# Persuasion, promotion, spin, propaganda?

Jim Macnamara[1]

## Abstract

Propaganda is a form and mode of communication eschewed by strategic communication practitioners, whether working with that title, or as public relations, or corporate, organizational, marketing, or government communication. However, all of these fields of practice involve persuasion and all are associated with promotional culture. Some are regularly accused of 'spin'. In worst cases, strategic communication is associated with or pejoratively labelled as propaganda, raising questions about social responsibility and the ethics of such practices. This chapter examines the 'dark side' of strategic communication to identify the elements that define and distinguish various forms of practice, explore the tensions that exist, and discuss the characteristics that enable strategic communication to be ethical and socially responsible, as well as effective in achieving organizational goals and objectives.

Keywords: Propaganda, persuasion, promotion, spin, strategic communication

## Introduction

As the editors and other contributors to this handbook note, strategic communication is an interdisciplinary field of research and practice focussed on communication in and between organizations, their stakeholders, and the surrounding society. The field has close affiliations with other disciplines and fields including public relations, and corporate, organizational, and marketing communication, and it draws on a range of theories related to rhetoric, persuasion, public opinion, mass communication, and propaganda.

As an academic field in its own right, strategic communication is commonly claimed to have been established in 2007 with the launch of the *International Journal of Strategic*

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[1]  Jim Macnamara is a Distinguished Professor in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney. He is also a Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Contact: jim.macnamara@uts.edu.au

*Communication* and publication of a seminal article by Hallahan et al (2007), which is extensively cited in this text.

However, as also discussed by others, the origins of the term go back much further, and its roots go much deeper and broader, being based on the noun 'strategy', which is used in many fields including the military, business management, and politics.

## Strategy

As many authors remind us, the term 'strategic' is derived from the Greek word *strategia*, which denotes 'generalship', 'victory', and military 'conquest'. In organizational management, strategy has been traditionally conceived as carefully planned decisions and actions to achieve the goals of an organization (Mintzberg, 1978, 1979). Hallahan et al.'s definition followed this approach saying strategic communication is "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil *its* mission" (Hallahan et al. 2007, p. 3) [emphasis added]. In some cases, this has extended to a 'by any means available' and 'at any cost' approach.

One does not have to look far to see strategy and strategic communication involving not only persuasion and promotion, but 'spin' and propaganda. In his book *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*, Farwell (2012) argued that "psychological operations [psyops] … propaganda, information operations, and public affairs generally constitute different forms of strategic communication" (p. xx). The US and UK governments considered their claims that Iraq had 'weapons of mass destruction' to be strategic communication necessary to justify and mobilize an invasion to dethrone Saddam Hussein. The claims were later found to be based on evidence that had been "sexed up" (Davies, 2009, p. 199) and it is now widely accepted that no such weapons existed. Media headlines such as '45 minutes from attack' in *The Evening Standard* and 'Brits 45 minutes from doom' in *The Sun* were also fabrication, fed to journalists by senior UK Government communication strategist, Alistair Campbell (Davies, 2009, p. 200).

Beyond the military sphere, Cambridge Analytica engaged in strategic communication, as acknowledged by Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 502), in accessing the personal data of millions of citizens and using them in conjunction with communication science techniques to attempt to

manipulate the results of the UK EU Referendum (*Brexit*) and the 2016 Presidential election (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Hindman, 2018).

In this chapter, the 'dark side' of strategic communication is examined to define and distinguish persuasion, promotion, spin, and propaganda; explore the tensions that exist; and discuss the characteristics that enable strategic communication to be ethical and socially responsible, as well as effective in achieving organizational goals and objectives

## Four ways of thinking about strategic communication

To set the scene and have a clear understanding of strategic communication as it is discussed in this chapter, it is useful to recap four main ways that the term 'strategic communication' is used. As identified by Heath et al. (2018) in *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*, the term is applied as:

