ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies

A 'Macro' View of Strategic Communication Management: Beyond 'siloes', dominant paradigms, and pandemics

ESSACHESS –
Journal for Communication Studies
Volume 14 Issue 1(27), p. 65-91

https://www.essachess.com/
DOI: 10.21409/essachess.1775-352x

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Abstract: Communication in and by organizations is ostensibly managed under a plethora of titles and functions including public relations, communication management, corporate communication, marketing communication, organizational communication, and strategic communication. Theory in a number of these fields claims to include *all* internal and external communication in and by organizations. Building on previous literature, this analysis of the internal and external communication of three companies operating in three different countries explores the boundaries of contemporary communication management. In doing so, it challenges disciplinary 'siloes' and normative theories and suggests ways to reimagine the future. While three cases do not provide generalizable findings, this analysis adds weight to arguments for broadening understanding of strategic communication and contributes to discussion of paradigms and theories of public relations, as well as the future of corporate communication.

Keywords: disciplinary siloes, paradigms, future of PR, innovation, transformation

Article received on the March 15, 2021. Article accepted on the June 1st, 2021.
Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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Une vision « macro » de la gestion stratégique de la communication : Au-delà des « silos », des paradigmes dominants et des pandémies

Résumé : La communication dans et par les organisations est ostensiblement gérée sous une pléthore de titres et de fonctions, notamment les relations publiques, le management de la communication, la communication d'entreprise, la communication marketing, la communication organisationnelle et la communication stratégique. La théorie dans un certain nombre de ces domaines prétend inclure toutes les communications internes et externes dans et par les organisations. S'appuyant sur la littérature antérieure, cette analyse de la communication interne et externe de trois entreprises opérant dans trois pays différents explore les frontières du management de la communication contemporaine. Ce faisant, il remet en question les « silos » disciplinaires et les théories normatives et suggère des moyens de réimaginer l'avenir. Bien que trois cas ne fournissent pas de résultats généralisables, cette analyse ajoute du poids aux arguments pour élargir la compréhension de la communication stratégique et contribue à la discussion des paradigmes et des théories des relations publiques, ainsi que de l'avenir de la communication d'entreprise.

Mots-clés : silos disciplinaires, paradigmes, avenir des Relations Publiques (RP), innovation, transformation

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1. The Multidisciplinary Field of Organization-Public Relations

A wide and growing range of communication activities is undertaken today by organizations in attempts to engage and build and maintain relationships with and/or persuade various *publics*—also referred to *stakeholders* and *audiences*. These publics, stakeholders, and audiences include customers, employees, and business partners, as well as various sector and site-specific groups such as members, patients, students, and local communities. For brevity, the single collective term 'stakeholders' is used in this analysis to denote "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46), particularly those that Freeman later described as "those groups who [sic] are vital to the survival" of an organization (2001, p. 105).

A number of the organization-public communication activities that were examined in the study reported here are described in disciplinary literature as *public relations*, which has coalesced as a body of theory and a professionalized field of practice over the past 100 years or more. Harlow (1976) identified 472 definitions of public relations, many of which are broad and suggest that the field includes all interactions between organizations and their stakeholders. Even a cursory analysis of widely cited definitions and descriptions shows that, in addition to *media relations*, public relations purportedly incorporates managing *stakeholder relations*; *reputation management*; *issue and crisis management*; *public affairs*; *employee relations* (Broom & Sha, 2013;

L'Etang, 2013, p. 800); and providing *counsel* to management (Bernays, 1971); as well as the all-embracing term *communication management* (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). For example, one of the long-standing definitions of public relations describes the practice as "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). Public relations is also directly linked with, or seen as synonymous with communication management, in the Excellence study books *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Grunig, 1992) and *Excellent Organizations and Effective Organizations: A Study of Communication Management in Three Countries* (Grunig, L., Grunig J., & Dozier, 2002), as well as *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Toth, 2007).

The functionalist communication management paradigm of public relations has been challenged in recent times by *rhetorical* (Heath, 2009), *dialogic* (Taylor & Kent, 2014), and *sociocultural* theories (Edwards & Hodges, 2011) that emphasize two-way engagement and dialogue to understand and mutually interact with stakeholders, and serve societal as well as organizational interests. The purpose here is not to provide a review of public relations literature, which is amply provided elsewhere, but simply to note that these conceptualizations, as well as the 'dominant paradigm', represent the field as responsible for advising management on and implementing a wide range of communication between organizations and their stakeholders.

To further set the scene for analysis of the following case studies, it is noteworthy that scholars continue to assert that public relations operates and can be evaluated at four levels, sometimes referred to as the "four-by-four model" (Falkheimer et al., 2017, p. 94). In the final Excellence Study book, these are listed as:

1. *Program* level, which focuses on the implementation and outcomes of specific programs or projects such as media publicity or social media engagement;
2. *Functional* level, which considers the effectiveness of public relations as a department, unit, or team within an organization;
3. *Organizational* level, which focuses on how public relations contributes to an organization and achievement of its goals and objectives; and
4. *Societal* level, which focuses on the role and impact of public relations in society (Grunig et al., 2002, pp. 91–92).

Others have identified four levels of public relations operations and impact as "individual, program, organizational, and society" (Gregory, 2018, pp. 4 – 5) and as "functional, corporate, stakeholder/value chain, and societal" (Falkheimer et al., 2017, p. 95). In short, a large body of literature conceptualizes and theorizes public relations as the function with primary responsibility for a wide range of organization-public relations (OPR) and stakeholder relations.

