

Nice to Have – or Need to Have?

The Professional Challenges of the Communication Sector

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Abstract

The present article argues that despite the considerable development and expansion of strategic communication as both an academic field and professional practice during the 20th century, strategic communication continues to have an ambiguous status in academia as well as professionally. The article argues for two related explanations of this ambiguity: 1) a communication-*internal* perspective concerning the interdisciplinary, practice-based and semi-professional nature of strategic communication, and 2) a communication-*external* perspective concerning the integration of and priority given to strategic communication in organizations. Both aspects constantly challenge the effectiveness, position and power of communication employees, making it necessary for them to continuously prove their worth – in relation to other professionals, in times of crisis, etc. Strategic communication in the Danish public sector is included as an empirical example, as communication practitioners, especially in this context, seem to be faced with professional challenges not least related to the organizational (external) setting, but also based on the (internal) nature of strategic communication.

Keywords: strategic communication, organizational status of communication, communication as profession, integrated communication, public communication

Introduction¹

The financial recession has challenged the position of the communication functions and employees in organizations, at least in a Danish context. On the one hand, the communication literature (e.g. Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 21; Davis, 2007: 73) as well as the communication practitioners (Nimb/*KOM Mag*, 2009; Jensen/*Kom Mag*, 2009) emphasize the increased importance of professional management of communication processes in crisis situations – in order to avoid a ‘double crisis’. On the other hand, communication budgets are cut and the need for communication professionals to document their effect and return on investments intensifies in hard times (Justesen/*Kommunikatøren*, 2009; Merkelsen/*KOM Mag*, 2009).

The present article argues that this is a symptom of a more fundamental condition for communication professionals: namely, that many, regardless of the professionalization and expansion of the communication sector during recent decades, continuously have an ambiguous if not secondary position in their organization – a condition that is only intensified when companies and organizations have to cut to the bone. Where this organizational positioning and challenge as to the ability of communication professionals

to compete for attention and results in companies and organizations is a recurring and on-going subject of discussion in parts of the public relations literature (e.g. Berger, 2007) and among for example Danish communication professionals,² the present article wishes to accentuate that the subject has continuous relevance to communication research more generally as well. Studies of political and corporate communication testify to the enhanced and predominant status of communication in the mediatized society, showing how, today, communication is often given greater attention than political ideologies, business or product quality – or as Davis puts it (2007: 177): “*The organisation is evaluated by the charisma and fashionability of its celebrity representative rather than its products, policies and arguments*” and similarly McNair (2007: 200): “*... politics has become not only a persuasive but a performance art, in which considerations of style, presentation and marketing are of equal if not greater importance than content and substance*”. In some contexts, however, e.g. the Danish public sector, strategic communication still has a secondary status – *strategic* aspects do not have high priority, communication professionals often attend mainly to technical, frequently media-related tasks and support agendas set by others rather than contributing to this agenda-setting (e.g. Lund, 2008; Petersen, 2008; Esmark, 2006; Sloth, 2006; Kjær, 2006; Frandsen et al., 2005; Kristensen, 2003, 2005). These differences may be explicable in terms of the managerial and communicative priorities and self-understandings that characterize various organizational settings (Esmark, 2006; Hon, 2006) – corporations, national politics, local administration etc. But they also point to a gap or discrepancy between the position and influence of the communication sector in theory and practice.

The article argues for two, interrelated explanations for this gap and the continuous ambiguous status of strategic communication: 1) communication-*internal* circumstances concerning the interdisciplinary, practice-based and semi-professional nature of strategic communication and 2) communication-*external* circumstances concerning the position, integration – and power – of strategic communication in organizations e.g. in relation to management, other professions and related (communication) functions, conditioned by the multifarious nature of communication. These explanations are naturally not exhaustive, but they point out the relevant and connected professional and organizational challenges of contemporary communication work.

Theoretically, the article is based on the international and national literature on strategic communication and public relations as an academic discipline, profession and practice in different settings (e.g. Toth, 2007; Pieczka, 2000, 2002; Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Langer, 2005), while its empirical focus is Danish, drawing on studies on strategic communication conducted in both academic and communication professional contexts (e.g. DACP, 2000, 2006; Kristensen, 2003, 2005). In closing, studies on strategic communication in the Danish public sector (e.g. Lund, 2008; Pedersen, 2006; Sloth, 2006; Frandsen et al., 2005) serve as the basis for a more detailed empirical illustration of and reflection on the argument. Due to the different historical developments of and approaches to strategic communication in various cultural, geographical as well as organizational contexts, considerable variations do after all exist across what is by both academia and practitioners perceived to be a professionalized and influential communication sector, which necessitates some empirical grounding.

