Bridging Corporate and Organizational Communication: Review, Development and a Look to the Future
Lars Thøger Christensen and Joep Cornelissen
Management Communication Quarterly published online 13 December 2010
DOI: 10.1177/0893318910390194

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mcq.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/12/04/0893318910390194

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Management Communication Quarterly can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://mcq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://mcq.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Bridging Corporate and Organizational Communication: Review, Development and a Look to the Future

Lars Thøger Christensen¹ and Joep Cornelissen²

Abstract
The theory and practice of corporate communication is usually driven by other disciplinary concerns than the field of organizational communication. However, its particular mind-set focusing on wholeness and consistency in corporate messages increasingly influence the domain of contemporary organizational communication as well. We provide a formative and critical review of research on corporate communication as a platform for highlighting crucial intersections with select research traditions in organizational communication to argue for a greater integration between these two areas of research. Following this review, we relax the assumptions underlying traditional corporate communication research and show how these dimensions interact in organizational and communication analysis, thus, demonstrating the potential for a greater cross-fertilization between the two areas of research. This cross-fertilization, as we will illustrate, enriches the theorization of corporate and organizational communication and may better link micro- and macro level analyses.

¹University of Southern Denmark, Odense
²VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
Lars Thøger Christensen, The Department of Marketing & Management, The University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M, Denmark
Email: ltc@sam.sdu.dk
Introduction

There is a continuous and growing interest in the study of corporate communication within the disciplines of management and organization theory, public relations, and mass communication research (e.g., Shelby, 1993). This interest has been spurred in recent years by an increase in the volume of theoretical and empirical work that explores processes and consequences of corporate (re)presentations to stakeholders (e.g., Marchand, 1998), by the emergence of ideas such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and corporate citizenship that have clear implications for stakeholder communication (e.g., Cheney, Roper, & May, 2007), as well as by the widespread and strategic presence of corporate communication professionals, procedures, and systems across private and public sector organizations alike (e.g., Cornelissen, 2008a). Although the interest in corporate communication across these writings is varied and multifaceted, together they highlight the economic and social significance of corporate communication as a domain of professional practice and as an important focus for academic reflection and research (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008).

Against this background, we set out to review existing perspectives on corporate communication to identify critical areas for theory development and empirical research. Specifically, we believe that current corporate communication research is mostly focused on the controlled handling and organization of communication (Cornelissen, 2008a; Christensen, Morsing, et al., 2008) with very little direct attention being focused on communication as such, including models of communication with stakeholders (see also, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007). We argue that the field of corporate communication would benefit from a figure ground reversal aimed at a better understanding of how communication organizes (e.g., Taylor & Van Every, 2000) rather than the traditional focus on the organization of communication. This reversal opens up ample space for theory development and highlights important connections between the two related, but largely separate, traditions of corporate and organizational communication (e.g., Shelby, 1993).

Our aim in the present article is to provide the groundwork for stronger connections between these two traditions of scholarship. To give this shape, we first present a formative review of existing work on corporate communication.

Keywords

corporate communication, consistency, wholeness, cross-fertilization
We critique current assumptions and preoccupations and analytically demonstrate that existing work presupposes metonymic reasoning and a related organizational or macro level of analysis in which parts of activities or the voice of single individuals (e.g., managers) are taken to stand for or represent the whole organization. We contextualize the difference with organizational communication, where recent work has focused on how, in micro interactions between speakers, organizations metaphorically "emerge" in acts of communication or are "constituted" by communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; see also, Cooren, 1999). We then proceed by advancing theoretically important connections between metonymic and metaphorical reasoning in research on corporate communication. In doing so, we attempt to show not only the common threads that cut across the areas of corporate and organizational communication but also how systematic, empirically useful theory can be derived from their integration. We conclude with a number of recommendations for research that indicate how scholars of organizational communication may engage the theory and practice of corporate communication and in this way help in better linking micro- and macro level analyses in this area.

Corporate Communication: A Pervasive Mindset

Given the size and diversity of the literature on corporate communication, a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of the present treatment. Instead, we draw on representative work to map the terrain of corporate communication research and to highlight current definitions, theories, and constructs as well as the prevailing assumptions and modes of argumentation. In this way, we intend to demonstrate that (a) corporate communication functions as a specific way of thinking that pervades and shapes many different types of organizations and (b) corporate communication, as a consequence, is highly relevant to the field of organizational communication, even though it is often driven by other disciplinary concerns.

On the whole, definitions of corporate communication are often unclear, vague, or even missing in the conventional literature. Many textbooks, thus, take the notion of corporate communications for granted and define it only indirectly by listing the different types of activities it encompasses, including, for example, crisis communications, media relations, community relations, investor relations, employee relations, public affairs, and other communication activities traditionally associated with the broad field of public relations (Argenti, 1998; Dilenschneider, 2000; Goodman, 1994). Without clearly articulating the differences, these writings seem to imply that corporate
communication is a more contemporary and sophisticated version of public relations (e.g., Dilenschneider, 2000). Even in writings where the theoretical foundation is more elaborate, corporate communications is often defined in terms of other communication practices, including marketing communications, organizational communications, and management communications (e.g., van Riel, 1995; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Corporate communication, in these writings, is simply used as an umbrella term for a field of practice that draws on multiple communication and management activities (Shelby, 1993).

Increasingly, however, corporate communication is regarded as a discipline in its own right, that is, as a discipline with a distinct rationale and ambition. In this capacity, corporate communication is highly significant for the broad field of organizational communication. Although corporate communication used to be a rather vague term referring loosely to messages from (major) corporations, today it designates a specific way of thinking that may be applied to many, if not all, sorts of organizations (Cornelissen, 2008a). According to Harrison (1995), the aim of corporate communication as a field of theory and practice is to manage all communications that involve an organization as a corporate entity. Likewise, van Riel (1995) described corporate communication as an all-embracing framework designed and organized to integrate “the total business message” (see also, Åberg, 1990). Within this framework, “orchestration” of different messages and behaviors becomes a central activity (van Riel, 1997). More recently, van Riel and Fombrun (2007) have defined corporate communication as “the set of activities involved in managing and orchestrating all internal and external communications aimed at creating favourable starting points with stakeholders on which the company depends” (p. 25). Rather than pursuing different identities vis-à-vis different audiences or letting different departments handle their communications autonomously, the vision of contemporary corporate communication, in other words, is to manage all communications under one banner.

