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Book review

The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication. Edited by D. Holtzhausen & A. Zerfass (2015). New York and Oxon: Routledge. 621 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-53001-9 (hbk); ISBN: 978-0-203-09444-0 (ebk)

Originally used in the realm of national governments and the military, strategic communication is a growing popularity expression used in communication science education in the last five years. The term strategic communication embraces various goal-oriented communication activities, signaling a managerial approach to the ways in which organizations off all kind communicate.

Agreeing with the viewpoint that “thinking about communication as situated at the center of society requires reflections on the frameworks of power and interests in which communication is enacted in all kinds of organizations” (p. xx), strategic intent should be envisaged as inherent in all communication, because “communication is primarily perceived as a means to fulfill certain goals and achieve control” (p. 34).

The notion of strategic communication presents communication as intentional, planned, goal-oriented and executed by a professional assigned to that purpose. It also emphasizes that, no matter how much strategizing and planning take place behind the scenes, the ultimate aim is to communicate in the public sphere. In other words, strategic communication is about the communication process that follows from an organization’s plan and focuses on the role of communication in enabling the organization’s goals and objectives, its success and impact. So research about this topic underlines outcomes such as: influence on the levels of knowledge; change in attitudes and behaviors towards issues, products or services.

Public relations scholars are among those who must contribute to the development of strategic communication theory and understanding, highlighting the basic contribution of public relations normative, sociological, critical and rhetorical theories for the development of intentional and effective communication. However, corporate communication scholar have also shed light in the meanings of strategy and strategizing in internal and external communication focusing strategic management disciplines and theories.

As stated by Frandsen and Johansen (chapter 15), strategic orientation of communication has been discussed since Grunig’s Excellence Study in Public Relations, but it remained confined to a narrow perspective without the ontological clarification of the concept. Nevertheless and since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the concepts of strategy and strategic management in communication studies and among communication scholars has become more sophisticated, reflexive and critically discussed in academic journals such as: *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Journal of Communication Management*, and, specially, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*.

The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication explores the field of strategic communication from a multi-disciplinary perspective with the premise that, as a complex and emergent phenomenon, the domain requires appropriate theories and studies. This reference book provides insights into ongoing discussions that build an emerging body of knowledge of strategic communication. Through 37 chapters, the authors explore what the different communities of communication practice can learn from each other, offering complementary perceptions and, to some extent, opening new fields for interdisciplinary research.

As a wide-ranging book, it is divided in four parts. Part I deals with metatheoretical approaches to the subject, namely, it provides insights about the arising of the expression “strategic communication” and sheds light on the appropriation of some concepts and theories from communication studies. On 8 chapters, several authors dissect perspectives about the concept of strategy and its origins in the military (chapters 1–3); communication in the public sphere and the conception of dialogic communication (chapters 4 and 5); a networked-communication framework (chapter 6) and the social network distortion in intended communication messages (chapter 7); social theory perspectives including the concepts of legitimacy, reflection, power and language for understanding of ethical and political consequences of strategic communication practice (chapter 8).

Chapters in Part II highlight the impact of institutional and organizational factors on strategic communication. For example, among the organizational factors that inhibit excellence in strategic communication, it is possible to identify: the institutional structures where strategic communication is a result of regulative, normative and cognitive structures where communicators conform with certain professional competences and tasks (chapter 9); the organizational culture and knowledge (chapter 10); discursive practices and polyphony in management messages (chapter 11); organizational interaction and social practices that involve communication and language, and contribute to the construction of strategic practices (chapter 12); the role of executives in good governance and building communication capital (chapter 13) and the impact of executives' roles, competencies, identities and legitimacy in strategy and strategizing (chapter 15). Chapter 14 focus the contribution of entrepreneurial organization theory to strategic communication formulation in organizations, considering the dimensions of gate-keeping and networking; orientation to innovation; transformative leadership and visioning; and enactment. Departing from the entrepreneurial organization theory, the authors propose an entrepreneurial communication theory made up the dimensions of aligning, energizing, visioning and constituting. Lastly, chapter 16 clarifies the importance and relationship between organizational goal and communication outcomes in organizational strategizing.

Part III focuses on the communication between strategic communicators and their stakeholders, as well, as it highpoints several key concepts, such as: strategic messaging, persuasion, image repair, semiotic analysis, visual literacy, relationship cultivation and participatory culture. Chapter 17 proposes a synthesis of theories from public relations and advertising to create a single theoretical perspective that clarifies the identification, description, and explanation of the message variable in the strategic communication process.

Strategic messaging is also the focus of the following chapters. While chapter 18 deals with persuasion disciplines, mostly message framing, in the production of effective messages; the 19th discusses the importance of message strategies, particularly, image repair strategies in crisis situations. Visual images and semiotic analysis of a communication campaign is the focus of chapter 20 that emphasizes the use of strategic communication and visual means to reinforce cultural values, since we live in an image-dominated world. This chapter semiotic analysis reveals that public signs may strategically be used to legitimate and sustain cultural identity traits, showcasing the power of strategic communication and underscoring "the need for visual literacy to critically decode pictorial messages and respond with acceptance, negotiation, or rejection" (p. 327).

The two final chapters of this part pinpoint relationships and participative practices in strategic communication. Chapter 21 appraises the extent to which relationship cultivation strategies – traditionally studied in the context of public relations' organization-public relationships theory –, may be relevant to strategic communication outcomes. Strategic communication in participatory culture through the context of social media is discussed in the final chapter of part III.

Finally, part IV deals with domains of strategic communication practice. In 15 chapters it is possible to realize how strategic communication is practiced in areas such as: public relations (chapter 23); advertising (chapter 24); political communication (chapter 25); government communication (chapter 26); health communication with the accent of the difficulties to change perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in the population in the field of strategic communication (chapter 27); online activism and social change (chapter 28); public diplomacy (chapter 29); strategic communication performed by international nongovernmental organizations through the use of international public relations literature (chapter 30); terrorism (chapter 31); crisis communication (chapters 32 and 33); risk communication (chapter 34); organizational change (chapter 35); digital communication (chapter 36); and global strategic communication considering the lens of coordination, control and standardization (chapter 37).

The strategic repositioning of power enhances opportunities for citizens and less visible or powerful publics to participate in the creation and spreading of information fostering a multiple-way flow of information. In this sense, interested citizens become members of the interlocking systems of governance. They can then use this information, spread it through sustainable networks, and advocate for change. So strategic communication is no longer imprisoned by the power control of organizations, it becomes a matter of communication capital (p. 203) and can be conceptualize in the realms of dialogic flows of communication. But strategic planning, implementation and management of communication may be endangered by social media and network communication, as well as, by the global complexity of publics and stakeholders. As stated by Eriksson (chapter 33), in digital age, strategic communication is both about planning and improvising. Web social media force to a crafting strategy practice combined with an implementing strategy where most message crisis scenarios are predicted.

As foreseen in the introduction of this handbook, strategic communication ground has many challenges ahead. Still, this work provides the first comprehensive review of research in the strategic communication field, term that has become popular in communication studies since the second decade of the twenty-first century. Considering that strategic communication is at the centre of communication studies, the editors informed about some omissions, particularly in the area of branding, consumer behaviour and marketing. They justify this omission with the need to focus strategic communication in the "soft" disciplines where it is much harder to determine and measure outcomes. Even so, *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* offers a wide-ranging picture of an emerging and pervasive domain that encompasses various goal-directed communication activities.

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