Strategic Communication

Before embarking on the main discussion, we need to briefly discuss the choice of vocabulary, as ‘strategic communication’ has many connotations.

Some of the terms used as synonyms for strategic communication are public relations, professional communication, organizational communication, spin, information work, and even marketing. Although each of these areas has distinct features – in terms of focus, methods, target groups, goals etc. – that can be used to differentiate them both in theory and practice (e.g. Dalfelt et al., 2001: 78ff), all are related and overlapping, and the various terms are therefore often used at random. As I will argue below, this pluralism and overlap arise from the fact that strategic communication (with its various sub-categories) is both an *academic field or emerging discipline*, drawing on several traditions (cf. Langer, 2005; Jensen, 2002), and a ‘*profession*’ or *practice* that is still developing (Pieczka, 2000, 2002).

One might argue that, theoretically, all communication is strategic, or in the words of Peters (1999: 266) “... *communication involves not the direct sharing of truths but the manipulations of effects*”, not least within organizations, companies, institutions, etc., rendering the prefix ‘strategic’ superfluous. I do however use the term *strategic communication* (interchangeably with strategic public relations management) first of all to emphasize that the focal point is not a fundamental discussion of communication as such – as dialogue, exchange, transmission, ritual etc. (e.g. Peters, 1999; Jensen, 2008) – but as a professional sector and work practice, performed in different organizational settings.

Furthermore, the ‘strategic’ prefix accentuates that communication in these contexts is to be perceived as not only a set of supporting communication tactics, but as strategically intended, planned, and purposeful mechanisms aimed at changing the attitudes or actions of specific target groups and with a potential value and mandate in relation to the communicating organization as such and in relation to its surroundings (see also Steyn, 2007, Dalfelt et al., 2001: 80). As I aim to show, however, the strategic element is not always prominent in practice, indicated, for example, by the distinction in the literature between ‘public relations (management)’ and ‘strategic public relations (management)’ (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Steyn, 2007).

Finally, the term ‘strategic communication’ (unlike, for example, ‘political communication’, ‘corporate communication’, ‘organizational communication’ or ‘professional communication’, see e.g. Faber, 2000; Dalfelt et al., 2001) is not restricted to specific professional, organizational, or communicative contexts, or (unlike information work and spin) to specific dimensions of communication work. This rather eclectic approach is thus consistent with the broad argument of the article in that it cuts across a multitude of traditions and subareas of strategic communication, planned and applied in diverse organizational contexts and with numerous constituencies.

Communication-internal Perspective: Strategic Communication as Academic Field and Professional Practice

Despite the continuing complexity of defining what strategic communication is – a difficulty reflected in the many attempts to do so – much of the research literature emphasizes that strategic communication has developed and expanded considerably during

the 20th century (e.g. Toth, 2007; Wright & Turk, 2007; Ottestig, 2002; Pieczka, 2000). However, strategic communication still has an ambiguous or ‘undefined’ status academically and professionally – two closely interrelated dimensions – with potential influence on the effectiveness and power of communication professionals in practice. Wright and Turk (2006) and Ottestig (2002), for example, show how the academic research is split regarding the question of public relations as a profession. One might argue that comparing strategic communication as a professional practice to classical professions and their characteristics – (1) an exclusive *body of knowledge* by way of (2) a specialized, accredited *education*; (3) a strong *professional* organization harmonizing the norms and practices of the professionals through (4) *ethical codes*; and (5) endorsed by a license issued by the state to exercise the profession (cf. McDonald, 1995; Laursen et al., 2005)³ – is not only static and normative, but also outdated. Professional boundaries are increasingly blurring and professional monopolies constantly challenged in our contemporary knowledge society, of which communication is an example and to which it contributes. When trying to elucidate why practitioners of communication experience difficulty in winning acceptance or at least constantly have to fight for their existence, however, this traditional approach is useful, because, as stated more generally by Laursen et al. (2005: 27), it presents the analytical dimensions of processes of professionalization. In the case of strategic communication, the relevance is not least emphasized by the fact 1) that the approach accentuates the interrelatedness of the academic and practical foundation of strategic communication and 2) that, although strategic communication is not a profession in the traditional definition of the term, there has been a marked *professionalization* of (strategic) communication work. Thus, the following is not an argument for or against strategic communication as a profession, but rather an analysis drawing on the characteristics of professions. The aim of the analysis is to present one explanation of the continuous challenges that communication workers meet in their everyday practice and thus of how professionalism and professionalization are important aspects when discussing the power, influence and effect of communication in organizations, because professionalism is about legitimacy and status. Serini (1993) and Hon (2007), for example, demonstrate that the more professional communication practitioners are, and the more they are able to establish their contribution to the organization as such, the greater the room for manoeuvre, power and success they enjoy in relation to the top management as well as other departments of the organization.