This broad claim to communication management is embodied in the name of the largest international industry organization, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, which represents more than 40 national bodies and almost 300,000 communication practitioners worldwide.

However, in a closely related field, Cornelissen (2017) says: "Corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of *all* internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent (p. 5) [emphasis added]. Cornelissen (2017) adds that the function of corporate communication has developed to "incorporate a whole range of specialized disciplines, including corporate design, corporate advertising, internal communication to employees, issues and crisis management, media relations, investor relations, change communication and public affairs" (p. 4). This view is supported by other corporate communication scholars such as Argenti (2016).

As shown in the above definitions and descriptions, both of these fields claim to conduct *communication management*, and both claim to be responsible for most or all internal and external communication on behalf of organizations.

Other closely related field also make claim to the management of an organization's communication with stakeholders. In the USA and to some extent in the UK and Australia, communication inside organizations focused on employees is described as *organizational communication* (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). However, in a number of European countries, organizational communication is conceived as all communication initiated by or involving an organization, both internally and externally. For example, in a study of research into organizational communication, Johansson (2007) acknowledged narrow conceptualizations, but said: "Organizational communication could also be used as a general term to cover public relations, public affairs, investor relations, labor market communication, corporate advertising, environmental communication, and internal communication" (p. 93).

Meanwhile, a substantial body of theory and practice referred to as *strategic communication* has emerged since 2007, as extensively discussed in the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* and a number of texts (Heath & Johansen, 2018; Holtzhauzen & Zerfass, 2015; Nothhaft et al., 2020). While strategic communication originated with a narrow focus on an organization's "purposeful use of communication to achieve its mission," (Holtzhausen et al., 2007, p. 3), these authors advocate broader understanding to "reject the use of strategic only in an asymmetrical context" (p. 13) and say that "strategic must not be defined narrowly" (p. 27). Recent analyses suggest that most if not all of the activities discussed in this introduction comprise strategic communication, and call for strategic communication to be recognized and advanced as a path to "disciplinary integration" (Werder et al., 2020, p. 5).

In addition to activities and methods traditionally associated with public relations and corporate, marketing, organizational, and strategic communication, organizations today are embracing a range of new methods and tools to communicate with stakeholders such as emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) including *data analytics*, *learning algorithms*, and other artificial intelligence (AI) tools (Buhmann, 2019), as well as techniques such as *behavioral insights*. Each of the aforementioned disciplinary fields claim to be engaging with these advanced methods (e.g., see Galloway & Swiatek, 2018).

Whether one agrees with the these claims or not, the purpose of this introduction is to note the multiple generalized claims in relation to who does strategic communication management within organizations, and what it entails. While, on the surface, the various definitions and descriptions suggest that these related fields of practice are open and flexible, the purpose of the research reported here was to look beyond normative theories and paradigms—and beyond the semantics of nomenclature and rhetorical 'turf wars'—to empirically examine 'who does what' in terms of management of organization-public communication practice.

The study reported in the following pages was undertaken to empirically examine the range of internal and external communication activities implemented on a systematic basis in a number of progressive organizations and identify the functional units responsible and involved. This study serves two important purposes. First, it tests definitions, descriptions, and normative theory in the fields discussed by identifying all of the major communication activities, channels, and methods used by the organizations studied and examining the roles played by various functions. Second, by identifying the range of strategic communication initiatives being implemented, including innovative strategies, it explores the boundaries of the field of contemporary strategic communication practice and identifies potential directions for public relations and corporate communication.

The findings contribute to understanding (1) the scope of communication in and by organizations today irrespective of the terms and titles used; (2) the functionality and status of public relations, corporate communication, and related disciplinary fields in modern management; and (3) future directions for research, professional development, and practice.

2. Communication – The Two-Way Street

As well as being framed within disciplinary definitions and literature, as summarized in the preceding section, this study is informed by human communication theory, which van Ruler (2020) notes is a foundation on which public relations, corporate communication, and related disciplinary fields rest. Communication studies today reflect that understanding of human communication has long since evolved from one-way transmissional notions to focus on *two-way* processes undertaken to facilitate meaning making and relationships (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). Communication is conceptualized as *dialogue* rather than monologue, grounded in the work of Buber (1958, 2002), Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and, more recently, Bohm (1996). This leads to understanding communication as a *dialogical-dialectic* (Baxter, 2011)—a back and forth discussion and debate that does not always lead to agreement, but is enabled and aided by *openness* to others to consider their views and interests (Gadamer, 1989). Also, recent literature on *engagement* and *participation* informs communication studies in important ways (Arnstein, 1969; International Association for Public Participation, 2016).

Craig (2006) parsimoniously but cogently defined communication as "talking and listening" (p. 39). Couldry similarly described voice as "the implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening" (2009, p. 580) and argued that "voice matters" (Couldry, 2010), but only if it is accompanied by effective listening, which has been identified as an essential element of organizational as well as interpersonal communication (Macnamara, 2016, 2019).

In developing dialogic theory of public relations, Kent and Taylor (2002) identified the importance of orientation toward the other; mutuality; propinquity (others are consulted on matters that affect them before decisions are made); empathy; (5) acceptance of risk; and commitment (p. 26)—principles that emphasize openness and two-way engagement. They also identified listening as a "skill" necessary for building relationships (p. 31).

Recognition of communication as a two-way process is important because this study was not simply an examination of how the organizations disseminated information, or how they sought to persuade through one-way rhetoric. Rather, understanding of communication as two-way interaction involving listening and responding as well as 'speaking' informed this analysis.

