

# Research on Organizational Communication

## *The Case of Sweden*

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### **Abstract**

Swedish research on organizational communication is characterized by empirical, qualitative research. The tradition of holistic and profound case studies is strong. In this article, a wide definition of organizational communication is employed, including research focusing on both internal and external communication. Research themes and methods are reviewed and discussed. The majority of the studies concern public information, including health communication and crisis communication. Particularly, scholars have studied planning and evaluation of information campaigns concerning health, traffic and environment; and more recently, authority communication during major crises in society. Research focusing on organizations' internal communication includes topics such as superior-subordinate communication, organizational learning, sensemaking, communication strategies and communication efficiency.

Strengths and weaknesses following from this empirical case study research tradition are highlighted. Finally, the contribution of Swedish research in an international perspective is discussed.

**Key Words:** organizational communication, public relations, research review

### **Introduction**

Societies and organizations are continuously constructed by their members through communicative processes. In Weick's terms, communication is the core process of organizing (Weick 1979). Organizational communication as an academic discipline embraces the study of symbols, messages, media, interactions, relationships, networks, persuasive campaigns, and broader discourses within an organization – be it a corporation, governmental agency, religious institution, social movement, or the like (cf. Cheney et al. 2004). In some respects the field is broad as the area of media and communication science in a confined setting.

However, organizational communication could also be used as a general term to cover public relations, public affairs, investor relations, labour market communication, corporate advertising, environmental communication and internal communication (van Riel 1995). This holistic view seems to be more advocated by European researchers. Moreover, since organizations both influence and are influenced by the larger social, political, cultural, economic, and technological contexts in which they operate, organi-

zations, and their internal and external communication, are important research objects for media and communication researchers.

In an international perspective, organizational communication is a flourishing field of research. Its breadth and diversity makes it impossible to review as a whole, according to Jones et al. (2004: 723). Within International Communication Association, ICA, organizational communication is the fourth largest group (July, 2005). At the turn of the twenty-first century many countries are pursuing the study, although it has had a U.S. base as well as a U.S. bias for most of its 50-year history (Cheney et al. 2004).

Some years ago Dalfelt, Heide and Simonsson argued that in Sweden, scholars seem to have missed the fact that organizational communication is a field that in an international perspective receives widespread and steadily increasing interest (Dalfelt, Heide and Simonsson (2001). Likewise, Flodin (2004), Dalfelt and Falkheimer (2001) comment on the scarcity of Swedish research in public relations. During the last decade, we have in fact seen a number of publications in this area, which gives the impression that this picture is no longer relevant. There is therefore a need for a research review, which traces out the recent developments.

These arguments were taken as the starting point for the following review of the Swedish research, which aims to give an overview of research topics, methods and perspectives.

Swedish research on organizational communication can be traced back to the 1970s. The area with the longest tradition is public information of non-profit organizations. From the 1980s onwards a number of studies in governmental organizations' external communication during major crises in society have appeared. During the last fifteen years, research focusing on organizations' internal communication has developed.

### **On the Scope of the Definition**

In the paper, a wide definition of organizational communication is used, including internal, external, informal and formal communication with processes ranging from intraindividual to mass mediated communication. Research focusing on organizational communication, public relations, and public information is reviewed. A rationale for this decision will be given here.

Definitions of organizational communication traditionally employ dividing lines between internal/external and formal/informal communication (c.f. Kreps 1990, Heide, Johansson & Simonsson 2005). Dalfelt, Heide and Simonsson (2001; c.f. Cheney & Christensen 2001a, 2001b) present a detailed discussion on the definition of organizational communication and the relationship to public relations.

Broadly speaking, organizational communication researchers study internal formal communication, and public relations researchers study external formal communication. Research focusing on informal communication is still largely non-existent.

In many countries, there is a sharp dividing line between the two research traditions. According to Botan and Taylor (2004: 646) public relations has developed its own specialized journals, professional and scholarly associations, publishers, and network of collaborative relationships. This phenomenon might be one cause of the divide.

Cheney and Christensen are certain that both arenas are to blame for this lack of interaction, networking, and cross-fertilization of ideas (2001b: 170).

However, in my opinion the divide is not defensible, but instead counterproductive. Firstly, it is difficult to separate internal from external communication. Internal communication expands beyond organizational borders and external communication receives

great interest from organizational members. On occasions, news on internal processes is first provided to members from external sources such as media organizations.

