The Adaptation of Communication Professional Roles to Organizational Complexity During Change Situations

DAVID GIL GARCIA

Lund University
Department of Strategic Communication
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Abstract

The Adaptation of Communication Professional Roles to Organizational Complexity During Change Situations

Scholars discuss about the importance of processes of communication in which all stakeholders actively participate influencing the constitution and development of change and organizations. However, communication professionals struggle to embrace these assumptions and modify their roles and practices in these complex settings. This study aims to understand how practitioners adapt their roles in these scenarios during change. Acknowledging the importance of meaning co-creation and negotiation processes in organizations, observation to current practices through sensemaking and institutionalism theoretical lenses is carried out in order to unveil constraints in practitioners' roles and practices attempting to handle complexity when tackling change.

Keyword: change communication, organizational change, sensemaking, institutionalism

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

The struggle for change is an ubiquitous element for organizations that strive to continuously adapt to new environments in many different ways (Lewis, 2011; Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2010). Change has historically attracted the attention of scholars from several fields including communication. This has fostered the development of different and confronting perspectives and approaches to analyse the relationship between change and communication in organizations (Ströh & Jaatinen, 2002; Johansson & Heide, 2008). In this sense, two approaches to tackle change from a communication perspective are spotted both in academy and practice. On one hand there is an approach that focuses on planned changes with clear aim to seek for efficiency. On the other hand there is an emergent approach that attempts to understand the intricacies of the process of change and how this unfolds (Johansson and Heide, 2008).

Nowadays organizations deal with complexity with implications that affects the overall organization. In this sense, Strategic Communication discipline is also eagerly discussing about how the field can adapt to such convoluted scenarios (Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, & Falkheimer, 2018). Acknowledging this, it is assumed that an emergent perspective must be taken in an attempt to increase understanding of the issue at hand. This leads the research to adopt a framework which sets communication at the core of the organization influencing all processes with constitutive characteristics (Zerfass, & Franke, 2013; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016). Thereby, when it comes to change situations, the link between communication and the change process is tight or inexistent since one constitutes the other (Cheney et al., 2010). This approach brings the discussion to an abstract level in order to understand the functioning of processes of meaning which are influenced by all the stakeholders and environments of the organization in varied situations such as change (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016; Heide et al., 2018; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). For this reason, sensemaking becomes a natural lens to look at emergent communication practices and their influence on meaning processes to ultimately understand how communication professionals adapt and handle the intricacies of nowadays organizational settings.

The role of communication professionals has evolved towards tasks that embrace these environment implications, assuming functions as enablers and facilitators instead of technicians and distributors of information (Zerfass, & Franke, 2013; Volk, Berger, Zerfass, Bisswanger, Fetzer, Köhler, 2017). As a consequence, the practices that communication professionals carry out have simultaneously adapted to these scenarios. These are performed taken into consideration that processes are influenced by all stakeholders in an intricate manner which forces practitioners to find new ways of influence beyond traditional and managerial actions. These are disregarded due to they clash against the theoretical explanations and assumptions of nowadays organizational settings. Several authors have analysed ways to instill meaning, for instance by driving the sensemaking process through leadership under managers responsibility. The new roles communication professionals are taking over are in line with these responsibilities, combining different types of operational and strategic contributions to the business (Volk et al., 2017). However, research in this field is still underdeveloped (Heide et al. 2018). According to Lewis (2011), previous literature has paid greater attention to efficiency issues related to implementers and implementations applying managerial and traditional approaches, than understanding the process of change which falls into emergent traditions. The same author encourages the role of communication professionals as "sensegivers" during change processes. However, the role of communication professionals has not been further analysed by recent academic research. Likewise, empirical studies are scarce and do not focus on the theme and theoretical thread followed in this paper. Similarly, beyond research related to organizational change, literature about the role of communication professionals and their practices in complex settings studied from the aforementioned emergent perspective is still generally underdeveloped (Heide et al., 2018).

The assumptions about the functioning of the social world we live in and the explanations about organizational complexity are taken from research and scholarship. Although practice is attempting to adapt to such scenarios shaping new roles and practices (Volk et al., 2017), communication practitioners struggle to embrace theoretical assumptions and act accordingly (Schön, 2003; Bartunek, Rynes, & Daft, 2001; Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). This problem has been clearly pictured by Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) in their study about the gap between theory and practice applied to crisis communication. In the same line, this research tackles practitioners struggles to bridge theory and their practices during organizational change. However, it is important to highlight that the purpose of this research is not to discuss about issues between research and practice, it is to shed light on the communication

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professionals struggles to adapt their practices during change situations to the theoretical emergent explanation of nowadays social world that involve assumptions such as understanding communication as a process and acknowledging the active role and influence of stakeholders in meaning co-creation and negotiation.

Furthermore, it is key to note that the term emergent refers to different meanings in literature consulted, including this paper. Thereby, acknowledging that this may be problematic, it is worth to mention that this paper refers to emergent approach described by Johansson and Heide (2008) when addressing one of the two main research traditions to study change, which is characterized by its aim to increase understanding about the process. Alternatively, the term emergent is also used when referring to a type of change similar to continuous and unintended, contrary to planned change. It is noted as seen in previous literature that emergent change can be studied from the two approaches introduced by Johansson and Heide (2008), traditional (managerial) and emergent. Therefore, there is not an excluding dichotomy and thereby the combination of these two terms in research will not necessarily lead to conceptual and theoretical inconsistencies.

Aim

The aim of this research is rooted on increasing knowledge about the role of communication professionals in organizational change processes. In order to attain this aim, this paper acknowledges the complexity in which nowadays organizations are immersed. This leads the author to take an emergent approach with a theoretical framework that considers communication as a process with constitutive and performative effects within and upon organizations. Hence, the research will analyse specifically the role of communication professionals that apply practices in accordance with this framework. Thereby, this research will aim to increase understanding in this area by exploring and answering the following research question:

- *How do communication professionals adapt their roles and practices to nowadays organizational complexity acknowledging the challenges of meaning co-creation and negotiation processes during organizational change situations?*

Thus, the research will contribute to Strategic Communication academic field by providing understanding about the role of communication professionals immersed in tensions between theory and practice in nowadays complex organizations studied from a emergent perspective. Besides, it will bring knowledge to sensemaking literature with special focus on communication and its combination with other theories such as institutionalism in an attempt to find explanations to the functioning of social world. Furthermore, it will enhance the study of change processes which has always been relevant in academy. In addition to this, practitioners will benefit from this study since it provides knowledge within a framework that can trigger adaptation of existent or new Strategic Communication practices applied in complex organizational processes such as change.

Delimitations

In order to attain the purpose and tackle the problem, the research followed an iterative abductive approach where different theoretical perspectives led the process while the researcher was always open to other perspectives that may explain the issues encountered. Thus, acknowledging the sensemaking and communication as a process theoretical framework, the study relies on interpretivist traditions sharing ontology and epistemology with subtraditions such as symbolic interactionism and social constructivism. Hence, the methods chosen are semi-structured interviews to 15 communication professionals who have applied to some extent practices that fall into these perspectives. These practitioners have worked in change projects for organizations operating in several european countries within a variety of industries with 6,000 employees the smallest and 140,000 the largest one.

Literature Review

This section covers the main research traditions that study organizational change emphasizing the relationship with communication and specifically within Strategic Communication discipline. Acknowledging the great concern that change has historically risen, wide variety of literature has been produced within the aforementioned approaches. Notwithstanding this, several trends can be spotted among the existent academic knowledge. Research about organizational change has recursively analysed types and categories which has influenced the definition of change and irrevocably the course of the research. Likewise, researchers have paid attention to implementers and implementations, assigning roles to participants and explaining the phases of change development. Besides that, when it comes to emergent perspectives there is existing literature about the role of communication in matters of how organizations become alive, evolve, and organize themselves through its members and environments. In this line, sensemaking literature has been found to be an interesting approach to analyse the process of change from many varied angles.

Definition of Organizational Change

Johansson and Heide (2008) reviewed the study of change and categorized the observed patterns in two approaches, the traditional one that aims to evaluate outcomes of planned actions and the emergent one which attains to enhance understanding of how change processes unfold. The duality of planned-emergent research and practice has set the path for the development and application of managerial and emergent perspectives in the field. Higher attention has been paid to managerial and functional traditions that have explored the efficient use of communication in change processes (e.g. Armenakis & Harris, 2002). Conversely, in a lower extent but noting its increasing interest, studies within the emergent approach have been carried out in pursuance of understanding how underlying factors involved in change issues develop and affect the organization immersed in this process (e.g. Wiedner, Barrett, and Oborn, 2017; Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013).

