# Understanding strategy in communication management

Juliana Raupp
*Institute for Media and Communication Studies,*
*Free University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany, and*

Olaf Hoffjann
*Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences,*
*Salzgitter, Germany*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to provide a new perspective on the relationship between communication management as a strategic process and corporate strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper compares approaches of the prescriptive and the descriptive branch of strategy research and highlights how these seemingly contradictory strategy concepts are interrelated. It integrates decision-making and interpretive perspectives on strategy in management and transfers those perspectives to strategy in communication management. Two areas of communication management, problem definition and the identification of stakeholders, serve as examples to illustrate the conceptual framework.

**Findings** – A conceptual model of strategic decision making in communication management is developed. Strategy in communication management is understood as deliberately creating decision-making situations. Strategic decisions in communication management are part of both retrospective and prospective sensemaking processes in organizations.

**Originality/value** – This paper points to fruitful tensions between different strategy concepts and suggests ways to resolve this tension partly. It offers further insights into the role of strategy in communication management by providing a comprehensive view on strategies of communication management from the perspectives of strategy content and strategy process research.

**Keywords** Strategy research, Decision making, Sensemaking, Management research

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

"Strategy" has long become an indispensable concept in the literature on communication management and public relations. The context of its justification has at least two facets: On the one hand, it is nowadays taken for granted that communication management is a strategic management function. Within this context the internal influence as well as the power of communication management is especially scrutinized. These considerations are usually tied to strategic management approaches. On the other hand, communication management itself should be organized and carried out strategically. The concept of strategy here often belongs to a discourse of quality and professionalization. These considerations usually appear in literature particularly in prescriptive approaches to the planning of communication concepts. These examples demonstrate how diversely the strategy concept is used in the literature on communication management. Nevertheless, a theoretical grounding for the strategy concept in relation to communication management remains for the most part to be accomplished.

Based on these considerations, the goal of this article is to provide a new perspective on the relationship between communication management as a strategic process and corporate strategy. Such an interlocking of communication management and corporate strategy points to a fruitful tension between the two strategies. We will also suggest ways how to resolute this tension partly.

Moreover, a second field of conflict shall be outlined and partly resolved: The approaches of the prescriptive and descriptive branch of strategy research are generally described to be contradictory. Instead, we propose an intermediary position which offers further insights into the role of strategy in communication management.

In order to create a theoretical basis for the description of communication management as a strategic function we will proceed in the following steps. First we will briefly review the present state of research on strategy in the literature devoted to management (1.1) and present the way strategy is regarded in the literature on communication management (1.2). Based on this we will develop a concept of strategy as decision-making process (2). In a third step this strategy concept will be transferred to communication management (3.1). We will specifically examine which consequences this understanding has for problem definition and situation analysis in communication management (3.2), as well as for the identification and prioritization of stakeholders (3.3).

## 1. The concept of strategy

The following section will provide a short overview of the present state of strategy research, particularly of how it is conducted in economics and strategic management literature. It will be shown that until now new insights from strategy research have hardly been taken into account in communication management research.

### 1.1 The concept of strategy in management research

The concept of strategy has long been a topic of research on strategic management (Mintzberg et al., 2005; Eden and Ackerman, 2004; Kaplan and Norton, 2001). In order to systematically describe the research field, existing approaches can be roughly divided into two categories: those in the area of prescriptive strategy research (linear and adaptive models) and those in the area of descriptive strategy research (interpretive and incremental models) (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Chaffee, 1985). An alternative way of systematizing the various currents in management research consists of examining the approaches according to whether they place the content of a strategy or the process of strategy formation at the centre (Rajagopalan and Spreitzer, 1996). *Strategy-content research studies* the strategic positioning of a corporation. The focus is on answering the question of which strategies under which conditions lead to success; this approach corresponds to the prescriptive stream of strategy research. In the perspective of strategy-process research, strategy is described as a consciously shaped organizational process which can be divided into various phases, thereby correlating at least partly to the descriptive branch of strategy research (see Whitehill, 1996; Pettigrew, 1992).