Thus, the distinct nature of corporate communication has less to do with the growing number of communication functions and disciplines it claims to subsume than with the vision it provides for contemporary management. Corporate communication differs from other types of communication management not simply because it claims to include a broader range of communication activities or to address more audiences across formal organizational boundaries but because its raison d’être is to organize the organization’s communication activities as one coherent entity (Jackson, 1987). In contrast to other types of organizational communication—for example, advertising, employee communication, or technical communication—that typically address very specific audiences with discrete messages, corporate messages...
speak to many audiences at once in the hope of establishing and maintaining favorable and coherent corporate reputations across different stakeholder groups (e.g., Cornelissen, 2008a).

The broad and somewhat diverse field of corporate communication, thus, is characterized by a common mind-set, a certain way of thinking about and approaching an organization’s communication, shaped by images and ideals of unity, wholeness, and totality. In many ways, this mind-set corresponds with the etymological roots of the adjective “corporate.” Derived from the Latin “corpus,” corporate suggests a collective entity united into one body. Thus, to label communication as “corporate” means to invoke a bodily metaphor of unity and totality. When we conceive of communication as a specifically corporate endeavor, we therefore refer to the efforts of organizations to communicate as whole, total, or “bodily” entities (Christensen, Morsing, et al., 2008).

In practice, the vision of wholeness unfolds into a goal of projecting a consistent and unambiguous image of what the organization “is” and stands for. Although formulations differ, writers in corporate communication argue fervently that organizations should aim for a unified, consistent voice across different markets and different audiences (Dolphin, 1999; Schultz & Schultz, 2003; Schultz, Tannenbaum, & Lauterborn, 1994; Smith, 1996). According to van Riel and Fombrun (2007, p. 23), the key task of corporate communication is to flesh out the profile of the “company behind the brand,” to minimize discrepancies between different markers of corporate identity, to define and assign communication responsibilities across the organization, and to mobilize support (internally and externally) behind corporate initiatives. Corporate communication, accordingly, defines a whole range of new managerial activities focused on the integration, coordination, and orchestration of an organization’s communications (Cornelissen, 2008a). By aligning symbols, messages, procedures, and behaviors, organizations hope to appear consistent and coherent across different audiences and different media (e.g., Duncan, 1993; Schultz et al., 1994).

Not surprisingly, this ambition, sometimes referred to as “integrated communications,” has been embraced in particular by marketing scholars and practitioners who argue that the alignment of symbols, messages, and so on, is necessary for organizations to optimize their communication budgets (Smith, 1996), to stand out as distinctive and interesting brands in a cluttered marketplace (Duncan, 2005; Knox & Bickerton, 2003; Shimp, 2003), and to be recognized as legitimate players in the globalised world of today (Balmer, 2001; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Schultz & Kitchen, 2000). Some writers in the field of marketing communication even suggest that integration is
inevitable (e.g., Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Schultz et al., 1994; Schultz & Schultz, 2003) and “absolutely imperative for success” (see also, Argenti, Howell, & Beck, 2005). Although the integration of an organization’s communication has been a recurring theme in many fields, including corporate design (e.g., Olins, 1989), corporate culture (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982; cf. Martin, 1992), and public relations (Gronstedt, 1996; Hutton, 1996a, 1996b; see also, Scholes & Clutterbuck, 1998), corporate communication conceives of itself as the integrated communication discipline *par excellence*, claiming to pool all possible communication disciplines and supply an all-encompassing framework for their integration (Argenti et al., 2005; Cornelissen, 2008a; Harrison, 1995; Nessmann, 1995; van Riel, 1995).

**Parts and Wholes: The Organization as a Unitary Actor**

A central characteristic of corporate communication as a field of research and practice, thus, is that it conceives of the organization as a single unit in communication with its stakeholders. It is not individual managers, buildings, advertising campaigns, or interactions with employees that communicate in and of themselves. Rather, these are all seen as parts or fragments of the same communicating organization as the unit of analysis. The main arguments and analyses related to corporate communication, in other words, presuppose a *metonymy*. Metonymy is a linguistic and cognitive operation in which we imply certain parts (e.g., buildings) directly to stand in for the larger idea or conceptualization (e.g., the corporation). As Manning (1979) writes,

> Metonymy takes the whole (an organization) to be indicated by its parts (e.g., the number of levels in an organization, the size of the body of rules governing procedures, the rates of mobility between and within organizational slots). The whole is thus represented by the parts; the essential features of a whole are reduced to indices. (p. 662)

When metonymy is at play, we come to experience the parts and the whole as compressed into one, which naturalizes the metonymy and leads us to see the whole (in this case, the organization) as directly implied in any specific activities or parts such as, for example, a corporate advert or an oil spill. This mind-set, we argue, is fundamental to research and practitioner thinking on corporate communication. The very idea of a corporate identity, for example, was initially coined by two designers (Lippincott and Margulies) who argued that visual designs could invoke and represent the whole organization.
(see also Olins, 1989). The central metonymy has since been sustained and reinforced by the location of much corporate communication research in business schools (e.g., Argenti, 1998; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). That is, by aligning themselves with business research on strategy, management, and organization, corporate communication researchers not only co-opted ideas but also, in borrowing from these fields, implicitly sustained the metonymy in adopting an organizational or firm level of analysis (e.g., Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Most, if not all, of the contemporary constructs and theories in corporate communication research, including stakeholder theory, corporate image and reputation, CSR, integration, corporate identity, and corporate citizenship, are elaborated on the back of the mentioned metonymy and the associated organizational or firm level of analysis.