Body of Knowledge – Academic Roots... in Practice

The question of body of knowledge relates to the theoretical ground and status of communication in academia. Academically, (strategic) communication is an interdisciplinary field or discipline with no distinct epistemology or core body of knowledge (Shepherd, 1993) – an *interdisciplinary community of discourses* with roots in the humanities and the social and natural sciences, as Langer put it (2005, see also Jensen, 2002). Even though media-centric and management-inspired paradigms have dominated the academic approach to strategic communication (Pieczka, 2002),⁴ it has a multifarious nature, covering, as indicated above, a wide range of individual and overlapping sub-areas from very different traditions – marketing, management and corporate communication, organizational communication, interpersonal communication and rhetoric, political com-

munication, media science and journalism, etc. Likewise, other academic disciplines, such as political science and cultural studies, law, medicine, management and the natural sciences (e.g. Langer, 2005; Strömbäck et al., 2008), have incorporated strategic communication into their research and education programmes. Thus, not only do strategic communication studies draw on other disciplines – other disciplines also draw on communication studies, which, according to Jensen (2002: 28), points to a revision of the institutional framework of communication studies as such – or: “*The edge of the field... is its boundaries with other fields and institutions, which are ready to be moved*”.

Another, significant characteristic of the ‘body of knowledge’ of strategic communication is its practical dimension, because regardless of its interdisciplinary background, strategic communication arises primarily from professional practice: It is “... *constituted and transmitted through practice. It is a complex interactive structure organized through past experience and current exigencies which modifies itself through action, i.e. professional work and training*”, Pieczka states (2002: 321). Similarly Langer (2005: 19) argues that the professional handling of communication skills today is, and will in future remain, the core of the communication discipline, just as Shepherd (1993) states that communication as an interdisciplinary field of study has less to do with epistemology and more to do with ontology – that is, ‘views of being’, expressed through the study of professional skills, practices and use in specific contexts. This close relationship between academic knowledge and professional practice is not least incarnated in the Grunigs’ research on Excellence in Public Relations (e.g. Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Toth, 2007), which for at least two decades has set the agenda for both scholars and practitioners of public relations and communication management by testing “... *theories from multiple disciplines – such as management, communication, public relations, sociology, psychology, and philosophy – that could explain how public relations contributed to organizational effectiveness (the excellence factor) and what indicators actually made up public relations excellence*” (Toth, 2007: ix).

Both the interdisciplinary approach and the foundation in practice have long contributed – and continue to contribute – to the expansion and success of strategic communication as an academic discipline and professional practice, despite their simultaneous challenge to its existence and identity as a distinct field. Parts of the strategic communication and public relations literature therefore argue for theories of communication to be rooted in both professional practice and an interdisciplinary context (cf. Just et al., 2007; Langer, 2005), just as it follows that it may be problematic to compare the work, knowledge and qualifications of communication practitioners only with that of the traditional professions (Pieczka, 2000: 230).⁵ Conversely, this particular background of strategic communication, especially its origins in professional practice, means that its status within professional and organizational structures is constantly contested by, e.g., the political, legal, managerial, and economic contexts in which strategic communication is applied and has to navigate: “... *not relying on a body of abstract knowledge, the public relations profession has to struggle to find a cultural bias for legitimizing itself and its jurisdiction, which makes it open to constant challenge*” Pieczka states (2000: 231), while Shepherd (1993: 89) likewise notes that communication will always be “... *caught trying to obtain legitimacy through association with ‘real’ disciplines, forced into borrowing existence from their ontologies ...*”. Thus, the interplay between the academic and the practical may indeed have been essential in developing the field, but may also

be one of the causes of its constant struggle for professional legitimacy in relation to other professionals and professions in an organization (see below).

More Education, Numerous Organizations and no License to Practise

Turning to the remaining professional characteristics, the practice of strategic communication is not restricted to professionals with a specific education, precisely due to the lack of a 'core body of knowledge'. In principle, anyone can practise the discipline, including people with highly varying expertise and education (if any). Empirical data indicate that the Danish communication sector is rather heterogeneous educationally, however with an increasing number of academically trained as a result of the introduction of communication programmes at more and more universities, especially since the 1980s (DACP, 2000, 2006; Kristensen, 2003: 181). Consequently, the sector has multiplied considerably (Kristensen, 2003; Ørberg/*Kommunikatøren*, 2002; Søsted/*Kommunikatøren*, 2009), even though no precise figures for its actual size are available due to the variety of overlapping professional organizations (see below).⁶