1. An *umbrella term* to collectively refer to the multifarious range of external and internal communication activities of organizations. For example, Botan (2018) lists "public relations (PR), marketing-advertising-promotion, and public health education" as "sub-fields" of strategic communication (p. 3). In this use, 'strategic communication' serves a utilitarian purpose as an overarching description, rather than necessarily denoting a distinctive approach;
2. A *substitute* for 'public relations' to avoid the negative connotations that have become associated with public relations and 'PR', particularly in Europe (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011, pp. 20–21). This use involves a 'rebadging' of existing practices "without changing the underlying research objects or perspectives of that field" (Zerfass, et al., 2018, p. 490);
3. A *cross-functional concept to facilitate integration and coordination*. In this approach, corporate communication, marketing communication, public relations, and other related disciplines remain as functional units, but strategic denotes efforts to ensure common objectives and plans aligned to organizational goals;
4. A *meta process* (a process that models and manages other processes) based on a different way of thinking, which changes the key characteristics of the field.

While the third way of thinking noted by Heath et al. is somewhat useful in pursuing the long-held aim of integration of various forms of communication by organizations, it is the fourth concept above that is a focus of considerable contemporary scholarship in relation to strategic communication.

Based on recent changes in thinking about strategy and strategic management in business literature, a number of scholars argue that this different way of thinking should involve rejection of the *organization-centric* and controlled approach that is central to traditional militaristic and corporate strategy. Rather than see achievement of the organization's goals as paramount and exclusive, Falkheimer and Heide (2105, 2018), Heide et al. (2018), King (1010), Macnamara and Gregory (2018), Murphy (2015), Torp (2015), van Ruler (2018), and others argue that organizations should follow contemporary management approaches and adopt the principles and steps of *emergent strategy* advocated by Mintzberg and colleagues (Mintzberg, 1978, 1987; Mintzberg, Quinn, & Ghoshal, 1998; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mirabeau & McGuire, 2014). Emergent strategy involves consideration of the interests and objectives of those commonly referred to as stakeholders as well as society generally in developing strategy, accessed through engagement, consultation, and even participation in the process of strategic planning and execution. Through this, an organization's "intended strategy" discards some elements ("unrealized strategy"), and proceeds to deliberate in conjunction with considering stakeholder, environmental, and societal interests, resulting in "emergent strategy" that becomes realizable and "realized strategy" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Emergent strategy as explained by Mintzberg (1987, p. 11).
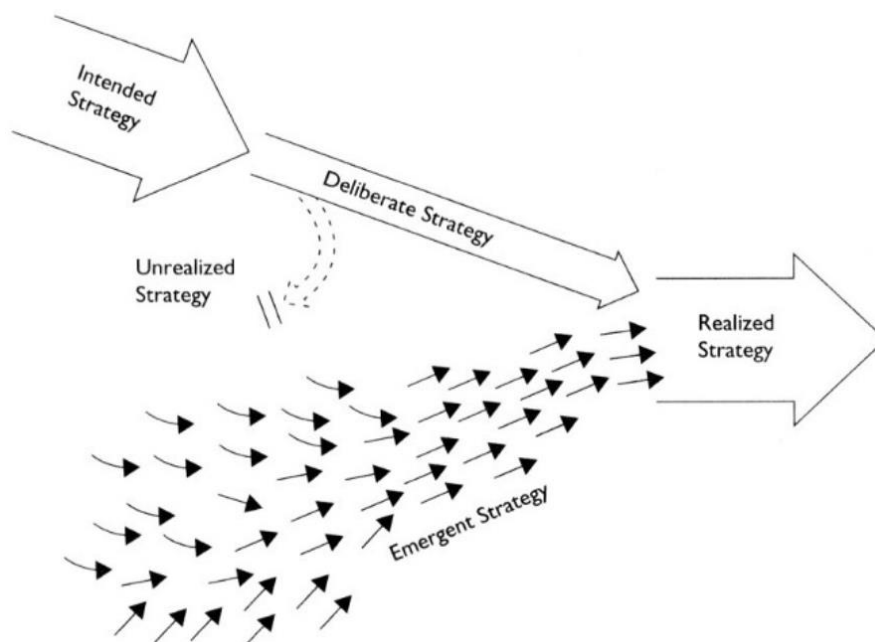
When applied to communication, Falkheimer and Heide (2015) refer to this as a *participatory* approach, Murphy (2015) calls it a *networked* approach, while King opts for the term "*emergent communication* strategies" (2010, p. 19) [emphasis added]. King explains this term as "a communicative construct derived from interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context, and discursive patterns" (2010, p. 20). Contemporary corporate communication literature says strategy development is a "combination of planned and emergent processes" involving "balancing the mission and vision of the organization" (p. 111) with the interests of its stakeholders and the environment", and it is "therefore often adaptive" (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 111).