Secondly, most communication departments are responsible for both internal and external communication, and practitioners work with communication in its entirety. Concepts like "total communication" and "integrated communication" surface in the popular literature (Erikson, 2002, Lesley, 2004). There is growing awareness that activities of internal organizational communication, often managed by managers, are important to public relations practitioners and scholars (c.f. Cheney & Christensen 2001b: 177).

Thirdly, both research traditions can benefit from each other's strengths. Swedish research is limited in both areas. In this country, there is no reason to divide the two traditions. On the contrary, a more holistic approach gives us advantages when we want to understand complex communication processes where internal and external communication processes are intertwined. I agree with Dalfelt, Heide and Simonsson (2001) that researchers in organizational communication and public relations need to cooperate more closely. In addition, we need to traverse traditional academic borders, since this research area has important common interests with other theoretical traditions.

On the basis of these arguments, I have chosen to use a wide definition of organizational communication research. A similar usage of the definition of organizational communication including public relations, public affairs, investor relations, market communication, environmental communication and internal communication is found in van Riel (1995).

Another question of delimitation is the different academic subject fields where organizational communication research is undertaken. Organizational communication traditionally comprises a number of subject fields such as media and communication science, organizational psychology, sociology of organizations, linguistics and business administration. In this review I will emphasize studies within communication science.

The remainder of the article is divided into research topics, methods and perspectives. Finally, I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish research tradition and the contribution of this research in an international perspective.

## **Topics from Micro to Macro**

The most prominent topic within research focusing on internal communication issues is leader – co-worker communication. In addition, studies are treating communication and learning, sensemaking and communication efficiency.

Within research focusing on external communication issues, studies consider organizations' risk communication and communication strategies.

Topics within the areas that have attracted the largest number of studies include: public information and crisis communication, governmental organizations' communication on health issues, environmental issues and the European Union. Among the crises examined are the sinking of the ferry "Estonia", the murder of foreign minister Anna Lindh, the fire in a disco in Gothenburg and the 11th September attack.

Studies integrating internal and external communication were not found.

### *Leader – Co-worker Communication*

Starting on a micro-level, with internal communication, the first topic covered is superior-subordinate communication – or as I prefer to name it leader-'co-worker' commu-

nication.<sup>1</sup> Some of these studies depart from a micro-perspective, and focus on interpersonal communication. A few of them belong to the academic field of linguistics, for example Adelswärd's study on employment interviews (1988) and Lindgren's study on performance reviews (2001). A couple of studies focus on meetings. Milles studied interaction and gender differences in meetings at work (2003) and Gunnarsson (1995) gender and interaction in research seminars at a university.

In a case study at Volvo Cars, Simonsson (2002) studied communication between department managers and employees in meetings. Simonsson concludes that the managers she studied at Volvo to a large extent are caught in an informative and distributive communication role. Examples illuminate managers' transmission of information, without placing news in context or relating it to employees' work.

Communication between managers and employees has not changed, in spite of organizational changes towards more decentralization and self-managed groups. New theories on leadership emphasize the important role of sensemaking, and both managers and employees speak of the importance of dialogue. However this rhetoric is not put into practice, concludes Simonsson (2002). Instead, leadership in this organization is permeated with the transmission view of communication. Communication problems are defined in structural and technical terms. Concepts such as meaning, understanding and interpretation are rarely mentioned when interviewees express their views on communication and their communicative roles. Noone states that managers ought to create a common understanding and a common basis for values. In other words, important aspects of leadership are overlooked.

There are similarities between this study and Johansson's study (2003) on the communication of mission statement from managers at group level to employees in a company. Both are case studies with ethnographic influences, combining observations and interviews, and in the Johansson study, discourse analysis. The fieldwork extended over a relatively long period, of one and a half years, in both studies. Theories on sensemaking and dialogue are conspicuous and analyses depart from an interpretive framework.

In the Johansson study, managers also showed their shortcomings in communication. In general, their views on communication processes were old-fashioned and simplistic. Even in this organization the transmission view of communication predominated. Managers expressed in interviews that they tried to solve their communication problems by repeating the message.

However there were modern features in the communication of the mission statement as well. The communication process consisted of workshops in smaller groups, where elements of dialogue and discussion were considerable.

In both studies, managers at different hierarchical levels did not have enough knowledge of co-workers or other managers work situations, conditions and opportunities. In both studies, managers were the main actors. Public relations practitioners were not partaking and active in the communication processes. Simultaneously, a number of managers strongly needed support and knowledge in communication issues (Simonsson, 2002: 247; Johansson, 2003: 338).