The increasing number of academically trained communication professionals is related to the mediatization of society and its institutions (Hjarvard, 2008), the development of new communication platforms and technologies (Just et al., 2007: 243ff), and hence the increasing complexity and diversity of communication within organizations, all of which have intensified their demand, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for professionalism and professionals within communication. As Langer (2005: 7) and Wright and Turk (2007) point out, practical – or in Grunig's terms (2000) technical – communication and journalistic skills have to be supplemented by knowledge of specific areas, analytical expertise and professional reflection, indicating a shift from craft towards scientific methods and knowledge, related not only to communication strategies and media logic, but also increasingly to economics, politics, accounting, law, management, administration, etc. (see also Søderberg/*Kommunikatøren*, 2002; Thomas/*Magasin K*, 2007).⁷ This emphasizes both the potential of and the need for the above-mentioned interdisciplinary nature of communication – and perhaps even more so than ever before. However, it also points to two potential scenarios of communication: as either marginalized to a suffix added to high-level education in politics, management, law, economics etc.,⁸ or, as argued for by Jensen (2002: 28), as not just a field or discipline, but an agenda-setting faculty for other departments and constituents.

The heterogeneity of the communication sector relates to its professional organization as well, because membership in a specific, professional association is not required, at least in the Danish context. Largely owing to their very varied educational backgrounds, communication practitioners belong to a variety of unions and associations with differing professional goals and ethical codes (if any). More traditional trade unions aim at securing and improving both the working conditions and the professional foundation of their members working with strategic communication,⁹ while a number of professional associations, specifically focusing on strategic communication and public relations management, primarily aim at improving the professional skills and identity of their members, at supporting the awareness and strategic as well as operative use of communication and public relations, and at formulating and ensuring the ethical norms and standards of the communication sector.¹⁰ These different associations have contributed

to the strengthened organization and professionalization of strategic communication in Denmark in recent years, not least because they offer networks, retraining and upgrading of their members' skills, and because they increasingly discuss and formulate ethical guidelines and professional standards for the occupation as such. That is, they thematize the professional foundation of the discipline.¹¹ The continuous organizational dispersal, however, may complicate the task of attaining a collective and respected professional identity and status, because identification of the sector's core values is an essential factor in achieving that goal (Grunig, 2000) – and most of, e.g., the Danish organizations operate with different, though similar ethical guidelines and values. Likewise, Berger (2007: 231) states, with regard to an American context, that systemic power resources such as professional organizations, associated codes and established measures of professional value are underutilized or underdeveloped in this field.

Finally, the core or main aim of strategic communication work has a double or conflicting nature concerning the relation of professions to the state and the market. On the one hand, it complies with the functionalistic, altruistic idea, originally stated by Parsons (Laursen et al., 2004), of putting the client and the public good at the centre of the professional work, not least in light of the historical development of strategic communication and public relations, which has increasingly been concerned with, precisely, balancing and unifying the interests of an organization or enterprise and the interests of the public. Grunig and Hunt's original four functionalistic models of public relations are classical and leading examples (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Eriksson, 2002: 57). This development has been in the interest of not only the enterprises and organizations, but of strategic communication or public relations as professional practise or occupation as well. On the other hand, the functionalistic approach to professions as such has been criticized as naïve (cf. Laursen et al., 2004: 20ff), because professions also work to secure their own professional and market status, which is the case for strategic communication as well. For instance, this is manifested and acknowledged in Grunig's (1992) later, fifth model of public relations, taking both specific interests and the ideal of symmetric, two-way communication into consideration (Eriksson, 2002). Despite the efforts to harmonize cliental and public interest, the former do not necessarily comply with latter – and in case of conflict, the primary allegiance of communication practitioners is to their organization (Berger, 2007: 232). Finally, contrary to the classical professions at least in a European context (Laursen et al., 2004: 23), the communication sector is not licensed to operate by the state: as already stated, anyone can work in strategic communication, just as there are no substantial sanctions against communication professionals who disrespect the existing ethical or professional codes.

Summing up, on the one hand, the professional developments, which can be observed, for example, in the Danish communication sector, have not transformed communication into a traditionally defined profession, but have nevertheless given rise to an increasingly professional area of work – one that requires specialist knowledge, education and ethical standards, and that has also gained power in relation to the media agenda (Kristensen, 2005), organizational decision-making processes, and other professions, increasingly providing practitioners of communication with credibility, respect and influence (Serini, 1993; Grunig, 2000: 26). On the other hand, the quantitative growth and qualitative developments of the communication sector per se do not bring about professionaliza-

tion. Indeed one might argue, as Langer (2005: 19) does, that this expansion – and the adaptation of strategic communication to many different spheres of society as well as to a variety of academic disciplines – makes it difficult to arrive at a clear definition and mutual understanding of the sector’s professional identity, especially in view of the diversity of its members in terms of education, organizational footing, conditions of employment, etc. Or put differently, the ambiguous professional status adds to the difficulties of strategic communication in gaining respect and power both in society at large (Grunig, 2000) and within organizational hierarchies (Berger, 2007) – for example in negotiations with management, marketing experts, economists, HR representatives or other specialists or professionals.

