

Strategic Communication and Its Application in Public Administration in Latvia

Inga Latkovska

University of Latvia

E-mail: inga.latkovska@lu.lv

Abstract. Strategic communication research has received increased attention during the last 10–15 years, predominantly viewing it as an interdisciplinary concept and employing various theoretical concepts as a basis for research – communication and media theories, organizational and management theories, as well as sociological and political science theories. Strategic communication is still used in different senses and meanings, however, most frequently it is applied as a synonym for purposeful management of the communication process in general, or management of specific communication disciplines. The most important aspect in this is being *purposeful* and tied to the strategic goals of the organization. Public sector organizations manage, lead and ensure the functionality of the public sector and provide services to citizens, including supplying the information process. In the tense situation of today, strategic communication is especially important for public administration in the context of ensuring national security. Latvia has a relatively good experience in this regard due to “The National Concept on Strategic Communication and Security of the Information Space 2023–2027” approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia in early 2023. The concept has been approved, but, of course, it is impossible to fully implement the concept in less than a year. Nevertheless, the Department of the Strategic Communication Coordination of the State Chancellery is actively working to make strategic communication an understandable, valued and professionally performed public administration function.

Keywords: strategic communication, communication, public administration, rights of an individual

Introduction

The task of public administration is to ensure communication that secures people’s awareness of public administration issues and involves the society in this communication, complying with the institutional and organizational goals of public administration. The communication process must be part of the public

sector's strategy and the communication itself must be strategic. Public sector organisations can be perceived as a means of achieving policy goals and priorities, and much of what the public sector does is deliberation, negotiation, compromise, and the communication of decisions made by policy-makers. Considering that public trust in public administration as a reliable source of information has become increasingly important in recent years, especially in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine and due to disinformation, questions are being raised about the capacity of those implementing the communication function of public administration to manage it at a strategic level.

Strategic communication as a theoretical concept within the last 15 years has been studied purposefully. The publication "Defining Strategic Communication" of March 2007 in *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, introduced the research and discussion of the concept. The publication so far has more than 1 000 references in other studies and publications related to the research of the topic (Hallahan, Holtzhausen *et al.* 2007). The term "strategic communication" makes sense as a unifying framework for analysing communications by organisations due to several reasons.

It can be observed that among communicators and in the professional environment in general, the opportunities to see, recognize and separate traditional communication activities and their effects from other communication activities are decreasing. Communication tools traditionally attributed to, for example, advertising – paid publications in the media – are increasingly used in public relations. And *vice versa* – marketing disciplines use more "classical" means, for example, public relations tools, such as events. As the situation changes, so does the after-effect of the used communication tools. Important changes in public communication are driven by technology and media economics, as well. On the World Wide Web, it is almost impossible to distinguish between sponsored publicity and professional media publicity. The creation of such communication products requires special writing skills, which are already included in study programmes in the mid-2000s. In fact, it speaks of postmodernism in communication. The need for what the organization's stakeholders, audiences know about the organization, how people feel, think and act in relation to the organization has not lost its importance. This sum of experience, which is of interest to the organization, is formed under the influence of various circumstances. Thus, the impact of direct communication is increasingly questioned. People do not always discern various types of communication, for example, they do not distinguish between an article created by a journalist and an article for advertising. And finally, strategic communication clearly recognizes that the fundamental purpose of organizational communication is influence, while some of the communication disciplines are focused on providing information or building relationships. Therefore, research should focus on what role and how

exactly communication contributes to the achievement of the organization’s goal (Hallahan, Holtzhausen *et al.* 2007, 10–11).

The purpose of the current study was to identify and appraise the research and publications on strategic communication, as well as to examine the situation of strategic communication in the public administration of Latvia.

The results

There is a jungle of flourishing concepts describing communication that are used as mutually synonymous. Amongst practitioners, it is common to understand that strategic communication includes management of all communication disciplines and activities in an organization. The problem with the traditional understanding of strategic communication is that it explicitly focuses on communication *per se* and the various activities linked to it (Falkheimer, Heide 2023, 85–113). Strategic communication as a research field is the study of organizations’ communication that includes several communication disciplines, for example, public relations, corporate communication, marketing communication, organizational communication and others. Only by respecting and being inspired by various forms of communication and disciplines can one comprehensively look at the concept of strategic communication. In addition to communication disciplines, sociological, organizational and management theories can contribute to the understanding of the concept, just as importantly, and remembering that in strategic communication it is crucial to know the public’s opinion, accurately use the management of organizations, etc. (Falkheimer, Heide 2023, 108). See Figure 1.

