

The butterflies from Brazil: Issues, contingency, and strategic communication

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Abstract

Strategic communication and issues management are inevitably linked in what Heath and Palenchar (2009) described as an ancient business and communication practice. Strategic communication deals with how an organisation functions as a social actor to advance its mission (Hallahan et al, 2007). Issues management is a strategic process by which organisations identify, analyse and deal with issues that are important to them to help plan and manage (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, Jaques, 2009a, 2009b). Contingency theory is an aspect of general systems theory and holds that “one thing depends on something else” (Hodge, Anthony & Gales, 2003, p. 17): In a management context, this means organisational structure depends on the context the organisation faces. Applied to strategic communication, contingency theory suggests that practitioners select positions and strategies to react to internal and external factors that apply to an organisation (Kang & Cheng, 2008). Pang, Jin and Cameron (2010) argued that contingency theory “liberates” (p. 27) communication strategists to think outside the box and to engage in strategic analysis. This paper suggests how that might be done. It uses contingency theory to explore the links between strategic communication and issues management to advance the discussion beyond a focus on the realities of practice (Pang et al, 2010) to one at a strategic level. The paper uses the significant drivers of strategic communication identified in communication and management literature to argue these “contingent variables” need to be considered in the context of the three horizons approach to management proposed by Baghai et al (2000).

Introduction

The notion that a butterfly flapping its wings in a Brazilian rainforest could have an impact on the weather in Europe is a popular theme in science fiction. This so-called butterfly effect is a metaphor for concepts embedded in chaos theory, especially to explain how small changes in a system’s environment may influence the way the system behaves. Management scholars use this principle when they apply systems, complexity and contingency theories to understand organisational structures (see especially the discussion by Donaldson, 2006).

In this paper, the butterfly metaphor translates to the impact that drivers of strategic communication (that is, general social, political and economic issues in organisational environments), have on planning and implementation decisions. This butterfly effect goes beyond the traditional use of contingency theory by public relations scholars to argue that two-way symmetrical communication is

a too simplistic, sometimes impossible, way of explaining public relations practice (for example, Murphy, 2000; Reber & Cameron, 2003; Kang & Cheng, 2008; Pang, Jin & Cameron, 2010). Theoretically, the energetic Brazilian butterflies here impact on high level, strategic decisions, and in different time horizons. That is, decisions to address these variables are not always based on immediate tactical practice.

This is an important distinction. Jaques (2009a) noted that not every issue was strategic, but that “all issue management should be strategic in its approach and implementation” (p. 21). Cornelissen (2005) argues that recommendations by strategic communicators on organisational responses to political issues, reputation protection, crises, and long-range positioning, are about advancing top-level strategic goals and objectives, rather than about implementing tactics. Gregory (2000) and Ströh (2006, 2007) have similarly argued for a differentiation between tactical practice and strategic considerations. Gower (2006) notes that much of the public relations literature has focussed on what practitioners do, rather than on the business drivers for practice, and argues public relations scholars have not kept pace with the evolution in the management literature’s “thinking about strategy” (p. 185). Gower (2006, p. 185) argues that,

If we are to be a management function, we need to bring that literature into ours and update what we do and how we do it.

Management scholars are working in this paradigm. Argenti, Howell and Beck (2005) argued the importance of strategic communication for business success. The implications of the 2008-2010 global economic crisis led some management scholars (for example, Bach & Allen, 2010; Ghemawat, 2010) to include communication in their solutions for revitalising corporate strategy, especially in repairing damaged reputations. This paper brings aspects of management literature into that for communication by “thinking about strategy” in terms of Baghai *et al*’s (2000) horizons approach to business planning. That is, if issues are contingent variables that effect strategic communication planning, in what time horizons are they best addressed?

Strategic communication

Strategic communication deals with how an organisation functions as a social actor to advance its mission and involves informational, persuasive, discursive, and relational communication (Hallahan, *et al*, 2007).