3. Methodology

The following analysis is based on three case studies of internal and external communication managed by national and multinational companies in Europe conducted over an 18-month period from the beginning of 2018 to mid-2019.

3.1. *The Cases*

The sample comprised the international headquarters and two major subsidiaries of a large insurance and financial services group: Achmea International based in the Netherlands; Interamerican in Greece; and Union poisťovňa in Slovakia. The group, which could qualify as what Stake (2008) calls a "multiple case study or collective case study" (p. 123), sells life, health, motor vehicle, property, and travel insurance directly online and through agents as well as independent brokers.

These companies were purposively selected as *exemplar* case studies, which Bronk (2012) describes as ideal for identifying "the leading edge of development" (n.p.). The criteria for selecting the three companies as exemplars were two-fold. First, the companies proactively invited research to be undertaken as part of a group management plan to achieve international best practice in internal and external communication. In 2017 the Achmea group companies adopted a written commitment to *two-way* communication including implementation of an 'architecture of listening' (Macnamara, 2016a) to achieve high levels of engagement, insights, and mutual understanding with their customers, employees, and other stakeholders. Their commitment aligns with best practice in 'Excellent' public relations theory and corporate communication, including contemporary theory on dialogue and engagement, as outlined by Cornelissen (2017), Grunig et al. (2002), Johnston and Taylor (2018), and others.

Second, the Achmea group of companies collectively has more than 10 million customers and more than 14,000 staff, with Interamerican in Greece and Union poisťovňa in Slovakia being two of the major operating companies in the group. Furthermore, in addition to employees and customers, the operating companies have large networks of other stakeholders including insurance agents, brokers, and business partners such as healthcare service providers that interact with the companies' in relation to their health insurance products. Thus, the companies have a substantial number of stakeholders and, therefore, a substantial requirement for both internal and external communication.

The research approach was qualitative case study analysis, as described by Stake (2008) and Yin (2009). While a small number of qualitative case studies do not provide generalizable findings, such analysis can provide deep insights into the practices examined. As noted by Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, and Falkheimer (2018), understanding is advanced by "close-up studies" (p. 454), which characterized this study as will be explained.

3.2. Research Questions

This case study inquiry investigated the following four research questions.

RQ1: What are the main types and forms of internal and external communication conducted in the organizations studied?

RQ2: What functional units, departments, or agencies plan and manage internal and external communication in the organizations studied?

RQ3: How do the internal and external communication practices of the organizations compare with existing theories and models of PR, corporate communication, communication management, and strategic communication?

RQ4: What evidence of effectiveness of communication activities—and thus their contribution and value—is collected or available in the organizations studied, noting that effectiveness demonstrated through evaluation is identified as fundamental in all of the disciplinary literature cited.

3.3. Research Methods

As Yin noted, case study analysis involves "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (2009, p. 18). Therefore, this case study analysis involved on-the-ground research in the Netherlands, Greece, and Slovakia studying the communication activities of the three companies (i.e., in a naturalistic setting). Two visits to each company were made in early 2018 and mid-2019 respectively to identify ongoing and evolving practices and collect comparative data over the period to identify patterns, trends, and results when possible. Three research methods were deployed as follows.

(1) In-depth *interviews* were conducted with managers and staff across a range of functional units including marketing, sales, market research, customer relations, public relations, human resources (HR), and operations. A total of 129 face-to-face interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours were conducted. Interviewees were de-identified in accordance with individual requests and human research ethics approval.

(2) *Observation* of communication practices such as public and employee events, call center interactions, and processing of customer and employee feedback and correspondence was undertaken.

(3) *Content analysis* was undertaken of relevant documents such as strategic communication and marketing plans; reports of research such as customer and employee satisfaction surveys and Net Promoter Score (NPS) ratings and comments; and internal reports by functional units such as marketing and public relations. A total of 88 documents containing more than 700 pages were analyzed.

3.4. Data Analysis

Interviews were not recorded and transcribed due to the length of many discussions and the volume of interviews (more than 100 hours of discussion). Instead, extensive notes including verbatim quotes were recorded on a notebook computer and circulated to interviewees post-interview for checking and verification that their comments were accurately and fairly reported.

Content analysis of documents was conducted manually, as its purpose was simply to identify the types and forms of internal and external communication conducted and to access data such as market research, customer and employee satisfaction, and call center records, rather than detailed analysis of texts requiring coding. Nevertheless, content analysis involving categorization of document content (e.g., customer satisfaction ratings, agent feedback, etc.) and extraction of statistical and textual data was important for confirming claims and statements made in interviews and for accessing independent as well as internal data.

Observation was undertaken over a period of three weeks in each operating company (two weeks in the first visit and one week in the second), plus one week in Achmea International headquarters. While this period was not sufficient to constitute ethnography, which typically involves observation over a year or more (Geertz, 1973; Tedlock, 2008), direct observation of communication practices and activities, such as call center operations and social media monitoring and response, provided further insights as well as confirmation and verification of claims made in interviews and in documents.

The combination of almost 130 interviews, seven weeks of full-time first-hand observation, and analysis of almost 100 documents related to planning and reporting of communication constituted a 'close-up' study and contributed *credibility*, *dependability*, and *trustworthiness* to the findings, which Lincoln and Guba (1985), Shenton (2004), and others cite as key criteria for valid qualitative research.

4. Key Findings—Wither Goeth Strategic Communication Management?

After seven weeks of field research studying the activities of a range of functional units inside the three companies, including visits to their separately located and managed call centers, and meeting with some of their contracted communication agencies, followed by a further three weeks of data analysis, an overall finding was that communication by and in these large organizations is multifunctional and complex.