The definition of organizational change and its relationship with Strategic Communication has gathered much attention due to the interdisciplinarity that the issue welcomes and the varied intricacies of change. The delimitation of two approaches for explaining and defining change is set by the different understandings regarding to its nature. In this regard, Weick and Quinn (1999) argue that there are episodic and continuous changes. Whereas the former is considered planned, linear, and framed in time; the latter falls into the emergent wave of understanding, where change is constantly evolving and shaped by many elements and actors. In line with this categorization, other terms that account for the same division can be found in literature. Lewis (2011) makes a fair revision of this conceptual evolution by categorizing change within similar type of dualities such as intended-unintended and planned-emergent. The author adds on the duality of material-discursive changes referring to those triggered by implementation of material goods or change in policies first introduced by Zorn, Christensen, and Cheney (1999).

Furthermore, it has been also categorized according to its scope in categories of first order, second order, and third order of change where its complexity increases progressively in each order. The first accounts for variations in routines and the third for continuous change (Bartunek & Moch, 1994; Lewis, 2011). Moreover, it is worth to mention Van de Ven and Poole (1995) contribution to the field and their discussion in the typification of change. The authors introduce a theoretical framework with four categories to analyse change from a management perspective. Furthermore, it is important to notice that literature in this field has studied change from a scope centered on implementers (e. g. Bel, Smirnov, & Wait, 2018), but also, although in a much lower extent, literature has tackled change and its influence from other stakeholders perspectives, commonly covering employee related issues and processes (e.g. Lewis, 2007; Bakari, Hunjra, & Niazi, 2017).

Academy has produced literature based on theoretical reflections and empirical data for all types of change. Planned changes have been the main type investigated. Studies about these issues have been principally aimed to create knowledge about how to make change more efficient. Thus, the angles taken to attain this purpose are varied and include a wide range of perspectives combining both managerial approaches and others based on less emphasis on ways to directly control the process of change (Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabring, & Townsend, 2008). Many implementation guides have been published commonly written within change

management field (e.g. Cameron & Green, 2012; Paton & McCalman, 2008; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Burke, 2002). Similarly, high number of studies have analysed change focusing on the effects of artifacts in the outcomes of the implementation. An example of these is Armenakis and Harris (2002) study about the efficiency and impact of communication content in pre implementation stages of change.

Referring to unintended, continuous, and emergent approaches to study change, a recent example is Wiedner et al., (2017) study carried out in the England Public Sector. The authors observe how practices that were not designed and dedicated many resources to, were those that triggered most fruitful change initiatives, challenging thus the pursued efficiency of managerial approaches. Changes in organizational policies or values are causes of changes in the organization, in the same way modifications in sensitive elements such as the name of the organization are proven to unfold substantial organizational phenomenons and effects on artifacts such as identity (Gilstrap & Smith, 2016). When it comes to material change, it has been eagerly researched about the implementation of technologies. Cheney et al. (2010) dedicate a full chapter to discuss the meaning of technologies in organizations its relationship with communication. This has received a lot of attention by organizational change researchers also with communication sided approaches (Guida, 2013).

Regardless the nature of change, it can be defined as "the difference(s) between two (or more) successive conditions, states, or moments of time" (Ford & Ford, 1995, p. 543). This definition describes the change as a process that pushes established elements out of an stable state towards a new setting (Cheney et al., 2010). During this process, the elements involved crave for stability with all the intricacies that this journey implies. The first model that embraced this definition and interpretation of change process is Lewin's (1951) which understands the evolution of change through stages of unfreezing, changing, and freezing, representing the endeavour towards stability. This classical model has been applied in studies throughout the last decade until now, when it is still being a reference in change studies (e.g Bakari, et al., 2017; Coria, Valderrama, Neme, & Rivera, 2016). Likewise, Lewin's (1951) model and its evolution has inspired other major theoretical frameworks which have had an independent impact after its development. One of the most spread examples is the widely known Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 1972). This provides an enhanced theoretical model applicable to practice that elaborates on top of the adoption stages presented by Lewin

(1951). It also designs roles that individuals take on during change, and gives insights about types of change and their implementation.

An Emergent Approach to Change through Communication

The aim of the emergent perspective is the common thread that the published literature follows in a wide variety of academic publications. This is the pursuance of increasing knowledge about the understanding of the process of change (Johansson and Heide, 2008). In this regard, Ströh (2007) already suggested an emergent approach for change communication that allows to dodge managerial perspective overlookings of complexity by taking into account a more participative take on change. Thus, literature within this tradition has produced discussions about change, defining and explaining this organizational process in a more complex way. As a result of this, the relationship between communication and change is regarded with more entangled arguments acknowledging that the implications of perspectives address communication as a key factor in change processes, but also as a constitutive element for organizations.

This said, communication and change have been regarded in many ways. Lewis (2000, 2011) has brought different perspectives to foster research on organizational change from a Strategic Communication perspective. The author sets communication at the core of the organization. In this sense, Cheney et al. (2010) define organizational change as a process constituted by communication. Change is not only transmitted through communication but it is assumed that comes into existence through people communicating between each other and the environments (Cheney et al., 2010). The constitutive characteristic of communication is a recurring argument in the discussion of nowadays communication role and scope within organizations. It has been argued about the organizing power of communication which is enacted through everyday interactions (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017; van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). According to van Vuuren and Elving (2008) the essence of organization and its coordination efforts are "conversational experiences" (p. 352) which guide the sensemaking process towards interpretation of events.

Regarding to this matter, Weick (1995) addresses the different key elements in sensemaking processes where communication always plays an essential role in line with its intrinsic constitutive characteristic. Weick (1995) discusses about the different challenges individuals

encounter when engaging in sensemaking processes which are resolved by engaging in action, dialogue, and participation. In this sense, Johansson and Heide (2008) concluded in their description of this emergent approach that "change takes place and is realized by communication" (p. 294). This argument has been recently enhanced by the development of the CCO perspective that provides better understanding on how organizations come to life from sensemaking processes enacted through communication processes carried out among individuals (Volk et al., 2017; Heide et al., 2018).

Reviewing The Strategic Communication Discussion

The debate about the role of communication in organizations is taking place within Strategic Communication field too. Scholars and practitioners reflect in previous literature about the evolution of this field which traditionally has shared the tensions among managerial and emergent perspectives already presented in this paper. This dichotomy has fed the discussion within Strategic Communication field about how managerial and emergent perspectives address nowadays organizational complexities and how suitable each approach is to tackle them. In this matter, recent approaches have emerged questioning control and integration aims of Strategic Communication challenging the widely referred definition of Strategic Communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, and Werder (2018) point out that traditional models and approaches are not capable of handling nowadays organization's complexity due to they:

> 1) neglect emergent strategies and strategies-in-practice, 2) are organization-centric and
> not inclusive of stakeholder interests, 3) discount the constitutive role of communication
> for strategy-making and organizations at large, and 4) place undue emphasis on
> communication professionals at the expense of the day-to-day communication activities
> of other organizational members (p. 491).

Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) provided an enhanced reflection breaking with traditional communication models characterized by linearity, thus recognizing the important role of individuals in meaning creation. In this line, when the transmission function is ignored in benefit of constitutive and performative effects, communication is seen as a process where stakeholders are regarded as key contributors in meaning transmission, creation, and

negotiation (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016; Heide et al., 2018). This leads to an understanding of the organization as a "world of complex relationships and uncontrolled interactions, placing importance on the process of meaning-making" (p. 66).

Therefore, taking into account that stakeholders have an important influence in processes of meaning during change, this approach in literature about change emphasizes the influence of other stakeholders beyond those who implement it. Thus, participation from other actors beyond implementers are key in change processes. Lewis (2011) acknowledges that "the change itself will constantly shift as it is negotiated by the stakeholders who engage about it and with it" (p. 33). Regarding to this matter, a recent study carried out by Burris, Rockmann, & Kimmons (2017) shows the complexity of processes of employee participation based on employee identification perspectives that influence change according to the levels they identify with the organization, the content of voice, and the situation at hand. The authors cover the interdependencies between managers and employees in a research composed by three studies carried out with mixed methods. Similarly, Aggerholm (2014) analyses how employees shape new identities enacting several discourses in organization reestructuracion settings which evidences the emergence of complex processes of sensemaking in change situations.