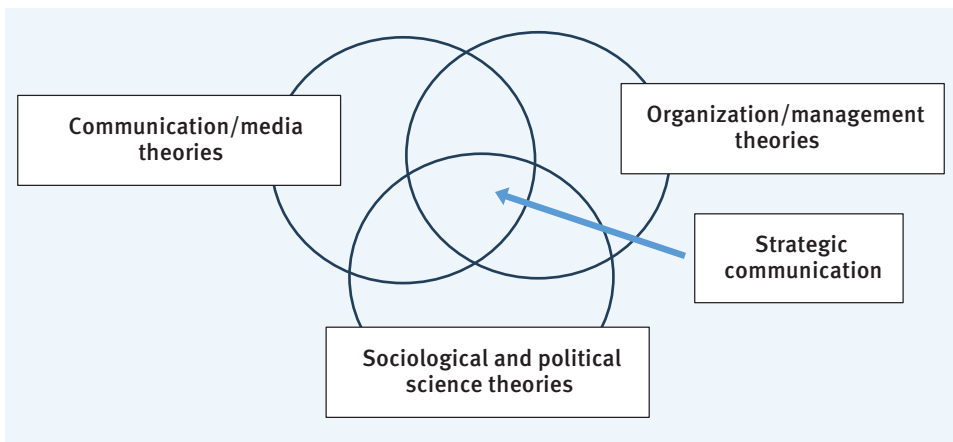


Figure 1. Relationship to other disciplines. Source: Falkheimer, Heide 2023, 108

From the outset, the development of strategic communication as an academic discipline has been an interdisciplinary project rather than creating a catch-all name for communication practice (Hallahan, Holtzhausen *et al.* 2007, 3–5). Globally, communication is practiced in many different contexts and called by different names. For example, public relations is also an ambiguously evaluated practice, 61.3% of professionals believe that naming public relations as strategic communication would be an appropriate practice designation (Zerfass, Verhoeven *et al.* 2011, 21–28).

“Strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen *et al.* 2007, 3) with the task of creating added value to communication, for example, a communication that strengthens the organization’s mission is undeniably a strategic communication that helps bring the organization’s goal closer. At the same time, every organization is a part of society, a social member of society, and also in this aspect the communication can be viewed holistically – as inseparable from other activities and the society of the organization, within which the organization shows itself with purposeful and deliberate action, its managers and employees communicate. Hence, communicate strategically. This communication builds meaning, trust, reputation, and manages symbolic relationships with internal and external stakeholders to support organizational growth and freedom of action (Grunig, Grunig *et al.* 2002, 30–32).

A communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach the set goals. Goals can be as diverse as winning market share, gaining victory in a political campaign, building a positive reputation, or effecting social change. In that sense, strategic communication is the practice of deliberative and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals (Holthauzen, Zerfass 2013, 74). The definition emphasises the strategic communication as a process that follows from organization’s strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in enabling organization’s goals and objectives. Likewise, it is one of the communication tools for achievement of the set goals. During the strategic communication process, the meaning of the communication is created in interaction with stakeholders, media, as well as other external actors in public sphere. The last, but not least – strategic communication entails presenting and promoting organizational goals, instead of creating or recreating them. The inclusion of the public sphere in the definition of strategic communication is valuable when discussing the role of practice. In addition to many other tasks of strategic communication specialists, the description of their duties must necessarily include helping others to access the public sphere by using good, well-thought-out arguments, the formation of which can contribute to the capabilities

of the communication unit itself and at the same time raise the level of public awareness.

Communicative entities can encompass the full spectrum of economic and social sectors, such as trade and industry politics, non-profit sphere, government agencies, activist groups, and even celebrities in the sports and entertainment industries. “Strategic communication is a purposeful use of communication by organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals, and it encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (Zerfass, Verčič 2018, 493). The definition describes alignment of strategic communication both as an outcome and an ongoing process, furthermore, it introduces a distinction between primary and secondary alignment. It also highlights the importance of professional and organized communication and emphasizes the need for strategic communication to be institutionalized and integrated into decision-making and planning process.

Van Ruler says: “the concept of “strategic communication” suggests that not all communication can be seen as strategic [...] communication is only strategic when it has a certain quality. When attempting to define a field, this is problematic” (Ruler 2018, 13). Observing the management of the communication process, including strategy creation, implementation, evaluation and, especially importantly, context creation in the strategy process, – strategy can be considered in that aspect – Van Ruler calls it “a continuous, reflective learning loop” (Ruler 2018, 12). Strategic communication focuses on how organizations purposefully use communication to accomplish their mission. Unlike communication in the traditional sense, where operational actions and short-term results are more important, in strategic communication organizations focus on thoughtful management of a set of communication processes.