Communication-Internal Perspective: Organizational Placing, Competition and Influence

Implicitly echoing the above-mentioned distinction between ‘public relations’ and ‘strategic public relations’, Kjær (2006) points out two related indicators of the position of the communication function within an organization: 1) whether it refers to the top management and 2) whether it has a technical and/or managerial nature, servicing an agenda set by others or contributing to this agenda-setting. Both dimensions concern the power and integration of communication in the organization, including the relationship with management as well as related functions such as marketing and HR, and the ability of communication professionals to compete, collaborate and gain acceptance and influence with related but established disciplines or professions – which has long been a controversial issue within strategic communication and public relations theory and practice (Berger, 2007: 222).

Staff Function – With Technical and/or Managerial Responsibilities

Despite considerable developments within organizational theory and organizational communication, and in particular the increasing focus on the world outside the organization (Just et al., 2007: 123; Dalfelt et. al., 2001), communication has long been a *staff function* in classical organizational terms. That is, an activity designed to support the organization’s other (line) functions (Bakka & Fivelsdal, 2003: 46; Cutlip referred to in Grunig, 1993: 10f). Traditionally, staff functions refer directly to the top management as analysts, advisors, etc. (Bakka & Fivelsdal, 2003: 46), but – precisely because of their advisory role – have no final decision-making power. Accordingly, Steyn (2007: 143) states that: “*In the strategic management literature, communication is regarded as an enabling function, facilitating the successful implementation of strategic decisions. By itself, it is not seen as a key element in the strategic decision-making process*”. Thus, the communication function is usually not part of the “*dominant coalition*” (Berger, 2007: 223), empowered with authority to formulate and make strategic decisions. In a Danish context, both surveys and professional debates (CFJE, 2003; DACP, 2006) confirm that communication, as part of the top management, is still the exception rather than the rule.¹² As consequence, it has long been reduced to a *functional* discipline with a *technical* rather than a *managerial* focus in many organizations (Grunig & Grunig, 2000: 311; Grunig, 1993: 8; Grunig & Grunig, 1991), implementing organizational objectives rather

than contributing to their formulation. This is exemplified by the continuously important role played by media-related tasks in communication work, verifying that strategic aspects have not replaced but rather been added to the media-related ones (Davis, 2007; 61ff, 67; 2002: 7; Pieczka, 2002: 313; Kristensen, 2005; DACP, 2000, 2006).¹³

Integrated and Corporate Communication

The organizational position of communication professionals in relation to other functions (e.g. marketing, HR, branding etc.), and the extent to which such functions are integrated or separated, collaborate or compete, has itself been an important topic among both scholars and practitioners since the 1990s, also known as ‘integrated communications’ or ‘corporate communication’ (Grunig, 1993, 2000; Cornelissen & Lock, 2000; Sandstrøm, 2006: 29, Hallahan, 2007; Just et al., 2007: 43; Torp, 2009). The arguments and positions are many, but a recurring issue is the increasing need for and attempts at some kind of coordination or collaboration – perhaps in the fullest demonstrated by the holistic approach to the corporate brand (e.g. Schultz et al., 2005) – which increasingly dissolves and renders the distinctions between different kinds of communication meaningless. This need for integration is explained (e.g., Frandsen et al., 2005: 19, Just. et al.: 243, 256; Falkheimer, 2002: 22-23) by the increasing complexity of society, which has intensified the demands on and expectations of organizations; the increasing competition regarding visibility and effective communication; organizational needs for efficiency and return on investment in light of the increasing magnitude and complexity of matters related to communication, that is the increasing number of departments working with communication or touching upon communication issues (marketing, public relations, public affairs, investor relations, brand management etc.); and the increasing number of media technologies or platforms that organizations have to relate to and use. That is, explanations echoing the background for the ‘academization’ of communication practitioners.

