A multidisciplinary approach for a new understanding of corporate communication

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Abstract
Purpose – The aim of this paper is to better understand the concept of communication in organizations through the comparison of definitions given by scholars from different business-related communication disciplines: marketing, public relations, organizational communication and corporate communication.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of prevalent definitions in the four mentioned disciplines; discussion of communication aims, communication categorizations, theoretical background and innovations in each of these disciplines; and finally analysis of convergences and differences.

Findings – All the disciplines considered in this study converge in looking at the entire communication of a business, adopting a relational perspective, valuing some intangible resources as outcomes of communication. They highlight also some nuanced differences.

Research limitations/implications – Higher value should be attached to research results in the communication field that come from considering multiple points of view, because each discipline contributes specific connotations to the comprehension of communication.

Originality/value – The paper compares some business-related communication disciplines and considers each as independent while benefiting from cross-fertilization. The multiple points of view allow a multidisciplinary approach and the awareness of the polysemic nature of communication.

Keywords Marketing, Corporate communication, Public relations, Disciplines cross-fertilization, Multidisciplinary approach, Organizational communication

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
What is corporate communication? How do the terms corporate communication, organizational communication, public relations, integrated communication, holistic communication, business communication and the like, each of which refers to the communication of an organization, differ from each other and how do they overlap?

Many fields of study have developed different points-of-view on the concept of communication: political science, economics, sociology, psychology, management science, anthropology, linguistics, cybernetics, biology, philosophy and government (Varey, 2000). The list could be extended further with business-related communication field of studies: advertising, corporate communication, marketing, organizational communication, public relations, mass communication and semiotics. Each of the above-mentioned fields is institutionalized as a discipline, because there are field-specific manuals, journals, university courses, professional associations and academic networks.
The contents of journals and courses in the different fields overlap, and as a consequence it is not clear if it is simply the case that academics call similar things by different names (Shelby, 1993). The abundance of terms could create confusion (Cropp and Pincus, 2001, p. 195). It is not just a matter of words, because the concept of communication adopted is relevant both for practice and research (Varey, 2000). Many scholars have dealt with the issue of multiple disciplines and terms referring to the communication of organizations because this issue is linked to their own disciplinary identity and the possibility of producing a better understanding of the communication phenomenon.

This study contributes to the understanding of communication of organizations using perspectives from several disciplines in order to enhance its understanding. The effort presented in this article traces areas of overlap and differences among the various business-related communication disciplines in order to reach a better understanding of the meaning of communication in organizations.

The article reviews previous studies that dealt with the issue of multiple disciplines of communication. Then it discusses a comparative analysis between four business-related communication disciplines: marketing, organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication. In conclusion the article reports some elements of convergence and difference and highlights some issues that call for a multidisciplinary approach, preserving a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, it proposes suggestions for further research and the development of managerial implications.

Previous studies
Previous studies treat the issue of similarities and differences among multiple communication disciplines in different ways. Some scholars have proposed comparisons between some of these disciplines. For example, several investigations have explored relationships between public relations and marketing (Cornelissen, 2008; Cornelissen and Harris, 2004; Kitchen, 2003; Hutton, 2010; McKie and Willis, 2012) and among public relations, communication management and organizational communication (Wehmeier, 2008). Also an attempt has been made to analyze the boundaries and the relationships among organizational, business, management and corporate communication, focusing in particular on differences (Shelby, 1993). A very recent study (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013) highlights some differences between corporate communication and four related disciplines (public relations, organizational communication, marketing and business communication) although considers promising the efforts to connect them.

