public relations) may rest with attention to the good of society instead of the communicator or organisation. The advancement of today's digital technologies makes it even more pressing to balance organisational interests and social values, strategic communication effectiveness and civil participation in the public sphere. Despite living in a digital world, human publics count more than technologies.

With this special issue as a springboard, we would like to invite and challenge future scholars to continue engaging in the re-imagining and transformation of theories and practices to make it possible for strategic communicators to contribute to truly equitable, participative and democratic societies. When progressing through the mist, we encourage scholars not to discard the intellectual heritage from existing insights, but rather discover or reinvent new approaches that could better incorporate the defining features of digital and social media by using three search lights: *diversity*, *fluidity* and *interactivity*. Diversity points our scholarship building to a wide array of strategic communication contexts (e.g. formal vs. informal, organisational vs.

individual/entrepreneurial, professional vs. personal). Fluidity alerts us to be highly sensitive to the changeable economical, political, technological and sociocultural climates, to recognise the shifting boundaries of organisations and develop more resilient communication strategies. Interactivity then requires us to break through the traditional linear, broadcast thinking and apply a multilevel, mutually influential logic in strategic communication. We believe not only is more research needed to determine what it means to be ‘strategic’ in the digital age, but also more robust debate is required to evaluate the most appropriate approach to strategies in varied and specific contexts. The mist still surrounds us but the way ahead is illuminated.

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