However, metonymy and metaphor, as we know from linguistics, are closely related figures of speech and forms of understanding. Gareth Morgan (1983) argued in his early writings that metaphor “makes meaning in a primal way” (p. 602) and that metonymy is used as a “secondary form within the domain or context forged through metaphor” (Morgan, 1983, p. 602). Morgan has since acknowledged a mutual interdependence between the metaphorical and metonymical: “Metaphor and metonymy are always interconnected. You cannot have one without the other” (Morgan, 1996, p. 231). Although he argued that “a metaphorical image relies on some kind of metonymical reduction, otherwise it remains thin air” (Morgan, 1996, p. 231), Morgan equally suggested that “metonymy is entirely dependent on metaphor, for without a prefiguring image we have nothing to see” (Morgan, 1996, p. 231). The basic point is that actually seeing organizations as single actors or as constituted in communication requires both metaphors—for example, of an organization as a person or of communication as a physical act of building—and metonymic compressions in which various parts can be seen to intimate the whole (person or building).

The strong connection between metonymy and metaphor has long been recognized within linguistics. Jakobson (1956/1990), for example, famously argued that metaphors and metonymies provide the “bipolar structure” of language; both are necessary for the development of discourse and meaning through statements of similarity (metaphor) and contiguity (metonymy), and both mutually implicate each other in actual instances of language use. Goossens (1995a, 1995b) similarly talked about frequent expressions that combine the two such as “metonymy-within-metaphor,” which occurs when “a metonymically used entity is embedded within a (complex) metaphorical expression” (Goossens, 1995a, p. 172). Goossens (1995a, 1995b) also pointed
to another category of expressions, “metaphor-from-metonymy,” which has been found to be a very frequent kind of “connection” or “interaction” between metonymy and metaphor (Deignan, 2005).

Cornelissen (2008b) considered constructs such as corporate identity and citizenship as a “metaphor-from-metonymy.” The idea is that these constructs first of all presuppose a metonymy—separate activities are the hallmark of single organization—which may then cue a further metaphorical interpretation of an organization, as the single unit, acting as if it were a human person with an identity and citizenship rights and obligations. This metonymy is actually quite pervasive in our thinking. Stakeholders, for example, have a natural inclination to ascribe identity traits to an organization and treat it as (if it were) a person when we form an image of it. Cohen and Basu (1987, p. 463) pointed out that stakeholders of an organization are inclined to perceive a company in corporeal terms and to ascribe traits holistically (where they perceive relationships among features, and also configural properties beyond merely correlated features, to make up for a perceived intact entity). They also effectively credit that organization with identity traits, just as they would an individual person (Cohen & Basu, 1987). The implication of the metonymy, as in this example, is that it privileges the whole over specific parts and suggests a “totalitarian” picture of control that communication professionals in practice hope to manage.

The Limitations of Corporate Communication

As a strategic project of communication management that emphasizes wholeness, integration, and consistency, corporate communication may be questioned and critiqued from many different angles. From a communication perspective, the project’s most obvious flaw is its reliance on linear models of communication. Classic models of corporate identity, image, and reputation, for example, usually assume one-way communication processes from the organization to its stakeholders (e.g., Abratt, 1989; Olins, 1989). Although there is some listening to stakeholders or attempts to gather feedback, the intent in such models is to represent the corporate identity, which, it is assumed, will almost automatically transform into an equivalent corporate image on the side of stakeholders. Fombrun and van Riel (2004), for example, argued that the strongest reputations extend from visible, transparent, and consistently portrayed corporate identities. The role of communication, thus, is reduced to a conduit (Reddy, 1979) between the self-definition of the organization (its corporate identity) and the cognitive image or company representation held in memory by others (corporate image or corporate
language (and other symbolic representations) employed by corporate entities simply “reveal” and “transfer” cognitive interpretations (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986), thereby casting aside any formative effects of language on thought processes and on the construction of meaning in social settings (e.g., Christensen & Askegaard, 2001; Fauconnier, 1997; Langacker, 1991).

With its ambition of managing consistent and unambiguous images of organizations, writings on corporate communication simultaneously promote a strongly sender-biased view on communication that ignores or at least downplays the interpretative propensities and capabilities of the alleged receiver. Although it is well known that receivers of corporate messages—internal or external—are not passive targets but mature, creative, and savvy partners in the production of identities and experiences (cf. Duranti, 1986; Iser, 1974; Jauss, 1982), this view on communication is central to the field. However, consumers frequently interpret and use corporate products and messages differently from their original purpose, reshape and adapt them to personal use, and modify and sometimes pervert their meanings in ways not imagined by their creators (Cova, 1996). Likewise, members of organizations creatively co-construct or de-construct the meanings of corporate messages in ways not intended by management (Christensen & Cheney, 2000; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Corporate communicators, in other words, are not the masters of meaning able to control the reception of corporate messages—inside or outside the organization (e.g., Christensen, Torp, & Fırat, 2005).

Interestingly, conduit models and sender-oriented notions of communication are also evident in research that highlights the significance of interpretation. Although recognizing the existence of different stakeholder perspectives on the organization, leading writers in the field emphasize the strategic importance for organizations in avoiding “gaps” in their communication (e.g., Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Simoes, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005). Fombrun and Rindova (2000), for example, focused on the importance of achieving “alignment” or “transparency” between corporate identities and corporate images and reputations. Transparency, according to Fombrun and Rindova (2000), is “a state in which the internal identity of the firm reflects positively the expectations of key stakeholders and the beliefs of these stakeholders about the firm reflect accurately the internally held identity” (p. 94). Similarly, Hatch and Schultz (2001) claimed that to ensure trustworthy communication, organizations must avoid “breach[es] between rhetoric and reality” (p. 4), primarily because such breaches result in cynicism, suspicion, and dispirited employees. To avoid these breaches, Hatch and Schultz have developed a so-called
“corporate branding tool kit” that allows managers to identify the nature of the corporate vision, the corporate culture, and the corporate image and, most importantly, to expose gaps between these dimensions. Such gaps, according to Hatch and Schultz, reflect key organizational problems and need to be eliminated to create and maintain a strong corporate brand (see also, Hatch & Schultz, 2002). These researchers, thus, stress the importance of alignment, the assumption being that where the internal and external ideas of identity are not aligned (so that presumably the rhetoric of corporate identity does not match the experienced reality of stakeholders), a range of suboptimal outcomes are anticipated, including employee disengagement and customer dissatisfaction.