A third study focuses on internal communication within a local police organization (Ekman 1999). There are clear parallels between the results obtained here and the previously mentioned studies. Ekman departs from the conception that texts govern and steer actions in organizations and analyses how they function as means of control in daily practice filled with numerous and often contradictory demands. Findings clearly display the significance of informal leaders and small talk in connection with daily work.

Ekman concludes that leaders must take an active part in the small talk even though this causes a dilemma. Participation in small talk presupposes trusting relations between people. At the same time leadership in itself contains sanction powers, which gives leaders and managers an outsider role (1999: 207).

Even Ekman's study is a case study where ethnographic methods (including a combination of interviews, observations and document analyses) are employed.

Rhetoric in strategic change is the subject of another study, comparing two cases (Müllern & Stein, 1999). The authors characterize leaders' rhetoric in these organizations with the help of some antitheses. It is leader-centered rather than decentralized. It involves one-way communication rather than dialogue, and it is abstract rather than concrete. The rhetoric focuses on high praise rather than unattractive descriptions and it is distanced rather than in close proximity (Müllern and Stein, 1999: 172).

Dialogue is desired both by managers and co-workers, but the authors see that this wish is not fulfilled. On the contrary, they give examples of one-way communication, little developed feedback often in the form of leader-centered audits of co-worker attitudes. This situation gives co-workers little means of having any influence. The authors also conclude that the rhetoric undergoes changes through the hierarchy of the organizations. It becomes more concrete and co-worker-centered at lower levels, where it likewise is more characterized by proximity and to some extent, dialogue.

Common features of the results of the referred studies, that could be subject to further research are:

- Managers' communicative competence does not meet the needs
- A transmission view of communication is common among leaders
- Informal communication between leaders and co-workers is important
- Communication from leaders to co-workers is far more developed than upward communication
- Managers at different hierarchical levels in organizations do not have enough knowledge of co-workers or other managers working-terms and conditions
- Public relations practitioners are conspicuous by their absence in internal communication processes
- Leaders and co-workers are, on a rhetorical plane, aware of the importance of and need for dialogue, but in practice, one-way communication still dominates

### *Communication and Learning*

Two studies focused on communication and learning. Heide studied the role of ICT, particularly the Intranet, for learning in Ericsson Mobile (2002) and Jimes analyses the relation between communication and learning in two case companies (2005).

Both authors depart from a social constructionist view on organizations and communication, and they clearly employ an interpretive perspective.

Jimes dissociates herself from the view that communication is a learning tool, and that learning is a communication product. In return, she emphasizes sensemaking processes. Her purpose is to find concepts to explain the relation between communication and learning, and she highlights two: local conversations and text negotiations. Her results concur with the results of Ekman (1999), previously mentioned above. Jimes

establishes that learning in her case companies takes place in everyday conversations and in conversations on texts, which in turn create new texts that structure the organizations. The rhetoric of managers and the narratives of co-workers form textual expressions of organizational change and organizational problems. Jimes sees that co-workers sensemaking and understanding are built on interaction of these linguistic expressions. She considers that organizations ought to pay attention to everyday conversations. They are important both to innovation oriented and decentralized activities, as well as for centralized and routine activities (Jimes 2005: 145).

One of the conclusions made by Heide is just that conversations are the most important medium to people's potential to learn (Heide 2002). All mediation via technical and digital media involve information losses, which in turn affects the receivers' possibilities to interpret and understand the senders' intentions – and to convert information into knowledge.

Heide considers Intranets have advantages as learning tools. They enhance availability of information, they give co-workers better insight into the organization and its processes, and it has a democratizing role, since more people gain access to information. The managers' distributive role diminishes in importance, while the collected information in the Intranet is part of the organizational memory and forms an important resource to the organization as a whole and to individual co-workers. In turn they acquire a more active role in information seeking, and experience an enlarged freedom.

However, the use of ICT is not solely positive. Some disadvantages pointed out by Heide are that managers no longer know if co-workers have received and made sense of the information. Obstacles that render seeking and acquiring information complicated are information overload, structural problems making information difficult to find, lack of time, distrust and interpretation of difficulties. The web is good for storing and distribution of information; but in everyday practice, many situations are characterized by insecurity and ambiguity – in those cases more information does not necessarily help, but rather guidance on interpretation of the matter is what is needed (c.f. Weick 1995). Heide's study shows that work-related communication primarily goes through "private channels" such as conversations and e-mail (Heide, 2002).