In practice, however, the literature states that strategic management and strategic communication are by no means always integrated, and communication initiatives frequently become reactive routines, involving interacting with journalists and responding to media coverage, as already indicated (e.g. Davis, 2007), rather than pro-actively preventing problems from arising or adapting communication efforts to the changing environment and needs of the organization (Grunig, 2000; Grunig & Grunig, 2000: 311, 315, 319). As argued by Falkheimer in relation to public relations (2002: 28), they become *cosmetic*. In a corporate branding context, Schultz (2005: 41) similarly criticizes parts of the literature as normative, in so far as they focus on how corporate branding *ought* to be executed, rather than on how it *is* executed, and she reiterates the above-mentioned secondary status of communication in the corporate hierarchy and the idealistic approach of some of the research. These limitations might be explained by the heterogeneous nature of many corporations, but other sectors as well (see below), where competing interests among stakeholders, both in- and externally, make it difficult to produce and adhere to a mutual set of values (Just et al., 2007: 275f; Christensen & Morsing, 2005). Another explanation is that the most powerful decision-makers in the organization determine the status and practice of communication (Dalfelt et al., 2001: 81ff), and, as indicated, communication is usually not part of or a priority for this ‘dominant coalition’, the man-

agement. As a result, communication professionals can experience limited autonomy to make decisions and have to struggle for the respect of their employers and to negotiate the actual implementation of communication plans and tactics (Serini, 1993).

Finally, despite theoretical arguments in favour of communicative integration and attempts to do so in practice, departments often compete for assignments and resources instead of cooperating, just as organizational or departmental integration is not necessarily synonymous with synergy, precisely because the different functions might oppose each other's goals (cf. Sandström, 2006: 29; Just et al., 2007: 157, 262). In this internal competition – with both related functions (e.g. marketing) and other professions (e.g. law, accounting etc.) – communication practitioners might lose out due to their short professional history, their difficulties in documenting returns on investments hands-on, and their primary focus on communication rather than, e.g., 'business'. Or as Steyn (2007: 167) incisively frames it: "*Top management is interested in solutions to business problems, not in communications problems.*"

The manifold and continuous academic discussions related to integrated and corporate communication highlight the organizational-hierarchical power struggles that communication functions are continuously involved in, and, importantly, that the lack of empowerment is explained by both communication professionals who "*don't have it*" and managers or CEOs who "*don't get it*" (Berger, 2007: 230).

Public Communication

In a Danish context, communication in the public sector can serve as a more specific example of the above-mentioned arguments and explanations, as various Danish studies point to a rather unprofessional – or the lack of a professional and/or strategic – approach to communication in this sector, especially at the municipal level, contrary to the national political scene.

Esmark (2006) shows that the specific setting of communication in the public administration has two major consequences for the communication practitioner: On the one hand, the sector is characterized by impartiality as to party-political interest by way of professionalism in relation to a specific policy area (e.g., health, culture or environment). On the other hand, it exercises this impartiality and professionalism precisely in a political context, as the local administration operates as the link between the political system and other systems (healthcare, culture, etc.). This duality is confirmed by Lund and Nyegaard (2008: 9), who point to the municipalities as both a *democratic actor*, legitimized by local elections, and as an *enterprise* with employees and whose main activity is to deliver services. Consequently, for communication professionals, this means that communication skills are not sufficient – specialized knowledge on, e.g., healthcare, culture or social issues is needed as well; and, secondly, even though public communication is not party-political communication, it is nonetheless political communication, as it comes from the public administration (Esmark, 2006). Thus, the professional communicator has to take several not necessarily concurrent interests into consideration – professional, political and communicative ones – echoing implicitly the more general precondition mentioned above as to interdisciplinary knowledge.

For now, however, as Esmark (2006: 64) further notes, communication in the public sector is primarily related to adopting new communication technologies, especially the

Internet, in order to optimize both internal and external communication, in particular with citizens – rather than long-term strategic communication. Similarly, Jønsson (2006) argues that the hiring of communication professionals in the municipalities in recent years (see also Lund, 2008: 297) is not enough – communication must be better integrated into decision-making processes and, consequently, communication professionals have to be placed closer to management. Accordingly, Lund and Nyegaard (2008) demonstrate that top management in Danish municipalities only to a limited extent have strategies to assure efficient communication, just as Lund (2008) argues for more focus on long-term proactive, strategic reputation management and niche-nursing of local democratic interests rather than short-term reactive tugs of war in and with the media. The handling of communication in relation to the local government reform in 2007 illustrates these points in more detail.