Sensemaking, Strategic Communication, and Change

As a result of adding academic complexity to organizations' entangled (and constructed) reality, the academic discussion revolves in the aforementioned abstract level where, instead of narrowing themes to common organizational constructs like some of the ones discussed before (information, identity), this stimulates the discussions around processes of meanings, understandings, and interpretations. In this line of research, sensemaking becomes a natural framework to analyse communication practices and change processes. Many studies have been carried out applying a sensemaking perspective. Although acknowledging the diversity of cases, a common thread is followed. In this sense, the general implications regarding to the combination of sensemaking perspective with communication is the relevance of interpersonal communication and most importantly the meaning produced in these interactions (van Vuuren and Elving, 2008). Thus, specifically when it comes to the analysis in theory and practice of handling meaning during change, research has interestingly attempted to show how sensemaking process unfolds in change situations.

In this sense, management field has produced quality knowledge about sensemaking and change processes with a growing interest despite the wide attention this perspective have received. An example of this is Guiette and Vandenbempt (2017) recent research where the authors have interestingly analysed how discourses are changed through micro-processes of sensemaking. The authors apply a sensemaking lense in order to unveil the formation of meanings as a consequence of management attempts to instill a change discourse from top-down in the hierarchy. This evidences the impact of employee communicative actions on change and organizational processes (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). Moreover, as a result of the sensemaking process, knowledge and information have been regarded as key elements in the game. Kuhn and Jackson (2009) produced a study with a sensemaking framework where they discussed processes of knowledge assuming that knowledge and information are triggers for sensemaking. This sets an arena where knowledge is negotiated in formal and informal ways creating a tension between actors (Timmerman, 2003). However, although information and knowledge flow in many directions, what is shared by individuals becomes active part of the sensemaking process. In this matter, interactions between different levels of management and other stakeholders —most importantly employees— shape internal processes and the evolution of change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). This brings the attention to the role of sensegivers which have been also approached in a similar way in a remarkable research about post mergers and acquisitions where the processes regarding to knowledge and interactions are covered applying a sensemaking perspective and showing how the sensemaking process unfolds around meanings of fairness (Moning et al., 2013).

Acknowledging the importance of meaning, the nowadays communication role of managers and leaders is not centered in information distribution but to act as "sense makers" (Heide et al., 2018) or sensegivers (Lewis, 2011). Hartge, Callahan, & King (2019) have recently demonstrated how leaders and managers behaviours have an effect upon subordinates during change situations, providing empirical prove of meaning creation without managerial, linear, and distribution approaches. Thus, other authors have interestingly addressed the role of change agents to canalize meaning relationship (Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012). This role, attributed to managers and leaders, has developed a broad approach to change processes with an important focus on leadership (Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & CaseBeer, 2017; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In this regard, it is worth to mention Kotter's (2012, 2007) contribution to the development of leadership within change. In addition to this, the

sensemaking established by line managers has also been highlighted as a framing way to enact sensemaking, dodging problems caused by hierarchical structures (van Vuuren and Elving, 2008). According to van Vuuren and Elving (2008), informal communication between employees and line managers creates communication loops, a phenomenon based on asymmetrical communication models where the employees provide feedback that may reach the top of the organization due to the message is carried through different levels of management starting at the bottom. These influences on meaning processes are also analysed by institutional theory approaches. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, (2005) regard the possibilities of combining sensemaking and institutional theory in order to alternatively address the limitations of each field when attempting to explain meaning processes.

The fact of that managers and leaders bear a key communication role in change processes becomes problematic when these actors are not prepared to carry out their communication responsibilities during change. In this matter, Guida (2013) concluded in her study about failure in IT implementations that the poor soft skills of implementers was one of the main cause that impede organizations to establish or complete successful change. In line with this argument, scholars within Strategic Communication have reflected upon the evolution of the communication professional role and they have suggested during the last decade that this is evolving towards positions that require the assumption and application of enabling, facilitating, and coaching duties (Volk et al., 2017; Zerfass & Franke, 2013). This is due to that in nowadays organizations, internal stakeholders such as coworkers have acquired, either voluntarily or involuntarily, communication responsibilities with effects on internal and external processes (Heide & Simonsson, 2011).

Apart from these attempts to document the development and adaptation of communication professional roles, literature that addresses communication professionals responsibilities and practices in processes of meaning studied from sensemaking perspectives are scarce. Even so, it has been identified that some nuances and clues towards the direction that these may evolve. Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) point out that communicators practitioners role within the complexity of Strategic Communication is to design processes and engage stakeholders in "the collaborative formation of the understanding and opinion of the organization" (p. 178). Similarly, as Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) put it, "the role of the practitioner is to send information that can act as the point of departure for meaning creation between a communicative entity and its stakeholders which can actually lead to social change and social

action" (p. 8). This is to engage in communicative processes to co-create and negotiate meaning. The different implications for practitioners described by research and what is actually happening in practice is problematic in Strategic Communication field. In this sense, Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) provide an example of how research differs from practice in the field of crisis communication which serves to document the problem of this paper.

Multidisciplinary and Varied Methods

As with the variety of studies of change and communication, there are many approaches from several disciplines applying different methodologies. Studies with quantitative methods within managerial and emergent approaches are found in great quantity (e. g. Heckmann, Steger, Dowling, 2016; Bel, et al., 2018). As seen before, these have commonly focused on implementation and implementers seeking to enhance performance and efficiency. Qualitative studies have contributed to explain processes reflecting about how this unfolds taken different perspectives and using varied methods (e. g. Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2017; Letiche and Eriksen, 2008; Lüscher, & Lewis, 2008). In the case of Sonenshein (2010) a narrative approach is taken showing the role of discourses in change. Similarly, qualitative interviews and ethnographic methods have been applied. Guiette and Vandenbempt (2017) study of the disruption of microprocesses of sensemaking in change situations was carried out through reflexive research methodology and involving the researcher into the project in order to enhance understanding and unveil underlying phenomenons. In lower extent but also progressively increasing in number and interest are researches applying mixed methodologies within organizational change (e. g. Burris et al., 2017; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012).

This review has covered themes in previous literature regarding organizational change, Strategic Communication, sensemaking, and the combination of all three with some nuances from institutional approaches. First of all, the most wide and common approaches to change and its definition have been touched upon highlighting a managerial perspective which has been commonly taken by the greatest contributors to the field. Secondly, acknowledging that organizational change is multidisciplinary and has been studied applying great variety of approaches, perspectives, and methods, this review has attempted to focus on an emergent approach to change as defined by Heide and Simonsson (2008) in order to cover the literature that is in line with the problem, aim, and framework of this research. Thus, this approach brings along the importance of communication for change due to its constitutive factor

(Cheney, et al. 2010; Weick, 1995). Once the key role of communication has been covered, the third point reviews the discussion that has taken and that is taking place within Strategic Communication field. Furthermore, the development and application of sensemaking to organizational change have been touched upon with emphasis on its communication aspects. Regarding to this last point, the application of this theoretical lens to change is wide and diverse, since it has been applied to many different types and change situations. However, its combination with other theories feeds the interest for new knowledge in order to observe how academy is able to explain real world life through sensemaking together with other lenses.

Theory

This chapter starts with the need of CCO as a metatheory to approach nowadays organization settings. This sets the arena to explain the assumptions made about the functioning of social world and organizations which are embedded in the understanding of communication as a process, sensemaking perspective, and institutional theory. These three approaches rely on CCO foundations and serve the researcher to find explanations to the aim and problem presented.

In the attempt to explore intricacies and conflicting situations that communication professionals face in nowadays organizations during change, the metatheory that provides an explanation to the social world we live in has its foundations on Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) (Heide et al., 2018, van Ruler, 2018). CCO provides ontological and epistemological standpoints from which the rest of the used theoretical perspectives depart. It guides the development of understanding communication as a process due to it assumes the holistic characteristic of communication embedded in all the dimensions and actors of the organization and its existence (Heide et al., 2018). Likewise, sensemaking is aligned with these standpoints and assumptions which are considered during the application of this perspective to analyse meaning processes.

Resolving Tensions in a Complex Social World

The world is immersed in intricate complexity spread around all areas of life. Given this complexity, observation and analysis of realities is always hard to attain (Van de Ven, 2007). As a consequence, a complex approach is needed to attempt to understand phenomenons related to Strategic Communication in organizations. Strategic Communication have been traditionally regarded as a multidisciplinary discipline driven to fulfill the organizations mission (Hallahan, 2007). However, nowadays this approach do not allow the observation of the aforementioned organization realities. Notwithstanding this, the discussion within

Strategic Communication is problematic due to the purpose of the discipline has a managerial aim, as it can be interpreted from the term strategic. This frames communication in a view in which rational and functional nuances are assumed due to the involvement of planning actions according to managerial and organizational elements such as goals (van Ruler, 2018).