Proponents of emergent strategic communication do not naively advocate consideration of the interests of stakeholders and society to the extent of abandoning the organization's objectives. As Torp (2015) suggested, communication should incorporate the twin elements of communication advocated by Deetz (1992)—*participation* and *effectiveness*—to be open to input from others, while at the same time not abandoning the organizational imperative to effectively advocate its interests and persuade.

Arguments for an emergent approach to strategic communication have gathered support from change management researchers such as Scharmer (2017), co-founder of the MITx u.lab. His *Theory U* proposes an about turn from top-down organization-centric approaches towards engagement, collective active, collaboration, and co-production of strategy in order to achieve organizational sustainability.

Also, recent commitment to *social purpose* by leading investment and management advisers and a significant number of major corporations supports an open consultative approach. For example, in 2019 the Business Roundtable in the USA, an organization representing the nation's largest and most influential businesses, issued a statement signed by 181 CEOs that said: "While each of our individual companies serves its own corporate purpose, we share a fundamental commitment to *all* of our stakeholders." (Business Roundtable, 2019, para. 3) [original emphasis]. As well as restating their goal of delivering long-term value to shareholders, the CEOs committed to "investing in employees," "dealing ethically with our suppliers," and "supporting the communities in which we work" (para. 3). In the same year, noted investment adviser Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock, sent a landmark letter to investors stating: "Companies that fulfil their purpose and responsibilities to stakeholders reap rewards

over the long-term. Companies that ignore them stumble and fail" (Fink, 2019, para. 10). Social purpose is increasingly accepted as part of the responsibility of commercial enterprises, as well as specific social purpose organizations (Everitt, 2018; Schlag & M Melé, 2020).

However, a fifth contrasting conceptualization of strategic communication is proposed by Zerfass and colleagues, who return to and build on the definition of strategic communication put forward in the seminal 2007 article by Hallahan et al. (2007). In an article dedicated to "defining the field", Zerfass, et al. (2018) reject the argument that strategic communication should be "geared … towards the goals of the organization as well as *all* of its stakeholders" (p. 492) [original emphasis] saying:

> It is doubtful that this is a viable research agenda. Instead, making distinctions and carving a territory is indispensable when trying to constitute a distinct body of knowledge that is specific enough to attract researchers and gain acceptance from other disciplines. (p. 492)

Like Nothhaft et al. (2018), Zerfass et al. (2018) argue that "disciplines emancipate by selecting a subject matter and imposing a perspective onto the world; otherwise, they are without boundary or centre" (p. 492). Zerfass et al. (2018) go on to impose a perspective by offering the following definition of strategic communication.

> Strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals. (p. 493)

By referring to "conversations", this definition does leave the door open for engagement and dialogue with others such as stakeholders, although conversations can be one-sided and not *dialogic*, as Taylor and Kent (2014) identify, referring to the need for openness and the principles of *dialogic orientation*: empathy, mutuality, propinquity, risk, and commitment to cocreation (pp. 387–389).

