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Title: Communication Professionals

1. Abstract (150 words)

Communication plays an important role in the formulation, revision, presentation, execution, implementation, and operationalization of strategies for entities of all kinds. Managing and executing strategic communication in a global and mediatized world is a complex task. To enable practitioners to achieve strategic goals, their skills, knowledge and personal attributes need to be developed into broader competencies that can then act as drivers of success for communication departments. Aspects of strategic communications are changing quickly, such as the move towards engagement across multiple media platforms. As such, there are some competency gaps which need to be considered and addressed to enable practitioners to keep up with and ensure their communications are effective. Other issue areas, such as the need to reduce gender pay gaps, are also important considerations for the field, if it is to succeed in the future.

2. Key words (up to 6)

Competencies; Excellence; Cyber security; Ethics; Digital technologies; Institutionalisation

<a> Strategic communications: understanding the field

In 2007, the first definition of strategic communications appeared: “*the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission*” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). Five years later, the definition was expanded to include a wider set of actors: “*the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity to reach set goals*” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). Now, strategic communications is seen more broadly, considering the field as a ‘*body of knowledge that focuses on the purposive use of communication to support organizations and other entities in the achievement of goals*’ (Nothhaft et al., 2018, p. 329) or more simply, ‘*any communication by any actor to serve the interests of any constituency*’ (Zerfass et al., 2018). Such definitions reflect the diverse nature of strategic communications.

As a discipline, strategic communications has connections to academic fields such as public relations and marketing as well as to concepts such as rhetoric, propaganda, public opinion and mass communications. Over the last two decades strategic communication has become institutionalized in the international academic community, with universities across the world introducing taught programs that combine theory from connected fields with key competencies for strategic communicators such as critical and strategic thinking, planning, and alignment (Nothhaft et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we provide a summary of why strategic communications is needed, and then delve into who works in the field, the work that they carry out, what core skills and attributes they have, and finally, discuss what the future looks like for the field.

<a> Who needs strategic communication and why?

Communication plays an important role in the formulation, revision, presentation, execution, implementation, and operationalization of strategies for entities of all kinds (Zerfass et al., 2018). Such entities include organizations, including corporations, governments, and non-profits, as well as social movements and individuals in the public sphere (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategic communication is used for different purposes across these entities. For instance, companies build brands to differentiate themselves, and employ reputation management to retain their license to operate, whilst the armed forces and political groups use information campaigns to frame the public debate (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategic communication is used to varying degrees due to factors such as the quantity of resources, the presence or absence of competition, changes in risk status, the importance of and presence of innovation, the need for engagement and any organisational change (Zerfass et al., 2018).

<a> Strategic communication practitioners

** Who are they?**

Entities tend to delegate much of their strategic communication to professionals working in departments of public relations, internal communications, organisational communication, marketing, advertising, corporate communications or information departments. Others may outsource their strategic communications needs to agencies. However, it is possible that any or all members of an entity can be part of the communicative process (Zerfass et al., 2018). **Related to this, Sha (2011) suggested that not all those engaging in the communicative process hold communication specific qualifications and as such vary in their competency and experience levels. Sha stated that those who are not accredited, i.e. communication practitioners, are younger and have lower levels of management and strategic planning experience than communication professionals who are accredited.**

** What do they do?**

Managing and executing strategic communication in a global and mediatized world is a complex task with one aim or purpose – to use communication for strategic objectives aligned with the organisational goals/strategy. To achieve this goal, practitioners who are responsible for strategic communications carry out a range of activities that can be separated into three distinct phases:

- strategy formulation and revision, which involves allocation of resources and the development of an intervention that enables action
- strategy presentation, which is when the actors involved in the communicative process are made aware of the strategy and what is required
- and strategy execution, implementation, and operationalization, which is the allocation of resources for operations and tactics (Zerfass et al., 2018).

What qualities do communication professionals have?

We see debates about professionalism and professions in many books and spread across numerous disciplines. The same case can be made for strategic communication. Cooper (2004) defines a similar set of qualities that both traditional and new professions hold. These are:

- (1) Esoteric knowledge – theoretical or technical – not available to the general population,
- (2) Commitment to social values such as health or justice,
- (3) National organisation to set standards, control membership, liaise with a wider society, and
- (4) Extra-strong moral commitment to support professional values.

Strategic communication (and related applied communication disciplines such as public relations) have this same set of qualities. They need to be developed, maintained and fostered. Using the 10-year data from the European Communication Monitor (ECM) the research team identified characteristics of the professional communicator in Europe (Tench et al., 2017). They identified three dimensions of professionalization in communication management as *training the communication team*; *continuing to self-develop* and *engaging in mentoring and networking*.

