STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

THE COCREATIONAL MODEL

Carl H. Botan

WILEY Blackwell

A guide to strategic communication that can be applied across a range of subfields at all three levels—grand strategic, strategic, and tactical communication

Communication is a core function of every human organization so when you work with communication you are working with the very core of the organization. Written for students, academics, and professionals, *Strategic Communication Theory and Practice: The Cocreational Model* argues for a single unified field of strategic communication based in the three large core subfields of public relations, marketing communication, and health communication, as well as strategic communicators working in many other subfields such as political communication, issues management, crisis communication, risk communication, environmental and science communication, social movements, counter terrorism communication, public diplomacy, public safety and disaster management, and others. *Strategic Communication Theory and Practice* is built around a cocreational model that shifts the focus from organizational needs and the messages crafted to achieve them, to a publics-centered view placing publics and their ability to cocreate new meanings squarely in the center of strategic communication theory and practice. The author—a noted expert in the field—outlines the theories, campaign strategies, common issues, and cutting edge challenges facing strategic communication, including the role of social media, ethics, and intercultural strategic communication.

As the author explains, the term "strategic communication" properly refers only to the planned campaigns that grow out of research and understanding what publics think and want. This vital resource answers the questions of whether, and how, strategic-level skills can be used across fields, as it:

- Explores the role of theory and the cocreational meta-theory in strategic communication
- Outlines ethical practices and problems in the field
- Includes information on basic campaign strategies
- Offers the most recent information on risk communication, preparedness and terrorism communication, and employment in strategic communication
- Redefines major concepts, such as publics, from a cocreational perspective

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Foreword

From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s the author worked, both paid and unpaid, on behalf of contests for city council, state house, US House and the Bobby Kennedy campaign, founded and operated the People's Law Program and the Community Law Project, worked with a small and now long defunct community newspaper, served very briefly as a newscaster on an FM station, worked with a number of union campaigns (e.g., United Farm Workers' grape and lettuce boycotts, Clothing and Textile Workers' Farah Pants boycotts in southwestern Michigan in the early 1970s and the Professional Air Traffic Controllers during their strike in the early 1980s), worked briefly as a union organizer in the hospitality industry and as a general public relations practitioner. He began to see similarities across these disparate fields, and how they used the same essential knowledge and skill sets. In 1979 he began an academic career teaching labor studies, industrial relations and parliamentary procedure in several Detroit-area colleges. He defined his academic career as primarily in public relations in spite of the fact that there were almost no public relations courses available in Detroit at that time and he did not get to teach a class actually called public relations until 1984 at Illinois State University. He has taught public relations, research methods and strategic communication at Illinois State, Rutgers, Purdue, Temple and George Mason universities, where he is currently a full professor and recent Director of the PhD program in Health and Strategic Communication at George Mason.

Never turning his back on his chosen field of public relations, the author began to see public relations as one core specialty of a much larger field, so that even in the 1980s he began also to describe his field of work as strategic communication. In retrospect, this was due to no flash of insight or prescience, but probably represented no more than an attempt, possibly motivated by the economics, of finding more consulting clients by describing several years of work in communication-related jobs in a way that suggested some specialization in one kind of work. Academic papers, articles and book chapters addressing strategic communication, beginning with an issues management approach, followed in 1985 (Brock, Botan and Frey), 1993 (Botan and McCreadie), 1996 (Botan), 1997 (Botan), 1998 (Botan and Soto), 2005 (Botan), 2005 (Taylor and Botan) and 2005 (Botan and Taylor), among others. Numerous grant applications, panel discussions, seminars, consultancies, book chapters and international speeches addressing strategic communication also followed.

Thus this book is in large part a pulling together of a lifetime of work in strategic communication that began before that term became popular. The chapters that follow represent integration, updating and expansion of many of these earlier works as well as much new material not previously published. The result is an approach to strategic communication that encompasses, in addition to public relations, marketing, social marketing, political campaigning, health campaigns, union campaigns, community relations, investor relations, stockholder relations, national development, public

diplomacy, military public affairs, risk communication, crisis communication, counterterrorism, social media and organizational intervention and change consulting (cf. Botan, 1990), as well as many other specialty areas of strategic communication.

The reader will be best served by keeping three things in mind while reading:

1) Not everyone who claims to be in strategic communication is. In fact, many who claim to be in the field just use the term strategic communication because it is a common buzzword in the business world of the early twenty-first century. It is best to develop your own view of the field as you read and then make your own decisions about who meets your criteria and who does not, including when evaluating this book.
2) Strategic communication is a subset of the broader field of Communication but there are large numbers of legitimate strategic communication practitioners, a term used in this book to denote both tacticians and strategists together, whose background is in other fields.
3) What follows is one person's understanding of a rapidly emerging and evolving field so, although the book is based on both practical experience and scholarship, the views in this book are just one perspective on strategic communication and even then at only one point in time.