In its long-term, multidisciplinary, intentional, and purposeful focus, strategic communication prepares organisations for an uncertain future and builds a bridge between organisations and their stakeholders in a response to business needs and concerns (Argenti, Howell & Beck, 2005; Cornelissen, 2005; J.E. Grunig, 2006; Sandhu, 2009; Zerfass & Huck, 2007; Zerfass, 2009). Strategic communication has three primary drivers: regulatory factors, organisational complexity, and the need to increase credibility (Argenti *et al*, 2005). For example, new regulations mean revisiting communication strategies to deal with them; the corporate crises in the 1990s meant a formidable challenge to restore business credibility (Argenti *et al* 2005), just as those that triggered the global

financial crisis of 2008-2010 required adjustments to corporate strategy (Ghemawat, 2010). Sandhu (2009) describes strategic communication as multidisciplinary intentional communication that requires a purposeful actor, and rational and deliberate decision-making. J.E. Grunig (2006) argues that strategic communication is a bridging activity between organisations and their stakeholders that should be standard procedure – that is, institutionalised. This reflects the notion of two-way symmetrical communication (see, e.g, Grunig 2001). Argenti, Howell and Beck (2005) define strategic communication as being “...aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning.” They note that strategic communication must have a long-term orientation in which practitioners must ‘...meet short-term needs by staying focused on the long-term issues’ facing organisations (p 89). Zerfass and Huck (2007, p. 108) argue that strategic communication “prepares organisations for an uncertain future.” Cornelissen (2005) notes that the scope and involvement of strategic communication as a management function becomes more substantial when it stretches beyond a set of functional goals and tactics to corporate and business unit levels. In its critical management function, strategic communication practitioners thus need to respond to business needs and concerns (Cornelissen, 2005).

Tench *et al* (2009) cite Van Ruler and Verčič’s description of communication management as including

- counselling the members of an organisation on matters of values, norms and issues important to society;
- coaching the members of an organisation to respond communicatively to societal demands;
- conceptualising and planning communication with important publics to gain public trust; and
- executing communication plans.

In Grunig’s (2009) view, communication practitioners working in the symbolic, interpretive paradigm of marketing communication generally believe publics can be persuaded by messages that change their cognitive representations. This approach devotes excessive attention to the tactical role of communication in negotiating meaning by emphasising messages, publicity, media relations and media effects (Grunig, 2009). A contrasting strategic management, behavioural paradigm builds relationships with stakeholders (Grunig, 2009). This paradigm facilitates two-way communication and dialogue and includes a framework of research and listening, as a result of which “...messages reflect the information needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of organisations” (Grunig, 2009, p. 9).

Issues and communication

Planning and managing organisational responses to social, economic and political issues is an ancient business and communication practice (Heath & Palenchar, 2009), but a focus of contemporary strategic management is on how that might be achieved. Ghemawat (2010), for example, has suggested that one of five adjustments to corporate strategy directions post the 2008-2010 global economic crisis should be communication activity with a focus on organisational identity and reputation, especially given the all-time low in the general reputation of business caused by that crisis. In Ghemawat's (2010) view that focus means senior executives should spend more time managing relationships with governments as a result of their expanded role as investors, customers, regulators and tax collectors. Bach & Allen (2010) argue that organisations need to manage carefully key social, political and environmental issues, and relationships with the "actors" who care about them, in their "non-market environment". Issues in this environment affect their ability to reach objectives in the "market environment" which comprises relationships with customers, suppliers and competitors (Bach & Allen, 2010).

Scholarly discussion of issues identification, analysis and management is usually confined to business contexts (see e.g. Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009a, 2009b in which "business" is used in its broadest sense), but they are also preoccupations of government agencies, non-government organisations and in the not-for-profit sector. Politics is essentially about identifying and managing issues. Issues management is most often the task of an organisation's senior strategic communication counsel in a boundary spanning role that identifies and analyses external and internal issues to understand the opportunities and threats they pose (Argenti & Forman, 2002; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques 2009a; Lauzen, 1997; Tench, Verhoeven & Zeffass, 2009; van Riel & Frombrun, 2008). Lauzen describes this role as "... a unique contribution to the issue-analysis step in the issues management process" (p. 67). Issues analysis and management is a sophisticated discipline used to develop strategies for a wide range of public issues (Jaques, 2009a).