Others have discussed an integrative approach. For example, researchers have examined interrelationships between organizational communication and public relations (Theis-Berglmair, 2008), between public relations and communication management (Szyszka, 2008) and between marketing communication and general management (Varey, 2000). One proposal has highlighted some intersections between research in corporate communication and organizational communication (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). Other scholars have regarded some of these disciplines as specializations of another field. For example, integrated marketing communication has been treated as a specialization of public relations and corporate communication (Tench and Yeomans, 2009).
One study proposes an interdisciplinary definition (Zerfass et al., 2008). Strategic communication considers all communications in organizations from an integrated multidisciplinary perspective elaborating on various academic fields: corporate communication, marketing, advertising and public relations, business communication skills and organizational behavior (Hallahnan et al., 2007). Some of these terms – corporate communication, public relations and organizational communication – have been considered synonymous because they share the same body of knowledge, skills and professional areas (Invernizzi, 2005).

Another study underlines different approaches in American and European definitions of corporate communication (Goodman and Hirsch, 2010). Other analyses lead to a preference for maintaining a distinction, in order to preserve the autonomy of public relations from marketing (Grunig and Grunig, 1998; Hutton, 2010).

**Research design and methodology**

The present article explores a new approach in order to better understand the concept of corporate communication: it adopts the perspectives of several disciplines in order to enhance its understanding. It avoids systematizations which tend to subsume a number of fields within a major discipline, and it does not attempt to reach an all-inclusive definition. Instead, this study chooses to analyze each area as a discipline that has evolved independently while benefiting from cross-fertilization. Its aim is to investigate whether the different disciplines present areas of overlap and specificity, in order to understand what kind of approach would be most appropriate for research and practice.

This study examines definitions derived from four business-related communication disciplines: marketing, organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication. They have been chosen among many disciplines dealing with communication by and inside organizations and sharing a common foundation and linked to each other (Elving, 2012). It does not offer a comprehensive literature review; that is not the aim of this article and it would be impossible due to the enormous volume of studies. It presents an analysis based on key articles and textbooks for each discipline, selected among those considered to be a point of reference for each discipline.

The study adopts a comparative approach, in order to identify the existence and the extent of similarities and differences among phenomena. Like variable-oriented methods, comparative methods examine patterns of relationships among variables (Ragin and Rubison, 2009). This study compares definitions given by the four disciplines on the basis of the following conceptual variables: the purpose of communication, the criteria applied for categorizing communication and the theoretical background. These variables have been identified analyzing the elements that recur in each discipline when they present their own definition.

**Marketing: integrated marketing communication and totally integrated communication**

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is the process of developing and implementing various forms of persuasive communications programs with customers and prospects over time (Kitchen et al., 2004, p. 22).
Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) sees communication as the focal point of relationships with customers because it creates brand value in the form of sales, profits and brand equity (Kitchen et al., 2004). IMC adopts an outside-in logic: it starts with the analysis of the relational needs of customers in order to develop suitable products and services and to align communication activities. All moments of contact between the company and the clients are valuable since every communication that emanates from the company contributes to developing customer loyalty and organizational reputation (Kitchen and Schultz, 2003).

Marketing communication has been divided into four areas (Guatri et al., 1999): marketing communication addressed to customers; institutional communication dealing with all stakeholders including customers, opinion leaders, politicians, citizens, activist groups and so on; management communication targeted to all roles that contribute to the value chain of the company including employees, suppliers, industrial partners and retailers; and financial communication addressed to investors including shareholders, stockholders and banks. Each area has specific targets, content and aims. Nevertheless, some targets, content and aims overlap, creating an area in common that the authors suggest calling “integrated business communication” that should harmonize targets, content and aims in order to seek synergy and avoid contradictions.

Integration at a strategic level of all communications is crucial in order to build and reinforce brands and to establish loyalty and long-term relationships (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Messages should be non-contradictory and complementary (Moriarty, 1994). Integrated messages stem from the sender, namely the company, but the receiving process involves making sense of messages and is greatly influenced by customers and stakeholders. Consequently, effective integrated communication requires a culture of partnership (Christensen et al., 2009). In order to avoid integrated communication becoming marketing controlled communication, the “flexible integration approach” focuses on both consistency and inclusion of variety (Christensen et al., 2009). This broad interpretation of integrated communication encompasses the sending and interpreting processes and also the internal integration of the organizational culture (Torp, 2009).