Also, this definition does not rule out propagandist communication such as that conducted by corrupt organizations, hostile regimes, and even that of terrorists. In one sense, this is a

positive step. In discussion of strategic communication at a 2018 pre-conference of the International Communication Association (ICA), a useful distinction was made between the *practice* of strategic communication and *research* of strategic communication. Most focus in the past has been on the practice and, in claiming the mantle of strategic communication for themselves, scholars and practitioners in public relations, corporate communication, communication management, and related fields, have adopted normative theories. Propaganda, political spin, and deceptive practices such as those of Cambridge Analytica have been sidelined and even rejected as examples of strategic communication. In contrast with this narrow view, these are important subjects for research in contemporary society, particularly in an era of disinformation (Macnamara, 2020) and post-truth (McIntyre, 2018). Understanding how and why disinformation and other propagandist techniques such as fallacies influence people is arguably essential. Thus, Zerfass et al.'s definition of strategic communication opens up research in important new directions. As Bakir et al. (2019), note in relation to current communication research:

> All approaches show minimal conceptual development concerning manipulative organized persuasive communication involving deception, incentivization and coercion. As a consequence, manipulative, propagandistic organized persuasive communication within liberal democracies is a blind spot. It is rarely recognized let alone researched with the result that our understanding and grasp of these activities is stunted. (p. 311)

However, alongside research into what might be broadly called unethical strategic communication, key questions remain in relation to practice. What type of strategic communication practice should ethical communication professionals plan and deploy? Is pursuing the goals of an organization on matters significant to its sustainability sufficient? Where is the line between legitimate persuasion, promotion, what is loosely called spin, and propaganda?

## The light and 'dark side' of strategic communication

These questions are explored firstly by looking at four key concepts related to communication designed to create change (awareness, attitudinal, or behavioural), and then exploring the key question of how to be strategic, but ethical, in communication on behalf of organizations.

Persuasion

Despite a large body of normative theory in relation to rhetoric (Heath, 2006, 2009), relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), excellence in public relations (Grunig et al., 2002), and "adaptive" corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 111), persuasion lays at the heart of most communication between organizations and their stakeholders and society. Since the early AIDA model (attention, interest, desire, action) developed by St Elmo Lewis in the late 1800s and popularized by Strong (1925), advertising has been unashamedly designed for persuasion. Miller (1989) described public relations and persuasion as "two Ps in a pod" (p. 45). In their analysis of evaluation of the outputs, outcomes, and impact of public relations, Watson and Noble (2007) confirmed an overwhelming focus on persuasion (p. 14). While rhetoric can be "invitational" (Foss & Griffin, 1995) for multiple speakers to exchange views in dialogue and debate, as well as "manipulative" (Heath, 2006), a study of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism by Cathcart (1981) stated that all rhetoric involved "a communicator's intentional use of language and other symbols to influence or persuade selected receivers to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires" (Cathcart, 1981, p. 2).

Persuasion, of itself, is not problematic. From the days of the Greek Sophists, people have sought to persuade others. Much persuasion is necessary for social progress and beneficial for many individuals and groups in society. For example, in the extensive volume *The Dynamics of Persuasion*, Perloff (2017) points out that activists have used persuasion to change attitudes and beliefs in relation to race and gender (an ongoing project); consumer advocates warn shoppers about dishonest business practices and faulty products; and health communicators seek to persuade people to adopt behaviours to protect their and others' health. This has been notably demonstrated and shown to be important in relation to physical distancing and immunization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Efforts at persuasion do not necessarily preclude reciprocal efforts at persuasion by others in a *relational dialectic* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) in which "meanings are wrought from the struggle of competing, often contradictory discourses" (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Most researchers agree that persuasion is a pervasive, legitimate, and even essential element of communication provided the content is truthful and that alternative views are not precluded or closed down. (See 'Propaganda'.)

Promotion

On the face of it, promotion is also a legitimate form of communication—and very common across all sectors of society. Health authorities promote behaviours and treatments to prevent disease, such as the work of the World Health Organization (WHO) during COVID-19 and in relation to polio, tuberculosis, AIDS, and other afflictions. Governments promote road safety, use of public transport to reduce pollution and congestion in cities, tourism to boost economies, and many other issues in the public interest. Churches promote their respective religious beliefs and doctrines. Many types of activist organizations promote causes that they consider important, such as environmental protection. And, of course, companies promote products and services. Many forms of promotion are extremely important to stakeholders and society, as well as the organizations involved.