Bjerlöv (1999) studied learning during workplace meetings studied from a pedagogical perspective. In this study interpersonal communication is in focus, and the author discusses which conditions are to be met in order to develop spontaneous and collective learning in groups. Important conditions elucidated are individual goals, technical solutions, legitimacy and identity, trust and respect, knowledge transfer and learning, and allowance to speak.

Bjerlöv means that collective learning during a workplace meeting is very difficult. This situation demands both that individuals can distance themselves and have enough time when speaking and listening (1999: 142).

### *Sensemaking*

A number of studies from different academic subjects (psychology, sociology and business administration) have discussed sensemaking in different types of organizations. Sensemaking processes are tied to organizational contexts and are founded on creative shaping of identities, according to Edvardsson Stiwne (1997). Furthermore she argues that sensemaking processes are central to how changes are construed and how employees negotiate organization strategies. Gustafsson (1998) who studied organization and

change in four industrial companies, finds that both the symbolic dimension and the rhetorical dimension are important elements in organizational processes. Wikström (2000) focused on communication in project teams, particularly how different ideas and notions are expressed, confronted and developed. Her conclusion is that each project consists of a unique combination of collective commitment and individual special interests (2000: 222). These elements are shown to co-exist in what she terms limited dialogue and open conversation.

Bredmar (2002) studied sensemaking in management control processes and results from this study show that sensemaking processes integrates written documents, verbal communication and actions. When co-workers interpret texts and documents, new conditions for action are created. Thus management control is an ongoing process, where sensemaking is both an important element and a basis for meaningful actions.

Alvesson (2002, 1996) employed a critical approach to communication during a meeting on reorganization in a private company. In order to enhance the understanding of power, dominance and subordination, multiple interpretations departing from three theoretical traditions were used. These were critical-cultural theory, Foucault's theory on power and Habermas' theory on communicative action. The resulting interpretations disclose how communication both function as manifestation and source of common meanings and understandings of reality, power relations and communicative disorders.

### *Communication Efficiency*

Alström and Sjöblom-Nordgren studied efficiency of internal communication strategies concerning Mission Statement and goals in a health care organization (Alström and Sjöblom-Nordgren 1999). The experimental design of the study rendered comparison of different strategies possible. Four groups were exposed for: 1. A leader-centered strategy, characterized by top-down, one-way communication, 2. A co-worker-oriented strategy, where co-workers themselves identified communication needs, 3. A time strategy, where time was allocated for communication and 4. A control group, where no communication activities were realized.

The authors conclude that different strategies resulted in significant differences in co-workers motivation and participation. The leader-centered strategy and the co-worker-centered strategy led to an increase in motivation, whereas in the control group motivation decreased. The possibilities to participate, be heard and influence at work increased with strategies 1 and 2.

Support for the goals decreased in all groups. This result is discussed by the authors who argue that co-workers ideally should be involved in developing goals in this type of organization. Goals formulated by politicians were often vague and sometimes went no further than describing organizational activities. Employees were clearly alienated from the goals and expressed in general that "those up there" didn't know or care about the organization (1999: 232).

Findings illustrated that the co-worker oriented strategy was the most efficient for this type of communication.

### *Communication Strategies and News Management*

Studies concerning organizations' external communication are few in number, apart from studies in public information, for example in health communication and crisis communication, which I will return to shortly. Falkheimer compared communication strategies

of important actors (or "sources") and conceptions in news content on the subject of the development of the Öresund region (Falkheimer 2004, 2005). The effectiveness of different communication strategies towards journalists is discussed and three strategy choices were found among the actors:

1. *the Factual Strategy* – where information materials are produced and communicated in an "objective" form, interplaying with the objectivity norm within journalism. The purpose of this strategy is to procure rational arguments to be referred in different discourse. The primary public includes opinion leaders (journalists, politicians etc.). The secondary target group is public opinion. Working methods are production of analyses and reports, statistics, prognoses, attitude surveys, economical indexes etc.

2. *the Journalistic Strategy* – with the purpose of legitimizing the region through production of actors' own channels and media. These channels contain on the one hand "pull information" such as newsletters, brochures and folders; on the other hand "push information" such as news, contact information, background information, maps, FAQs in digital form on websites.

3. *the Publicity Strategy* – is about attracting attention by the mass media, where the primary target group is journalists. Working methods are classical publicity techniques (press releases, tips, invitations, direct contact). Often these activities are linked to an event, for example arranging a seminar.

Falkheimer finds that the Factual Strategy had the largest impact in media content. The Journalistic Strategy was also of some consequence, whereas the Publicity Strategy was most effective in the period during the year when the Öresund Bridge was inaugurated.