Nowadays marketing is becoming more oriented to creating and maintaining positive relationships with all stakeholders in order to balance the company’s need to make a profit with customer satisfaction and the public interest (Kitchen and Schultz, 2003). In addition, marketing studies stress that the corporate brand transfers its values from the corporate identity to the single product brands, reinforcing them. For this reason, both product and corporate communication activities are important in achieving marketing objectives. Therefore, the concepts of totally integrated communication (Kitchen and Schultz, 2003) and total communications (Aberg, 1990) are emerging. They refer to the integration of communication at both single brand and company level and encompass all communication initiatives carried out by the company directed toward its stakeholders, from a coordinated and synergetic management perspective.

Organizational communication

Organizational communication is the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships to cope with environmental uncertainty (Goldhaber, 1993, p. 15).
The very large number of theories and volume of research in organizational communication (Jablin and Putnam, 2001) have been synthesized into six metaphor clusters (Putnam et al., 1996). The conduit metaphor views organizations as containers or channels, and communication is a tool for information transmission. The lens metaphor views the organization as an eye that scans the environment seeking information and relaying information. Communication is a filtering, reception and perception process.

The linkage metaphor defines the organization as a relationship network, and communication is equated with connections. It views the organization as coordinated actions that enact their own rules, structures and environment through social interactions. Communication is social interaction and sense-making.

The symbol metaphor considers the organization as a literary text and a symbolic milieu. Communication is interpretation through meaning creation and sharing. The voice metaphor views the organization as a chorus. Communication is the expression and distortion of the voices of organizational members. The discourse metaphor considers the organization as texts and patterns of interaction. Communication is equated with conversation that intertwines action and meaning.

Research studies in the field of organizational communication assume, implicitly or explicitly, a peculiar view of human communication synthesized into four perspectives. The mechanistic perspective sees communication as the transmission of messages across space, via a channel from one sender to a receiver. It is a causal and linear model of communication and primarily focuses on the channels. The psychological perspective primarily concentrates on how the characteristics of individuals, such as cognition, attitudes and conceptual filters, affect the communication process. The interpretive-symbolic perspective adopts the ideas of the process of organizing (Weick, 1979) and states that organizational communication consists of coordinated behaviors that build the socially constructed reality. The focus is on congruence between the meanings given to events and on culture that impacts the interpretive process. The system interaction perspective focuses on sequences of patterned behaviors. The communication process is greater than the sum of its parts.

Organizational communication studies show, first, that communication and organization are two equivalent concepts (Tompkins and Wanca-Thibault, 2001). Second, it appears that communication is not contained in the organization, nor does it mirror or reflect reality. On the contrary, communication is formative and creates the organization (McPhee and Scott Poole, 2001): “Communication and organization are equivalent ( . . . ); it is the paint and the canvas, the figure and the ground” (Tompkins and Wanca-Thibault, 2001, p. xxix).

There is a growing tendency to focus organizational communication research on the “communication theory of organization” (Deetz, 2001, p. 5). Organization is “a text produced by a set of authors, through conversation” (Taylor, 1993, p. 96). In other words, what emerges is the idea that the organization is communicative by nature. This concept is synthesized in the idea of the “expressive organization” (Schultz et al., 2000).

More recently, the notion has emerged in the field of organizational communication of “Communication Constitutive of Organizing” (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). This concept derives from Weick’s notion of “process of organizing” (Weick, 1979), which contrasts with the concept of a static organization. It points out the relevance of language and collective sense-making communication processes to create the organization. The communicative constitution of organization relies on four
kinds of interaction processes: membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning (McPhee and Zaug, 2000).