Hatch and Schultz (2002) elaborated on these issues of alignment in a model extended from Mead’s theory of social identity. In their framework, organizations are again metaphorically personified on the back of a metonymy that compresses all individuals and activities into that of a single organization (Cornelissen, 2008b). In this way, Mead’s ideas about the relationship between the “I” and the “me” are extended to identity processes at the organizational level of analysis. Mead considered identity as an inherently relational or social process; at the level of organizations, it is similarly assumed that an organization’s identity is relational in balancing images and expectations of stakeholders (“me”) and one’s own deep-seated and internal cultural values (“I”; cf. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Implicit in the model is again the idea that a balance between internal and external ideas on one’s identity is important. A broadly supported identity is one that results from effectively channeling ideas across from the organization to stakeholders and back so that the appropriate alignment and consistency can be achieved.

In addition to these communication-specific assumptions, the project of corporate communication operates with limited understandings of what an organization is or should be. Writings on corporate communication first of all assume that it is possible for the organization or parts thereof to oversee its own communication as a whole. Its preoccupation with integration and alignment of all messages underscores this perspective. Although such an all-embracing viewpoint or “privileged perspective” is an illusion—no system can describe itself in full (Andersen, 2003)—the notion of a panoptic organization, able to see and manage the totality of all messages, is an essential and defining feature of contemporary corporate communication. This perspective is particularly prevalent in writings on corporate identity. With its notion of a consistent organizational voice, corporate communication tends to promote a monolithic type of organizational identity in which the members of the organization are seen as “walking-around embodiments” or manifestations of the
organization as a whole (Christensen, Morsing, et al., 2008). This we see, for example, in the corporate branding literature. Although branding often is associated with products, the ultimate ambition of corporate communication is to develop and present the organization as one unified brand: a so-called corporate brand. As Schultz (2005) pointed out, the notion of a corporate brand encapsulates the preferred dimensions of organizational identity, which are highlighted and staged vis-à-vis the surrounding world. Corporate branding assumes a strong coherence between the organization’s identity, image, and culture (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Arguing that the success of a corporate brand depends on the extent to which there is harmony between the values defined by management and the way these values are seen and implemented by staff, writers in the field urge organizations to develop strong cultures that motivate employees to support corporate values without supervision (e.g., De Chernatony, 2002; Mitchell, 2002). De Chernatony (2002, p. 114), thus, talked about the “orchestration of staff,” claiming that members of the organization need to “be genuinely committed to delivering the [brand] promise” if the corporate brand is to be successfully implemented. Employees, in other words, are expected to align themselves with the idealized version of the organization’s identity, its corporate brand.

However, the identity to which employees are expected to swear allegiance is highly equivocal—especially in the corporate communication literature. On the one hand, this literature describes an organization’s identity as intrinsic and as capturing unique characteristics or traits that define the organization and set it apart from its surroundings. Drawing on Albert and Whetten’s (1985) classical definition of organizational identity as the central, distinct, and enduring dimensions of an organization (see also, Whetten, 2006), writers and managers of corporate communication often equate organizational identity with an individual’s “personality” (e.g., Kunde, 2000; Olins, 1989), in other words, something solid and reliable—deeply rooted in the organization—that shapes its choices and defines its integrity. On the other hand, the same literature frequently talks about shaping and changing organizational identities, leaving the impression that an organization’s identity is fluid and malleable, in other words, an ongoing project that can and should be planned, manufactured, and communicated into existence. Descriptions of organizational identity as essence and continuity, thus, coexist with discussions of identity as projects of communication.

Acknowledging these limitations and equivocalities, critical management and marketing scholars have challenged corporate communication on several accounts. Cornelissen and Lock (2000), for example, suggested that integrated communication is an attractive management fashion because of the simple
solutions it appears to offer, but whose instrumental value is difficult to identify and evaluate because of the vagueness of its jargon. Simultaneously, Christensen, Morsing, et al. (2008) argued that corporate communication and its implied belief in message regulation and control ignores important developments and insight from the general field of organization studies. Although seemingly celebrating employee involvement, corporate communication research and practice advances a type of employee regulation that in fact contradicts notions of participation and empowerment (Christensen, Morsing, et al., 2008). The “organization” we find represented in the corporate communication literature is an organization that operates in the full service of the communications program, in other words, an organization defined, shaped, and controlled by its overall corporate message (Christensen, Fırat, & Torp, 2008). With its notion of integration, corporate communication imposes new types of inflexibility on organizations that subscribe to this ideal and, thus, constrain their ability to respond to changes in environments marked by turbulence and change (Christensen, Fırat, et al., 2008; Christensen, Fırat, & Cornelissen, 2009). The potential for reaping the fruits of its different voices and thus retain diversity and possibilities for change (see also, Hazen, 1993; Morrison & Milliken, 2000) are seriously constrained in organizations that subscribe to the strict ideals of corporate communication.

Against these ideals, it may be argued that organizations—and especially large corporations—may speak with many different voices simultaneously. Thus, we know that organizations often differentiate their messages to adapt to different audiences (Hill & Winski, 1987; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987), cultivate strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) to accommodate multiple interpretations and conflicting goals, and manage multiple identities (Cheney, 1991) to build and maintain legitimacy in a complex world. Even with such strategies, however, attempts to define the organization’s identity from above are precarious and likely to be contested. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) pointed out, efforts to foster, regulate, and control processes of loyalty and commitment are frequently challenged by employees who fail to see, or reject the notion, that the identity defined by management is inclusive enough to embrace the differences among organizational members (e.g., Fairhurst, Jordan, & Neuwirth, 1997). Similarly, Humphreys and Brown (2002) pointed to the difficulties of maintaining a monological and hegemonic identity narrative in an organizational context where centrifugal forces and heteroglossia unavoidably challenge the community defined and declared by management.