Strategic Communication and the Local Government Reform

As of January 1st 2007, 271 Danish municipalities were merged into 98, and 13 counties were replaced by five regions (<http://www.im.dk/im/site.aspx?p=34>, 24.09.09). Whereas Frandsen et al. (2005), prior to this local government reform, emphasize the reform as a welcome opportunity to make up for the prior limited professional and strategic approach to communication, Sloth and Stærbo (2006), during the reform-process, show that most of the newly-created municipalities put communication high on the agenda in implementing the merger: they published ambitious communication strategies for the fusion, including important communicative values (openness, dialogue, credibility, access, comprehensibility, etc.) and communication with key stakeholders. Thus, on the face of it, some of the more strategic communication aspects, called for by both Esmark (2006) and Jønsson (2006), were accommodated, which Frandsen et al. (2005: 64-65) confirm. However, most municipalities, according to Sloth and Stærbo (2006), failed to carry out detailed stakeholder analysis or formulate detailed tactics for distributing information or involving essential stakeholders, such as municipal employees and the users of local services, i.e. the general public. Furthermore, many of the municipalities never converted their strategic communication goals (dialogue with and information to the public, unambiguous communication, matching expectations and reality, etc.) into more concrete operational targets. All in all, those responsible for communication were required to accomplish a very demanding task, but received no additional resources or room for manoeuvre to do so – a circumstance also noted by Frandsen et al. (2005: 65), who emphasize that the majority of the merging municipalities had no communication department. Two years later, Lund and Nyegaard (2008: 15, 22) draw similar conclusions, especially regarding the neglect of employee communication, which is stressed as a main problem, as employees are essential ambassadors in relation to the community as both public and users. Furthermore, they implicitly point to a lack of top management awareness and engagement in communication, first and foremost strategically, by accentuating the importance of strengthening such a commitment.

Thus, the analyses indicate a considerable gap between strategic communication ambitions and their actual implementation, or suggest that, although strategic communication was long a central issue, in reality efforts were limited to standard routines and tools.¹⁴

Conclusion: Change *and* Status Quo

Parts of the literature on strategic communication in general, and on public relations, political communication and corporate communication in particular, argue and demonstrate that strategic communication has increasingly gained a foothold both within academia and within various organizational settings. Communication aspects play an ever more important role in research across a range of disciplines, while communication studies as such generate a growing number of graduates and research results, in many cases from an interdisciplinary and/or practical background. Accordingly, in the 'real world', communication, at least in certain contexts, has ceased to be merely a routine exercise and has gradually been strategically incorporated into management practice, potentially influencing, if not setting, the agenda and calling the shots, not least within politics and corporate management.

At the same time, empirical studies document the status quo in terms of the position, authority and decision-making power accorded to strategic communication, for example in the Danish public sector, where communication efforts are often relegated to a subordinate position within a hierarchical structure, in which they are seen to serve and support rather than help define the institution's primary agendas and tasks. Attempts may be made to prioritize and optimize communication – by hiring communication workers, establishing communication departments and formulating communication policies and plans of action, etc. – but, seemingly, primarily at a technical rather than managerial level.

Thus, even though communication theorists and practitioners have increasingly argued for an integrated approach, and to a certain degree attempted to put this into practice, parts of both the academic approaches to and the self-understanding of the communication sector appear normative in that they focus more on how communication *ought* to be studied and practised and on the *ideal* organizational position of communication workers, rather than on how it *is* in fact practised, ascribing more importance, status and power to the communication function as such than reality can always confirm.

This normative approach, however, may inspire practitioners to strive for more power and respect in their organizational surroundings and more generally, as a (quasi)-profession, to demonstrate and thus accentuate the importance of their expertise – for example in times of crisis and tightening budgets. The normative perspective is thus not necessarily mistaken, but in light of the anchoring of much academic communication research in practice, the apparent gap between ideal and reality indicates that more systematic and in-depth empirical research on these subjects is needed, e.g. in a Danish context. That is, we need to look more closely at the organizational positioning, power, room for manoeuvring and respect that communication professionals have – in relation to both top management and related communication functions; the tasks that communication professionals more specifically attend to – managerial and/or technical; the similarities and differences across sectors; and thus basically what strategic communication is in practice, including the blurring boundaries between communication tasks and other organizational processes, undertakings, and decisions.