Structurally, communication in Achmea International is led by a Head of Transformational Leadership and Strategic Communications, who in conjunction with her supervisor sponsored this research. The grouping of transformational leadership and strategic communication is interesting and potentially enabling because of its link to leadership, but also limiting in that the role reports to the group's Director of HR, suggesting a predominantly internal focus.

Beyond the internationally coordinated functions of transformational leadership and strategic communication, stakeholder communication activities were identified in 18 departments, units, and teams in the three companies, namely: marketing; marketing communication; market research; business intelligence; insights; analytics; sales management; agent sales and support; broker sales and support; customer contact centers; customer relations; complaints; claims; public relations, digital/social communication; information technology (IT); human resources (HR); and operations. Both operating companies studied have a public relations unit. This was staffed by only one person in both cases, but the function was supported by external public relations agencies.

The wide range of communication activities of Achmea International and the operating companies studied centered around four main communication functions: (1) customer communication; (2) employee communication; (3) agent and broker communication (the companies' primary distribution channels); and (4) other business partner communication (e.g., healthcare providers and motor vehicle repair operators). In the space available, key communication initiatives with the first two of these are discussed.

4.1. Customer Communication

By far the largest focus and communication resource allocation in the companies is in relation to customers. Achmea International and its operating companies describe themselves as "customer focused" and "customer-centric" ('Marta', personal communication, June 17, 2019). While this is part of the corporate rhetoric of many organizations and a marketing buzzword, the companies studied have a large ongoing investment in a range of communication activities related to both speaking to and listening to customers. Beyond media advertising, which by nature is mostly one-way dissemination of information and persuasion, a number of major communication and engagement activities with customers have been implemented under the coordination of the marketing department.

4.1.1. Call Centers

The first of these is a major investment in customer contact centers, commonly referred to as call centers. Up to 500 operators are employed in call centers in the group, all within the country of the operating company to ensure cultural compatibility. While traditionally communicating mostly by telephone, e-mail communication is becoming the most common medium. For example, in Interamerican alone, its three customer contact centers in Athens receive around 700,000 phone calls a year and more than one million e-mails. These range in nature from basic requests for help in logging in to websites to inquiries about products and verbal complaints. For most customers and potential customers, call centers are the primary communication channel. The call centers also play a key role in the following major communication initiative.

4.1.2. NPS Surveys and 'Closed Loop' Methodology

In addition to the responsive role of call centers, a major communication initiative introduced by Achmea International across the group in 2018 was the introduction of outbound calls to dissatisfied customers. Like many organizations, Achmea companies have adopted Net Promoter Score (NPS) surveys following all transactions (e.g., after calls to a call center, sales inquiries, purchase, insurance claim, etc.). The well-known NPS methodology involves a single question that asks for a rating on a 0–10 scale in response to the question 'how likely are you to recommend [product/service] to a friend or colleague?' Those who give a rating of 9–10 are regarded as 'promoters' or advocates; those who give a rating of 7 or 8 are considered to be 'passives' or neutral, and those giving a rating of 0–6 are regarded as 'detractors', who are dissatisfied. Some NPS surveys add one or several open-ended questions for respondents to give reasons for their rating. However, until recently, like many organizations Achmea group companies did not systematically review comments provided. Detractors, particularly those with low-level scores, were regarded as likely to be lost customers.

A major communication initiative introduced in 2018 and expanded in 2019 was the adoption of a 'closed loop' methodology in partnership with Achmea's NPS service provider, MetrixLab, headquartered in Rotterdam (https://www.metrixlab.com). This involves call center operators specially trained in 'difficult conversations' making outbound calls to detractors to gain further insight into their concerns and try to resolve the cause of their dissatisfaction. Initial expectations were that a proportion of detractors could be converted to at least passives (neutral) through proactive communication. With a total of 17,000 detractors across the group's companies in 2018—a low 0.17% of all customers, but a significant number nevertheless—retaining even a small portion of these has the potential to contribute considerable ongoing revenue.

The results of detractor call-backs are, in fact, greatly exceeding expectations. For example, in early 2019 a follow-up NPS survey sent to 586 detractors who had been called received 107 responses, of which 23 were converted to passives and 52 were converted to promoters. Other surveys have confirmed this conversion rate. In summary, almost 50% of detractors are being converted to promoters through call-backs to listen to their concerns, acknowledge them, and respond to them.

A senior marketing manager said "we can clearly see a monetary value in call-backs to detractors" ('Leo', personal communication, June 19, 2019). For example, if even half of the 50% of detractors who convert to promoters continue to be customers, a conservative estimate of customer lifetime value (CLV) multiplied by 4,000–5,000 retained customers amounts to in excess of €20 million (Euro) in revenue. In an environment in which evaluation of communication lags and is seen as difficult or impossible by many (Watson & Noble, 2014; Macnamara, 2018), the 'closed loop' NPS methodology implemented by Achmea and its operating companies tangibly demonstrates the value of communication, which contributes to its perceived importance in the organizations.

4.1.3. Customer Journey Mapping

Both Interamerican and Union poisťovňa were in the process of introducing customer journey mapping at the time of the research. This tracking and evaluation technique shifts emphasis from measuring individual 'touchpoints' that customers have with an organization, such as attending an event, visiting a website, or reading media articles, to constructing a picture of a customer's journey over time through various transactions and interactions by combining multiple data sets. For instance, call center reports, NPS ratings, customer satisfaction survey responses, complaints, website feedback, and social media comments can be aggregated and then visualized to literally provide a picture of high points and low points in customer experience (CX/UX).