Promotion becomes problematic, in the first instance, when it is misleading or deceptive. Regulatory authorities exist in most countries to enforce standards in advertising and other forms of promotion—although the content of social media continues to be a vexed issue in terms of regulation versus self-regulation (Flew, 2019).

However, even promotion that is truthful can be detrimental to people and society in the view of many sociologists, psychologists, and some economists. For example, intensive promotion of products and services fuels *consumerism*, which increasingly involves "excessive consumption of goods and services" (Vujnovic, 2017). This, in turn, leads to *materialism*, resulting in lower life satisfaction in many cases (DeAngelis, 2004, para. 1), social problems such as increasing personal and household debt, and environmental degradation caused by the drain of resources and pollution (Fellner & Goehmann, 2020).

These issues are pertinent because contemporary society is characterized by *promotional culture*, a term coined by Wernick (1991), which refers to the pervasive and inescapable combination of capitalism, commodification, and promotion (Bensimon, 2012). Political economy researchers such as Davis (2013) express concern about the continuing growth of advertising, public relations, and marketing in contemporary societies. Edwards (2018a) says that "in societies soaked in promotional culture, Cambridge Analytica's work is the thin end of the wedge that industries such as public relations, advertising, and marketing have managed to insert into all areas of our lives" (para. 6). She goes on to argue that:

> The origins of the current scandal lie not in lax oversight by Facebook, or in the amorality of Cambridge Analytica and its clients, but in the histories of promotional industries that have normalized the idea of manipulation in their professional practice, while marginalizing ethics and the public interest. (Edwards, 2018a, para. 6)

Edwards sends us a warning that, while promotion, like persuasion, is legitimate, it holds legitimacy only insofar as it avoids unethical behaviour and damage to the public interest. While unethical behaviour is addressed through *de jure* (legal) standards set by regulators such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the USA and OfCom in the UK, as well as *de facto* standards such as codes of practice and codes of ethics adopted by professional institutes and associations, acting in the public interest requires social responsibility and reflexivity by practitioners.

## Spin

Spin, a colloquial term derived from fabrication in the manufacture of thread and textiles, with connotations of twisting and stretching, has received considerable attention, particularly in relation to public relations (Ewen, 1996). 'PR' practitioners are often referred to as 'spin doctors'. Journalists tend to label all self-promotion by organizations as spin, which trivializes and politicizes the term (Macnamara, 2014). Nevertheless, in *Flat Earth News*, Davies (2009) describes *pseudo-events*, *pseudo-evidence*, *pseudo-leaks*, *pseudo-pictures*, *pseudo-illnesses* and *pseudo-groups* as all too common in public communication by organizations (pp. 172–193).

While some of these are dismissed as relatively harmless "puffery" (Kinnick, 2005, pp. 721–723) and "hype" (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006, p. 14), public relations, marketing, and political communication also have been directly connected with the spread of disinformation, deception, and manipulation (Macnamara, 2020). In discussing findings of a 2019 RAND study of "truth decay" (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018), CEO of the Institute for Public Relations, Tina McCorkindale, acknowledged this saying: "I do think PR bears some responsibility for truth decay." (Field, 2018, para. 5). In a keynote address titled 'Organized lying and professional legitimacy: Public relations' accountability in the disinformation debate', Edwards said "disinformation is part of the DNA of PR" (as cited in Peacock, 2019, para. 13). She explained: "I'm not saying the average PR and comms company is involved in fake news." But she said the PR industry has not acknowledged that the techniques and practices of public relations are being used in other contexts to distort public life and, in some cases,

"the biggest companies in public relations … have been revealed to be duplicitous in what they have been doing" (paras 18–24). Scholars, and many practitioners, agree that when spin is more than mild exaggeration in self-promotion, it deserves its pejorative meaning and most researchers will say that it has no place in strategic communication.