The prescriptive branch includes works that provide recommendations on how strategies should be designed (Porter, 1980, 1985, 1991; Wilson, 1994). This research direction dominates textbooks just as much as the non-scholarly reception of management theory. The dominating teaching and research methods are case studies,

which lead to the formulation of strategic decision-making models. The practical benefits of prescriptive strategy research have been demonstrated in numerous cases (Ansoff *et al.*, 1970; Armstrong, 1982; Welch, 1984). However, the assumed positive association between strategic planning and company performance, with a directional causality from strategic planning to performance, has been doubted (Greenley, 1994). Next to this, especially when based on simplified models of rational decision-making, the scientific benefits of this approach are questionable. Some authors go so far as to regard the practical relevance of prescriptive strategy research as an obstacle to scientific advancement. Thus Nicolai (2000) describes strategic management research as a discipline "in which scholars also present themselves as consultants, in which quotable sources are widely disseminated and the proof of practical relevance enhances their scientific reputations" (pp. 79-80, our translation). As a result, popular management concepts have to be rendered in a scientific format. The scientific discussion is coupled in this manner to management fashions and draws a large portion of its dynamics from them.

The descriptive branch of strategy research in management studies and economics is much more heterogeneous than the prescriptive one and includes a variety of approaches from diverse disciplines. Their common theme is above all the skepticism that the process of strategic management proceeds as rationally as studies from the prescriptive branch basically assume. Criticism of the rationality of strategy management has come from various directions. Prominent approaches of the descriptive branch include for example March and Simon's well-known concept of limited rationality which was published first in 1958 (March and Simon, 1993), the garbage can model by Cohen *et al.* (1985), and the micropolitical approach by Crozier and Friedberg (1979). Also, ambiguity can be used strategically in order to promote contingency and to facilitate organizational change (Eisenberg, 1984). These approaches do not revolve around the question of what strategies should look like, but whether – and under which conditions – strategic action is possible.

Incremental models go one step further, disregarding the idea of intentional decisions as a characteristic of strategic action. Lindblom (1959) developed the notion of "muddling through" in order to describe the daily decision-making in administrations. In line of this thinking, Mintzberg and Waters (1985) demonstrate a fundamental skepticism towards the concept of decision-making as regards strategy formation. They ultimately call for a replacement of the concept of decision-making with that of action. In this manner also those patterns of action would be considered that reveal themselves to be strategies only in retrospect. This allows the examination of emergent sequences of action which later prove to create strategies. Drawing on conceptions of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), on the theory of practices (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001), and on discursive approaches (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Grant *et al.*, 2004), a group of researchers have proposed a research agenda for the study of strategy as practice (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007).

Likewise, some strands of systems theory have essentially questioned the possibility of intentional and rational action. Especially in combination with a constructivist view, intended changes are seen to have virtually nothing to do with "real" changes, due to the operative closedness of psychical as well as social systems (Willke, 2000, p. 201).

Some researchers have recently argued against strictly separating prescriptive and descriptive strategy research and instead interweaving strategy-content research and strategy-process research (e.g. Sminia, 2009). We embrace this appeal and in the following will develop an understanding of strategy that incorporates various perspectives. But first we will review how the concept of strategy has until now been treated in the literature on communication management.

*1.2 The concept of strategy in the literature on communication management*
If one examines the literature on communication management it is apparent that here, a practically-oriented perspective which implicitly is based on simplified decision-making models dominates (e.g. Tibbie, 1993; Argenti and Forman, 2002). Many textbooks or handbooks formulate strategy concepts determined by case studies (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004). In addition, numerous studies commissioned or conducted by agencies adopt the synoptic-planning strategy model without questioning it, yet hardly contribute to a systematic increase in knowledge. The extent to which communication management is in fact a strategic function has rarely been directly addressed (Moss and Warnaby, 1997). Often it is simply taken for granted that this is the case: It is assumed that communication represents a decisive factor in a corporation's value chain, and the demand that communication managers are either included among upper-level managers or at least report to them directly is derived from this assumption.