Public relations

Scholars in the field of public relations adopt several paradigms (Edwards, 2012) generating many terms associated with it (Cropp and Pincus, 2001). The concept of public relations can assume three meanings. The first is to communicate with the publics of an organization in order to persuade them. For example:

The goal of PR is to influence the behaviours of groups of people in relation to each other (White and Mazur, 1996, p. 11; cited in Tench and Yeomans, 2009).

This meaning includes the “press agency-publicity”, the “public information” and the “two-way asymmetric” models of public relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Through a scientific approach based on persuasion techniques and audience analysis, public relations specialists have honed their abilities to construct and disseminate persuasive messages.

The second meaning refers to public relations as relationship management. It was introduced by Ferguson (1984) and then supported by many scholars, including Cutlip et al. (2006), Broom and Dozier (1990), Guatri et al. (1999), and Hutton (1999).

This type of definition refers explicitly to systems theory by defining public relations as a subsystem that connects the organizational system to the environmental system (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Ledingham and Bruning (2000) developed this model and applied it to specialized areas of public relations. Kent and Taylor (2002) expanded the concept to the one of dialogic public relations. The most recent and promising trend in public relations is the transition from functionalism to the co-creation perspective (Botan and Taylor, 2004).

The third meaning refers to public relations as a mean for positioning the organization (Cropp and Pincus, 2001) and its reputation (Hutton, 1999). Crucial to this step is the maturing of the role of public relations professional from technical to managerial (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig et al., 2002; Broom and Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1984). The communication technician’s work focuses on message creation, its spreading at a tactical level and implementing decisions taken by other people in the company. The communication manager develops communication strategies and policies with a long-term horizon (Dozier, 1984). The managerial role implies extending the skills of public relations practitioners to financial and economic analysis, decision-making and project management. Mastering managerial skills can legitimize public relations professionals within the executive management board of the company.

The various concepts of public relations are part of a continuum and they overlap. They do not disregard each other but rather integrate each other (Cropp and Pincus, 2001). Furthermore, scholars in the field adopt assumptions that are connected, showing that public relations cannot be compartmentalized (Edwards, 2012).

Public relations have been divided into specialist areas such as media relations, internal communications, community relations, issue management, crisis management, public affairs, financial relations and sponsorship (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Kitchen, 2003; Cutlip et al., 2006; Tench and Yeomans, 2009). This kind of categorization implicitly refers to the specialized competencies and skills supposed to be mastered by the professionals and managers in the field.
Corporate communication

Definitions of corporate communication (Goodman and Hirsch, 2010) in the US are centered on the concept of strategic management (for example Argenti, 2009), whereas in Europe, they are more theoretically based (for example, Cornelissen, 2008; and van Riel, 2003).

Corporate Communication is the orchestration of all the instruments in the field of organizational identity (communications, symbols and behaviours of organizational members) in such an attractive and realistic manner as to create or maintain a positive reputation for groups with which the organization has an interdependent relationship (van Riel, 2003, p. 53).

The common features of some of the prevailing definitions of corporate communication (van Riel, 1995, van Riel, 2003; Goodman and Hirsch, 2010; Cornelissen, 2008), have been synthetized in three points (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013). First, corporate communication is a strategic management function that takes a strategic approach to communication activities and is tied the overall strategy of the company. Second, it integrates external and internal communication activities spread among a series of organizational practices to build, maintain, change and/or repair one or more positive images and/or reputations. Third, all this activities take place inside relationships with the external and internal stakeholders of the company.

Corporate communication encompasses and manages all company’s communication activities as an integrated whole with the aim of building and maintaining a valuable corporate reputation across different stakeholder groups, markets and audiences (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Cornelissen, 2008). The corporate communication paradigm privileges the sender’s point-of-view, assumes for itself an orchestration role, and justifies centralized control of the communication function (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011).

Corporate communication includes three categories of communication defined by the senders or the receivers of the communication (van Riel, 1995):

1. Management communication implemented by senior managers for planning, organizing, supervising, coordinating and monitoring. It is useful to develop a shared vision within the organization, gain and maintain trust in corporate leadership, enable and manage change processes and, finally, help employees to grow professionally.