Propaganda

Propaganda typically includes persuasion, promotion and spin, but it is different because it goes further in one important respect. In the widely used text, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) say that "the purpose of propaganda is to promote a partisan or competitive cause in the best interest of the propagandist, but not necessarily in the best interest of the recipient." (p. 30). In an earlier edition they said:

> Propaganda is a form of communication that is different from persuasion because it attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. Persuasion is interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both persuader and persuadee. (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1986, p. 13)

In discussing engagement and dialogue, Taylor and Kent (2014) support the Jowett and O'Donnell definition, but add an important further characteristic of propaganda, saying:

> The propagandist wants to limit individual freedom and choice, and constructs messages designed to generate adherence and obedience. Propaganda is a one-way communication model, or a two-way asymmetrical model, wherein the message ''sender'' (to use the 1949 Shannon & Weaver communication model) controls the channel and content of information. (p. 389).

Taylor and Kent note that propaganda may give the appearance of two-way communication, but they explain that "for the propagandist, individuals and publics are only consulted (in focus groups, surveys, etc.) as a means of finding out how to be more effective at achieving one's goal" (p. 389).

Propaganda has existed for thousands of years, dating back to a study of propaganda by Xenophon, a pupil of Socrates in Ancient Greece (Welsh, 2013, p. 4). However, it "came of age in the 20th century", according to a study published by the British Library (Welsh, 2013, p. 2). In this period, notable examples included the communication of the Nazi Ministry of

Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda headed by Joseph Goebbels—although all sides used propaganda during the two world wars of the 20th century and since, as Welsh points out. In more recent times, the use of propaganda as strategic communication has been identified in studies of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL) (Wilbur, 2017), reflecting the broader concept of strategic communication advocated by Zerfass et al. (2018).

While propaganda has been largely associated with military and political campaigns, there have been many studies of advertising as stepping beyond ethical persuasion and constituting propaganda, some dating back to the 1950s (e.g., McGarry, 1958; Pearlin & Rosenberg, 1952; Rutherford, 2004). Fawkes (2015) cites examples of "gross distortion of communication, amounting to corporate propaganda" (p. 23), and a number of authors have examined public relations and its links to propaganda including Cronin (2018); Moloney (2006); and Weaver et al. (2006).

It does not help public relations that the title of the second book by Edward Bernays, who is described as the "father of public relations," (Guth & Marsh, 2007, p. 70) was titled *Propaganda*. In it, Bernays advocated "manipulation of the … opinions of the masses" and said that "those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country" (Bernays, 1928, p. 9). It is also instructive that a later book by Bernays was titled *The Engineering of Consent* (Bernays, 1955). To be fair, Bernays identified three roles of public relations—information, persuasion, and "efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with that institution" (Bernays, 1952, p. 3). But many studies show that, despite normative theories, public relations is mostly focussed on the first two roles identified by Bernays, particularly persuasion (Watson & Noble, 2007, p. 14).

Moloney (2006) acknowledged that public relations "is a pervasive form of promotional culture in modern liberal democracies" (p. xii) and, in questioning the "communicative virtue" of models such as Excellence theory of PR that are "not supported by much evidence from the field", he proposed that public relations is "weak propaganda" (p. xiii)—or what some refer to as *white propaganda* in contrast with more sinister black propaganda (Guth, 2009). Moloney's purpose in adopting such a frank and somewhat controversial position, was "to present mechanisms for a state of communicative equality that will attenuate negative effects" (p. xiii). This ongoing project is a good segue to the final discussion of this chapter

focussed on how communication professionals can be strategic and ethical, thus avoiding propaganda.

## How to be strategic and ethical in communication

Noting that strategic communication is intended and designed to be effective in achieving an organization's objectives; that there are new ways of thinking about strategy and strategic communication; and warnings about the 'dark side' of strategic communication, it is important to identify what constitutes ethical strategic communication. Ethics is the subject of a large body of literature, but five key considerations are summarized to guide strategic communication practice that is effective and ethical.