In their counselling roles, strategic communicators advise management about organisational responses to political issues, reputation protection, crises, and long-range organisational positioning. Their concern is about how top-level strategic goals and objectives are advanced, rather than with implementing tactics (Cornelissen, 2005).

Contingency theory and communication

Contingency theory is not an uncontested lens through which to view either management or communication decision-making (see, for example, Donaldson, 2006 for a detailed discussion of arguments for and against using contingency theory in this way). Yet it is a useful tool through which to examine the potential impact of political, social and economic issues on organisations, especially given that these issues play out in what Bach and Allen (2010) describe as the "non-market environment" but nevertheless impact on day-to-day operations.

The notion that organisational environments impact on management decision-making grew out of scholars' application of systems theory to better understand organisational structures (Hatch, 2006; Donaldson, 2006). In this view, organisations are complex systems which comprise dynamically interacting parts; a change in one part can affect the behaviour of other parts (Beinhocker, 1999). Hodge *et al* (2003) argue that this approach helps to model organisational structures and how their constituent parts interact with each other, and with external factors, to achieve organisational goals. These complex systems are "path dependent" (Beinhocker, 1999, p. 49), meaning that, like the Brazilian butterflies, random changes produce unrelated outcomes. In this strategic systems model (Hodge *et al*, 2003) an organisation's structure is contingent on the contexts it faces. Mackey (2009, p. 60) noted that many complex contexts "...support, enable, change and threaten..." a system, or organisation. This notion that complex systems like organisational structures are affected by internal and external variables led scholars to apply contingency theory to communication practice. Kang and Cheng (2008) argue that contingency theory plays "close attention" (p. 4) to the influence of variables on how practitioners select a stance and communication strategy that is best for an organisation. For example, Kang and Cheng (2008) found that legal and regulatory factors were contingent variables affecting issue management. Other public relations scholars (see for example, Murphy, 2000; Reber & Cameron, 2003; Shin *et al*, 2006) have used contingency theory to argue the limitations of the two-symmetrical model of public relations theorised by J.E. Grunig and colleagues (Grunig *et al*, 2000) and to describe how practice moves along a continuum of pure advocacy to accommodation. They use contingency theory to understand the internal and external dynamics that could affect the stance an organisation takes on a particular issue (Pang, Yin & Cameron, 2010). Research grounded in contingency theory, found that 87 internal and external variables impact on practitioners' abilities to do their jobs (see, for example, Pang, Yin & Cameron, 2010). Cancel *et al* (1997) argue that strategic communication is practiced on a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation depending on the circumstances (contingent variables) the organisation faced.

However, this discussion of contingency theory in strategic communication has focussed on the tactical level, that is, how communication practice can be used to respond to the attitudes of a public (see for example the discussion in Pang, Yin & Cameron, 2010, esp. pp. 24-28).

Strategic issues analysis and strategic communication in three horizons

The concept that corporations could be managed across "three horizons" simultaneously in order to distinguish between the embryonic, emergent and mature phases of a business" life cycle (Baghai *et al*, 2000) provides a theoretical a paradigm for the application of strategic communication to dealing with issues. Baghai and colleagues were writing about how business can manage growth in three time horizons:

Horizon 1: Extending and defending core business. This horizon encompasses the businesses that are at the heart of an organisation and with which customers and analysts most readily identify. Horizon 1 is "critical to near-term performance" (Baghai *et al*, 2000 p. 5) as cash and

skills generated in it provide resources for growth. One of the primary management challenges is to shore up competitive positions aided by, among other things, marketing.

Horizon 2: Building emerging businesses. In this horizon, management is concerned with the emerging stars of the company, because they transform companies. Baghai *et al* (2000) argue that Horizon 2 is about building new streams of revenue which may be extensions of current business or moves in new directions.

Horizon 3: Seeding options for future businesses. Baghai *et al* (2000) describe Horizon 3 businesses as options on future opportunities. Horizon 3, then, is the longer term future in which real activities, such as research projects, test market pilots, alliances and so on, mark the first steps toward actual businesses which, if they prove successful, will be expected to reach the profitability of those in the Horizon 1 stage of growth.