The process of strategic communication itself includes various elements of communication that characterize this concept not only at the theoretical level, but also in practice. The function of strategic communication is to strengthen a centralized and coordinated approach to communication in the public sector, creating the possibility of such communication practice that supplies complete information with the aim of providing a quick and efficient solution to issues of importance to society, including the ongoing processes in the information space. Ensuring this requires strategic and coordinated actions of all involved parties, including the management and use of communication processes to achieve and explain the set goals. Several researchers in strategic communication primarily point to the need for management elements or the management perspective in its understanding, others emphasize the organizational communication perspective,



Figure 2. Levels of strategic communication

stating that one of the key elements of strategy is dialogue. From this point of view, strategic communication can be understood as one-way manipulation and persuasion (Falkheimer, Heide 2022, 105–108). However, such a view does not allow highlighting the complex nature of organizational communication. Only by looking at strategic communication from different perspectives – communication and media, sociology, organization and management theories – is it possible to obtain a holistic and true understanding (Hallahan, Holtzhausen *et al.* 2007, 10).

Three hierarchical and nested levels of analysis could be applied in studying the strategic communication: the macro or societal level, the meso or organizational level, the micro or communication level (Holtzhausen, Fullerton *et al.* 2021, 20–24). See Figure 2.

The Terminology Working Group of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence defines strategic communication as a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that includes everything a communicator does to achieve goals in a competitive environment (Bolt, Stolze *et al.* 2023, 19). Strategic communication is strategic because it focuses on long-term discourse change; it is strategic because it navigates in a dynamic and competitive information environment; it is strategic in that tactics must be coherent and consistent in a strategy that evolves as the best intentions of planners are confronted with the impact of real events. Strategic communication is based on 3 principles: (1) strategic communication respects the individual’s right to choose between competing ideas or to reject them; (2) strategic communication respects the principle of transparency of information and foresees the responsibility of communication specialists for this; (3) strategic communication respects the individual’s right to freedom of speech.

The objectives of strategic communication focus on four important fields of communication: organizational effectiveness, for example, the knowledge about communication provided to the stakeholders of the organization will contribute to the effectiveness of the organization – the stakeholders will use the best channels to convey the message; ensuring the principles of openness and transparency in communication, which includes openness of information between the organization, its stakeholders and the external environment; the formation of organizational identity, which focuses on the formation of identity for employees, is linked to the organizational culture, values and understanding of common goals; organizational image formation, which focuses on how the organization is perceived, what associations its performance provides, what the public knows about the organization as a whole (Falkheimer, Heide 2023, 196–198).

Communication is at the heart of an organization's existence and performance. Likewise, it plays an important role in the process of reaching organizational goals. Strategic communication is not limited to the activities of communication practitioners; strategic communication practices, as noted above, build meaning, trust and reputation, and manage symbolic relationships between internal and external stakeholders to ensure organizational growth and enable the freedom to deliver necessary activities. This largely applies to any kind of external communication, as well as internal communication, or communication with employees who are representatives of the organization and contacts for many different interested parties. At the same time, it does not mean that the understanding of the importance of communication among all the stakeholders, including the internal stakeholders of the organization, such as managers, is similar and truly valued. It is important to find out how communication professionals are perceived by the management and how they evaluate their competence in contributing to the achievement of strategic goals, and whether they are ready to invite communication professionals in the strategic decision-making process.

Opinions on the evaluation of strategic communication differ, however, the most important questions of the discussion are how strategic communication is understood and how the practice of strategic communication is integrated in the process of achieving the organization's goals. Earlier studies have focused on how top management and/or communication practitioners in organizations perceive the value of communication. The value of communication in an organization is highly dependent on the knowledge, beliefs and expectations of managers and other employees about what communication can provide. It is top managers who may or may not provide communication practitioners with the kind of influence that enables action. Moreover, even if communication is valued in the organization as important, there is a gap between this perception and the slow development of a professional communication department and the inclusion of strategic communication at the management level. In a study of

managers' and board members' perceptions and expectations of communication's contribution to organizational success, researchers concluded that advanced strategic communication visions developed in academia and practice have not yet reached many boardrooms (Zerfass, Sherzada, 2015, 13–15).