Union poisťovňa's marketing department has advanced further than other parts of the group by engaging a specialist service provider, Clientology (https://clientology.be) to help it collect, aggregate, and visualize customer journey data. At the time of this study Interamerican data analysts were constructing customer journey maps manually. A senior marketing executive said: "We are in the early stages of development, but we see great potential for understanding our customers and accurately identifying touchpoints for improvement" ('Mark', personal communication, June 19, 2019). Subsequently, in a letter reporting progress, the executive advised of a plan to "extend customer journey mapping as a management tool to gain [a] holistic overview of the customer experience in all businesses" ('Mark', personal communication, October 14, 2019).

4.1.4. Text Analysis

A related initiative introduced in the Achmea companies stemmed from recognition that the voice of customers (VOC), the voice of employees (VOE) and the voice of other stakeholders (VOS) is expressed in words more than in statistics. In particular, VOC, VOE and VOS are most fully expressed in written text in the form of e-mails, letters, open-ended responses in surveys, complaints, reports, and social media posts.

Paradoxically, many organizations that have substantial analysis capabilities for structured numerical data have little or no capability to analyze text (unstructured data). In fact, data analytics and so-called 'big data' are often narrowly conceived as relating only to statistics, when some of the largest and most insightful data sets available to organizations are in the form of text.

A major initiative launched in 2019 was to introduce text analysis (also called textual analysis) tools and capabilities in the Achmea operating companies studied. Interamerican is most advanced in this, following the licensing of SAS Analytics software, which includes text mining and analysis tools, and the hiring of two full-time data analysts with text analysis skills. An example of Interamerican's use of text analysis that afforded major insights and led to improved communication was an analysis of all comments recorded in open-ended NPS questions to identify the leading issues reported by detractors, passives, and promoters. Text analysis was conducted using SAS Analytics, but in addition Microsoft Power BI was used to graphically visualize the results in charts. These enabled management to easily identify the leading causes of dissatisfaction, which were marked for service improvement, as well as the most common causes of high levels of satisfaction that need to be maintained. Union poisťovňa has engaged a specialist customer experience research company, Staffino (https://staffino.com), to conduct 'deep dive' qualitative analysis of its customers' NPS comments.

Ultimately, it is planned that text analysis will be conducted on e-mails sent to customer contact centers, open-ended comments in customer and employee surveys, and other textual feedback from stakeholders using advanced text analysis tools. These incorporate *natural language processing* and *machine learning* (i.e., learning algorithms) that enable semi-automated time-efficient analysis. This was confirmed in a report in October 2019 which listed communication improvements including "enhancement of the newly established text analysis system to cover all written communication with customers" ('Mark', personal communication, October 14, 2019).

These initiatives have been led and enabled by the establishment of an Analytics Center of Excellence (ACE) in Interamerican, which employs a team of quantitative and qualitative data analysts. Union poisťovňa appointed a Head of Business Intelligence in August 2019 to lead such initiatives. The integration of data and insights as well as overall communication strategy development is increasingly undertaken by these functions, particularly for external communication, while HR integrates internal communication.

In addition, the sales department of Interamerican has established a Customer Council which convenes regular face-to-face meetings between sales management and major customers. Union poisťovňa has similarly established a Customer Experience Board. An Interamerican executive said "We get great feedback. We have found out things that we didn't know" ('Pamela', personal communication, June 17, 2019). Interamerican's sales team also held a major event that attracted 500 customers in early 2019. The companies and the international head office are also considering the use of behavioral insights and a number of other innovations in communication with customers and potential customers.

4.2. Employee Communication

As well as traditional one-way information distribution through newsletters and staff events, a number of two-way channels of employee communication have been implemented across the Achmea group as part of its 'architecture of listening'. These recognize employees as key stakeholders and as potential participants in developing products and services and improving processes. The following are some examples of employee communication initiatives.

4.2.1. Interact, Innovate, Imagine

In addition to intranets for employee communication established in both operating companies (e.g., 'Interact' in Interamerican), a major employee engagement and communication initiative launched by Interamerican is its Imagine Innovation Program. Imagine is a special intranet established and maintained by IT and coordinated by HR that invites and rewards ideas and suggestions from staff. Management reports showed that 227 ideas had been submitted by employees in the previous 2–3 years. Ideas are classified as 'promising' or 'incremental'. Of these, 24 promising ideas were processed through three phases: (a) discovery; (b) incubator; and (c) scaling for implementation, during which coaching is provided and innovators test their ideas with customers. In addition, 51 incremental ideas have been progressed. In July 2019 seven promising ideas and 11 incremental ideas were presented to a judging panel attended by senior management, and winning ideas were advanced to implementation. Participation in the Imagine program is encouraged and recognized through internal publicity, prizes for winners, and major innovations gain entry to the Imagine 'Hall of Fame'.

Interamerican involves employees in 'accelerator teams'—small cross-functional groups assigned to work on 'wicked problems' as part of the company's *agile management* strategy (Hobbs & Petit, 2017). A senior C-suite executive said: "It's not just top-down here. We learn bottom-up" ('Ian', personal communication, June 18, 2019).

Both companies also produce the usual employee newsletters and employee events, including 'transformation events' in Union poisťovňa to help employees cope with change. Also, all three companies conduct an annual employee engagement survey managed by a specialist employee engagement firm, Effectory (https://www.effectory.com).

4.2.2. Face-to-face Remains Important

As well as encouraging open two-way communication via its employee intranet and Yammer as an internal social media platform, Union poisťovňa conducts regular 'town hall' meetings; a regular series of small group meetings in which employees get to meet face-to-face with Board members of the company; and 'SmartUp teams'—small teams of employees acting like business start-ups to develop innovative ideas.