Crucially, the line running through these objections and critiques is that an organization is neither a single unit nor can it be managed and controlled as such. In fact, when managers are too strictly trying to manage and control
its communication and its employees from the perspective of a single organizational or corporate identity, it may undermine employee well-being and morale and stifle creativity, innovation, and organizational adaptation (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2003). Recent studies on CSR, for example, demonstrated that although we usually associate responsibility and accountability with consistency, organizations are not single unitary actors. Pavelin, Barmmer, and Porter (2009) showed that corporations operating in so-called “countries of concern” (with questionable governance or corruption or where governments knowingly suppress human rights) often continue with their operations (as one part of their activities) in such settings but, to offset any possible negative stakeholder perceptions, give more to charitable donations and promote their donations (as another part) on the other. Although such behavior is often denounced, the significance and inevitability of buffers or loose couplings between different dimensions of the organizational practice are fully acknowledged in the classic organizational literature (e.g., Orton & Weick, 1990; Thompson, 1967; Weick, 1976; see also, Meyer & Rowan, 1977). More recently, it has been argued that organizations operating in complex environments cannot escape some level of hypocrisy—understood as a split between words, decisions, and other types of organizational action (Brunsson, 2003a, 2003b; Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2010). Consequently, we cannot and should not look at organizations simply as single and unitary actors but rather perhaps as collections of individuals and activities, dispersed over the globe, from where strategies and coordinated activities emerge. The same kind of critique extends to the models of communication discussed in corporate communication research.

A Persistent Ideal

Why should scholars of organizational communication pay any attention to a managerial mind-set so clearly preoccupied with marketing or public relations concerns of visibility, linear persuasion, communication impact, and control? After all, and as Hallahan et al. (2007) have argued with respect to the term strategic, corporate evokes a one-way, managerial, and thus top-down, approach to communication that seems to ignore the utmost concern of organizational communication: the communication practices of organizations and their members. Against this view, we argue that the mind-set of corporate communication no longer is an exclusively managerial project, but an ideal that is shared and kept alive by many different actors inside and outside the organization. As such, and as we shall argue below, corporate
communication is dramatically shaping how contemporary organizations come to see, manage, and evaluate their communication activities.

In spite of the problems and critiques outlined above, the mind-set behind corporate communication continues to appeal to organizations for many different reasons. Its attraction to corporate managers is rather straightforward. Speaking of alignment, integration, consistency, synergy, and so on, corporate communication holds the promise of order, stability, and predictability in an otherwise fragmented and uncertain world (Cornelissen, 2001; see also Cornelissen & Lock, 2000). Simultaneously, corporate communication justifies a more centralized control of an organization’s communication functions in a business environment that otherwise calls for participation, involvement, and decentralization (Christensen et al., 2005). Among the most dramatic formulations of this promise, Åberg’s (1990) notion of “total communications” sends the message to contemporary managers that it is necessary and feasible to encompass all communications, both externally directed communication activities and internal messages, within one integrated whole. No matter how idealistic or even delusional such notions may sound, their rhetorical appeal should not be underestimated.

The current appeal of corporate communication, however, goes far beyond these narrow managerial interests. Clearly, organizations are concerned that without coherence, integration, or consistency, their messages can be misunderstood and their audiences get conflicting or inconsistent meanings which, in the end, may cause confusion and distrust in what the organization offers or stands for. Today, where corporate misconduct is so strongly associated with inconsistency and insincerity, this concern is represented—and frequently articulated—by many other stakeholders, including critical interest groups, journalists, and the media. Although these audiences do not necessarily ask for corporate communication per se, there is a growing call for communication consistency and coherence in society at large (Christensen & Langer, 2009). Thus, although early articulations of corporate communication were driven by an interest in aligning a limited number of tangible marketing or design parameters, today the most powerful driver behind integration seems to be a potent combination of inquisitive publics demanding insight and information and critical media and journalists zealously looking for gaps, contradictions, and discrepancies in corporate messages. Owing to these pressures, organizations and institutions across sectors are compulsively focused on producing consistent messages to both internal and external audiences (Christensen et al., 2009). In their efforts to respond to social expectations for accountability and transparency and to present themselves as coherent, reliable, and trustworthy institutions with nothing to hide, a growing
number of organizations, for example, implement policies of consistency by formalizing all communications and pursuing uniformity in everything they say and do (Christensen & Langer, 2009). The emphasis on corporate credibility and the growing desire for information and stakeholder insight seem to indicate that an increasingly critical and well-organized public is in fact demanding such policies of consistency.

As the pool of arguments in favor of integration is expanding beyond marketing and corporate design into revered areas such as accountability, sustainability, and CSR, the ambition of corporate communication becomes even more difficult to reject—even though it ignores decades of research into the organizational dimensions of communication. Although the connection is rarely expressed in such terms, it may well be the case that ingenuous programs of CSR, sustainability, and accountability are unthinkable today without corporate communication and its systematic focus on integration. Under these circumstances, the notion of consistency becomes a shared currency that brings together the expectations and demands of critical stakeholders with the ideals and endeavors of corporate communicators.

Given these trends, it is only logical that corporate communication has become a guiding principle for communication management and has expanded from a rather vague and bounded activity to an organization-wide issue and concern spanning functional and disciplinary confines. Following its expansion to still more dimensions of the organization, the field is experiencing a growing involvement from management. As Cornelissen (2008a) pointed out, corporate communication is increasingly understood as a management function—a function that “offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communications with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent” (p. 5). Realizing that communications are no longer a bounded set of tactical activities but an ongoing strategic process that taps directly into issues of identity and legitimacy and, ultimately, organizational survival, organizational leaders increasingly seek to master communication as a general managerial competence.