### Honesty and authenticity

While post-truth has become a popular term in recent times, truth is a relative and much debated concept. As such, it does not provide a clear marker for communicators. 'What is truth' is a question that has troubled philosophers since Plato and Aristotle. While some associate truth with facts and figures derived from science, truth is largely a result of human interpretation and social construction. For example, some see the existence of God as truth. Official histories are written by the victors; the vanquished and forgotten usually have a different view of truth. Postmodernism has put an end to most singular notions of truth. Rather than attempt to deal with the slippery concept of truth, philosophers and social science researchers today are more interested in *authenticity*, defining authenticity as giving "a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life." (Neuman, 2006, p. 196). Therefore, it should go without saying that strategic communication practice, as well as research, must be based on honesty and authenticity.

### Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

While business management and public relations have lauded and made big claims about corporate social responsibility (CSR) for decades, often this has been operationalized as trying to 'turn a pig's ear into a silk purse'. Corporations too often undertake ad hoc 'add on' activities such as sponsoring local sports clubs or charities in attempts to protect their reputation, without incorporating social responsibility in their values, vision, and day-to-day operations. Practicing strategic communication, as described in this chapter, requires a genuine commitment to meaningful social responsibility. Increasingly, social responsibility is

operations is likely to expand to proactively adopting social purpose as part of an organization's vision, values, and strategic planning.

## Participatory, networked, and emergent approaches

Ideally, this author argues, strategic communication should adopt participatory, networked, and emergent approaches, as described by Falkheimer and Heide (2015), King (2010), Murphy (2015), Torp (2015), and others. The warnings of influential business advisors such as Larry Fink that organizations that ignore the interests and needs of their stakeholders will "stumble and fail" (Fink, 2019, para. 10) are salutary. The calls for considering stakeholders, the environment, and society as a whole, and having a social purpose even in the commercial sector, is not coming from left-leaning activists, but from the heartland of business and economics (Business Roundtable, 2019). The 'crisis of democracy' observed by political scientists in many developed countries (Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017) also requires government organizations to rethink their engagement with citizens and adopt more consultative, collaborative, and coproduction approaches.

## Dialogue and dialogic engagement

Engaging with stakeholders and communities needs to be more than tokenistic and not undertaken simply to persuade them to the views of the organization. The term 'dialogue' is derived from the Greek terms *dia* (διά), which means 'through'—not 'two', as many mistakenly think (Bohm, 1996)—and *logos* (λόγος), which means 'speech' or 'words'. However, it requires more than speech. Even two or more parties speaking does not constitute dialogue. Drawing on the *dialogism* of Bakhtin (1981, 1986); definitions of dialogue contrasted with monologue and 'monologue disguised as dialogue' provided by Buber (1958, 2002); and the openness advocated by Gadamer (1989), Taylor and Kent (2014) argue that a *dialogic orientation* (p. 387) and *dialogic engagement* (p. 384) are necessary for ethical communication and productive relationships. Their call for a dialogic approach transcends dialogue, which refers to specific acts of two-way discussion. They say dialogic is a philosophical stance that informs and guides procedures to create an open interactive communication environment in which the views and interests of others are recognized and considered.

Organizational listening

While proponents of dialogue and engagement mention listening, it has been scantily discussed in political, corporate, organizational, business, and marketing literature, as noted by Bickford (1996), Dobson (2014), Couldry (2010), Flynn et al. (2008), and others. And often not done! Research show that, on average, 80 per cent of the communication resources of organizations, and sometimes as high as 95 per cent, is devoted to distributing information (speaking), with just 5–15 per cent assigned to listening (Macnamara, 2016, 2019). Furthermore, when listening is undertaken by organizations, it is mostly done to gain insights and intelligence that help serve achieve the organization's objectives. Lewis (2020) specifically discusses the "power of strategic listening", but this should not be based on narrow interpretations of 'strategic' as discussed earlier in this chapter. Organizations need to conduct open, active listening to understand and respond to stakeholders' needs and concerns. Without organizational listening, it can be argued that strategic communication is propaganda because it resorts to one-way transmission of information designed to serve the organization's interests, and denies a voice to others.