Interviews with journalists revealed they were aware of and vigilant towards the Publicity Strategy, sceptical towards the Journalistic Strategy, but more defenceless towards the Factual Strategy (2004: 201).

### *Public Relations Practitioners and the PR-industry*

A couple of studies dealt with the profession and role of public relations practitioners (Hård af Segerstad 1997, Emanuelsson and Karlsson 1993). These studies show how multi-faceted and extensive the public relations profession is, and outlines development tendencies.

Flodin (2004: 419) points out that the Swedish public relations industry of today is highly differentiated and complex. It ranges all the way from the assistant who disseminates information up to a member of the senior management of a large, multinational company. There is also a strong specialization in the various subject fields, for example, investor relations, crisis communication and media relations.

A future challenge in this area is to increase research with a critical dimension, according to Flodin. Not only instrumental, industry-led research is needed, but research that is capable of analyzing public relations from a critical point of view, research that is more focused on public relations as a phenomenon in society rather than as a profession that deals with internal and external communication in organizations (p. 422).

Two recent studies (Larsson 2005a, 2005b), fulfill this desire. A thorough account of the development of the Swedish PR-industry and the public relations' profession is made by Larsson (2005a). The study traces the background and history of the public relations' profession and the public relations industry through interviews and document analyses.

Three distinctive periods are brought forward: the construction period from the 40s to the 60s, the middle period from the 60s to the 80s and the expansive period from the 80s to the present time.

Early activities focused on media relations and publicity. The next period saw a growing need of internal as well as external information in private businesses. Also the expansion of the public sector during this period entailed a substantial growth of public information on national and local level (p. 168). As is commented by Bentele (2004: 488), in Europe it seems to be more common and more convincing to think of public relations as a social phenomenon, which has societal functions, than only an organizational activity.

The third period is characterized by a dramatic increase in the number of consultancy firms, and in the returns and turnover in the PR industry. Larsson argues that once again, the activities are more focused on publicity and advertising (ibid). Lately, this development is manifested in private businesses, which display a growing interest in brands, and brand communication. This development might also cause a blurred dividing line between public relations and market communication, which in turn might cause conflicts between communication and marketing departments over funding.

Today, the Swedish public relations industry comprises 6,000 – 8,000 professional practitioners (Larsson 2005a: 170). During the past 15 years, new ICT have brought radical changes that affect working conditions for most public relations practitioners. Intranets and websites have been revolutionary production channels, at the same time information overload is more of a problem than ever.

### *Opinion Consultants and Democracy*

The role and power of PR-consultants in relation to the process of agenda setting in society is analyzed by Larsson (2005b) and also discussed by Dalfelt and Falkheimer (2001). Dalfelt and Falkheimer portray the PR-consultants as involved in many pursuits. The consultants active in lobbying activities work for the most part with collecting information, covering complex political processes and analyzing the consequences of political decisions (2001: 99). However, the empirical material on which they base their conclusions is limited. In contrast, Larsson interviewed 64 PR-consultants, journalists and senior PR-practitioners and he also studied three cases. These were: the tax adjustment between Swedish municipalities – also called "the Robin Hood-tax", the closing-down of the Luxor factory, and the information on Acrylamide from the Swedish National Food Administration. Both information strategies, agenda setting-activities, media coverage and the outcome in the media were analyzed in these cases.

Larsson concludes that the Swedish PR-industry has grown considerably during the past fifteen years. From the beginning of the 1990s the number of consultants have increased seven times to embrace about 1,000 people in 2004. This development is similar in other European countries. Through their agenda setting-activities the PR-consultants have established themselves as important actors alongside of traditional parties in the political arena and the democratic process (2005b, p. 183).

Larsson places the activities of the consultants in a typology with four types of agenda-setting work. Type 1 consists of open activities like press releases, press conferences and lobbying. Type 2 consists of creating events, research and basic data for "facts and figures"-reports as well as recurrent news production. Type 3 consists of more covert methods, like bill writing for political parties, which suits a particular campaign

or agenda. Type 4 is the special area of consultants, with issues management, opinion polls, alliance creation, engagement of debate writers and different types of intelligence activities (p. 187).

The interviewed consultants stated that they often succeed in influencing journalists and editors and get their material in the media both as news and as debate material. The interviewed journalists considered themselves unaffected by PR-strategies. Both occupational groups thus answered in line with the norms of their profession (p. 190).

However, Larsson states that agenda setting today is constructed and initiated by covert actors, thus the consultants have become powerful actors in the democratic process in Sweden. The result is professionalized ideology production in society performed by the new opinion industry.