2. Organizational communication includes heterogeneous communication activities: public relations, public affairs, CSR communication, investor relations, communication with the labour market, corporate advertising and internal communications.

3. Marketing communication encompasses commercial communication activities developed to support the sale of goods and services. It typically includes the promotional mix: advertising, direct mail, personal sales and product sponsorship.

Other scholars of corporate communication have proposed categorizations based on specialist areas such as media relations, internal communication and change communication, issue and crisis management, identity, image and reputation, corporate responsibility and investor relations (Goodman and Hirsch, 2010; Argenti,
2009; Cornelissen, 2008). Corporate communication is used as a broad and comprehensive term to include a variety of communication and management activities (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Shelby, 1993).

Studies of corporate communication have recently focused on value and reputation management as the primary asset of the company (van Riel and Fombrun, 2004). Reputation has been defined as “a collective representation of a firm’s past actions and results that describes the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders. It gauges a firm’s relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments” (Fombrun and Rindova, 1996). Reputation is seen as a fundamental signal for financial markets, which reward companies with the best reputation.

Core themes of corporate communication are corporate identity, image and reputation; the integration of verbal and behavioral activities; and the relation between the organization and its stakeholders (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013).

Discussion and conclusions: convergences and different nuances

This section compares the definitions of communication from the disciplines of marketing, organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication, referring to the following conceptual variables: the purpose of communication, the criteria used to identify communication categories and the theoretical background.

The prevailing purpose of communication in organizations, according to marketing, is the building of loyal relationships with all stakeholders (Kitchen and Schultz, 2003). For organizational communication it is the social creation of the process of organizing (Ashcraft et al., 2009). For public relations it is the managing of relationships to position the organization’s reputation (Cropp and Pincus, 2001). And for corporate communication it is reputation management.

The criteria used to categorize communication at a conceptual level are contents and receivers for marketing, the perspectives on human communication for organizational communication, the areas of specialization for public relations, and the receivers and the sources of communication as well as the areas of specializations for corporate communication.

The theoretical backgrounds privileged by the four disciplines are wide. Nevertheless it is possible to indicate some prevalent theories. Marketing communication studies are rooted in marketing and management theories. Organizational communication is mainly based on human communication theories and organizational behavior theories. Public relations use mass communication, sociology, psychology, and system theories. Corporate communication is mainly rooted into management and strategic studies.

The comparative analysis of the disciplines of marketing, organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication highlights some convergences and some issues that highlight divergent perspectives (see Figure 1).

They converge in three aspects. First, they consider the communication of an organization as an indivisible concept. Marketing underlines the concept of total business communications, encompassing all the contact points with stakeholders. Organizational communication highlights the network of relationships that crosses organizational boundaries. Public relations comprise dialogue activities with all
publics, even though it is based on professional specialization. Corporate communication identifies itself with a holistic view of communication.

The second convergence is that all the disciplines adopt, implicitly or explicitly, a relational perspective. Marketing stresses the relations with customers and all stakeholders, developing relationship marketing (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Organizational communication focuses on networks of inter- and intra-organizational relationships (Monge and Contractor, 2001). Public relations assume that relationship management is one of the key features of its role (Ledingham, Bruning, 2000). Corporate communication places the building of relationships with all the company’s stakeholders among its purposes (van Riel, 2003). This point provides the transition from the notion of communication as a connection between two points to that of interaction between players.

The third convergence is that all the disciplines assume that communication in organizations supports the creation of intangible resources. Intangible resources, for example, knowledge, trust, loyalty, reputation, identification, are valuable, rare, inimitable, organization-specific and they are key assets for long-term competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). They are generated through networks of trust relationships (Coleman, 1988, 1990).