Botan (2006) differentiates between a "grand strategy" and a "strategy". While a grand strategy refers on a policy-level to decisions regarding goals, ethics, relationships to publics, strategies are positioned at the campaign-level of decision-making. Here decisions refer to maneuvering and resources in order to realize the superordinate grand strategy. Tactics then refer to specific activities and outputs through which strategies are implemented. Bentele and Nothhaft (2007, p. 341) likewise advocate a distinction between strategy and tactics. Cornelissen (2009, p. 100) regards corporate strategy and communication strategy as interlocking levels of strategy, linked with one another by means of translation and information services which those responsible for communication perform for the overall management.

One of the few empirical analyses that examine the contribution of communication management to the formulation of corporate strategy has been carried out by Dolphin and Fan (2000). Based on a survey of communication managers in 20 British corporations they came to the conclusion that those responsible for communication had a growing influence on the formulation of corporate strategy. The significance of communication management for corporate strategy, however, depends on whether the organization is more traditional (in these cases the influence of communication management is minimal) or whether communication generally enjoys high standing within the corporation. According to the results of the European Communication Monitor, a long-term European-wide survey among communication practitioners, the link between business strategy and communication is regarded as the most important issue for communication management within the next three years (Zerfass *et al.*, 2009, p. 66).

Only a few texts on communication management and on public relations critically engage with the concept of strategy. Hallahan *et al.* (2007) aim at deconstructing the concept of strategy in relationship to strategic communication. One of their central

argument states that the development of strategies depends on organizational cultures just as much as on societal cultures, implying that strategic decisions are not objective, independent of culture and gender-neutral, but rather influenced by all of these factors. This brief overview of the literature illustrates that in most cases it is simply assumed that communication management is a strategic management task. The concept of strategy, however, is rarely taken into consideration (Bronn, 2001). Likewise, the process of strategy formation and the contribution of communication strategy to corporate strategy are only marginally discussed. The following will develop a theory-driven understanding of strategy which then will serve as a basis to describe communication management as a strategic corporate function.

## 2. Strategy formation as decision-making and as construction process
In our opinion, neither strategy-process and strategy-content research nor descriptive and prescriptive strategy research present irreconcilable opposites. Instead the following will delineate an integrative understanding of strategy which will serve as the theoretical foundation of communication management as a strategic organizational function. Without wanting to consider here the decision-making models of prescriptive strategy research, strategy will be first modeled as conscious decision-making. Decisions will, moreover, be regarded as conscious, calculated choices among alternative actions, in which certain goals are linked to certain possibilities of action. They can stand at the end of a rationalized decision-making process just as much as they can be the result of incremental "muddling-through" (see Schimank, 2005). Finally, the perspective of decision-making theory on strategy will then be augmented with an interpretative strategy perspective.

### 2.1 Strategy as a sequence of decisions
In the understanding of strategy from the viewpoint of decision-making theory there is initially no difference between strategies and decisions. As in strategy development, a conscious, calculated selection among alternative actions is made (Barnard, 1938; Schimank, 2005). Even the cross-situational quality that is often ascribed to strategies (see for example Quinn, 1988, p. 3) can also be assumed for decisions in organizations. Every decision is not only connected to previous decisions, but is oriented to specific rationalities and thus reproduces the organization and its structures (path-dependency of decisions). At the same time every decision is the basis – in a structuration-theory perspective a "resource" (Giddens, 1995) – for subsequent decisions.

A process-oriented perspective allows decision-making to be broken down into different phases. The recognition of a problem is the prerequisite for a decision-making situation. When decisions, in contrast to simple actions, thematize their own contingency, the result is that there are several alternatives which – no matter how rudimentary – will be evaluated and from which one will be selected. Evaluation follows implementation, which then in turn can lead to the recognition of a new problem.

Again, decision-making can essentially be divided into these four phases. The existence of these phases does not imply anything about their rational or irrational formulation. A decision of enormous consequences can – voluntarily or due to external circumstance – be made within an hour or be the result of a rationalized decision-making process. Precisely as the rationality of the result cannot be predicted, actors are left only with the procedural rationality (Simon, 1976) of their decision-making.