In the remainder of this article, we will explore how the field of organizational communications may enrich our understanding of corporate communication as a specific management discourse with important consequences for contemporary organizations. In particular, we will discuss how the ideals of corporate communication may be recaptured and rearticulated in a disciplinary context in which communication is not seen as a conduit through which organizations simply relay and amplify their self-perceptions, but as an active and constitutive force in the construction of organizations.
The Communicative Constitution of Organizations

Organizational communication scholars have long been claiming that communication is an important force of organizing, indeed is the building block of organizations (e.g., Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Inspired by Weick’s (1979) emphasis on the process of organizing (rather than the noun and entity of organization) as well as by the turn toward discourse and language analysis in the social sciences, this claim has been elaborated by a growing community of speech analysts and interpretive scholars interested in questions of how communication is the means by which human beings coordinate actions, create relationships, and constitute or maintain organizations (e.g., Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). Although theoretical perspectives on the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) vary (e.g., Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), they subscribe to the same emphasis on the formative effect of language and speech on collective sense making and social coordination.

Collective sense making, to the extent that it involves communication, takes place in interactive talk and draws on institutionalized resources of language to formulate and exchange through talk symbolically encoded representations of the jointly experienced circumstances (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As this occurs, a situation is talked into existence as basis for collective action. Communication, and the collective sense making that emerges from it, is, thus, an act of turning circumstances “into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard to action” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 40; see also Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

A basic assumption here is that although the inner thoughts and imaginations of individuals within organizations matter, they are not spoken or even necessarily speakable; to get to speech, something further takes place. Sense making, in other words, functionally refers to the point where ideas take form in the stream of an individual’s experience with external speech reconfiguring ideas to fit the demands of spoken language (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010). The linguist Slobin (1987, 1996) labeled this as thinking for speaking that refers to how individuals organize their thinking to meet the demands of linguistic encoding online, during acts of speaking with others. As he noted (1996), “Whatever else language may do in human thought and action, it surely directs us to attend—while speaking—to the dimensions of experience that are enshrined in grammatical categories” (p. 71). According to Slobin (1996), the demands of online sense making require that individuals think by speaking (cf. Weick, 1979), which means that they pick “those
characteristics that (a) fit some conceptualization of the event, and [that] (b) are readily encodable in the language” (p. 76). Within this process, thought and language are intimately and dynamically connected at the point where individuals verbalize their ideas and, although communicating, articulate them in their speech to others.

Communication is also a dynamic process, with the social context of speaking and the interactions with others affecting the construction of meaning. Taylor and Van Every (2000), in their classic text, referred to the work of the linguist Goldberg (1995) on construction grammar and frame semantics to make this particular point. Frame semantics originally emerged from the work of Charles Fillmore who suggested that the meaning of many words relies on our experiences with the cultural scenarios and social institutions they presuppose. Fillmore (1975, p. 124) initially defined a frame as a system of categories invoked by words and whose structure is rooted in some motivating cultural context. Words are defined with respect to a frame and perform a categorization that takes the frame for granted. Activating a frame thus creates expectations about important aspects of the context or circumstance by directing individuals to elaborate on the default or prototypical scenario in a manner suggested by the frame (Lakoff, 1987). Although frames are linguistically motivated within frame semantics, they may invoke entire conceptual scenarios or scripts accessed from working memory (cf. Minsky, 1975; Schank & Abelson, 1977). Individuals use such frames (also referred to as idealized cognitive models or scripts (e.g., Barsalou, 1992; Lakoff, 1987)) to make inferences in context, to make default assumptions about unmentioned aspects of situations, and to make predictions about the consequences of their actions. Although they aid individual inferences, within the context of a work group or organization, specific words (e.g., action verbs, role-related vocabulary) may also cue collective scenarios or familiar scripts and can thus be seen as “behavioral grammars that inform a setting’s everyday action” (Barley, 1986, p. 83). Such common scenarios or scripts may enable individuals to comprehend and predict the behavior of others through stereotypical inference and, as such, support coordinated collective action if individuals commit themselves to playing out the scripted situations (Gioia & Poole, 1984; Pentland & Reuter, 1994). A highly scripted scenario (Schank & Abelson, 1977, p. 422) in particular is one that, because of its familiarity, provides an expectation “about what will happen next in a well understood situation,” thus “[obviating] the need to think” (Schank & Abelson, 1995, pp. 5-6).

Through communication, and the formative effects of language in particular, a collective situation is defined and encoded in understandable terms. In addition, through the cultural frames (e.g., scripts) that may be
invoked, certain representations and scenarios (with implications for action) are suggested that provide a basis for social coordination. In both these senses, communication can be said to shape or constitute organizing as a collective process of sense making and coordination.

Building on these basic assumptions, recent research in organizational communication (e.g., Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) has been devoted to questions of “scaling up” from communication between individuals (micro) to the organization (macro). Cooren and Fairhurst (2009), for example, theoretically suggested that any local act of communication between individuals already implies other times and spaces, whether these are in the future or in the past. Society and its institutions, in a sense, speak through our utterances to the effect that our talk always is collective or organizational (Taylor & Cooren, 1997). Larger structures such as rules and procedures are embodied or implicated in specific acts of communication and sense making in the “here” and “now,” with such embodiments shaping future action and communication. Hence, the focus is on how the macro organization, as the collective whole, is constantly present in local acts of communication. Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor (2004) similarly suggested that language as a resource and in the way in which it is used is recursive. “To be recursive means that the structure of a whole emerges in the same way as the structure of the parts” (Taylor, 2009, p. 175). Language thus functions as both the matter and the framework of communication, as defined above (Robichaud et al., 2004). Cultural frames, which include representations of individual roles and identities as well as routine behaviors, are represented and socially confirmed in and through language. Finally, Taylor and Cooren (1997) and Taylor and Van Every (2000) considered how communication, although allowing individuals to magnify the power of their personal voices, implies epistemic closure in their understanding of the circumstances or objects to which they relate, with this closure changing their relationship into a single unit (an “in-group” or “organization”). Their affiliation switches to the joint relationship (see also Cornelissen et al., 2007), and as a result they may act as a single agent (Taylor & Cooren, 1997).