There are various methods of evaluating communication practices, including strategic communication evaluation methods. One of them is the Communication Maturity Index (Johansson, Grandien *et al.* 2019), where the communication practice in the organization is evaluated according to four levels of maturity – immature, in the process of development, established and mature. Such levels are determined by analysing 6 main theoretical and practical aspects of strategic communication: “(1) communication understanding among key stakeholders of the communication function and the value of communication to the organization [...]; (2) communication function – the comprehensive approach to work with internal and external communication [...]; (3) communication prerequisites such as budget and the number of people working in communications as well as time devoted to communication activities for managers and employees [...]; (4) communication organization – how communication work is organized and how the organization work integrated and specialized with communication issues [...]; (5) communication competence such as skills, education of key personnel as well as the need for training [...]; (6) communication practices and assessment methods” (Johansson, Grandien *et al.* 2019, 4–10).

A communication maturity model with adapted assessment criteria in addition to the Maturity Model and the evaluation criteria offered in the OECD Report on Public Communication, for example, including digital communication as one of the elements of the Communication Maturity Index, has been used for the analysis of the strategic communication by the British government (OECD 2023).

Application of strategic communication in public administration in Latvia

Public communicators are facing an increasingly complex information environment brought on by the rapid technological changes, which have provided both novel opportunities and unprecedented challenges. These evolutions have connected individuals around the world, facilitated their ability to create and share information, and helped social movements to broaden their reach. At the same time, online and social media platforms are undermining the role of traditional media and have facilitated the unparalleled speed and scale of the spread of mis- and disinformation in ways that undermine trust, public discussion and democratic engagement. Russia's full scale invasion in Ukraine has raised the issue of disinformation, the role of strategic communication in public administration and the role of information for the national security.

For the first time in the history of Latvia in January 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia approved the “The National Concept on Strategic Communication and Security of the Information Space 2023–2027” (hereinafter – the Concept). Here, strategic communication is defined as a strategic, planned, targeted and coordinated application of all available communication means to achieve the strategic objectives of the institution and the state (Cabinet of Ministers 2023). The development of a uniform strategic communication capacity of the public administration and information space security monitoring structure, and a model of coordination mechanism, as well as strengthening of the national strategic communication capacity and the security of the information space are determined by the National Security Concept, the Comprehensive State Defence Concept and the National Defence Concept (Saeima 2019, 2020; Aizsardzības ministrija 2019).

The vision of “the Concept is to contribute to the security of the information space, including through strategic communication, ensuring that public administration and society are resilient to external and internal risks of interference in democratic processes and information space, and able to participate effectively in managing crises and threats. The Concept is intended to promote resilience of the public administration and society of Latvia against various manipulations, including disinformation and information influence operations, in the context of Russia’s war, by strengthening all three pillars of information space security over the next five years: national strategic communication capabilities, media environment, media and information literacy” (Cabinet of Ministers 2023).

The model for coordination of strategic communication and security of the information space presented by the Concept can be applied to day-to-day situations, as well as in case of crisis and threats, and specific measures will allow for achievement of high-level resilience of public administration and public itself to external and internal interference risks. The Concept will be implemented according a semi-decentralised governance and coordination model, while ensuring comprehensive involvement of national and local government authorities. At the strategic level, the State Chancellery will ensure the planning and inter-institutional coordination of medium- and long-term measures on a daily basis, as well as in case of crisis and threats. At the tactical and operational level, the public administration institutions will, according to their competence, design and implement their strategic communication plans and strategies on a decentralized basis, as well as contribute to the strengthening of information space security (Cabinet of Ministers 2023).

The State Chancellery will monitor and coordinate the implementation of the Concept in cooperation with more than 20 public administration institutions, independent institutions, security services, as well as organised civil society, private and academic sectors. In order to implement the Concept, a plan

(restricted access information) of intended measures has been designed with specifically defined activities and results to be achieved, the division of responsibilities between institutions, as well as deadlines for the implementation.

Conclusions

Research and understanding of the concept of strategic communication and the application of strategic communication is still under development. New studies and publications analyse various aspects of strategic communication from an interdisciplinary perspective. The first formulation, stating that strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission, has been reformulated, as follows: strategic communication is the practice of deliberative and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach the set goals. The roles of both engagement and communication agent have been added to the definition. Finally, an even broader explanation of the functions and role of strategic communication has been reformulated – strategic communication is the management of amalgam of communication processes in the context of making, presenting, realizing, and remaking of strategy as a continuous, reflective learning loop. Hence, strategic communication is the overall management of communication process, including the full cycle of strategy formation, coordination, implementation and evaluation. It is possible that future studies will look more broadly at the impact of the COVID pandemic, as well as the impact of digitization processes on strategic communication. In fact, the latest OECD report on public communication already has included that in the study. In Latvia, the process of institutionalization of strategic communication is taking shape, as well as the understanding the role of strategic communication in public administration. Two studies are in progress at the University of Latvia on strategic communication, which will certainly provide an expanded understanding of strategic communication in Latvian public administration.

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