4.2.3. Other

While space does not permit detailed discussion of all communication between the companies and their key stakeholders, an example of community-wide engagement and innovation is that part of the Imagine Innovation Program is the Open Innovation Initiative, which includes a partnership with universities and other innovators in the Athens Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (ACEin) (https://acein.aueb.gr/en). This external partnership resulted in 47 innovation proposals in 2018/19, from which 23 were selected for consideration, 10 have been developed, and 3–5 are likely to proceed to implementation.

For brevity and to provide an overview of the extensive communication activities undertaken in the companies, a summary of the main strategic communication activities and methods with customers, employees, agents, brokers, and business partners is provided in Table 1. This lists the media and methodologies used including software applications, as well as the functional unit and/or agencies responsible for creation and implementation.

Table 1. Summary of key internal and external communication activities of the organizations studied with the methodology and the unit/agency mainly responsible

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES	MEDIA / METHODOLOGY	UNIT / AGENCY RESPONSIBLE
CUSTOMERS:		
Advertising	Print; digital; TV; Outdoor	Marketing (contracted to advertising agencies)
Customer inquiries Customer complaints	Telephone and e-mail E-mail Digital recording	Customer Contact Center Customer Contact Center Customer Contact Center
Market research	Surveys Focus groups	Marketing (contracted to various research firms such as GfK, Kantar and Nielsen)
User testing of proposed new products	Face-to-face discussions	Marketing
Net Promoter Score (NPS) Call-backs to ‘detractors’ Follow-up survey	Online survey Outbound phone calls Online survey	MetrixLab Customer Contact Center MetrixLab
Customer feedback on websites	Usabilla Web application	Marketing / IT
Behavioral insights	Behavioral insights methodology	Internal behavioral insights staff liaising with BIT (Behavioral Insights Team) in the UK
Customer journey mapping	Clientology Reframer Manually	Marketing (contracted to

		specialist agency Clientology)
Text analysis of open-end NPS survey comments; written complaints; customer e-mails; call center reports based on digitally recorded phone calls	SAS Text Analytics Microsoft Power BI Voice to text (VTT) software under evaluation	Data Analytics team
'Deep dive' analysis of NPS comments	Qualitative text analysis	Marketing (contracted to specialist agency Staffino)
Focus groups with customers, non-customers and healthcare providers	Small group meetings	Marketing and Sales
Customer events	Face-to-face meetings organized by sales	Sales
Customer Council	Face-to-face meetings	Sales
Customer Experience Board	Face-to-face meetings	Sales
Head of Business Intelligence / Insights	Specialist appointment to lead data integration and analysis	Business Intelligence
Analytics Center of Excellence (ACE)	Team of analysts for analysis and sense-making of quantitative and qualitative data	Analytics / Business intelligence
Open Innovation Initiative	Partnership in Athens Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (ACEin)	Operations
Integrated Insights Report	Internal report combining multiple data sets	Analytics team
Media news releases	Media writing	PR
Media relations	Answering journalists' inquiries; arranging interviews	PR
Media monitoring and analysis	Scanning and reporting	PR (contracted to agencies – e.g., New Media Concept)

EMPLOYEES:		
Employee engagement survey	Online survey	HR (contracted to Effectory)
Interact	SharePoint intranet platform	IT
Imagine Innovation Program	Web platform to invite and reward ideas and suggestions from staff	Marketing and IT
'Town hall' meetings	Face-to-face meetings	HR
Staff meetings with Board members	Small group face-to-face meetings	HR
SmartUp teams	Face-to-face meetings	Marketing & HR
Staff events	(e.g., 'Transformation events' to help staff cope with change	HR
Newsletters	Several (digital)	HR
OTHER STAKEHOLDERS (agents, brokers, partners)		
AskMe intranet	Extranet	IT
Agents' Council	Informal meetings	Marketing
Focus groups with healthcare providers	Small group meetings, self-managed	Marketing
Stakeholder engagement / channel management	Informal meetings by branch and sales staff	Sales

In terms of the focus of this discussion, it is noteworthy that public relations in the companies studied is restricted to writing and distributing news releases, media relations, and media monitoring via monitoring and analysis agencies. This raises the question 'why', which was explored. One reason for this revealed in interviews is that senior management sees "PR" as a necessary function, but view it narrowly as media relations and publicity, thus pigeon-holing the practice ('Mark', personal communication, June 19, 2019; 'Director', personal communication, June 24, 2019). But another reason was apparent in interviews with public relations managers in the two operating companies. Despite expressing ambitions for an expanded role, neither held qualifications equivalent to other senior executives and both admitted to not understanding some of the advanced technologies and methods being adopted, such as those discussed in Section 4.1.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

What can be clearly seen from the findings reported in detail and those summarized in Table 1 is that the organizations studied are managing a diverse range of strategic communication for two-way engagement with their key stakeholders and using a diverse range of methods, platforms, and technologies. The reported findings and Table 1 provide substantial data in response to RQ1 and RQ2. When organization-public communication is examined holistically, it can be seen in these case studies to extend far beyond what is traditionally referred to as public relations, corporate communication, or communication management as they are typically described in those disciplines. This finding supports and extends those of Falkheimer et al. (2017); Heide et al. (2018); and Zerfass and Franke (2013). Falkheimer et al. concluded that "strategic communication activities occur throughout the organization, not only in the communications department" (2017, p. 94). To a significant extent, this is to be expected. All workers in organizations communicate to some extent and the role of some, such as marketing and customer relations staff in particular, involves communication with customers and potential customers. However, Heide et al. (2018) went further to say "an organization's communication function and its activities only represent a very small proportion of the communication carried out in and by that organization" (p. 464). The case studies confirm Heide et al.'s conclusion, showing that public relations and corporate communication functions play a relatively minor role in the expansive communication that is managed within the organizations studied.