The focus of each horizon and associated outputs are illustrated in Table 1 which Baghai *et al* (2000) use to demonstrate how planning for each should be separated to avoid a natural tendency for Horizon 1 immediacy to overshadow the needs for the other two.

Table 1: Planning in three horizons

	Horizon 1	Horizon 2	Horizon 3
Focus	Executing to defend, extend, and increase profitability of existing businesses	Resourcing initiatives to build new businesses	Uncovering options for future opportunities and placing bets on selected options
Outputs	Annual operating plan: tactical plans, resourcing decisions, budgets	Business building strategies: investment budget, detailed business plans for new ventures	Decisions to explore: initial project plan, project milestones

From Baghai et al (2000), p. 130.

Baghai *et al's* (2000) argument about Horizon 1 immediacy, resonates with what Ströh (2006) describes in a communication context as a normative tactical approach and is behind Gregory's (2000) argument that a tactical focus is the major reason so many communication campaigns fail to produce anticipated results.

Mahoney (2010, 2011-in press) theorises that Baghai *et al's* (2000) approach could be adapted to strategic communication planning. This would involve a focus on issues management as a strategic function (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009a, 2009b) in which issues and their potential impact on organisations are classified in the three horizons and developing programmes to address them (see e.g. J.E. Grunig and Repper, 1992; Cornelissen 2005; Heath and Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009a, 2009b; Jones and Bartlett, 2009). Strategic communicators need to make these links if dialogue between their organisations and stakeholders is to improve. This is not simply an application of the

classic approach to issues management in which issues are coded by assessing the *possibility* they will occur against the likely *impact* they could have on an organisation in *high, medium* and *low* frames. Nor is it an adaptation of traditional short, mid and long-range frame for communication planning. It is about making communication decisions in the same sense that Baghai *et al* (2000) argue business decisions need to be taken. This approach applies not only to commercial business; it applies equally to strategic communication for not-for-profit organisations, government agencies, and in politics. For example, a pilot study of Australian community cabinets (Mahoney, 2010) found that issues that dominated political discourse were not necessarily those that concerned citizens, despite the focus given to them by politicians and the mass news media.

Given strategic communication operates in the non-market environment (Mahoney, 2010), adapting the horizons approach would classify issues in, and align communication activities to, the appropriate time horizons.

The model would mean,

- **Horizon 2** being used strategically to enhance reputations, by managing relationships with stakeholders, and implementing, for example, financial and investor relations, government relations, community relations.
- **Horizon 3** providing a focus for long-term issues identification and the associated strategic communication programme planning.

As **Horizon 1** has a focus on immediate concerns, this is the arena for the day-to-day tactical communication: For example, advertising, marketing communication, media relations and crisis communication.

Table 2 shows how the model could be adapted for strategic communication planning.

Table 2: Horizons for strategic communication

	Horizon 1 <i>Now</i>	Horizon 2 <i>Mid-term to 5 years</i>	Horizon 3 <i>Long term 5 years →</i>
Focus	<i>Current business</i>	<i>Emerging business</i>	<i>Future business</i>
Outputs	Day-to-day media Crisis communication Marketing communication	Issue identification Policy development Tactical lobbying	Strategic issue identification Strategic communication through relationship management, persistent government relations, community relations

Adapted by the author from Baghai et al (2000), p. 130

Theorising independent variables influencing communication decisions

To determine which issue categories could impact on strategic communication decisions in the three horizons model, a two-step qualitative content analysis was undertaken of selected communication and business literature to develop a list of independent contingent variables. The variables were then applied to the theorised horizons approach.

The first step in this analysis identified a list of external variables that influence communication, and the definitions of them, via a content analysis of the works of Shin et al (2006), Argenti et al (2005), Ghemawat, (2010), Bach and Allen (2010), Reber and Cameron (2003), and Porter (2008). Porter's (2008) analysis of the forces that shape industry competition was included because those forces apply specifically in the market environment (Bach & Allen, 2010) and thus have communication implications. These six works were chosen because they represent both communication and management literature dealing with aspects of contingency theory and communication. The result of the qualitative analysis is reported in Table 3.