*2.2 Interpretative understanding of strategy*
With regard to decision making the interpretative view takes into account the prerequisites that lead to decisions: decisions are the product of individual or collective processes of sense-making of the organization and the organization's environment. In contrast to an incremental perspective which qualifies the process of decision-making, the interpretative view emphasizes the significance of decisions. It does so, however, against the background of a different knowledge interest and can thus suitably augment the perspective of decision-making theory. Strategic decisions have recourse to the need of management to structure the perceived organizational environment and to establish as well as maintain a commonly shared meaning. Seen from this perspective, decision-making is part of a retrospective sense-making which serves to localize, articulate and ratify decisions made previously (Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005). From an interpretative perspective, however, strategic decisions cannot only be explained in retrospect, but can also be interpreted prospectively as a concept for action (Hendry, 2000). A sense-making perspective regards the contribution of strategies to develop an interpretation of the organization and to offer it to internal and external stakeholders. While stakeholders refer to these interpretative patterns the organizational environment, which feeds the sense-making processes, is in turn transformed.

Action research describes the process of strategy formation as organizational practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006), thereby providing empirically constructive questions for our research problem. Praxeological strategy research, for example, investigates which actors are involved in which manner in strategic actions. Who writes texts within a corporation that are of strategic importance? Who reads these texts? And how are the symbolic artifacts formulated in this manner disseminated within the organization? These questions are helpful in order to determine the role of communication management in the formulation of organization strategies. At the same time it is vital to study from an interpretative perspective the extent to which "strategic plans" devised in this manner from practical action become part of, and in turn shape, a corporation's identity.

## 3. Transferring the concept of strategy to communication management
In the last two sections we have presented some basic assumptions of strategy formation within the decision-making and the interpretative paradigm. The two approaches highlight distinctive features of strategy, yet they can complement each other well. By combining the two approaches and applying them to strategy making in communication management, different aspects can be brought together: The focus of the sensemaking perspective is mainly on questions of perception and interpretation of ambiguous information. The decision-making perspective, on the other hand, deals primarily with problems of rationality respectively irrationality of decision-making as a sequence of consecutive operations. Both approaches refer to actions which are embedded in a specific context. A linkage of decision-making and interpretative perspectives sheds light on essential problems of communication management strategies. In the next section, we will demonstrate this with regard to the act of decision-making itself and thus for the development of communication strategies, internal and external effects of communication strategies and finally, a retrospective and prospective view on communication strategies.

In the next step, we will apply this concept of strategy to communication management and its contribution to strategy-making on a corporate level. Subsequently, we will illustrate our line of thought: We will single out two specific stages of communication management and substantiate how they are interlocked with corporate strategy.

### 3.1 Strategic communication management from a decision-making and interpretative perspective

The strategic capability of collective actors, such as corporations, depends on how the division of labor is internally organized and on which opportunities for strategy development are given to individual actors or departments within the organization. The issue thus is of scope of action and self-responsibility as prerequisites for strategy formation. In a traditional conception of management the primacy for strategy formation lies exclusively in the corporation's management. Subordinate segments of the corporation are thus not allocated an independent ability to formulate strategy, but at most the ability to implement strategies. This deterministic view of the primacy of strategy formation with management is nowadays considered as obsolete. It has been replaced by the recognition that corporations operate under conditions of structural uncertainty. This results in the need for subordinate segments of a corporation as well in order to develop their own rationalities of action. However, those are themselves related to the rationalities of action of the entire corporation (Steyn and Niemann, 2010). Steyn (2003), Harrison and St John (1998), and Steinmann and Schreyögg (2005) define this as the functional strategy or the strategic programs of functional areas. These programs follow the same logic of planning processes as the superordinate corporate strategy and usually take place in all those functional areas of a corporation where processes are strategically managed. If communication management is regarded as a subsystem of a corporation, then the function of communication management at the level of the overall organization has a legitimizing function, as well as being constitutive for the interpretation and evaluation of the organization's environment in the form of stakeholder expectations. These functions allow one to conclude that communication management performs independent interpretation, explication and selection services and is thus functionally constitutive for the formulation of a corporate strategy.