From the Swedish perspective, several democracy problems arise in a public opinion climate directed by consultants. The transfer of agenda setting activities from organizations to consultants might result in less insight and transparency than before. Consultants can operate from a more hidden arena where the demands of transparency valid for public organizations in Sweden are put aside. As a result, agenda setting remains largely a business secret. When alliances are created with other actor groups, and pseudo actors, who act as spokespersons for the assigner, are used, the background and purpose of agenda setting is hidden. This in turn creates a responsibility problem, because these actors appear as influential social and political actors without either a public function or responsibility that can be publicly scrutinized (p. 196).

Larsson concludes that interests with strong economic means are favoured on behalf of organizations without economic means when consultants govern agenda setting. The fact that wealthy clients dominate in the PR-companies, also signifies that the elite in society become even stronger and more powerful.

### *Public Information*

Since, I'm employing a wide definition of organizational communication in this paper, incorporating both internal and external communication, I've chosen to include studies in public information. Here, public information is meant to cover communication between public organizations and their environment. "Public information consists of activities aiming at identifying, establishing or terminating and developing communication between public organizations and their environment (Flodin 1993a: 12, my translation).

This type of research has a relatively long tradition in Sweden, and can be traced back to the 1970s. Two areas have been more frequently studied: health communication and crisis communication (Flodin 1993a: 95).

Studies in health communication focus on e.g. patient information and information campaigns on health risks like HIV/AIDS and smoking (Jarlbro 1987, Windahl 1989, Jarlbro & Palm 1990, Palm 1994), traffic risks (Palm & Windahl 1996, Linderholm 1997, Palm 2001), communication on environmental problems (Palm & Åkerström 2001, Palm 1998, Palm & Windahl 1998, Sandberg & Thelander 1998).

Also public information on the European Union, EU, and the European Monetary Union, EMU, belongs to this group of studies (Flodin 1996, Holmgren & Flodin 1996, Palm & Nilsson 2001).

A prominent research area is planning, effecting and evaluation of information campaigns. Studies often have an instrumental purpose: to find factors optimizing campaign effects, or to evaluate effects of campaigns. An influential study is "Persuasion strate-

gies” by Palm (1994), where the author departs from theories of persuasion and constructs an analytical tool for the analysis of topics, targets and target groups. Another study treats the importance of analyzing target groups to message design and planning of campaigns (Linderholm 1997).

A recent study concerns discourse on nuclear waste in a rural district (Sjölander 2004). Here the organizational perspective is not so prominent, rather the creation of public opinion in a critical and discourse analytical framework is in focus.

### *Risk Communication*

Eriksson studied risk communication in four companies with operations that could entail public danger (2003). He departs from Grunig’s PR-theory, developed in the Excellence project. The comparison of the four different companies display, above all, differences in organizational conditions. The companies’ external PR activities and risk communication are formed by organizational dimensions such as dependency on experts, knowledge elitism, hierarchies and centralized decision making and cultural conditions (2003: 223).

Eriksson concludes that when organizations’ PR activities and risk communication are developed into forms of dialogue, changes in organizations’ distinctive features are needed. One all-embracing conclusion in this study is that external communication and internal organization are linked. Thus, changes in forms of external communications demands internal organizational changes. Research overviews in this area are found in Hedman (1999a) and Lidskog et al. (2000).

### *Crisis Communication*

Where to place crisis communication is called into question. Arguments exist for placing it within public information/public relations but also within organizational communication. Here a brief outline of the great number of studies on this subject is included. Research on crisis communication deals with organizations’ communication and, governmental organizations’ in particular, when crises occur. Flodin (2000) defines crisis communication as: ”the exchange of information within and between governmental organizations, other organizations, media and interested individuals and groups before, during and after crises.” (p. 20). This definition regards the interplay between different actors. However, a large number of the published reports in this area depart from a sender-receiver perspective illustrated by a triangle model (Nordlund 1994: 5) whose points are represented by governmental organizations (senders), media (mediators) and citizens (receivers). Three overviews of the field were published in 1993: Crisis communication by governmental organizations (Flodin 1993b), Crisis communication from a citizen perspective (Jarlbro 1993) and Crisis of the media (Nohrstedt and Nordlund 1993).

A revision of the literature in this area reveals that the analysis of the research made by Flodin (1993b) is still valid and relevant:

- Research on crisis communication is above all empirical and consists of case studies.
- Methods are above all qualitative and descriptive, even though a few quantitative studies were found.
- Studies treating policy aspects of information issues in crisis management are non-existent.

