

Comments on Lurati & Eppler

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COMMENTS ON LURATI & EPPLER

Martin Eppler and Francesco Lurati have done an impressive job of reviewing and integrating the literature of corporate communication and knowledge communication into a coherent framework. I am most familiar with the theories of corporate communication they reviewed, but I also found their analysis of theories of knowledge communication to be relevant to corporate communication and to bear a striking resemblance to theories of science communication with which I am familiar.

I generally use the term “public relations” rather than “corporate communication” because the two parts of the term define the nature of the public relations function. That is, the purpose of public relations is to use communication to cultivate *relationships* between organizations and their *publics*. As Eppler and Lurati pointed out, public relations has strategic value to an organization because it helps the organization to make decisions and to behave in ways that meet the expectations of stakeholders. The term “corporate communication” emphasizes only the communication aspects of public relations and not publics and relationships—the groups with whom an organization communicates and the outcome it tries to accomplish. In addition, “corporate” limits the term to corporations, whereas public relations is also practiced by governmental organizations, associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and nonprofit organizations. Nevertheless, I understand that the continual misuse of the term public relations (equating it with media relations and publicity) and the unethical and unprofessional behavior of many practitioners who claim to be doing public relations have led many European scholars to substitute a term such as corporate communication or communication management for public relations.

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In their discussion of corporate communication, Eppler and Lurati emphasized the strategic role of corporate communication. They made an important distinction between the strategic role of corporate communication in *defining* organizational objectives and its tactical role in *supporting* organization objectives. As they pointed out, practitioners of public relations are eager to assume a strategic role, but they typically define strategic public relations as communication that supports the implementation of organizational objectives that corporate communicators had no role in defining. They explained: "From this perspective corporate communication is considered strategic when it pursues objectives which are merely aligned with the corporate ones. The term 'strategy' does not change the tactical nature of the task communication fills. In other words, the communication function here makes no contribution to the defining of corporate strategy" (p. 77). They then emphasized that corporate communication must be involved in strategic decision-making to be truly strategic. This conclusion mirrors the major finding of our research on excellence in public relations and communication management (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002).

Eppler and Lurati also weaved together a coherent theory of relationships of organizations with stakeholders and cognitive concepts such as images, reputation, and identity. Developing such a coherent theory is difficult because it includes concepts from what are generally two competing approaches to public relations. I call these approaches the symbolic, interpretive, paradigm and the strategic management, behavioral, paradigm.

Scholars and practitioners following the symbolic paradigm generally assume that public relations managers strive to influence how publics interpret the organization—to buffer (in the words of van den Bosch & van Riel 1998) the organization from its environment. These cognitive interpretations are described through such concepts as image, reputation, brand, impressions, and identity. This paradigm can be found in the concepts of reputation management in business schools, integrated marketing communication in advertising programs, and rhetorical theory in communication departments. The interpretive paradigm emphasizes publicity, media relations, and media effects in the practice of public relations. This paradigm, therefore, relegates corporate communication to the tactical role described by Eppler and Lurati.

In contrast, the behavioral, strategic management, paradigm, which I advocate, focuses on the participation of public relations executives in

strategic decision-making to help manage the behavior of organizations. Corporate communication, therefore, is what van den Bosch and van Riel (1998) called a bridging activity to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organization from them. The paradigm emphasizes two-way and symmetrical communication of many kinds to provide publics a voice in management decisions and to facilitate dialogue between management and publics.

For the most part, Eppler and Lurati emphasized the behavioral, strategic management, paradigm in their article, although they bridged the gap between the two paradigms by suggesting that the ways in which publics interpret the organization (reputation, image, or brand) essentially mirror the way the organization behaves. Messages without substance, in other words, cannot create positive interpretations. Likewise, they suggested that an organization's understanding of itself, its identity, should reflect how publics see it and that an organization's "expressiveness" (p. 81) should reflect its strategy, culture, and values. I believe that identity as they defined it can be integrated into Porter's (1990) concept of strategic advantage. In this sense, organizations gain competitive advantage when they define themselves through their culture, values, and behavior in ways that publics see as desirable and unique.

Eppler and Lurati's discussion of the tactical, programming, role of corporate communication covers the standard asymmetrical strategies defined by such theories as attitude, diffusion, and social learning. However, they branch out to cover coorientational and symmetrical theories of dialogue and conflict resolution that I believe offer the greatest promise of cultivating quality long-term relationships between organizations and publics. This discussion then leads them to their review of knowledge communication—the study of the communication of complex ideas from one person to another.

Their discussion of knowledge communication applies mostly to communication between individuals in organizations with different types and levels of knowledge. However, in their conclusions, they point out that these theories could apply also to communication between organizations and publics. I was not familiar with theories of knowledge communication in organizations before reading this article, but I found a striking resemblance to the theories of science communication I have researched—research on how to communicate complex scientific knowledge to nonscientists (Grunig 1980). Their Table 1 contains a compre-

hensive list of barriers to knowledge communication. The next step, I believe is to construct theories of how to overcome these barriers—using theories of cognitive psychology as I did in Grunig, Schneider (aka L. Grunig) and Ramsey (1985). In addition, I believe theories of cognitive psychology offer great promise in improving cognitive concepts such as reputation, image, and brand to make them more useful in the strategic management, behavioral, paradigm of public relations.

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