Because organizational listening often has to be undertaken at scale with tens or hundreds of thousands of employees, customers, and other stakeholders, it is commonly *delegated* to functions such as customer relations, call centres, market research, human resources (HR), and social media monitoring. Scale also means that organizational listening is beyond the capabilities of interpersonal listening. The voice of customers (VOC), the voice of employees VOE), and the voice of other stakeholders (VOS) are largely *mediated*, such as through correspondence, calls to call centres, responses to surveys, complaints, and social media posts. Therefore, organizational listening depends on systems, processes, and technologies for listening, such as machine learning text analysis of submissions, correspondence, transcripts of focus groups, and open-ended comments in surveys; voice to text (VTT) software to enable analysis of audio, such as call centre recordings; social media content analysis; customer journey mapping; innovative research methods such as participatory action research (PAR); and *sense making* methodologies (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). Organizations need to invest in listening, as well as speaking, to operationalize strategic communication in a participatory, networked, or emergent sense.

## Conclusions

Calls to engage broadly with strategic communication as a field of research as well as a field of practice open up important new avenues of study that can benefit society. For example, the workings of and methods to counter disinformation that threatens to create a post-truth society (McIntyre, 2018); the *psyops* of friendly and hostile states, which Farwell, (2012, pp. 3–19) notes is a large field of strategic communication; and campaigns conducted by terrorist organizations to lure sympathizers and fighters to their cause are largely ignored by those focussed on normative concepts of strategic communication. Along with corporate and marketing propaganda, such practices warrant greater attention if strategic communication is to be an inclusive field of study.

However, in terms of practice by corporate, government, non-profit, and non-government organizations (NGOs), strategic communication needs to be understood and conducted in ethical and socially responsible ways. Given the substantial resources available to such organizations—often many millions of dollars and large teams of staff and specialist agencies—a narrow focus on achieving the goals of the organization leads to extreme power imbalances in the creation of public policy and the conduct of the marketplace. While the definition of strategic communication by Zerfass et al. (2018) says an organization should "engage in conversations", these are restricted to those that are "of strategic significance to its goals" (p. 493). Conversations related to the goals of stakeholders and society would thereby be excluded, tipping such communication towards propaganda.

Despite Botan's (2018) advocacy for a "cocreational model" of strategic communication that includes "information inflow" (p. 7), focus predominantly or only on what is of strategic significance an organization's goals also leads to mostly *one-way* transmission of information, which fails to meet most definitions of communication (see Carey, 1989; Peters, 1999, 2008; van Ruler, 2018). It renders engagement a targeting activity to extract gains for the organization. It reduces listening to gaining intelligence and insights that can be exploited by the organization for its advantage. Relationships and trust are unlikely to be created in such one-sided interactions.

Nothhaft et al.'s (2018) and Zerfass et al.'s (2018) argument that, to have a centre and focus, disciplines need to impose a perspective and define boundaries ignores widespread calls for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary focus, as well as greater attention to the large body of

human communication theory, as advocated by van Ruler (2018). Fields of communication research and practice professing to be strategic logically need to engage with management literature including contemporary views on emergent strategy and increased attention to social purpose, as well as classic communication theories in relation to dialogue, engagement, and listening, which are essential to relationships.

On the other side, proponents and disciples of normative theories that disavow propaganda and even persuasion "in order to over-state idealized versions of the field … disregarding the reality of practice" (Fawkes, 2015, p. 105) need to broaden their perspective. Close study of propaganda, and its deleterious effects on society, including disinformation, deception, and manipulation perpetrated by corporations, governments, political parties, and their agents is warranted. Analyses such as those of Davis (2019), Edwards (2018b), and Macnamara (2020) serve as warnings that normative theories of strategic communication and its disciplinary doppelgangers are often unrealized and that a fine line exists between ethical persuasion and promotion, on one hand, and deceitful spin and damaging propaganda on the other. Research and practice require close scrutiny of the closely-connected continuum—sometimes a slippery slope—from ethical persuasion and promotion to spin and propaganda. Only through critical research and practitioner reflexivity can ethical strategic communication be identified and differentiated.

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