Nevertheless, the emergent view towards strategy argues that communication becomes an essential part of the organization body (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008). As Heide et al. (2018) discuss, strategy is understood as a "communicative practice" (p. 20) carried out in all areas and levels of the organization which is "continuously created and reproduced" (p. 20). In this sense, it is assumed that communication influences listening and learning processes in which strategy is shaped, reframed, and reorganized (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). Thus, communication is placed at the core of the organization since it brings value to all its spheres. It is present in primary activities such as operations and sales, but also supporting resources such as human resources or technology (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). This evidences that communication role and influence is beyond the scope of functionalist and rational approaches. Therefore, it is not a tool serving top management to convey messages throughout the organization and its stakeholders.

Thus, the communication established in organizations could be studied applying different models developed in theory and practice. Traditional models focus on the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver. This asymmetrical way of communication is characterized by its linearity (Heide et al., 2018; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). Communication is enacted in one way direction which leaves the receiver powerless in front of the the sender. As a consequence, the receiver's interpretation is not observed in these models. Thereby, the oversimplification of communication within organization leads to overlook the complexity of communication processes. In order to understand how communication works, these traditional models have evolved towards symmetrical and circular ones, challenging the validity of linear versions. This is due to that the receiver voice is taken into account and audiences are recognized as active stakeholders in the process (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016). Receiver's interpretations and reactions are considered as inputs that modify and influence the message. Thus, communication is understood as a loop where the message travels in two directions when receivers voice is taken into account and there is space for meaning processes to take place through sensemaking.

In this regard, the journey that the message follows goes through different stages since the sender encodes the message until the receiver decodes it providing new meanings (Guldbrandsen and Just, 2016). This creates frameworks of knowledge that are transmitted through 'relations of production' between the audience and the sender. This complex process embraces the influence of active audiences and environments in the process of communication (Guldbrandsen and Just, 2016). These models imply that communication can not be analysed by only observing "independent facts" (p. 166), it is the overall process what must be considered due to meaning "is not transmitted from sender to receiver, it is actively created by both the communicator in the process of producing the message and by the audience in the process of interpreting it" (Guldbrandsen and Just, 2016, p. 166).

Guldbrandsen and Just (2016) introduce three patterns of reception. First, dominant patterns are regarded as those that follow the meaning intention of the senders. In this sense, the audience engages in the process of decoding the message accepting the given meaning. Second, audiences may enact an oppositional pattern of reception by adding contrary meanings to those encoded by the senders. Third, the authors present the negotiation pattern where audiences acknowledge the sender's meanings and provide their own ones through the decoding process. This is seen as a negotiation of interpretations resulted from the symmetrical interaction in which both senders and receivers have engaged. Taken into account the discussed theoretical framework and approach to communication and Strategic Communication, this understanding implies the assumption of negotiation patterns which reproduce the co-creation and negotiation of meaning among all stakeholders as the factor that guides the process of communication in nowadays complex organizations. Specifically, this is important for this research due to it sets the conditions of realities that communication professionals face in their work during organizational change.

Communication as a Process

Acknowledging that communication and its role within organizations is a complex matter, Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) lead the discussion towards evaluating the functions and value of communicative acts in an attempt to determine the influence of communication on the organization and its actors. In this regard, the authors identify three types of speeches: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Whereas the first focuses on the surface meaning, the second refers to what "the utterance does in and through the uttering" (p. 170),

and the third observes effects after utterance reception. When looking at the process of communication, this may be regarded as illocutionary which allows the observation of the complex interaction. In this case, the authors emphasize the performative value of communicative acts which do not only describe reality, besides that it is assumed that these have an effect on it. Thus, the performative value of communication shapes and enables the creation of new realities through interaction (Heide et al., 2018; Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016).

Furthermore, communicative acts also have other type of function upon which the foundations of this theoretical approach is based. This is the constitutive power of communication. Heide et al. (2018) have taken a holistic approach towards communication which embraces the heterogeneity and complexity instilled by the active participation of all stakeholders and environments in the process of communication. The authors argue that "organization's capacity to communicate strategically is constituted by a multitude of subprocesses that take place between coworkers, managers, senior management, and external stakeholders on a daily basis" (p. 463). This statement leads to the main argument of this approach which assumes that these interactions are regarded "not only as important in themselves, but also as constitutive of an organizations' strategic communication and overall performance" (p. 463).

Acknowledging that Strategic Communication is regarded as a transversal element of organizations, it can help to attain organization's mission in different ways (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Thus, what is expected from communication must be reframed according to its nature as a process taking place throughout the whole organization. Therefore, this is addressed as the value that Strategic Communication is capable to produce within such complex scenarios (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Regarding to this matter, an emergent framework is needed in order to embrace the described assumptions implied in this approach to communication in organizations. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) propose the communication value circle that takes into account several values grouped in four areas that consider intangible assets produced by the complex process of communication. These categories address challenges such as building intangibles, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting strategy that shape strategic and operational communication roles together with different types of contributions to the business (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017; Volk et al., 2017). It is important to acknowledge such approach developed by scholars when observing the adaptation of communication professional roles and practices to nowadays organizational settings and their theoretical implications here described.

In addition, before digging into sensemaking to understand the role of communication during meaning processes, it is important to note that despite assuming that meaning is co-created and negotiated in communication processes, the complexity of such processes hides the struggles for meaning formation. Guldbrandsen and Just (2016) acknowledge that although meaning creation is collaborative "it is not symmetrical, evenly distributed, mutually engaged or consensus oriented" (p. 176). Even if it may seem contradictory, this theoretical approach recognizes the power of communication as a process of "mutual engagement" (p. 176) where all the actors attempt to find agreement through the hostile endeavour of conflicting arguments and interpretations (Guldbrandsen & Just, 2016). It is this conflict what triggers meaning creation through sensemaking processes.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking is a natural lens to study organizational change due to the development of this phenomenon and the way this theoretical approach explains how individuals and organizations make sense of issues and challenges presented in different situations. As Van Vuuren and Elvin (2008) put it, "the active interpretation of a certain reality helps to make sense of a situation one encounters. This is especially relevant in the context of organizational change as a previously fixed and framed reality has to be transformed" (p. 354). Thus, this paper fully embraces sensemaking theory as a lens to look at how communication professionals adapt their roles to organizational complexity, change situations, and the meaning processes taking place in such scenarios. Weick's (1995) argumentations about sensemaking are the basis of the approach used in this research. Among the several applications and approaches of this theory, this paper mostly relies on retrospective sensemaking characterized by its high equivocality.

In order to attain the purpose and problem of this research it is important to have a theoretical reflection about natural sensemaking tensions such as ambiguity versus uncertainty, discovering versus creating, and interpreting versus making sense. These discussions shape the theoretical framework applied to explain practice and enhance academic knowledge. In addition to this, it is important to highlight that sensemaking is understood as a socially constructed process with a clear ontological foundation on constructivism. This implies the acknowledgement of different and shared realities. As Weick (1995) further explains, "to talk

about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations". Sensemaking is then a lens to look at the way these realities are formed and how these are shared or confronted between each other. Thereby, it sheds light into the meaning process in which communication is a key element.

The main characteristics of sensemaking covered in this research are the retrospective essence, the importance of actions, and the high equivocality. The process of sensemaking can be divided in three stages of enactment, selection, and enhancement about which there will be given more insights in the following sections (Weick et al. 2005). This model serves to explain the importance of these characteristics. Regarding to the main foundation that is the retrospective essence, it is assumed that the whole process has a strong reliance on the past. This means that individuals fulfill their knowledge and practice enhancement by looking at their actions once these have been completed. As a result of this, action becomes another essential pillar in which sensemaking is based. When action takes place during the enactment stage, individuals interact with the interruption that triggered the whole process, this leads to the selection process where information flows, interactions, and any kind of input is used to create meaning and make sense of situations. It is in this stage where individuals must deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. Acknowledging the framework in which this research is established, equivocality has a lot of importance on the discussion among this element due to assumptions that communication as a process entails. Thus, one of the problems practitioners face resides in the great variety of inputs that influence meaning which is a consequence of equivocality. Once the selection process has been undertaken, all the elements needed to support meaning formation are set in place for the enhancement stage in which the whole past experience is stored. This serves for making sense of what happened after the action was taken and how future processes will be approached.