Decision-making and thus strategies of communication management and of the corporation's management exist in a close interrelationship with one another, but are not identical. Corporate strategies rest on decisions made by management which on the whole decides the direction and the goals of the organization. Communication strategies, which however are directly connected with corporate strategies, are decided by those responsible in specialized departments for communication management. With reference to strategy and management theory this difference can be described as overall corporate strategy in contrast to the communicative partial or functional strategy. The conception of strategic communication campaigns can thus be defined as a functional strategy.

How great the mutual dependency between overall corporate strategy and communicative partial or functional strategy is can be demonstrated with the distinction made by Christensen *et al.* (2008, p. 27) between strategies of first and second order. While strategies of first order aim to analyze the organization's

environment and to react to contingencies from the environment, strategies of second order aspire to influence and to shape the organization's environment. Since communication management performs interpretation and explication as regards the organization's environment, it operates on both levels of strategy. From the perspective of interpretive communication research, communication strategies represent processes which help organizations to structure and lend meaning to perceived environments. Organizations make use of different functions to this end, which are anchored in communication departments as regards personnel (for example environment monitoring or issues management). Scanning procedures can serve to collect information (information services; see Heath, 1997; Choo, 2002). By means of the interpretation and transmission of environmental information inwards (transmitting services) communication management contributes to changing the self-perception and self-descriptions of organizations. In turn, communication management attempts to exert influence on the organization's environment by transmitting self-descriptions after statements.

The perspective of decision-making theory necessitates that communication management must be included in corporate decisions, since the internal and external implementability of self-descriptions is not only a key selection criterion, but rather both directions can never be considered separately from one another. As Dozier (1992, p. 342) puts it, "if practitioners are to help organizations adapt to changes in the environment, they must participate in the management decision-making process, not simply implement decisions made by others." Whether this requisite is given depends, according to Botan (2006), on the grand strategy of a corporation. He differentiates between four archetypes of a grand strategy, which at the PR level resemble Grunig's four models of PR (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). While communication management assumes more of an implementer role in an intransigent and a resistant grand strategy, in a cooperative and an integrative grand strategy it can exert a consulting influence. A corporation's grand strategy influences, as per Botan, not just the content of communication-related strategy but also the essential influence of communication management.

The question arises here of how corporate and communication strategy are formally integrated with one another. Bentele and Nothhaft (2007) distinguish three alternatives: In a personnel-oriented solution the head of communication management either exerts influence on corporate decision-making formally (e.g. via a seat on the board) or informally (e.g. since he or she has known the chairperson for a long time). In a process-oriented solution aspects are systematically integrated in the processes and procedures of corporate strategy formulation (see also Steyn, 2007, pp. 147-8). Finally, in the result-oriented variant communicative aspects are incorporated in the values and identifiers of a corporate financial control system. All three variants, however, have in common the question of the status of communication management within the organization.

While communication management is united in its relevance for the interpretation and evaluation of the organizational environment, its segments are marked by numerous contradictions – as in the traditional opponents, public relations and marketing communication. PR and specific marketing strategies therefore have to be differentiated from strategies related to communication. The following will exemplarily describe decision-making criteria and behavior, which are constitutive

for two sub-segments of communication management, namely for situation analysis and for the identification and prioritization of publics resp. stakeholders. These represent two functions of communication management that have particular relevance for the development of a superordinate corporate strategy.

### 3.2 Problem definition and situation analysis of communication management
The relevance of the considerations of the decision theory for communication-related decision-making is demonstrated in the problem definition and situation analysis of communication management, which will be explained in the following. Communication-related decision-making requires that a problem is recognized which cannot be solved by means of routine action. As Baecker (1994, p. 163) argues, "the decision does not accept [. . .] the course of things and instead inverts the course of things against itself, to the benefit of desired or merely other possible, conditions" (our translation) In the everyday flow of routine actions, therefore, it is the identification of a problem that leads to decision-making being initiated. How one has arrived at this diagnosis of a problem is yet another question. The diagnosis can be a partial result of an elaborate issue-management process, but it can also arise in the context of an incremental "waiting for a problem".