- Most studies are carried out in relation to the crisis and treat the acute phase above all. Studies treating preventing, preparing and recovering stages of crises are non-existent.

An additional comment to this is that the existing theoretical framework developed by Flodin (1993b, 2000) is sparsely used, if at all. A few research oriented institutions and organizations are involved in crisis communication research and research groups are often created to cover one crisis or course of events.

Studies have analyzed<sup>2</sup>:

- The sinking of the Estonia ferry in 1994 (Larsson and Nohrstedt 1996)
- The ammonia accident in Kävlinge 1997 (Jarlbro et al. 1997)
- The snowstorm in Gävle 1998 (Hedman 1999b)
- The fire in Gothenburg 1998 (Larsson and Nohrstedt 2000)
- 11th September 2001 (Larsson 2002)
- The murder of foreign minister Anna Lindh 2003 (Larsson 2004)

Rarely are previous crises and research reports used for comparisons. This situation renders the character of the research more repetitive. Two studies stand out from the rest: a study by Dahlström and Flodin (1998) concerning local authorities' information preparedness for crises and Palm and Falkheimer (2005) who studied communication strategies before, during and after crises of trust. They compared four recent cases, and studied how Swedish authorities at differing levels work with crises of trust.

### **Perspectives: Interpretive Research**

A commentary from McKie (2001) concerning the field of public relations, highlights the isolation of public relations theory and the lack of perspective thinking in public relations research (p. 76). In organizational communication a number of contributions on the issue of research perspectives have been published through the years. In their textbook *Communication and Organization*, Heide, Johansson and Simonsson (2005) advocate three perspectives: classical, interpretive and critical (following Redding and Tompkins 1998). A number of other works have favoured other types of division of research perspectives. However, Heide, Johansson and Simonsson argue that the tripartite distinction is sufficient and that these three perspectives follow the development in social science with the cultural turn in the 1980s and the critical turn in the 1990s. In previous reviews, the classical perspective has been found to embrace the largest number of studies and the critical perspective the smallest number (Wert-Gray et al. 1991).

Looking at Swedish research we find a totally different pattern. Studies analyzing internal communication in organizations are of a similar kind – in spite of the fact that they are from different academic fields, as mentioned above. Most studies can be placed in the interpretive perspective, with researchers advocating one or other type of basic outlook based in social constructionism. This can possibly depend on the late development of Swedish research, with early studies published in the 1990s and onwards. Nevertheless, the resemblance of the perspective employed in the different studies carried out independently of each other is striking.

Regarding research in public information, a development from a more sender-oriented perspective towards more receiver-oriented perspective can be traced. Within crisis communication, most of the studies are descriptive, telling the story of the crisis, and simultaneously analyzing communication strategies chosen by governmental organi-

zations and media content. Further, the attitudes of ordinary citizens on these communication strategies and media content are measured.

Rarely, a more critical perspective is chosen. An exception is Sjölander's study (2004), which contains an analysis inspired by Foucault's theories. Also, Alvesson (2002, 1996) employed Foucault's as well as Habermas' theories in differing critical readings of a business meeting, and Larsson (2005b) discussed democracy problems in a public opinion climate directed by consultants, as mentioned above.

### **Research Methods: Case Studies**

Swedish research on organizational communication is predominated by empirical case studies. Either one or a few organizations, an event / a crisis, or an information campaign is the subject of study. Ensuing from this situation, qualitative methods such as interviews and observations or a combination of different qualitative methods are most often used. Studies employing quantitative methods are more rare. Most researchers who engage in case studies use a combination of different qualitative methods, preferably interviews, observations, qualitative document analyses and/or content analyses. Some of the studies stand out by their design. This is true of the studies on information campaigns (Palm 1994, Linderholm 1997), and also of the experimental study on communication strategies in a health care organization, mentioned above (Alström and Sjöblom-Nordgren 1999).

The design of this study combined qualitative and quantitative methods. A survey was distributed in order for the researchers to establish information status in the organization. Then employees were divided into four groups and were subject to communication activities following four different strategies. The survey was repeated, and results were compared. Finally, qualitative interviews were made with a number of managers, in order to enhance understanding of the results from the two surveys (Alström and Sjöblom-Nordgren 1999: 18).

Within the area of public information, empirical studies dominate as well. A number of them have the character of evaluations, often initiated by the governmental organizations or institutions.