This finding supports Cornelissen's critique that public relations is "tactical in most companies", largely consisting of "communication with the press" (2017, p. 4), and it aligns with research showing that a focus on media relations and publicity remains widespread despite expansive theories of public relations. For example, recent *Communication Monitor* studies in both North America and Europe show that public relations reporting to management is mostly in the form of media monitoring reports (Meng, Reber, Gower, & Zerfass, 2019, p. 37; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 37).

The definition of public relations as "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6) and its frequent generalized association with communication management are shown to be an unrealized ambit claims in these cases. Similarly, Cornelissen's claim that corporate communication is the function through which "all forms of internal and external communication are harmonized" and "coordinated" (2017, p. 5) is clearly not true in the case studies examined.

Thus, in response to RQ3, it can be concluded that practice in these case studies does not align with disciplinary theories in a number of significant respects. Furthermore, in terms of RQ2, the case studies reflect a trend identified in international surveys that show internal and external communication is increasingly conducted under the rubric of marketing and related functions such as sales and customer service (USC Annenberg, 2018).

6. Implications—Isolation, Integration, or Innovation?

In one sense, these findings can be viewed as negative in relation to public relations, corporate communication, and communication management theory and practice. Without change, this research supports the warning by Falkheimer et al. (2017) that "strategic communication might soon be considered too important to be left to communication professionals" (p. 100), leaving public relations and corporate communication practitioners operating at a functional level with a narrow range of delegated tasks.

However, in another sense, this research identifies opportunities for expansion and transformation of public relations and corporate communication to play a larger and more important role in organizations. At one level, this study adds weight to arguments for greater interdisciplinarity and advances calls for "broadening the understanding of strategic communication" (Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, & Falkheimer, 2018, p. 455), as well as raising questions about paradigms of public relations (Heath, 2006; Ferguson, 2018) and the future of corporate communication ("What does the future … look like", 2019). In the *International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication* (Heath et al., 2018), Gregory (2018) says communication management "is about how communication can make a strategic contribution at every level of the organization and how it is organized structurally" (p. 1). To achieve that, Heide et al. (2018) say that "we definitely need to integrate a greater variety of disciplines than hitherto" p. 464).

This indicates that one approach to expanding the role and strategic value of public relations is through *integration* with other related functions such as corporate communication, organizational communication, and marketing communication. However, a number of researchers and practitioners warn that, despite 'grand' theories of public relations, Cornelissen's hierarchal optimism, and Werder et al.'s claim that the relatively new field calling itself 'strategic communication' is the path to "disciplinary integration" (2020, p. 5), it is likely that the larger budgets and structures of marketing will dominate and subjugate public relations to a product publicity role (Dühring, 2015, p. 11; "What does the future … look like", 2019, para. 16). For example, research shows that the growing practice of social media management is increasingly coming under the rubric of marketing communication (Killian & McManus, 2015; Kotler, 2018). The 2018 *Global Communications Report* published by USC Annenberg (2018) reported that 87% of communication professionals believe that their work will become integrated with, or come under the control of, marketing during the next five years.

An alternate route to a broader and more influential role is *innovation*. The case studies examined are noteworthy for the range of platforms, technologies, and advanced practices used, such as customer journey mapping, behavioral insights, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools including algorithms, natural language processing (NLP), and machine learning to provide data analytics to support evidence-based planning and evaluation. Studies worldwide confirm the finding in this study that public relations and corporate communication lag in these areas (Tench & Moreno, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2018). Therefore, capability development remains a high priority in terms of future education, training, and practice.

The cases examined also demonstrate innovation in their substantial commitment to listening to key stakeholders such as customers (see Section 4.1.2) and participation by stakeholders such as employees (see Section 4.2.1), which operationalizes *two-way* communication that is espoused in normative theories of public relations, but little practiced (Macnamara, 2016, 2019).

Therefore, in terms of research and theory building, this suggests that there is an opportunity and a need for continuing review of theories and *translational research* in public relations, corporate communication, and organizational communication to help practitioners apply theory in practice.

Even more broadly, there is scope for further consideration of paradigms in which theories and practices are nested—and this may ultimately be more important in imagining and shaping the future. Drawing on the seminal work of Kuhn (1996), who concluded that, because of human agency and diversity, the social sciences do not lend themselves to a single unifying paradigm, Botan and Hazelton (2006, p. 6) and Curtin (2011, p. 35) noted that public relations is inevitably "polyparadigmatic".

Beyond theories that provide explanations of how things work, a paradigm—or what Kuhn subsequently referred to as a "disciplinary matrix" (1970, p. 182)—is a framework of thought about how knowledge is constructed in a particular discipline. This includes the beliefs, assumptions, methods, and the purpose or *raison d'etre* that shapes thinking and practices developed within that discipline.

Curtin identified four paradigms, or disciplinary matrices, in social science that inform public relations theory and practice as *post-positivist* focussed on prediction and control drawing on scientific methods; *constructivist* focussed on understanding the construction of shared social realities through social science; *postmodern* involving and emancipation from Modernist ideas and structures; and *critical* involving critique and praxis to improve society (Curtin, 2011, p. 36). Such paradigms, and others grounded in pragmatism, interpretivism, and poststructuralism, steer the field either towards managerial and functionalist approaches that are engaged to support neoliberal capitalism and political power elites, or potentially towards true communication involving engagement, dialogue, participation, and social responsibility. Paradigmatic thinking goes to the heart of who public relations works for and what it seeks to do for, or to humanity.