The Process of Sensemaking

One of the most common change models is the one that follows the sequence of unfreezing, changing, and freezing first introduced by Lewin (1951). When looking at this model and the development of sensemaking processes, it is clearly observed that both unfold following the same pattern. In order for sensemaking to be triggered, there must be an interruption of current statuses, realities shaped by routines, common understandings, and established assump-

tions which are related to the unfreezing stage. When a change is produced in the environment, the interruption functions as a way to create awareness through which individuals and groups start a process of sensemaking in order to understand the new situation, adapt, and act accordingly. As Weick (1995) states, these interruptions are enabled through "occasions for sensemaking" which are first created before they become a platform for further construction of meaning (Weick, 1995, p. 85).

Once an interruption takes place, individuals encounter themselves in a state of ignorance which they try to solve engaging in different processes. Ignorance after the interruption is solved with cues of meaning that help to initiate and drive relation between different elements that lead to meaning creation through the sensemaking process. Extracted cues of meaning can act as a point of reference for sensemaking which assist this process by enabling the relation between a specific observation caused by the interruption and a familiar general idea (Weick, 1995). According to Weick, "the abstract and the concrete inform and construct one another" (p. 51). This informs the challenge of linking the abstract levels of novelty that change brings along with a more concrete already formed idea.

As an example of this process, the author argues about the formation of problems in "real-world practice". Acknowledging the intricacy that characterizes the co-creation of different realities within organizations, when practitioners must face problems these are not attained as if they already exist 'out there', beyond individual scope of reality. Instead, as the complexity when constructing realities, these also must be "constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain" (Schön, 2002, p. 40). Therefore, individuals undertake a process of construction assembling several challenging elements presented in different situations in an attempt to create accessible problems that can be further attained. Thus, in this endeavor, individuals need to resolve sensemaking processes for new and challenging situations that do not make sense for them, and a key factor to clear this is assumed to be action.

Regarding to this matter, action is been known as one of the key factors that drives sensemaking. The different phases and stages individuals go through are highly determined by action. The most common definition and explanation of sensemaking is that of learning by doing. This is a simple and narrowed way to picture the essence of this theoretical lens. On top of that, there are intricate theoretical explanations attempting to untangle how meaning is created

and realities constructed. As it has already been showed, the enactment stage is characterized by the start of the action, which will "generate tangible outcomes", also named cues of meaning, which assist in the discovering and creating process of situations (Weick, 1995, p. 55).

Tensions about The Nature of Sensemaking

Scholars within sensemaking theory have developed several approaches and perspectives opening an enlivened discussion about core concepts. Weick (1995) addresses the debate about defining sensemaning as a process of discovery or invention. This argumentation is key in order to apply this theoretical framework since it may even slightly affect its ontological standpoint. The author argues that, on one hand individuals create the sensation that drives the process which is implicit in the word sense. On the other hand, it is noted that this sensation must come from existing elements out there which are already created. Whereas the first approach highlights the invention side of sensemaking, the second stands for a view that sees it as a discovery process. This influences ontological assumptions regarding to the existence of one 'out there' reality and several shared and conflicting realities co-constructed by individuals.

The already discussed complexity within organizations and the constitutive importance of communication regarding the existence of it is also shared by sensemaking perspective. Therefore, following the line of this research, acknowledging the influence that everyone in the organization have, this paper embraces Weick's (1995) view in which invention prevails on discovery. Weick (1995) rejects those views that approach social construction as the interpretation or reading of texts due to that would imply the assumption of that meaning already exists out there waiting to be discovered. As a result of this, the author takes one step further and drives the discussion towards a more abstract level where the implication of understanding communication as a process is acknowledged when assuming that meaning "awaits construction that might not happen or might go awry" (Weick, 1995, p. 15) and recognizes the intricate meaning processes through interactions between all the actors, layers, and environments of the organization by accepting that unities of meaning are "untenable when there are subuniverses of meaning" (Weick, 1995, p. 15).

Similar to this discussion, a more transcendental tension is the one of interpretation and sensemaking. The way individuals understand, act, and react to interruptions in their realities

at the organization can be analysed by two processes that seem identical but have important theoretical nuances which influence the whole framework depending on which one is chosen to further develop and apply in real world life. Although sensemaking processes can be explained by using the interpretation concept, the act of interpreting overlooks key factors in the meaning process that sensemaking addresses. In this sense, sensemaking takes into account the invention elements in which individuals are actively engaged influencing the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), which is in line with one of the theoretical assumptions of this research that is the high influence that all stakeholders have on organizational processes through communication. Thus, Weick (1995) argues that "sensemaking seems to address incipient puzzles at an earlier, more tentative stage than it does interpretation" (p. 14). Such standpoint implies an initial questioning about the situation at hand which leads the sensemaking process through a continuously changing process of construction (Weick, 1995). Conversely, interpretation takes for granted that there is an existing and evident object 'out there' waiting to be interpreted. Hence, acknowledging that this approach suits the previous theoretical framework set by Strategic Communication theory and with the aforementioned prevalence of invention upon discovery, this research embraces this nuanced sensemaking perspective.

When individuals find themselves in the aforementioned ignorance state that follows interruption, two elements with opposed implications that must be dealt are encountered, these are ambiguity and uncertainty. Thus, sensemaking processes may unfold in different ways in order to resolve these challenges. The argumentation about this theme is rooted in the discussion of the nature of sensemaking and the different perspectives in which these are treated. In this sense, the tensions between ambiguity and uncertainty are closely related to the conflict between creating and discovering meaning. On one hand, uncertainty may be solved enhancing flows of information mainly in terms on quantity. This is supposed to help individuals to create their own realities and discover those that are 'out there'. On the other hand, ambiguity emphasizes the variety of conflicting elements that may further lead to cues of meaning. In this case, individuals face untangled situations with high equivocality that need a more complex approach to progress in meaning creation process. In this sense, face-to-face interaction becomes key in order to provide information that facilitates the aforementioned cues of meaning that will lead to the creation of meanings and new realities (Weick, 1995). Communication comes into play at this point when approaching sensemaking in different ways acknowledging these theoretical implications. As Weick (1995) states, "the problem is

that there are too many meanings, not too few. The problem faced by sensemaker is one of equivocality, not one of uncertainty. The problem is confusion, not ignorance" (p. 27-28). This approach goes in line with the theoretical understanding of communication and Strategic Communication as process where dialogue and participation prevail on transmission.

Managing Sensemaking

Acknowledging that such organizational complexity is difficult to handle, taking into consideration all the untangled characteristics that the theoretical framework chosen implies, it may seem that practitioners are powerless in front of such scenario. However, it is still possible to discuss about the role of communication professionals on sensemaking processes during change situations. As Guldbrandsen and Just (2016) note, if communication practitioners have any chance to develop an impactful role on communication processes, it is through approaches that cover the unfolding of meaning. Thus, since the paper fully relies on this theoretical framework, the purpose is far from managerial perspectives. Although real world life is hard to attain and manage, the are open windows for influencing sensemaking. In this sense, Weick (1995) notes about this endeavour that "to engage in sensemaking is to construct, filter, frame, create facility (Turner, 1987), and render the subjective into something more tangible" (p. 14). Hence, the way communication professionals may influence realities is by applying practices that fall into this line of management.

This approach implies the assumption of that individuals rely on given elements that initiate the creation of meanings and/or assist during its process. Weick (1995) widely explains the forms in which these elements can be presented. Traditions, stories, or values are some of the frameworks that can help to develop sensemaking. One of the commonalities that these factors have is the high influence of already lived experiences. Thus, the retrospective process of resorting to past moments and finding a connection with the present helps to understand current situations (Weick, 1995). The theoretical explanation behind this process argues that the synthesization of many different meanings is done through the mentioned frames "within which cues are noticed, extracted, and made sensible" (Weick, 1995, p. 109). Such process unfolds in the selection stage of sensemaking where individuals engage in processes of identifying, categorizing, and selecting information from which meanings can then evolve in the attempt of making sense of a certain situation. In this sense, as Weick (1995) puts it "frames tend to be past moments of socialization and cues tend to be present moments of

experience. If a person can construct a relation between these two moments, meaning is created" (p. 111). Thus, frames carry key content based on past experiences to which individuals relate cues extracted from present situations looking for the connection that help them to progress in the process of sensemaking.