Notes

1. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer, to Professor Klaus Bruhn Jensen, University of Copenhagen, and to Associate Professor Unni From, University of Aarhus, for their useful comments.
2. The Danish professional journals, *KOM Magasinet* and *Magasin K*, have for example in recent editions thematized the organizational positioning and challenges of the communication sector (e.g., Jensen/*KOM Mag*, 2009; Thomas/*Magasin K*, 2007).
3. This ‘trait method’ is frequently used in studies of professions, semi-professions and occupations. Grunig (1984, 2000), Ottestig (2002), Wright & Turk (2006), among others, discuss professional characteristics in relation to public relations.
4. Especially technological developments in journalism and the mass media during the 20th century have been important catalysts for the emergence of modern communication practices, due to the (mass-)mediated character of much strategic communication and, by extension, the rise of communication research and education within academia (cf. Jensen, 2002; Langer, 2005: 11f; Just et al., 2007: 52ff). Endorsing Pieczka’s media-centric critique, Langer (2005: 17) however argues that the importance of the mass media perspective is often overstated, as linguistics, rhetoric, and information technology are also prominent areas within communication studies today, for instance in discussions about reliable, credible or ethical communication (Just et al., 2007: 63; Sha, 2007).
5. Some of the literature on professions, however, does argue precisely for professions as ‘practical’ or ‘practical application’ of knowledge and skills (Wright & Turk, 2006).
6. According to a recent survey by DACP (Jørgensen/*Kommunikatoren*, April 2009: 11) more than 1000 candidates graduate from the communication programmes at the Danish universities annually (1074 in 2008). Furthermore, in 2006, the Communication Group of the Danish Union of Journalists, established in 1977 and organizing members working within public relations or with other kinds of communication work (<http://www.journalistforbundet.dk/sw2175.asp>, accessed 21.08.09), had approximately 1000 members, which by March 2009 had increased to 1500 (Søsted/*Kommunikatoren*, April 2009). This may also be a consequence of cuts and rationalizations within the media industry, pushing media journalists into the communication sector.
7. Recent Danish data document awareness among communication practitioners as to the strategic aspect, but to a lesser degree regarding e.g. business strategies, politics and economics, as the members of DACP (2006) state that their key competence is ‘journalistic communication’, while ‘development, planning, and implementation of communication policy and strategy’ are their preferred areas for reeducation, as opposed to e.g. business strategies, politics and economics.
8. The recurring dispute among Danish communication professionals, as to whether the journalist or the academic graduate in communication studies is the better communicator (e.g. Martensen/*Kommunikationsforum*, 2009, www.kommunikationsforum.dk/artikler/journalister-er-bare-bedre-oev-boev, accessed 21.08.09), thus seems somewhat mistaken, as the focus has moved beyond different kinds or levels of communication skills – craft or a scientific approach – to other kinds of professional know-how.
9. The most important unions, according to a survey by DACP (Søsted/*Kommunikatoren*, 2009), are the Danish Union of Journalists with approximately 2,000 of 14,000 members working principally with communication, most assembled in the above-mentioned Communication Group; The Danish Association of Masters and PhDs with approximately 4,000-6,000 of 36,000 members working in the communication sector; and The Union of Communication and Language Professionals with 8,000 members.
10. These include the Danish Association of Communication Professionals (DACP) with approximately 3,000 members (www.kommunikationsforening.dk/Menu/Om+DKF, accessed 21.08.09) – some of whom are also members of the trade unions already listed; and the Danish Association of Public Relations Agencies (www.publicrelationsbranchen.dk/forside, accessed 21.08.09) with 33 public relations agencies as members.
11. The Danish Association of Public Relations Agencies, for example, decided on a new set of ethical guidelines in March 2009 (<http://www.publicrelationsbranchen.dk/etik>, accessed 21.08.09).
12. A survey among Danish information managers in 2003 shows that four in five were not part of the top management (CFJE, 2003). Likewise, DACP (2006) shows that in one in five cases, the communication function is part of the management work, while in two in five cases the communication function is an independent department with reference to the management. Accordingly, leading communication professionals are split as to the possibilities of communication managers as *part of* the top management and/or *as* top managers (Thomas/*Kommunikatoren*, December 2007), and thus as to the question of top managers’ awareness of communication (Klebak/*Kom Mag*, 2009).
13. In a Danish context, DACP (2000, 2006) shows that in 2000 three out of four communication professionals were working at least to some extent with media relations on a daily basis, and in 2006 ‘media relations’ (media contact, media training, press releases, press conferences) and ‘journalistic communication’ (e.g. writing or editing employees magazines) were among the top-five tasks (the remaining were ‘project

management', 'counselling' and 'development, planning and implementation of communication policies and –strategies'). Likewise, Kristensen (2005) shows that media-related tasks (media relations, media monitoring, media counselling and journalistic communication – press releases, news letters, home page texts etc.) take up two thirds of the weekly working hours of Danish communication workers. Similarly, media relations are, according to Davis (2002: 7; 2007: 61ff, 67), the most important task of British communication workers in both corporate and political contexts, especially blocking journalists, suppressing negative coverage and targeting rivals through the media, while Pieczka (2002: 313) states that “*Working with the media is a major aspect of public relations*”.

14. Kjær (2006) and Petersen (2008) draw similar conclusions in relation to strategic communication in the Danish hospital sector – a context in which both professional hierarchies (medicine, healthcare) and political structures challenge the power and manoeuvring space of the communication professionals, but simultaneously emphasize *professionalism* as a key factor.

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