**Communication and Emergence**

Organizations, as social or macro phenomena, are recursively implicated in local acts of communication and sense making. This is a similar kind of metonymic argument (part-whole reversal) to the one implied in corporate communication. However, it is markedly different in the sense that it considers organizations not as a given, but as emerging in, and indeed constituted
by, such local episodes. What this means is that organizations are constantly (re)produced, and thus subjected to change and renewal. It also implies that individual voices matter in the constitution of organizations, and as such it unsettles the privileged perspective (panopticon) and the assumption that the organization, as an entity or actor, exists ex ante.

Models of CCO suggest that common knowledge about an organization is not necessary for the emergence of symbolic conventions and organized behavior. According to these models, semantic representations are coordinated through its actual use (e.g., Barr, 2004; Donnellon et al., 1986; Hewes, 2009), that is, as a by-product of individual attempts at coordination among individuals who are distributed over time and across space. The origin of symbolic conventions lies in the act of communication itself, and not in its externalization. Individuals also do not necessarily share an explicit global representation of common knowledge about the organization. The primary focus instead is on the connections between individuals and, specifically, between their communicative acts (i.e., the communicative statements they produce). Collective sense making about the organization, in other words, emerges from the interactions of individuals and the complex connections between those interactions rather than resides in individuals (e.g., Barr, 2004; Hewes, 2009; Hutchins, 1995). When applied to organizational settings, it is assumed that individuals may have incomplete knowledge but are capable of responding to unexpected events and interactions and are able to modify their communication opportunistically (Barr, 2004; Hewes, 2009; Sawyer, 2005). Collectively, then, individuals may resemble an improvisational jazz performance (Weick, 1998) or a plastic (collective) mind (Weick & Roberts, 1993) in which it is the individual’s reactions to communicative statements (and the choices the reactants make about how to connect) that constitute the collective, emergent sense-making process and any notion of an “organization.” As in improvisational jazz, structure and stability exist, but unlike a fully scripted performance, the emergent character of the communication is primary.

**The Polyphony of the Organizational Voice**

Taking this idea one step further, the CCO perspective recognizes an organization as emerging from, or constituted in, a multiplicity of voices. Organizations or society, as Taylor and Cooren (1997) put it, “[have] no voice of [their] own” (p. 433; cf. Morin, 1973, 1986). Taylor and Cooren drew on Durkheim and Boden to argue that organizational communication is inevitably local, as it continuously depends on local repetitions of collective opinions and representations. This is not to suggest that individual voices simply
reproduce ritualistically the voice of the collectivity. The dynamics of any social collectivity depends on a constant interplay between order and disorder (Morin, 1973, 1986), between society as instituted and society in the making (see also, Castoriadis, 1987; Giddens, 1984). In this process, the polyphony of local articulation plays a central role.

In turn, this suggests that although the growing desire for clarity and consistency is understandable in today’s business environment, organizations are simultaneously dependent on the many voices of its individual speakers. Against the prevailing propensity of contemporary management to focus on consistency in corporate messages—a propensity which, as we have seen, ignores the organizational and behavioral complexities of human communication—we suggest that polyphony is an essential dimension of all organizing. The very concept of polyphony, and its study in episodes of communication, has been a hallmark of organizational communication research. In the organizational context, polyphony manifests itself at many different levels. Language is not only essentially polyphonic but also used deliberately to obfuscate or to allow for multiple interpretations to coexist side by side. The Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) introduced the notion of heteroglossia to describe the centrifugal powers of language and the coexistence of distinct varieties within a single linguistic code. Heteroglossia challenges the assumption that communicators must conform to the same linguistic code for communication to take place. Following Bakhtin, Humphrey, and Brown pointed out that “organizations are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic, involving multiple dialogical practices that occur simultaneously and sequentially” (p. 422). Although clarity and consistency may be essential dimensions of contemporary communication ideals, such communication does not necessarily guarantee the type of agreement, commitment, and an espirt-de-corps presupposed by corporate communication (Pascale & Athos, 1981). In contrast to the emphasis on sharedness, coherence, and commitment, as we often find the literatures on corporate communication, corporate branding, and integrated communication (e.g., Ind, 1997), Eisenberg (1984) posited that vague and equivocal language allows organizations to talk about themselves in ways that integrate a variety of members and stakeholders without alienating anyone. Too much clarity and consistency in the formulation of “shared values” may actually prevent managers from establishing accord with some corporate audiences. Although writings in corporate communication and corporate branding call for organizations to eliminate ambiguity (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2001), ambiguity is essential in promoting what Eisenberg calls “unified diversity” (p. 230), the ability for differences to coexist within the unity of the organization. Ambiguity and
polyphony may even be a conscious management strategy designed to foster identification and reduce tension by allowing different audiences to apply different interpretations to what is seen as one corporate message (Christensen et al., 2010).

**Implications and Recommendations for Research**

If we accept the propositions that organizations emerge in communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) and that communication has organizing properties that shape and generate organizations (Cooren, 1999), the ways organizations and their members formulate visions and ideals for their communication practices are important to study—*even* when such visions and ideals contradict established knowledge in the field.

As corporate communication has expanded from a rather vague term referring loosely to messages from (major) corporations to a broader communication ideal shared by many different stakeholders, it potentially has wide-ranging implications for organizational life. The field therefore calls for a thorough examination and deconstruction of its dominant assumptions, its main arguments, and its levels of analysis—as well as their consequences for managerial practice. In analyzing the field of corporate communication from the perspective of organizational communication, our question should be: What type of organization emerges in a social environment in which both managers and critical stakeholders focus compulsively on wholeness, consistency, and integration in all communication?