When digging into the form of these frames, it is interesting for this research to cover the theoretical process in which traditions and stories influence sensemaking. Regarding to the former, according to Weick (1995) these are created by "individuals, groups, and organizations that work hard at articulating their evanescent actions" (p. 130). This takes place when actions, norms, and structures become normalized and embedded in the organizational constructs such as culture in form of traditions. Thus, traditions are constructions that contain sensitive content for sensemaking based on "the patterns which guide actions, the ends sought, the conceptions of appropriate and effective means to attain those ends, the structures which result from and are maintained by those actions" (Shils, 1981, as cited in Weick, 1995, p. 25). Similarly, stories are one of the most common frames that also become cues of meaning when told in situations where individuals deal with information of different kind influencing the many existing meaning processes (Weick, 1995). Acknowledging the power and feasibility of stories, it is observed that these have the intrinsic quality of working as both cues within frames where these are addressed as the content, and whole frames by themselves (Weick, 1995).

Regarding to the content of frames, this can be characterized by having an explanatory and/or descriptive function. Descriptive frames provide biased and one sided view of realities which overlook the many possibilities at hand and hinder the independent creation of meanings. Conversely, explanations help to the whole purpose of sensemaking by providing sense on the aforementioned process of connecting past experiences with new cues of meaning (Weick, 1995). Explanations open different ways of understanding situations and engage individuals in a constructive process in which they are able to pick elements from the explanation in order to make sense of situations independently. Besides this dichotomy, sensemaking in organizations takes place in conflicting argumentations among individuals, in discussions where "divergent, antagonistic, imbalanced forces are woven throughout acts of sensemaking" (Weick, 1995, p. 136). When facing practice, it is important to acknowledge the potential of opposing points of view displayed in situations of conflict and argumentations for sensemaking process as the theory propose.

Institutional Theory as an Alternative View

Sensemaking and the theoretical foundations of communication understood as a process are not enough to build knowledge regarding to the problem presented in this research. The struggles of communication professionals to assume the theoretical stances and act accordingly in practice need of an alternative theoretical explanation to enhance the understanding of the phenomena at hand. Thus, this paper relies on institutional theory with emphasis on neo-institutional approaches to find enhanced explanations.

The sensemaking approach taken in this project focuses on individual processes. In this sense, neo-institutionalists embrace a social constructivist perspective that combine the assumption of macro regulatory forces with an acknowledgement of the active role organizations and their actors in institutionalization processes (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). However, Institutional theory highlights that applying a narrow lens to individual dimensions of meaning, the influence of wider social processes might be overlooked (Weick et al., 2005). In this sense, institutionalists take into account broader sources of influence in form of norms, cognitive assumptions, and other constructs that guide behaviours through sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). These structural elements are institutions that impact the functioning of organizations and its members. According to Scott (2008) "institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (as cited in Frandsen & Johansen, 2013, p. 208). The way these institutions instill meaning cannot be understood without communication. In this matter, neo-institutional theory has been recently applied within Strategic Communication discipline and Public Relations field. Thus, communications activities enable the apparition of institutions through social construction or imposition (Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013).

Similarly to sensemaking, two of the communication activities through which institutions are created or imposed are frames and translation (Fredriksson et al., 2013). In the case of frames, neo-institutional theory alternatively explains the effects of these elements that are key in sensemaking processes. Besides, another way institutions are transmitted is by translation. This takes place when an idea that is aimed to be legitimated and institutionalized in an organization or a part thereof is translated to the terms in which members of another context will better understand. This adaptation is in line with the theoretical preconceptions of

Strategic Communication and communication as a process since it acknowledges the importance of co-creation at all levels through communicative acts. When individuals engage in such communication activities they are exposed to become participants in institutionalization processes. This phenomenon is defined as institutional work, a concept that refers to the active role of individuals in processes were institutions are aimed to create, maintain, or disrupt insitutitions that influence organizational legitimacy (Fredriksson et al., 2013). In the case of change, frames and translation can act as communicative ways in which institutionalization elements such as institutional work is influenced in order to disrupt existing institutions that constrain change.

This chapter has covered the metatheory that guides the theoretical framework and the perspectives taken by this research. CCO provides assumptions for understanding nowadays social world and organizations. These implications are further developed by communication as a process and emergent perspectives of Strategic Communication. The main assumptions are that 1) transmission models of communication do not attain nowadays organizational settings, 2) every stakeholder in the organization has an active role and important impact in processes such as change, which leads to the 3) co-creation and negotiation of meanings through sensemaking. Besides, in order to overcome the limitations of sensemaking explanations to the role of communication professionals during change, institutional theory emphasizes the important influence of institutions and wider structures.

Methodology and Research Design

This chapter begins with an introduction to the overall research approach guided by engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) which leads to adopt an iterative abductive position. After the general implications are stated, it is necessary to reflect on the philosophical standpoints to expose ontological assumptions taken by the study and argue about the epistemology that drives the methodology. Thus, methods to gather and analyse empirical data are further explained which are qualitative interviews to communication professionals analysed applying constructivist grounded practices.

This research project has been crafted following throughout its whole development the principles of engaged scholarship stated by Van de Ven (2007) with the main intention of creating knowledge that is interesting for both academy and practice. Van de Ven (2007) stands for a participative research approach where many different stakeholders bring varied perspectives to the endeavour of studying "complex problems" (p. 9). The application of different types of knowledge enriches the overall research process producing better outcomes than if the problem was attained alone by the researcher (Van de Ven, 2007). Thus, conversations with practitioners have been established in order to find relevant problems and approaches within the field of change communication during the different stages of the study. Likewise, advice from scholars has been essential to narrow the research to the problem at hand. This active intent of this research to observe the world and its anomalies led the project to take an abductive approach.

Van de Ven (2007) recommends that the process must be iterative so the researcher can go back and forth from different stages such as from going back to problem formulation or theory after gathering data in order to shape and adapt the research to fulfill its purpose. Thereby, an iterative abductive approach guided the research since it allows to take on theoretical assumptions keeping an open mind to consider alternative theories, perspectives, problems, and interpretations that may arise throughout the research process. It is

acknowledged that researchers have preconceived ideas and that observations and interpretations are theory-laden (O'Reilly, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007). Hence, the research started from the theoretical standpoint of communication as a process and sensemaking with their ontological and philosophical assumptions in order to explore issues within communication professionals role during change. Thus, the study begun with a wide problematization that was narrowed down to a specific issue encountered once the empirical data was gathered. Then, keeping an open mind when approaching the data helped to spot alternative theoretical explanations to enhance the understanding of the problem and fulfill the purpose of the research.

Interpretivism Traditions and Subtraditions

This study falls into the interpretive tradition and shares ontology and epistemology with several of its subtraditions. The paper relies on the constructivism ontological standpoint which assumes that realities are co-constructed by individuals but also acknowledges that there are underlying structures that mediate the creation of meaning through interactions (Prasad, 2018; O'Reilly, 2012). Interpretivism is a wide field where many philosophical discussions have led the development of different perspectives and assumptions about the nature of reality and the way knowledge can be created (Fay, 1996; Prasad, 2018). This research finds its philosophical foundations in the common ground that the variety of interpretive understandings shares. It relies on the importance that social factors have on the process of reality construction, a fact that has developed perspectives focusing on how social dimensions influence individuals mediating agreements that create taken for granted realities (Prasad, 2018). Furthermore, another assumption is the active role of individuals in this social world that focuses on the individual impact and the singular process of understanding and creating realities (O'Reilly, 2012). Although these two interpretive assumptions have different implications in terms of epistemology —the first one attempts to explain social world by looking at the groups whereas the second focuses on individuals— both build the philosophical foundations in which this research relies on. In this sense, Prasad (2018) resumes these two approaches by stating that "even while we are individually engaged in acts of sense making, these acts are significantly mediated by the cognitive schema and language that we obtain from our wider societies" (p. 14). This implies that whereas individuals have an active role and thereby there are different interpretations of reality, social interaction produces

the tendency to drive individuals to embrace those realities that are commonly shared (Prasad, 2018).