Table 3: External variables influencing communication

Authors	External variables
Shin <i>et al</i> (2006)	<p><u>External threats</u>: Litigation, Government regulation, Potentially damaging publicity, Scarred reputation, Activist causes</p> <p><u>Industry environment</u>: Changing or static industry, Industry competition, Industry resources</p> <p><u>Political/social/cultural environment</u>: Political and social support of business, Powerful members or connections</p> <p><u>Public power</u>: Public size, Organisation's advocacy, Public's communication, Public relationships, Past success or failures of public, Does public have PR counsellors?, Community perception of public, Past media coverage of public, Public representatives know/like organisations' representatives, Public's willingness to dilute its cause, Public moves and countermoves</p>
Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005)	<p><u>Regulatory imperatives</u>: New regulations, Transparency in financial reporting</p> <p><u>Organisational complexity</u>: More markets, customers, products, services, employees, suppliers, investors, Global business</p> <p><u>Need to increase credibility</u>: Low credibility, Internal and external corporate crises, Publics' views that business does a poor job of balancing profit and public interest, NGOs held in higher esteem than business, Low levels of approval and trust.</p>

Ghemawat (2010)	<u>Identity and reputation</u> : One-firm identity, Clear, well-understood values, Respect for diversity, Strong global leadership-development programs, Government's expanded role as investor, customer, regulator and tax collector, Management of government relationships, Low business reputation, Low perception of business executives, Protectionism.
Bach & Allen (2010)	<u>Non-market environment</u> : Multiple audiences, Globalisation of NGOs, New regulatory hurdles, Competition, Businesses as social and political beings – plethora of actors seek to influence them: Formally through laws and regulation; informally through social pressure, activism and efforts to shed the public perception of business. <u>Issues and actors</u> 'beyond the market' increasingly affect the bottom-line and can be managed just as strategically as conventional core business activities in markets.
Reber & Cameron (2003)	<u>External variables</u> : Organisation size, Corporate culture, Business exposure, Urgency of a situation, Threats such as negative media coverage, government intervention, litigation, General public's perception of issues, Organisational reputation, Characteristics of the external public and its claims/demands. <u>Reduction of variables</u> : Moral conviction of an organisation, Countermanding demands by multiple publics, Regulatory constraints, Pressure from management, Jurisdictional issues, Legal constraints.
Porter (2008)	<u>Five competitive forces that shape strategy</u> : Bargaining power of suppliers, Threat of new entrants, Rivalry among existing competitors, Bargaining power of buyers, Threat of substitute products or services.

The second step was a content analysis of the data in Table 3 to identify common themes such as advocacy, or organisational complexity. This enabled the development of a second taxonomy by a reduction of broad categories of issues that influence communication decisions to a set of keywords (see Table 4).

Table 4: External independent variables impacting on strategic communication decisions

Independent Variable	Reference to principal authors on which reduction is based
Advocacy	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Ghemawat (2010); Bach & Allen (2010); Reber & Cameron (2003); Shin <i>et al</i> (2006).
Competition	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Bach & Allen (2010); Ghemawat (2010); Porter (2008); Shin <i>et al</i> (2006).

Complexity of organisation	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Porter (2008); Reber & Cameron (2003)
Credibility of organisation	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Bach & Allen (2010); Ghemawat (2010); Reber & Cameron (2003)
Socio/economic/cultural	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Ghemawat (2010); Bach & Allen (2010); Reber & Cameron (2003); Shin <i>et al</i> (2006).
Political	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Ghemawat (2010); Bach & Allen (2010); Reber & Cameron (2003); Shin <i>et al</i> (2006).
Regulatory environment	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Ghemawat (2010); Bach & Allen (2010); Reber & Cameron (2003); Shin <i>et al</i> (2006).
Relationships	Argenti <i>et al</i> (2005); Ghemawat (2010); Bach & Allen (2010); Porter (2008); Reber & Cameron (2003); Shin <i>et al</i> (2006).
Values (Organisational)	Ghemawat (2010); Reber & Cameron (2003).