Corporate communication makes people inside and outside organizations pay attention to certain things, like “gaps” and inconsistencies in corporate messages, although ignoring other dimensions such as, for example, the adaptive and innovative potential of variety and differences; it frames situations in terms of clarity and univocality, attracts resources (including professional positions) to integrated communication programs, and invites certain types of action, like projects of corporate branding. Folded into the vision of corporate communication, thus, are not only prescriptions for proper ways of devising and handling messages and campaigns but also definitions of organization that guide the behaviors of managers and employees far beyond message creation and message handling *per se* (see e.g., Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). We therefore call on organizational communication scholars to study the organizational dimensions of corporate communication. More specifically, scholars of organizational communication may study the following:
• The *structural* dimensions of corporate communication, including questions of how its call for consistency and wholeness may stimulate the emergence of new types of (consolidated) communication departments, change the role and the influence of communication managers, or give rise to new cross-disciplinary communication functions;

• How corporate communication, as an ideal and mind-set, shapes organizational *decision making*, and how its notion of integration is used as a decisional premise in arguments about projects, power, and resources;

• How corporate communication, as an ideal and mind-set, influences the way organizations *collect and handle information*, including questions of what opportunities and trends corporate communication allows organizations to see or, alternatively, ignore;

• Types of *organizational culture* stimulated by the corporate communication ideal, including questions of how new employees are socialized into cultures that emphasize integration and the importance of alignment and commitment to a shared corporate brand;

• Issues of organizational *identity and identification* and the difficulties of managing univocal identities in complex and multifaceted environments that often call for flexibility and differentiated messages;

• The role of *leadership* in defining and communicating consistent images of what the organization “is” or stands for, including redefinition, manipulation, and other types of resistance to such images;

• Issues of *participation and ownership* in corporate communication projects, including the question of how (even critical) members of the organization may contribute to the maintenance of consistency as an organizational ideal;

• Questions of *power, control, and hegemony* associated with the project of corporate communication and its implementation, including issues of discursive closure;

• New types of organizational *conflict* stimulated by the call for consistency and univocality in organizational messages;

• Corporate communication as a discourse of organizational *change*—or persistence;

• The role of *information technologies* in driving managerial projects of message integration and consistency;

• The significance of *globalization* in stimulating corporate communication as an ideal among managers and critical stakeholders, including questions of organizational isomorphism;
• And the role of ethics in shaping discourses on organizational consistency.

Considering the social pressures on contemporary organizations—focused in particular on accountability and credibility—the continuous expansion of the field of corporate communication seems both logical and inevitable. In such a context, it is not sufficient to reiterate the difficulties of managing univocal images of organizations. Such difficulties are generally well conceived and understood. The current challenge for scholars of organizational communication may instead be to appreciate and conceptualize how the growing pressure on contemporary organizations to pursue such images nonetheless shapes the management of both internal and external messages. Such pressure and its implied call for corporate communication is rarely articulated and discussed in the organizational communication literature. Given the organizational and social implications of such efforts, it is time, we believe, that scholars of organizational communication begin to embrace corporate communication as a powerful management discourse able to shape the communicative practices of contemporary organizations. To paraphrase Hallahan et al. (2007), the emergence of corporate communication as a unifying paradigm for studying communicative consistency and integration provides an important opportunity to reinvigorate and refocus the study of organizational communication in the context of contemporary markets. As a particular way of organizing, the attempts to apply consistency and assert univocality in and around contemporary organizations are an interesting (and, perhaps, troublesome) managerial dream in itself and certainly worthy of study as a new type of communication ideal through which new types of organizations potentially emerge.

The theoretical perspectives and methods associated with organizational communication simultaneously complement and enrich scholarship on corporate communication. It unsettles the assumption of a fixed organization and brings a new range of questions to the theory and practice of corporate communication about politics, voice, and social coordination or organization, as a process. The ideal of corporate communication implies that the representation of an organization is given and known to all and is not often or easily subjected to debate or discussion. Organizational communication offers a more liberating perspective that recognizes the multiple voices of individuals within an organization. It opens up the “black box” of the organization including processes of politics and polyphony.

The emergent or constitutive model of communication helps in addressing the question of how organizational identities may change and be transformed over time. Depending on the connections that individuals make
while communicating, the organization and its identity is constructed rather
than antecedently given or residing in individuals (e.g., Barr, 2004; Hewes,
2009; Hutchins, 1995). Such an emergence or constitutive model may reso-
nate with communication professionals who have been involved in organi-
zational changes and who recognize that an identity is dependent on the
voices of individual employees. Such a model, however, has so far not been
promoted as part of corporate communication teachings, with most graduates
still leaving business or communication schools with the ideals of whole-
ness, unity, and integration in mind.

As we have seen, the research traditions of corporate and organizational
communication are significantly different in terms of their level of analysis.
These traditions also have very different assumptions as to whether an orga-
nization is objectively given, as a representation of an entity or single actor,
or whether it is constituted in, and emerges from, communication. Despite
these differences, we also believe that they share common ground. One way
of considering this common ground is to recognize that both metonymically
combine the micro and macro in their analysis of an organization. Corporate
communication research generally examines issues of corporate representa-
tion to stakeholders that metonymically compress the complexity of organiza-
tions into a single corporate actor although organizational communication
research tends to address how organizations metaphorically emerge in, or are
constituted by, communication processes at more micro levels of analysis.
The advantage of recognizing the dynamic interplay between metonymy and
metaphor is that it forces us not to “objectify” or locate organizations either
in abstract metaphorical images of, say, a corporate identity or in specific or
local instances or episodes of talk, although ignoring that wider social struc-
ture and institutionalized scripts may exist. The whole, in other words, is
recursively and dynamically related to the parts, and holding this in perspec-
tive allows us to recognize corporate and organizational communication as
two sides of the same coin.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship
and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this
article.


References


(Eds.), *By word of mouth: Metaphor, metonymy and linguistic action in a cognitive perspective* (pp. 175-204). Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.


Bios

Lars Thøger Christensen, PhD (Odense University), is a professor of communication at the Department of Marketing & Management, University of Southern Denmark. His research focuses on identity, integration, and transparency and draws on critical and postmodern approaches to organizational and corporate communications.

Joep Cornelissen, PhD (Manchester Metropolitan University), is a professor in communication and organization at the Department of Management and Organizations, VU University Amsterdam. His current research focuses on narratives and processes of framing in the context of entrepreneurship and organizational change.