Their thesis argues these three dimensions of professionalisation include different kinds of activities. Training the team means training communication skills and management know-how, new communicative tasks and learning to handle communication processes and business models in the organisation. The management of high potentials and succession planning are also part of this keeping the team up to date.

Self-development involves personal development and contributing to the much-needed ‘academisation’ of the field. Developing personal skills, knowledge and competences goes hand in hand with using, understanding and supporting research. This includes investing in an organisation’s own research or project, as is supporting academic research more generally in the field. Also, supporting the education of future professionals at universities and training institutes belongs to academisation. Building relationships with future professionals through internships and wider employer branding are also activities that contribute to professionalisation. Mentoring (internally and externally) and networking involves benchmarking with peers and other organisations as well as sharing best practices with them, for example at conferences.

Barriers to professionalism within organisations

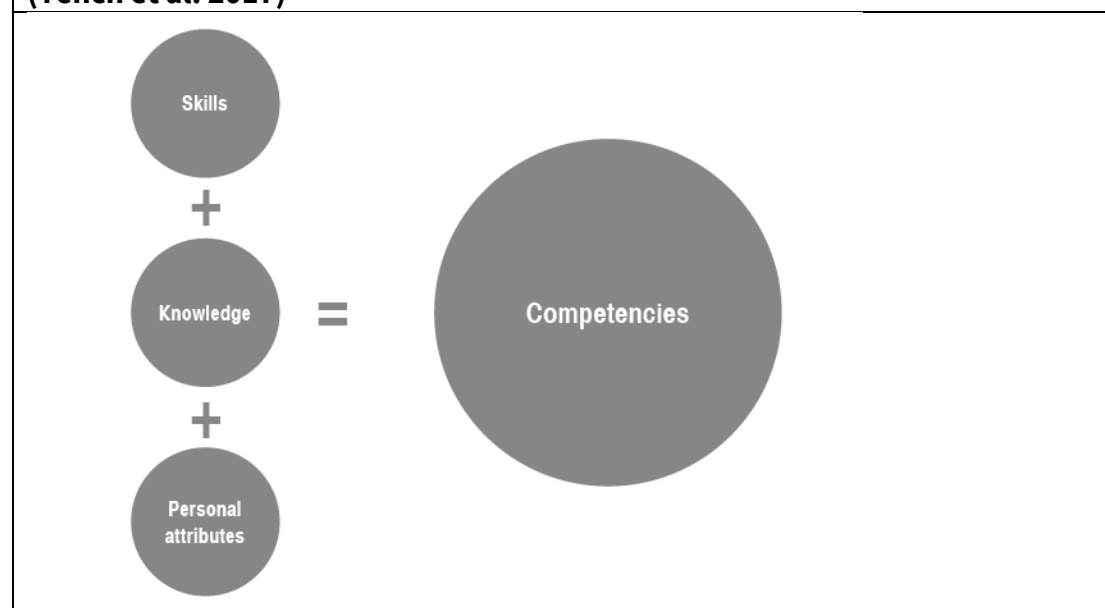
Whilst many public relations organisations strive for professionalism, there are several barriers that can hamper this process. Bivins (1993) suggested that one of these barriers is the lack of guidance from professional organisations for how public relations organisations may advance their service goals. Aldoory and Toth (2002) suggest an alternative barrier to professionalism, that of enduring gender discrepancies. The authors reveal significant gender differences across public relations organisations, including differences in hiring perceptions and salaries. Aldoory and Toth provide theoretical propositions to explain why

such differences continue to exist and argue that despite public relations being dominated by women, power in organisations in regard to managerial positions continues to be held largely by men (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). This, they state, is leading to a glass ceiling problem and a lack of employee support for women, which is ultimately hampering professionalism within the field, as supported by other researchers. For instance, Lathabhavan and Balasubramanian (2017) revealed ongoing glass ceiling challenges for women working in public relations in Asian organisations, whilst Fitch and Third (2010) discuss ongoing issues of gendering in public relations in Australia, and argue that such patriarchal gender relations lead to ongoing barriers to professionalism within the field. Moreover, Sha (2011) reported that stark differences in the demographic, job-related characteristics and professional competencies of practitioners working in public relations exist and that these differences are unlikely to be supporting the field as it strives toward professionalism.