Marketing highlights how relationships with different partners generate loyalty and knowledge. Organizational communication underlines the knowledge creation processes. Public relations and corporate communication focus on reputation as a valuable resource.

The three convergences among business-related communication disciplines represent a very important area of overlap and correspond to the core identity of communication in organizations. The concluding remark is that all the disciplines
considered look at the same phenomenon – i.e. communication by and inside organizations – starting from a specific point-of-view.

Although there are these points of convergence, the analysis of the four disciplines indicates some differences, as previous studies have already done (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013). The comparative analysis in the study highlights in particular some specific nuances. Marketing underlines the competitive value of the intangible resources generated by means of communicative interactions. Organizational communication points out the role of communication as constitutive of organizations. Public relations value the social relevance of relationships with stakeholders and professional competencies. Corporate communication clarifies the organizational and managerial role of communication as a company function that can be used for the governance of consistent communication.

To conclude, the comparative analysis presented in this article shows that the disciplines of marketing, organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication refer to the same phenomenon, although they give to business-related communication different names and highlight specific nuances. This variance is not negative per se, although it may generate some confusion. On the one hand, the plurality of definitions creates confusion among scholars and practitioners, while on the other hand, it highlights the multi-faceted nature of the concept of communication. Communication is a polysemic phenomenon and in constant evolution (Gould, 2004). The different ways of interpreting and defining the concept of communication should be understood as the expression of different points-of-view arising from various cultural and professional backgrounds.

In highlighting the convergences among the academic disciplines of marketing, organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication, preserving the specificity of each of them, this study supports an approach that goes far beyond a single discipline in order to embrace a multidisciplinary perspective. A disciplinary definition would be based on constraining disciplinary boundaries and risk being based in a too narrow perspective. It might cause scholars to ignore some evidence only because it is not consistent with a single discipline (Gordon, 2006). “Disciplinary decadence” emerges when disciplines forget “their impetus in living human subjects and their crucial role in both maintenance and transformation of knowledge-production practices” (Gordon, 2006, p. 1). Looking at the world from a disciplinary point-of-view could lead to one being constrained by already well-established ideas: “The communication discipline, like many others, lacks the capacity to actively engage the irreducibly living human presence within our work because deeply entrenched ideas that guide our prereflectively embodied practices” (Martinez, 2011, p. 19). Disciplines nowadays are required to respond to an environment that anticipates intersections among them. The complexity of the phenomena studied requires complex thinking (McKie and Willis, 2012). Consequently, the new approach should go beyond the boundaries of specific disciplines and continue in the effort of building bridges among them (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011) and adopting a cross-disciplinary perspective (Zorn, 2002).

Scholars are pressured by the need to adopt a wide spectrum of concepts in order to better understand communication in organizations. In fact, it is common to find articles and research referring to a wide range of previous studies from different fields. Although disciplines exist, scholars frequently move across their boundaries, simply
because they must borrow concepts from many fields in order to generate valuable knowledge.

A first research implication emerges: there is a need to study if and how scholars in the field of business-related communication merge literature sources, theories and research methods. This could be done through a content analysis of articles from the most important journals of considered disciplines or through interviews with a sample of eminent scholars. The topics of such study could be academic backgrounds, main theoretical frameworks, research topics, differences and intersections they perceive among communication fields, areas of beneficial mutual cross-fertilization, areas of conflict and divergences, difficulties and the advantages of multidisciplinarity.

Multidisciplinarity could add value in research in the communication field: each discipline would contribute specific connotations to the comprehension of communication. For example, the discipline of organizational communication can broaden the perspective and the topics covered by corporate communication scholars to embrace politics, voice and social coordination (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011).

The present study has a number of limitations. It considered only four business-related communication disciplines, and it might be interesting to extend the analysis to other fields. This study should be thought as a work in progress because in recent years the number of articles about the issue of the relationship among communication disciplines is growing, consequently providing continuous new insights.

References


Further reading

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