Therefore, there is a strong case for continuing critical review of the paradigms in which public relations is conceptualized and practiced—particularly in light of widespread criticism of the dominant US paradigm based on Excellence theory (L'Etang, 2008) and the frequent scandals and breaches of ethics in public relations identified by Edwards (2018a, 2018b) and in *Beyond Post-Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception, and Manipulation* (Macnamara, 2020).

In ongoing critical review there is an opportunity to reimagine public relations beyond modernism and postmodernism. How will it conceive its role and what will it do in a post-postmodern world, or what some refer to as *metamodernism* (Van den Akker, Gibbons, & Vermeulen, 2017)? Metamodernism refers to a rejection of the pastiche, subjectivism, relativism, and 'anything goes' approach of postmodernism and a refocussing on depth and values. Also, rather than an "end of history" as pronounced by Fukuyama (1992) in relation to the 20th century global dominance of democracy and capitalism (later retracted), metamodernism calls for a 'rebooting' of history. Philosophers and social and political scientists point to the need for new thinking and new approaches to address major challenges and crises facing society such as climate change; the "crisis of democracy" due to declining public trust, populism, and post-truth politics (Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017); the widening gap between rich and poor; and *data colonialism* in which digital technologies are used to exploit rather than benefit people (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. xiii).

As reported in Section 3, 'Methodology of this study', the empirical research informing this analysis was conducted shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world. Thus, the increased pressures and opportunities for change, and the direction of change resulting from the pandemic, are not revealed in the data collected. However, contemporary studies of managing crises, such as Boin et al. (2017), and pandemic crisis communication studies that are emerging (see Macnamara, 2021), further underline the need to step beyond existing paradigms that are primarily focused on serving the interests of organizations, largely through one-way information and persuasion in media. Boin et al. highlight the importance of leadership during crises and note that leadership in corporate, government, and non-government organizations is not responding sufficiently to societal needs. As scholars note, leadership is different to management in several key respects, such as having an outward versus inward focus, a commitment to change, and looking to the future rather than preserving or re-establishing the status quo, which is a key focus of management (Lunenberg, 2011).

If public relations are to live up to its name and remain relevant, its senior practitioners need to play a leadership role—not simply a management or technician role as identified in 20th century literature (Dozier, 1992).

One direction worthy of further exploration is the role of Chief Communication Officer (CCO) as advocated by the Arthur W. Page Society (rebranded as Page in 2018). Based on an extensive 2019 research study and its *CCO As Pacesetter* report (Page, 2019), Page says that "the CCO should be a senior strategic leader in an organization" (Page, 2021, p. 4). While there has long been generalized discussion of public relations being part of the *dominant coalition* of organizations (e.g., Berger & Reber, 2006), Page has set out principles and skills that public relations need to bring to the senior leadership of an organization to have an impact on its strategy, policies, and decisions. Significantly, the Page *2021–2023 Strategic Plan* sees the CCO advocating for contribution of "societal value", ethical use of "CommTech", and creating a corporate culture characterized by empathy and emotional intelligence (Page, 2021, pp. 2–3). Page offers a program of conferences, workshops, and other learning opportunities for members to perform this role.

However, achieving a strategic leadership role and influence requires a high level of capabilities and credibility. As noted previously, studies show that the competency and capabilities of a majority of public relations practitioners are lacking in many key areas of communications technology. Industry studies continue to show a lack of training in ethics (Macnamara, Lwin, Hung-Baesecke, & Zerfass, 2021, p. 43). Such findings indicate that educators in universities and those responsible for professional development programs in industry associations have a substantial job to do if public relations is going to play a leadership role in organization-public relations (OPR) in future. Furthermore, surveys such as Gallup polls (e.g., Czarnecki, 2019) and academic studies (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014) note that public relations has a poor reputation and a lack of credibility in many parts of society. This raises the controversial but inevitable question: should the term public relations and the even more disdained abbreviation 'PR' be abandoned? Why not simply refer to communication, or public communication, to identify the increasingly diverse, multidisciplinary, multimedia field of organization-public communication and OPR practices that are undertaken today? What purpose does the discursively constructed concept and theorization of public relations as distinct from corporate, organizational, and strategic communication serve in light of the porous boundaries of these fields and the paradigmatic and practical limitations of 'PR'? Perhaps the future of public relations is not public relations!

Such a suggestion is not simply a call for a name change. Nor is it to echo the common call for 'PR for PR'. Transformational change is required along the lines of the literature discussed in Sections 1 and 2. Hope and inspiration may be drawn from the fact that transformational change is often triggered by cataclysmic and existential events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps in a world of rising temperatures, warming oceans, and extreme weather events; in which further pandemics are likely; where post-truth politics threatens democracy; where social inequity is creating outrage; new paradigms will evolve and new leaders emerge.

7. Limitations

A limitation of the study is that it is based on three cases only involving a multinational corporation and two of its major subsidiaries operating in western, southern, and eastern Europe respectively. Further research is required to establish the extent of the practices identified. However, given the best practice focus of the organizations studied, the scale of their operations, and the results obtained, these case studies raise questions worthy of further exploration and discussion.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This research was funded by Achmea International in the Netherlands and its operating companies, Interamerican in Greece, and Union poisťovňa in Slovakia.

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