Sensemaking relies on an approach to understand social world by looking at the individual process of reality formation. Acknowledging this, the research leans towards an epistemology that attempts to unveil individuals processes of meaning through sensemaking processes. Thereby, one of the interpretive subtraditions which assumptions may support this endeavour is symbolic interactionism. It is important to mention that the research is fully committed to its iterative abductive process, so the study do not pursue or take for granted all elements of this perspective in order to keep the discussion open to other perspectives. Symbolic interactionism mostly helps to emphasize and articulate the social constructivism pillar of this research. Regarding to this, as Prasad (2018) argues, scholars within this subtradition embrace and adapt interpretivism in order "to show how realities are negotiated out of the multiple social constructions in any situation" (p. 17). Thus, the purposes of this research and scholars position within this subtradition is shared in its main ontological and epistemological standpoints.

This research attempts to provide understanding about the social world by observing the role of communication professionals in the construction of meaning through interaction between individuals. This is shared by symbolic interactionism subtradition which understands that "all social phenomena are symbolic —that is, objects, events, and actions always hold meanings for different individuals" (Prasad, 2018, p. 21). Thus, organizational elements such as technology, culture, rituals, or structures come into existence through the interpretation when individuals make sense of them (Cheney et al., 2010; Prasad, 2018). Acknowledging this, it is necessary to inquiry about ways in which communication professionals guide interpretation processes in organizations directed to employees, regarded as individuals, who make sense of situations establishing meaning to organizational objects during change. Besides this, regarding to the inquiries on the process of sensemaking, symbolic interactionism is closely related to the process of identity formation of individuals. One of the reflections that Prasad (2018) brings in her review of this perspective is Mead's argument about the role of self images in meaning process. It is argued that the action of observing oneself in certain situations is "key to understanding the process of sense making and reality construction" (Prasad, 2018, p. 20). Thereby, acknowledging this, it is important to inquiry

about the way in which communication professionals see themselves, their role, and their profession during change situations.

Space for Contradiction and Confluence of Perspectives

The existence of multiple realities is a philosophical and theoretical foundation of this research. However, due to the iterative approach of this study, when diving into organization complexity through the interaction with the participants, the fact of being open to different perspectives opened the discussion about addressing an existing reality that is 'out there'. The reflection on this may harm the ontological standpoint since it conflicts the constructivist foundation based on co-creation. However, when analysing the data it was observed that an 'out there' reality was constantly referred to by the participants which could explain certain phenomena. When encountering this situation, the researcher has the risk of falling into contradicting standpoints.

However, according to Van de Ven (2007) "robust knowledge is a product of theoretical and methodological triangulation where evidence is not necessarily convergent but might also be inconsistent or even contradictory" (p. 38). Besides, it is assumed that when we attempt to understand "complex reality", multiple perspectives are needed which is often a result in abductive inferences (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 38). Regarding to this matter, it must be added that Weick (1995) recognizes the polyvalence of sensemaking which can be applied and combined with different theoretical ways to observe and explain organization constructs. Besides, social constructivism is neither a closed philosophical standpoint and it does not deny the possibility of an existing 'out there' reality (Czarniawska, 2003). In fact, when individual realities are merged through interaction a common ground of meanings is formed around multiple realities (Prasad, 2018).

Selection of Participants

The selection of participants followed two criterias in order to align the research with the theoretical approach towards Strategic Communication in theory and practice. In order to seek consistency throughout the research, it was needed to have cases of study within the same framework. Thereby, there were two requirements. On one hand, the practitioner interviewed had to have a communication background and a communication role. Applying this requirement, other professionals such as change managers, human resources specialists,

project managers were disregarded. Even if these could provide valuable insight about communication and change, the aim of the research is to explore the role of communication professionals and not the communication alone. On the other hand, the second requirement was to select communication professionals who have applied or currently apply practices that require high participation and dialogue among internal stakeholders. In addition to this, in-house practitioners were prioritized over external consultants due to the dynamics these different roles are exposed to.

This criteria allows to select participants whose practices can be analysed with the theoretical perspective taken by this research. Hence, the participants were selected in two ways. First, through scholars and other practitioners recommendations who were aware of the purpose of the research and had an enhanced understanding of the framework and approach proposed. Second, reaching out by LinkedIn or email through searches that include keywords such as communication and change in the job title, abstract, summary, or job experience descriptions. After scrapping the candidates profile information it was determined whether the experiences could fit the research or not and the candidates were sent a contact request adding a written note with a short presentation, introduction of the research, and invitation to participate. Those who responded were further informed by sending them a one page document with a more elaborated topic, aim, and purpose about the project and some were asked preliminar questions about their experiences to ensure they qualified. Short calls were eventually carried out too. Once this was done, day and time for the interview was set. The majority of the interviews were carried out by videoconference for practical reasons except two of them that were done in person. Although several limitations and particularities were acknowledged (Seitz, 2015), the difference in the outcomes of the interviews carried out physically and online where minimum or inexistent.

The final sample of qualified and keen to participate candidates reached a number of 24, excluding those who were contacted but either there was a negative response to participate or there was not any answer. Thus, after some candidate dropouts and time impossibility to set and carry out the interview, the final list of participants was 15 communication professionals which was the objective set for this research. These 15 participants were communication professionals currently involved in change projects in their organization and with past experiences in the same or other organizations. Since the research was framed in Europe, participants job experience was developed in Europe. The countries where these experiences

have taken place are Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom. Regarding the organizations, all of them are among the leaders in their sector, operating in several european countries and most of them are multinationals with global presence. The amount of employees within these companies ranges from 6,000 to 140,000 people.

Qualitative Interviews

Semi structured qualitative interviews were chosen as method to gather data since it opens access to descriptions of the world and the phenomena that are aimed to explore (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This research attempts to dig into the functioning of subjective dimensions in which different realities interact. Hence, direct interaction through interviews is necessary to overcome time boundaries and limitations when exploring individuals experiences in order to "reach areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible such as people's subjective experiences and attitudes" (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018, p. 1163).

The interviews covered different themes extracted from previous literature which could instill reflections from which interpretations of the issue at hand could be drawn during the analysis. Thus, these were divided in different parts. A common thread was followed during the interviews which was related to the specific role of communication professionals. This was achieved by driving the interviewee from their general reflections to their individual take on the issue, asking for examples of real situations, actions they took, and reactions experienced by themselves and by others. Thus, since the topic focuses on the role of communication professionals, in the first part of the interview questions referring to the individual role and background of each interviewee were asked. It was important to dig into individual perspectives, backgrounds, ways to talk about their job and tasks they develop. This is due this may affect their vision on how they describe the issue at hand (Filby and Willmott, 1988). The sections covered attempted to dig into how the change projects unfold, what is the impact of communication professionals, and how practitioners and organizations engage and listen to employees. This allowed to have enhanced information on the tasks that communication professionals perform. Furthermore, it showed the extent practitioners embrace theoretical assumptions of organizational settings.

Regarding to the number of qualitative interviews, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) state that it is common that studies of this kind present between 10 and 15 interviews. It is acknowledged that in qualitative studies this matter is relative and it will always depend on the research effort to gain understanding of the issue presented (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Thereby, taking into account that this paper is framed in a Strategic Communication perspective and approached with a specific theoretical framework, it is assumed that this filters the heterogeneity of reality and only takes into account participants from practices that fall within this framework. Thereby, a small amount of cases is still representative and allows to approach the problem and aim of the research in similar terms. In the same way, the always present variety and complexity of unique and constructed different realities gives enough differences to challenge oversimplifications and overgeneralizations.

According to O'Reilly (2012) ethical guidelines, disclosure of names was discussed with participants and supervisor. As a result, it was taken a decision to give participants full anonymity. Thereby, the names of the participants and organizations are not shown due to unique practices and projects are described in the interviews and touched upon in this paper which would hazard their projects, businesses, and hinder their contribution to this research. Before the interviews, their consent was given to record the interviews and to use the data for this academic purpose.

Coding and Analysis

The method of analysis is influenced by a constructivist approach from grounded theory. The analysis of the empirical data gathered has emphasized reflection on findings and on the theoretical foundations and perspectives taken. This reflectivity involved a back and forth iteration from theory to empirical data. The fact that data is constantly questioned is due to that it represents the complexity of social world and its anomalies (Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2018). This reflective analysis was materialized by applying a coding strategy mainly based in two stages, although a flexible approach was maintained. First, the transcribed interviews were coded with broad tags of categories. Second, theoretical connections were added to the categories in the classified events and facts the interviewees narrated. The flexibility allowed to go back to the data several times to check arising issues and findings in order to provide an enhanced explanation to the issue at hand which led to the introduction of an alternative theory. The main categories were transmission practices, negotiation practices,

mixed approaches, participation, and listening/feedback. Theoretical notes were added under this categorizations in order to find suitable explanations. The flexible tagging allowed to highlight interesting phenomena that fall in more than one category.