When organizations are regarded from a social-interpretative perspective as information-processing systems, then the connection between organization and environment takes on the form of a reciprocal relationship: The information organizations transmit to the environment represent the input for the environment. By this, the environment changes and in turn influences the organization. From a constructive view the organization's observation of the environment can be seen as the application of various interpretation schemata of the organization's members, who are able to explain the different environmental constructions. Strategic communication management can resort to different methods of gathering environmental information in the analysis phase. Sutcliffe distinguishes between "scanning", i.e. formal methods of environmental observation, and "noticing", the informal perception of the environment (Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 204f.). Daft and Weick (1984) establish four different methods of information processing, ranging from incremental to formalized methods. These different methods are examples of which strategy-relevant routines of action can arise in the framework of organizational communication.

### 3.3 Identification and prioritization of stakeholders
A second area of communication management, the identification, prioritization and addressing of stakeholders, is likewise directly or indirectly relevant for the development of a superordinate organization strategy. A rich literature exists on identifying and prioritizing stakeholders (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Andriof et al., 2002; Friedman and Miles, 2006; Freeman et al., 2010) resp. publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Hallahan, 2002; Aldoory and Sha, 2007; Newsom et al., 2010; see for a discussion of both concepts Grunig and Repper, 1992, for a critical perspective Mackay, 2009).

With regard to stakeholders or publics, the key outcomes of communication-related decision-making are the self-descriptions (e.g. press releases or product advertisements), dialog options, and recommendations to the corporation's management (e.g. on product policy or on the change to more environmentally-

friendly production processes). The criteria of selection for the self-descriptions, the options for dialogue, collaboration, negotiation and for the recommendations reflect the relevance of different stakeholders (Flynn, 2006). Communication management receives these selection criteria from a multifarious connection to the environment: primarily from explicitly stated or assumed corporate goals[1] and secondarily from the interests of externally relevant stakeholder groups (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). And finally selection criteria are received from "intermediary target groups" such as journalists or other opinion leaders (Fassin, 2009).

PR often has conflicts with the corporation's management since what one reference group expects from a corporation is sometimes connected with (at least short-term financial) harm to the corporation – and vice versa. An imminent tension therefore exists between the goals of PR and those of corporate strategy. This probably leads to the most original criterion for PR strategies: The enforceability of self-descriptions in an inward as well as outward direction. As regards external stakeholders, enforceability is linked to the credibility of self-descriptions. Inwards, liability is again important, i.e. the reconnection with the operations (Kieserling, 2005). One could exaggeratedly say that reconnecting self-descriptions are often unsuccessful with external stakeholders, since they place the corporation's rationale at the centre. Self-descriptions that promise success with external stakeholders, however, have few chances of being put into effect internally, since they run contrary to the corporation's rationale.

A further original selection criterion is connected with this: issues that are positively regarded by stakeholder groups. These can include issues in which a corporation consciously relinquishes something for the good of society – for example bonus payments or a controversial production site. The rare ideal case of positive self-descriptions which can be implemented everywhere are so-called win-win situations, described as follows by Jarchow (1992, p. 98): "When public relations systems come against 'shared realities' or common levels of sense between social systems which can be used for cooperative behavior, then they have discovered the lever with which their arguments can enter the self-informing constructive manners of target groups. A good PR campaign is characterized by the fact that it makes the interest – the 'argumentandum' – of one system compatible in meaning for other systems with other constructs of reality" (own translation). An example of this provides the aviation industry. Efficient airplanes which are in demand by airlines for cost reasons are re-positioned as "climate protectors" after the renewed beginning of the climate debate. In addition, communication management will pay attention to the consistency of self-descriptions, so that contradictions and thus irritations among external publics are avoided.

Differences between the communication management disciplines of public relations and marketing communication are also evident with regard to the publics or target groups. While in marketing communication the initiative comes from the corporation – after all, sales of products and services are to be supported – in Public Relations the initiative in a certain sense comes from the environment: stakeholders have a "problem" with a corporation's operations. This leads to publics considered as relevant by PR momentarily become target groups (Szyszka, 2005).