** What skills and competencies do they have?**

Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) highlight the advantage of studying competencies over roles, “as ... roles outline tasks and responsibilities in the job description, in today’s dynamic workplace these same roles are likely to change frequently. In contrast, competencies are the underlying foundational abilities that are integral to successfully carrying out the tasks and responsibilities, and thus remain a stable blueprint for practice over time”. Based on findings from an EU funded research project, Tench et al (2013) through the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation Programme (ECOPSI) argue how in communication management skills, knowledge and personal attributes combine to form competencies (See Figure 1, (Tench et al., 2013; Tench & Moreno, 2015).

Figure 1
Skills, knowledge and personal attributes contributing to competencies
(Tench et al. 2017)



The difficulty in establishing a workable definition of competencies has been discussed in the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) by Winterton

et al. (2005). Their aim was to clarify the concepts of knowledge, skills and competences. Competences provide a link between education (and skills) and job requirements (roles). Three professional competencies can be distinguished. First, 'conceptual competence' which refers to knowledge about an entire domain. Second 'procedural competence' which refers to the application of conceptual competence in a particular situation. Third 'performance competence' which is required to assess problems and select a suitable strategy for solving them.

In communication management competency is usually defined as conceptual competence and performance competence. In other words competencies refer either to the substantive ability to carry out a task or how practitioners should behave in order to perform in the role.

Four Qualifications For Communicators

Following the competence line of thinking about qualifications Tench et al (2017) asked European professionals what they think the most important qualifications for communication management are. Four groups of qualifications could be retrieved from the answers. Communication professionals should (1) have a social and empathic antenna, (2) be able to produce and deliver effective messages, (3) have research skills and organisational management skills and, (4) have knowledge about society (see Box 1).

Box 1

Four necessary qualifications for communication professionals

- (1) Social and empathic antenna
- (2) Producing and delivering effective messages
- (3) Research skills and organisational management skills
- (4) Knowledge about society

Tench et al. 2017

The authors describe the *social and empathic antenna* as being related to the skill of coaching others in their communication or enabling others to communicate. It's also about handling power and coalition building between people inside and outside the organisation. This can mean initiating and moderating dialogues with a cross cultural and cross gender sensitivity. Furthermore it has to do with handling ethical issues and knowing about ethics and with managing projects globally.

In order to be able to *produce and deliver effective messages* it is necessary to have a lot of knowledge about the effects of traditional and new media, about persuasion concepts and strategies but also about how to manage relationships inside and outside the organisation. The actual message production and delivering and presenting messages as a public speaker are also characteristics of this dimension.

Research and organisational management skills they argue concern developing knowledge practical understanding about communication technologies and research to be able to perform effect-studies as well as forecasting based on data retrieved. Also being able to interpret the data for insights about marketing, consumers and other stakeholders is part of this qualification. The management skills are handling organisational change and development, as well as finances, budgeting and accounting for the communication function of the organisation.

The fourth attribute involves *Knowledge about society* and they related this to being about depth of understanding about the way society and politics work and how this is translated into legal requirements and issues for the organisation. Knowledge about the functioning of organisations in democratic societies and the rule of law are considered important here.

The skills, knowledge and personal attributes that communicators have, lead to broader competencies which act as drivers of success for communication departments (Tench & Moreno, 2015). These competencies are both specific to communication such as data handling and those that are relevant to organisational success more generally, such as management skills (Topić & Tench, 2018). Results from the 2020 ECM, highlight the importance of competencies to practitioners. Almost half of respondents (43.3 per cent) agree that competencies are intensively discussed in their country, and most (80.9 per cent) believe in the need for constant improvement in order to succeed in the workplace (Zerfass et al., 2020).

The specific competencies that practitioners have vary between entities. For instance, results from the ECM 2020 revealed that practitioners working in governmental organisations and non-profits rate their business competencies significantly lower than those working in other sectors (Zerfass et al., 2020). The results also indicate that practitioners working predominantly online have the highest technology and data competencies of all practitioners but lack business skills compared to those working in other areas. There are also differences in competencies between practitioners, with communication leaders more likely to be skilled in business, management and communication skills, than their subordinates, whilst younger professionals report the greatest skill in handling technology. Moreover, there are differences in capacities between genders, with female practitioners confident in their communication and management competencies, whilst male practitioners rate their business and technology skills significantly higher (Zerfass et al., 2020).

Results from the 2020 ECM highlight important competencies for strategic communication professionals. The survey highlights communication, management, business, technology and data competencies are the most important skills needed to be an effective communicator, as supported by over 60 per cent of practitioners. However, there are significant gaps in practitioner competency level across these areas, the largest of which occurring in the areas of technology and data compliance, with approximately half of practitioners (50.6 per cent, and 42.1 per cent respectively) feeling competent in these areas (Zerfass et al., 2020).