Aligning contingencies, horizons and strategic communication

The final step was to theorise how the nine independent variables in Table 4 might apply in the horizons model. This was done by making qualitative assessments of the reality of addressing each variable in each horizon. For example, Ghemawat (2010) listed organisational identity and reputation as the focus of one strategic decision business needs to make post the 2008-2010 global economic crisis. Clearly, re-building corporate reputations and establishing an identity is a longer-term proposition and requires a strategic rather than a tactical approach. Table 5 sets out the result of this application to the horizons model.

It is clear that corporate values influence (or should influence) how an organisation goes about its day-to-day business. Bach and Allen (2010) see organisations as social and political actors and argue that their leaders need to engage in socio/economic/and political debate in the non-market environment. Ghemawat (2010) makes a similar point in the context of the increasing role of government in industry regulation, and sometimes direct investment in business. Thus advocacy, perhaps the primary role of both tactical and strategic communication (see e.g, Heath, 2000, on the rhetorical role of public relations) that attempts to advance organisation values, and credibility would appear to be a driver of strategic communication decisions in each horizon. Similarly, current and emerging political issues drive both tactical and strategic communication decisions. Thus the theorised drivers of strategic communication decisions, advocacy, political issues and values, appear in Table 5 in each horizon.

Table 5: Independent variables affecting strategic communication decisions

	Horizon 1 <i>Now</i>	Horizon 2 <i>Mid-term to 5 years</i>	Horizon 3 <i>Long term 5 years →</i>
Focus	<i>Current business</i>	<i>Emerging business</i>	<i>Future business</i>
Variables	Advocacy	Advocacy	Advocacy
	Competition	Credibility of organisation	Complexity of organisation
	Political	Political	Credibility of organisation
	Values	Regulatory environment	Political
		Relationships	Regulatory environment
		Socio/economic/cultural	Relationships
		Values	Socio/economic/cultural
Outputs	Day-to-day media	Community relations	Values
	Crisis communication	Government relations and lobbying	Strategic communication through relationship management, government relations, community relations
	Marketing communication		

Adapted by the author from Baghai et al (2000), p. 13

Conclusion

Issues analysis and how organisations deal with issues is a strategic function (Jaques, 2009a; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). However, much of the professional communication literature deals with issues through a perspective that emphasises tactical practice. On the other hand, management scholars (see Ghemawat, 2010 and Bach & Allen, 2010, for example) stress the need for important issues like corporate reputation, values and identity to be dealt with in a strategic time frame.

It is argued here that contingency theory helps to understand how social, political and economic issues act as independent variables that influence organisational decisions on strategic communication directions. This paper posits that broad categories of issues can be classified in the

context of the three horizons approach to managing business growth (Baghai *et al*, 2000) to enable strategic communicators to more effectively plan how they deal with issues.

This paper theorises from an analysis of literature on issues, management, and strategic communication that nine broad categories of social, political and economic issues act as independent variables on decisions about strategic communication directions. Further, the paper suggests that by adapting Baghai *et al*'s (2000) three horizons approach to organisational growth, communications strategists have a useful paradigm in which to plan issue responses. In doing this, the paper accepts Gower's (2006) challenge to bring the management literature's "thinking about strategy" into the communication literature to "...update what we do and how we do it" (p. 185).

In this approach, the paper reflects the views of scholars who argue that identifying and analysing issues is strategic rather than tactical (see for example, Bach & Allen, 2010; Ghemawat, 2010; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009a, 2009b; Tench, Verhoeven & Zeffass, 2009; van Riel & Frombrun, 2008; Ströh, 2006, 2007; Gregory, 2000; Lauzen, 1997).

The theoretical paradigm suggested here needs to be tested. That is the subject of a planned mixed method research project that will seek the views of senior practitioners about the drivers of their strategic communication decisions, in which time horizons. Do those drivers - or contingent variables - match the nine suggested here? This research project will extend the work on the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations, especially external variables, reported by Reber and Cameron (2003).

Scholars and practitioners accept that, like the metaphoric butterfly in Brazil, issues impact on organisational communication strategy in different ways. But do organisations plan to address issues in more than a tactical day-to-day time frame? The planned research will seek to answer the question and thus contribute to a better understanding of how communication is practised in a strategic way rather than at a tactical level.

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