A conclusion drawn from this review is that there is a great need for more Swedish research in organizational communication, research employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, which also needs to be independent of actors' / institutions' research grants.

### **Case Study Tradition: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Given the wide definition employed here, research concerning communication activities of organizations ranges from authorities' mass communication related to crises, organizations' communication with internal and external publics to more micro-oriented research on the communicative behaviour of individuals. Cutting across these differing research themes, is a far-reaching homogeneous approach when it comes to research perspectives and methods employed. What then are the strengths and weaknesses following on from an empirical case study research tradition? Some suggestions are brought forward in the following passage.

Clearly, the strength of the Swedish research tradition is its empirical research base. The reviewed empirical studies represent each and together a rich and realistic image of organizational life and organizational communication activities. Often this type of

research is called for – in order to enhance our understanding of theoretical implications in daily practice (cf. Putnam and Fairhurst 2001).

Furthermore, the strong empirical base both suggests and points to the possibility of a close link between research and practice. This situation can allow researchers to pose research questions that fit practitioners actual need for knowledge development. Which in turn can strengthen individuals' communication competence in organizations. Sometimes researchers are accused of positioning themselves far off from the experienced "reality" of organizations. These accusations might be far-fetched in the Swedish tradition. At least, prerequisites for research to keep in step with practice are excellent.

Case studies in addition allow researchers to study chosen phenomena in a profound way, illuminating topics from different angles in the same study. An example of this is Johansson's study of the communication of Mission Statement spanning over one and a half years. The complexity of this communication process is demonstrated, and a number of influencing factors were found ranging from organizational structure and culture to team and individual level (Johansson 2003). Another example is Falkheimer's study, which studied communication on regional development both from a sender and a media perspective (Falkheimer 2004, 2005).

These examples are but two, chosen to illustrate that research employing multiple methods and / or multiple materials is a strength in case studies, although not very common in other types of studies, since they would then be too extensive and difficult to manage.

Case study research would easily lend itself to studies integrating internal and external communication – in other terms integrating studies in public relations and organizational communication. This would be a preferred development that could enrich both traditions.

Finally, case studies are often deceptively descriptive in nature, often revealing deeper explanations and a thorough understanding of communication issues and activities – which of course can be subject to further testing in a larger number of organizations with other research methods.

When it comes to weaknesses, obviously an important shortcoming of a case study tradition is the difficulty of generalizing results. As mentioned, results from one or a few organizations have to be subject to further testing before their validity is established. Comparisons with theoretical work and other case studies can lead the analysis one step forward – however just like gathering jigsaw pieces, it is difficult to see patterns and the big picture.

On the other hand conditions differ widely in different organizations – to the extent that researchers have long argued that general models of communication are neither possible nor desirable. This is also why research in different national contexts is very important. Nevertheless, the importance of syntheses of different case studies has to be recognized to a larger extent in the future. This type of work is still scarce, which slows down theory development.

The strength of a close link between research and practice can also turn into a weakness. When research is governed solely by practical implications and considerations, for example through allocation of research grants, there is an evident risk that important issues are not researched. Even in this case theory development and basic research in the area is restrained.

## Conclusion

To summarize and conclude I will discuss the contribution made by Swedish research in organizational communication. I have in this paper argued that a more holistic approach is advantageous when we want to understand complex communication processes influenced by a diversity of factors. In particular this concerns issues and / or topics where internal and external communication processes are intertwined. I will further this argument by suggesting that the studies reviewed in the paper, most of which are not yet published in English, represent unique knowledge on a number of communication topics – knowledge that is not possible to access when working with other research designs, for example survey methods.

Recognizing that both qualitative and quantitative research is important, also means that the apparent lack of more quantitative research in a Swedish context is a weakness. It is my strong belief that a multiplicity of topics, perspectives and methods is conducive to a rich and vigorous research tradition.

However, in these studies, a world rich in realistic images of organizational communication is revealed, even though this concise review cannot do full justice to the studies discussed. When comparing results with those of the great quantity of studies in other countries, there is often a concordance to be found.

In this respect, I challenge and encourage Swedish researchers to increase their publication in the English language in order to contribute to making this field of research even more flourishing.

## Notes

1. As Simonsson (2002:254) notes, the word 'co-worker' has been used for subordinates in almost all Swedish organizations, in recent years. According to her both managers and subordinates/co-workers argue that the meaning of this term is that all employees should be participant, responsible, independent and take initiatives on their own.
2. This list is not all-embracing. There is a great number of this kind of studies, many of which of local character analyzing crises resulting from snowstorms and train accidents and the like.

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