<a> What does excellence in strategic communications look like?

There are differences between experienced and younger professionals in terms of perceived importance of developing competences. Results from the 2020 ECM indicate that experienced practitioners are more aware of the need for competency development, with less than one quarter of practitioners in their 20s reporting only little or moderate need for such development. A similar difference in the awareness of the importance of competency development was also reported regionally, with the awareness of the need for development strongest in Western and Northern Europe. Such differences may in turn lead to variations in what competencies are held, and thus could account for some of the differences in the success of communication efforts i.e., achievement of desired goals, between entities (Zerfass et al., 2020).

<a> The future of strategic communications

** Future requirements for applied strategic communicators**

Some areas of strategic communications such as alignment with management have changed gradually over recent years, providing time for practitioners to adapt, however other areas have changed more quickly, such as the move towards engagement across multiple media platforms, which has resulted in some competency gaps. There are also new challenges arising for the field, which practitioners need to be able to deal with. Such challenges include the need to tackle fake news and disinformation, the move towards digital, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for communications, and the rise of new media platforms and formats (Tench & Waddington, 2021). Many of the key competencies mentioned above, including the ability to produce and deliver effective messages across new media channels, are not fully developed across strategic communications practitioners. Thus, in order to progress as a field, practitioners will require training. The importance of doing so in communication has been assessed similarly across all ranks. However, despite the importance of improving competencies, there are differences between perceived importance of competencies and current qualification level of practitioners. For instance, in the ECM 2020, 68.5 per cent of practitioners reported that technological competence is important, but only 50.6 per cent reported a highly developed competence in this area. Moreover, despite data handling being an important skill for all communicators, a lack of data competencies is particularly striking across all levels, with 50.6 per cent of communicators in Europe under-skilled in this key area.

To close these competency gaps and enable communicators to achieve excellence, training time needs to be prioritised with a correlation between educational efforts of communication practitioners and their competency level. The prioritisation of personal development is currently not equal across organisations, with practitioners working in joint stock companies having the least time to train whilst those working in consultancies and agencies have the most time, such differences also need to be considered. There are also discrepancies between practitioner age groups, with younger professionals (29 years or younger) investing over eight weeks of work and leisure time in further study, compared to only two weeks for those between 40–49. In terms of who should be responsible for further

competency development, most practitioners (84.4 per cent) report that individuals should invest in their own development, but many (82.9 per cent) plead for development programmes at the organisational level.

In addition to the core competencies needed to be an effective communicator, there are several competencies that are becoming more important due to changes in organisational priorities and environmental challenges. These include communications ethics, digital technologies and cyber security, discussed in more detail below.

<c> Ethics

As in any discipline, practitioners working in communications can face situations where activities are legally acceptable but may be challenging morally (Bowen, 2010). For instance, communication campaigns that attempt to influence the audience in one way or another can raise ethical concerns, which are heightened the more successful the campaign is at influencing. Such ethical challenges are more prevalent now than they were just 5 years ago, thanks to the rise of digital technologies such as big data analytics and sponsored content. Highlighting the prevalence of ethical challenges for communications practitioners, the results from the 2020 ECM revealed that almost half of all practitioners (46.5 per cent) experience several ethical challenges or concerns in their day to day work, including the use of bots to generate feedback and followers on social media (Wiesenberg & Tench, 2020), paying social media influencers to communicate favourably, and profiling and targeting audiences based on demographics (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Resources such as organisational guidelines have been developed to help practitioners deal with ethical challenges in their work. However, many of these resources lack relevancy in practice, and many are not widely accepted due to being outdated. As such, most practitioners rely on their own values or beliefs to deal with the challenges that they face. To aid practitioners, up-to-date guidelines made to fit the digital age need to be developed. Alongside such guidelines, training is required as recent research indicates that most communication professionals are lacking competencies needed to tackle the ethical challenges. This is despite ethical issues being more relevant now than they have been in the past, driven by compliance and transparency rules within organisations. In order to equip practitioners with the skills they need, practical training should be offered. Doing so would enable them to work effectively in the future. However, such training is limited at present, with results from the ECM indicating that many communication practitioners have never participated in specific ethics related training.