How publics differ from each other as concerns their knowledge and involvement has been studied by Grunig in the situational theory of publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984;

see for an overview Ni and Kim, 2009). Building on this theory and also drawing on Luhmann's (1995) distinction between a social, a material and a temporal dimension of information processing, publics can be described in various dimensions. In the social dimension publics seem to be organized in extremely different ways. One or two shared characteristics suffice and there is no need that any kind of social integration or feeling of solidarity among these persons exists. However, it is often assumed that the persons belonging to such a common category will react in a similar manner under certain conditions (Klima, 1994). Thus, publics can consist of individual persons who have approached corporations with a critical concern, without knowing anything about each other, or publics can be organized in initiatives or formal organizations. In the material dimension, publics constitute their relationships with the organization by means of a specific issue. However, once such a relationship has been constituted – for example a citizens' initiative aiming to prevent the expansion of a chemical plant – then further issues can be added in the material dimension. For a conflict leads to generalizations – the action group will later criticize emissions and possible lay-offs as well. For the monitoring of organizations this means that although organizations, in order to conserve resources, do indeed look for risk issues initially and in this way come across new relevant stakeholders. However, organizations will very closely observe the issues of existing stakeholder groups ("observation of the adversary"). In the temporal dimension the relevance of publics is subject to great changes. Thanks to a current cause a reference group which until now has been completely irrelevant can become a major threat for the perceived legitimacy of an organization.

This exemplary overview of the selection criteria and publics or stakeholders of PR has briefly shown which aspects influence the development of PR strategies and the extent of that influence. At the same time it has become apparent with which contradictions communication-related strategies have to deal.

## 4. Conclusion
In this article the traditional contradictions between strategy-process research and strategy-content research as well as between descriptive and prescriptive strategy research have been overcome and substituted by an integrative understanding of strategy. This integrative understanding of strategy is based on decision-making theory and social-interpretive considerations. This double approach has allowed us to demystify the concept of strategy, without shelving it completely.

The concept of strategy has first been demystified on the basis of decision-making theory. We have determined that, first of all, every communication-related decision goes beyond any given situation in the sense that it takes into consideration rationalities of communication management and of the corporation. In this manner, every decision has strategic character. However, when strategies can be observed at every organizational level, this requires greater differentiation – for example between corporate strategies reserved for management, strategies defined by the head of communication management, and implementation strategies which are also defined by employees. Communication-related decisions and consequently communication-related strategies therefore have a different scope. They range from implementation strategies regarding individual measures to strategies for the future corporate policy, which communication management can only recommend.

While decision theory focuses on the integration of communication management in corporate decision-making, from an interpretive view the influence of communication management, through information and translation services, on corporate decision-making is inevitable.

At the same time an integrative understanding of strategy does not shelve the concept of strategy for two reasons. First, a distinction between strategic and non-strategic communication management continues to make sense. Decision-making needs to be differentiated from spontaneous and routine actions. In habitual or routine action thus alternatives of actions are not recognized – which is why conscious decision-making is not necessary (Schimank, 2005). Strategic communication management can therefore be understood as communication management which deliberately creates such decision-making situations in which several alternatives of action are evaluated. Second, the interpretive view has made clear the relevance of strategic decisions for sensemaking: Strategic decisions are part of both retrospective and prospective sensemaking in organizations. This moreover accounts for the symbolic function of strategic decisions.

By integrating the decision-making and the interpretive perspectives, the prevailing conflicts between strategy-content research and strategy-process research can be overcome. Especially with regard to functional strategies – and communication strategies are functional strategies –, this combination of the two approaches proved to be fruitful. Because communication strategies as functional strategies are highly dependent on corporate strategies, the content and the formation of a strategy cannot be considered separately. A comprehensive view on strategies of communication management requires taking into account the content and simultaneously the development of the strategies.

### Note

1. This distinction should make clear that aside from specific and explicitly formulated corporate goals and rules (self-descriptions of the management) unregulated "empty spaces" always exist in which structures only arise through decision-making. In these decisions, corporate actors guide themselves by previous decisions or norms which in their view are comparable. In other words, corporate actors ask themselves what the goal of the corporations's management would be in this specific situation.

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**Corresponding author**
Juliana Raupp can be contacted at: j.raupp@fu-berlin.de