Overview of the Book

Many historically quasi-autonomous communication practices are treated as separate in part because practitioners and scholars do not talk enough with each other and in part because once any organization is structured in some way there can be very strong resistance to change because of perceived budgetary, career or disciplinary/departmental interests. The way strategic communication (SC) is handled in a particular corporation or university serves as a kind of window through which to see how well that organization understands which publics are important to it and what its relationships with those publics are. Many corporations and universities balkanize the strategic communication field, dividing it into multiple organizational compartments because of superficial sensory similarities such as, "we all do a lot of writing," or "we all need to communicate with our customers." Both of these views reflect very similar mental models based in the instrumental metatheory discussed in Chapter 2 and throughout this book. But in the larger scheme of things how much, or even how well, we write is not as important as what content we write because the overriding strategic issue of relationships with publics is determined more by content than by form or quantity. Thus, being message-centered is not nearly as important as being publics-centered and among the goals of this book is helping develop an alternative metatheoretic view of strategic communication focusing on strategic-level matters involving relationships with publics.

Some practitioners, particularly in large firms, are a bit ahead of many universities in this regard because they offer services that integrate a broad range of strategic communication practices, although not always with a full understanding of why such services can sometimes be easily integrated and sometimes not. Universities that teach strategic communication related courses also often separate closely related practices into different departments, different schools and even different colleges. They may also combine them inappropriately on the basis of very superficial similarities that comport well with their own assumptions and needs, such as getting a piece of the enrollment or business pie, rather than any real understanding of strategic communication. This book is organized around different views of strategic communication and how these relate both to tactical-level and more strategic-level considerations, including ethics specific to strategic communication.

Part I: Elements

In Part I, the two themes of the book are discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 covers the first theme that strategic communication is a single field, including, among many others, the core subfields of public relations, marketing and health communication. It does so largely through discussing

basic concepts that apply similarly across subfields. Chapter 2 discusses the second theme of the book, a new approach to strategic communication called the cocreational approach, by first discussing what theory and metatheory are and then comparing the current metatheoretic assumptions about strategic communication with the cocreational view. Consistent with the cocreational metatheory from the second chapter, Chapter 3 discusses the most important concept in strategic communication, publics. It does so through the lens of the cocreational metatheory from Chapter 2. Finally, Chapter 4 discusses the ethical implications of the cocreational model as they apply across strategic communication subfields.

Part II: Strategies

Part II of the book applies the two main themes, but particularly the cocreational theme, to theory-level and applied-level issues in strategic communication (as distinct from the focus on the metatheory level in Chapter 2). It does so by beginning in Chapter 5 with the strategic core of issues and issues management that apply across all subfields. Chapter 6 then discusses examples of existing well-known theories and evaluates each for its applicability and consistency with the cocreational metatheory. The specific theories discussed are by no means all, or even the best, of the theories available to strategic communication practitioners. They are used here because they are so well known and illustrate two underlying arguments, that there is a body of theory that can help break down artificial boundaries between the subfields of strategic communication and that there is an existing body of theory that supports a cocreational view of strategic communication. Part II of the book concludes in Chapter 7 with a discussion of the strategically focused practice of risk and preparedness communication.

Part III: New Challenges

In fields changing as rapidly as SC, new directions of interest are always emerging as well as new developments in more established areas. Strategic Communication is far too broad, and many of its practices far too new and complex, for any one person, one book, or even a whole firm or university department to keep up with. So in keeping with the primary themes of the book, Part III addresses broad areas of development and practice that cut across many areas of SC practice and scholarship. These include social media and new information technology in Chapter 8 and international and intercultural SC in Chapter 9. Finally, although terrorism has been with us since ancient times, it is a new area of theory and SC practice in the early twenty-first century that may one day become another major force transforming SC, and it is the topic of Chapter 10. In keeping with the second theme of the book, Part III discusses these areas through the lens of the cocreational metatheory. Many other areas of development and practice belong here, including the special character of SC as one emerging field that is both primarily composed of women and increasingly well-paid, the continuing practical and ethical issues of studying under one roof both in-house staff practitioners and external consultants with the large differences in socialization and values this implies, the role of SC in national development and nation-building worldwide, political religious and tribal SC, and others. However, time and space considerations limited the book to these three broad areas of emerging practice.