<c> Digital technologies

As mentioned above, digital technologies are increasingly being used in strategic communications practice. These technologies offer communicators with the opportunity to engage with publics across the world around a topic or issue. To effectively communicate, practitioners need to have the awareness of these technologies and the competencies required to utilise them to their full advantage. This requires focussed training and on the job experience. There are additional challenges with some technologies

as they offer both a positive and negative impact on the discipline. For instance, social bots are programmed to provide useful services such as automatic email responses or chats to respond to enquiries (Ferrara et al., 2016), but they can also be destructive, for instance when used to spread misinformation (Ross et al., 2019). With the increasing use of such bots, practitioners need to ensure they have the skills needed to both utilise and control them within the discipline. However, as the ECM results indicated, practitioners lack many of the competencies required to make full use of them. To enable more effective training in the use of such emerging technologies, theoretical concepts and empirical knowledge from the organisational perspective need to be enhanced (Wiesenberg & Tench, 2020).

<c> Cyber security

As so much communication happens digitally, entities are vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Such attacks include cyber fraud including phishing or whaling, malware attacks such as viruses, and hacking including distributed denial-of-service attacks (NIBusinessInfo, 2020). Such events occur regularly and in organisations of all sizes, with more than half (54%) of the communication professionals in Europe surveyed in the ECM 2020 stating that they have experienced cyber-attacks or incidents of data theft in their own organisation. Cyber-attacks present a significant - and increasingly unavoidable risk for organisations, but despite this, the extent to which cyber security is discussed by communications practitioners across different entities varies, with the ECM highlighting that more discussions are happening in Northern and Western Europe than in Southern and Eastern Europe. Seeing as entities are facing more cyber-attacks, practitioners need to be aware of their possibility and be offered training and support that can enable them to deal with the attacks and communicate their impacts.

<c> Gender equality

Currently there are stark disparities in leadership opportunities for practitioners in strategic communications, with a clear glass ceiling for women working in the field. This glass ceiling refers to barriers to career progression experienced by women. Such barriers are varied, but it has been suggested that within strategic communications and related fields such as public relations, the biggest barrier to career progression is childcare and caring responsibilities. The glass ceiling persists, despite increasing feminization of the field. This was evidenced in the 2020 ECM, with findings suggesting that whilst three out of four departments and agencies in Europe employ more women than men, only one out of two leaders are women. There are also discrepancies in salary between men and women working in strategic communications and related disciplines such as public relations with recent research indicating that the current gender pay gap in the industry is 21 per cent, which has increased from 17.8 per cent in 2016. In the UK, this gap results in a median pay gap of £11,364 in favour of men. For strategic communications to progress as a discipline, further work is needed to achieve gender equality (PRCA, 2017). Interventions that focus on female leadership, firstly from organisations and secondly from professional communities would support this goal.

** The evolution of strategic communications as an academic discipline**

It has been posited that the maturation of a discipline, such as strategic communications, can be determined by “*the extent to which it becomes more interdisciplinary and advances knowledge by crossing the traditional (but arbitrary) boundaries between the subdisciplines and by synthesizing material from the subdisciplines rather than importing ideas from the ‘mainstream’ disciplines*” (Abernethy et al., 2004). The move towards an interdisciplinary worldview has begun in strategic communications practice, but among its scholarly and professional communities this move is less pronounced. As the field continues to develop and evolve, interdisciplinary working and thought will be necessary to ensure that strategic communication scholarship continues to contribute to and further understanding of the management of communication in organization. Moreover, the move towards interdisciplinarity will enable scholars to develop concepts and theoretical frameworks that ensure conceptual and methodological collaboration across various disciplines to provide a holistic view of the communication of organizations (Tench et al., 2009).

However, in addition to interdisciplinarity, for a discipline to evolve, it requires discipline-specific terminology and unique, robust methods (Nothhaft et al., 2018). It is here where scholars have posited that strategic communications is lacking. Although there is a body of knowledge, discipline specific terminology, and specific research methods; there is little agreement on what these all are. As a result, it has been argued that, based on the four-stage evolutionary model of scientific disciplines proposed by Shneider (2009) strategic communication is stuck, oscillating between Stage 1 and a stage of “proto-4,” caught in a cycle of constant reinvention. In this vein, the discipline is becoming more sophisticated, but may not be making any real progress (Nothhaft et al., 2018). Part of the reason for the stasis in evolution of the discipline, is a lack of transfer of learnings between academia and practice, with practice more inspired by academia rather than academics taking the lead (Nothhaft et al., 2018). Moreover, there appears is little methodological development unique to strategic communication with most of those used at present being generic methods used across social sciences. Thus, for strategic communications to progress, and move to stage 3 specific methods that give answers to strategic communication’s unique questions are needed. Such methods could be intertwined with theory and also developed for useful application in practice.

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