Part I

Elements

1

Strategic Communication Concepts

Summary

Strategic communication (SC) is practiced in many fields, including communication, the military sciences, business management and marketing, politics, public health and a host of others. All the fields that practice SC have developed terms, practices and definitions to meet their own needs. The first purpose of this book is to unify the understanding and practice of strategic communication across these subfields. The job of this first chapter, then, is to lay the foundation for doing so by providing an understanding of SC that can be used across all constituent subfields at all three levels of grand strategic, strategic and tactical communication. To do that, this chapter briefly introduces the scope of SC and how this book is organized and then defines grand strategy, strategy and tactics and explains their relationships. With this background, the chapter then defines SC and explains four generic grand strategies, which serve as archetypes of the policy views that guide much SC practice.

Strategic Communication Is Big and Getting Bigger

The first challenge for anyone studying or practicing strategic communication is that the field is growing so fast in both its core employment and at its margins that no one can get a good handle on all the places and ways we practice it. In addition, there is no generally accepted list of all the constituent subfields of SC, although as discussed later what data there is suggests that the largest subfields of SC include public relations (PR), marketing-advertising-promotion, and public health education (also sometimes known as social marketing). In the United States, for example, there are separate federal employment statistics available that fit pretty well with these three, which can be called the core subfields because the primary purpose of each is to conduct communication campaigns.

Many other fields have only one or a few members doing SC work per organization where the primary purpose is something other than communication campaigns, so these can be described as secondary or peripheral subfields. These are SC practitioners who might work for units of government, in political campaigns, for charities, for religious organizations, as community advocates, in the armed forces, in corporate communication departments, and in the newly emerging communication industries such as social media, web-page design and online research, as well as some independent practitioners and consultants and so on. Although the primary purpose of these fields is not communication

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campaigns, the practitioners who work in them are by no means marginal practitioners and they may or may not outnumber the SC practitioners working in the core subfields of SC. However, there are no separate data collected on these practitioners and as a practical matter they are uncountable today. Then there is the academic field of organizational communication, to which SC owes substantial intellectual and practical debts. Organizational communication is (a) where many SC practitioners, both core and secondary, get their academic training, (b) the historical home of much SC research (see especially the rhetorical organizational communication tradition), and (c) a subject area that does not restrict itself to strategic campaigns, so it is not a core subfield of SC.

Employment in SC

It is very difficult to estimate SC employment in any one country, let alone worldwide. This is largely due to two related issues. First, there appear to be no data published for strategic communication by that name. Second, the enormous SC employment in secondary subfields is not parsed out and reported anywhere. On the other hand, there are some data available for the three core subfields in some countries, such as the United States, that can provide some guidance in understanding SC employment, although the way employment categories are grouped again injects some lack of precision.

In the case of public relations in the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) separates the 240,700 non-management public relations specialists from the 65,800 public relations and fundraising managers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016–17). But then BLS data do not similarly report on non-management marketing communication specialists at all. Instead they merely report 225,200 "advertising, promotions and marketing managers," not all of which fit the definition of strategic communicators. These data, in turn, appear to contribute significantly to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016–17) overall estimate of 484,640 in "advertising, public relations and related services." Not included in this figure, however, are all the non-management jobs in marketing or the 63,000 health educators (social marketers or social marketing), many of which are core SC practitioners. Notably, health communication jobs are expected to grow much faster than PR or advertising, promotions and marketing jobs.

Clearly, adding up all the jobs and job growth in the core and margins of SC would be impossible, but an estimate of SC employment in the three federally reported core subfields in the US alone by 2020 would be in the range of 600,000–750,000. A guesstimate of total SC employment in the US alone by 2020 would be well over a million, suggested in part by the number of job openings in SC today. For example, in August 2015 one internet job site alone listed 149,797 job openings in strategic communication, although some of the listed jobs fell short of what would be called SC in this book (Indeed.com, 2015). The same source listed 64,954 PR jobs, 228,491 jobs in marketing communication and 375,460 jobs in health communication on the same date, although many of these listings clearly overlap, job titles are a bit subjective and, again, not all the jobs listed on this site fit the definition of SC used in this book.

A guesstimate for worldwide SC employment by 2025 might be in the range of 2–2.5 million jobs, with the largest numbers in the US, Europe (France, United Kingdom and Germany leading) and China. This is at best a wild guess, but a quick check of how much SC is discussed on the internet every day can at least hint at the size of the field and maybe at future employment.

SC on the Internet

The number of SC hits found with simple internet searches appears to be in the area of 50–100 million. In 2010, Yahoo alone returned 204,003,168 hits, but with possible changes to their search procedures that number had dropped to only 16,400,000 by late 2015, at a time when Google had 36,900,000 and