This epistemological approach implies participatory effects from the researcher in the findings (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). Intersubjectivity is an element involved throughout the whole research process and navigates inadvertently with the researcher when reviewing and selecting previous studies and existing theories, when interacting with participants during the data collection stage, when analysing, and when creating new knowledge from the research conclusions (Van de Ven, 2007). This is accepted as an unavoidable fact of the complex social world we live in where realities are constantly co-constructed by individuals interacting between each other, the contexts, and environments that surround us.

This chapter has carried out a philosophical discussion to argument the chosen methodology addresssing ontological and epistemological standpoints and the used methods. Qualitative interviews to 15 practitioners have provided the data which has been further analysed performing a reflective analysis influenced by constructivist grounded theory.

Analysis

Communication professionals strive to adapt their role to the change projects they are facing within a common and widely shared complex organizational setting. The way these roles develop depend on the organizations and its intricacies. However, all the interviewed practitioners face similar challenges and observe an evolution towards facilitation roles where advising becomes a core responsibility (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). The way this responsibility is articulated shows the tension between transmission and process models of communication and an adaptation to nowadays complex environments. This chapter analyses different practices with a sensemaking lense in order to observe adaptation of the role of communication professionals during meaning processes in change situations. Moreover, it deeply explores the role evolution and its implications. Ultimately, it focuses on tackling the problem of the research providing explanations based on an analysis of roles and practices applying an institutionalism lens.

Communication Practices

The practices carried out by communication professionals during change are varied but follow similar trends. These have been categorized in three sections according to the extent in which is interpreted that these allow space for negotiation and co-creation since both are main implications of organizational settings as described in the theoretical framework. Although many interesting activities were discussed in the 15 interviews, the ones analysed here are those that better represent the problem and phenomena at hand which analysis can increase knowledge on this issue.

Practices with Inexistent Negotiation

The procedure to select participants allowed to have only those who apply practices which may fall into the theoretical framework embraced, that is practices that require high participation and dialogue where everyone among the stakeholders are taken into account and

their input has an effect on meaning co-creation and negotiation. The problem that this research attempts to tackle is that practitioners struggle to develop practices fully aligned with theoretical assumptions developed by academy. Thus, it has been noted that part of the interviewees still perform practices that can be better explained by traditional models of communication, breaking with assumptions on how academy sees the world from emergent perspectives that attempt to explain complexity. This section will give an overview analysis of these practices and will argue about how these contradict the emergent approach to Strategic Communication and its theoretical views of organizations' social world.

Communication practitioners have explained that they spend big part of their time in tasks such as writing content for the intranet, scripting and making videos, making tutorials, writing newsletters, writing executive communications, preparing and carrying out podcasts, writing questions and answers (Q&A) documents, outlining presentations, and writing guidelines. When analysing these communication practices from Strategic Communication perspective, the tension reviewed in this paper arises again. Managerial approaches of Strategic Communication are the ones that better explain the aforementioned compilation of practices since communication is used in an instrumental and formal way to achieve the organization's missions (Hallahan et al., 2007). Nuances within complex organizational settings are disregarded due to the influence of different stakeholders and emergent strategies and needs are overlooked (Zerfass et al., 2018). Furthermore, the importance of interaction that influences the creation of meaning is not considered (Guldbrandsen and Just, 2016; Prasad, 2018).

In the best scenarios, practitioners justify the use of this type of communications as being necessary due to these serve as a starting point to develop further conversations where meanings can be co-created throughout the organization.

> *Videos and articles should not be used as passive tools. I think that when it comes to communication it's not only the product based of formal communication that we want to put out there: the movies, the videos, the articles... It's also about encouraging people to have these conversations locally. That's what really matters.*

This attempt to provide understanding constrains the creation of meaning. The audiences of these communication materials engage in a discovering process instead of getting involved in the creation of meaning. Regardless whether this materials foster dialogue, the arena upon which this takes place has been already set by communication practitioners following the management desire where the decisions about the change were already taken. In this sense, these audiences do not engage in quality sensemaking process because the creative element is overlooked (Weick, 1995).

Similarly, this can also be observed in the following communication initiatives. It has been noted that transmission type of practices with inexistent negotiation is found within practices that apparently seem to involve and take into account different stakeholders' input. In initiatives such as having ambassadors —in the cases observed these are employees, communication professionals, or key stakeholders such as HR directors— as change agents, communication professionals provide materials that must be used by the ambassadors when communicating change to their groups. These materials are guidelines, Q&A, and already prepared slides for presentations. As one of the practitioners noted, *the information that you give to ambassadors is already set. It has a function of informing, spreading knowledge, and improving understanding.* Here communication professionals take advantage of the "participative" system created to establish dialogue with employees through ambassadors, although this "dialogue" is highly mediated by one of the parts involved, with few or inexistent interaction.

The attempt to provide accurate and closed information to face any possible enquiry made by the audiences leads to the production of thorough and descriptive communication materials. Thus, in line with the overlooked creative characteristic of sensemaking, descriptive practices such as Q&A or guidelines hinder the individual engagement in sensemaking processes. This is the opposite to those practices that focus on providing explanations. According to Weick (1995), explanations help the creation of meaning since these allow space for individual interpretation which may help employees to even fulfill the practitioner's purpose of initiating local conversations (Christensen et al., 2008).

Meaningful Approaches but with Low Negotiation

Some of the interviewees are participating or have participated in change projects where there has been a change of business strategy that involve new organizational concepts (definitions, values, vision...) and new ways of working. In this matter, the following case description is taken because it exemplifies other cases. The core mission for communication professionals in this project is to foster a cultural change in which ownership is enhanced in order to empower local decisions to be agile and flexible. One of the ways is to provide frames upon which they can draw on interpretations. The content, as Weick (1995) points out is commonly a story that practitioners assemble attempting to influence their process of understanding and acting in reference to the change. In order to instill confidence among management to take independent and quick decisions, it has been observed that practitioners participate in the planning and execution of actions which can create routines over time. In such a subtle process, one of the recurring practices is to publicly recognize success and good practices. For one of the interviewees, recognition is *calling out people specific people by name for doing specific things at a specific time* and one of the way to articulate it is as simple as setting an email routine from top management to key groups of people. The purpose of this action is also to provide examples of cases showcasing models to follow by the rest of the organization.

> *When you are engaging people, being specific about what good looks like, often means giving an example. When I talk about meeting targets, I'm talking about this part of the organization because look what they did. I think that with any kind of a story being specific about who did what, makes it more credible. It's not just 'oh what a great job you all did'. No, it's what X person did yesterday, when we got together for a one o'clock meeting, and did a great presentation, and so on.*

By doing this it is expected to create a culture of agile collaboration. Stakeholders involved in change pick the most suitable information and elaborate an understanding of the situation which resolves the ignorance stage in which they do not connect cues of meaning to the new situation yet. The meanings attached to the good examples will foster the establishment of a new culture influencing the way of working. Then, individuals will rely on another sensemaking frame to take quick and agile decisions which is a 'tradition of conduct' (Weick, 1995). In this case, traditions are addressed as a future outcome of current sensemaking processes where the main content/frames are stories (real examples of good practice

developed independently by some groups of people at the organization). Similarly, this is also a way to disrupt established institutions and institutionalize new values.

It is interesting to highlight how this practice has been escalated. This approach with the same frame and sensemaking influence by communication is also practiced in greater scenarios than just an email. One of the practices different organizations work on is to carry out great events few times or once a year where the top managers of the organization from different locations meet and formally share in big presentations their best practices. As with the email action, there is a retrospective element (past actions = good practices) in this practices embedded in the cues of meaning (stories) that help to connect new meanings to past situations. As an example of this, one of the interviewee talks about how they relativize failure and embrace success to influence meaning processes during sensemaking and push the change:

> *If someone makes a mistake, now that is something that is okay because we have to make mistakes. If we want to do well we cannot keep the pace if we don't make occasional mistakes. What happens if someone makes a mistake and then we can see that there is a retribution of some kind? Then no one will take the risk.*

Thus, the sensemaking of this organizations is based on actions from which individuals can learn (Weick, 1995). Communication professionals, designers and facilitators of these gatherings, supervise that those managers who have to give presentations are going to expose successful practices, failures, and challenges. Although there is not the chance to negotiate through interaction, the co-creation of meaning takes place when taking into account the retrospective activity of viewing actions performed by the same people involved in change. The shared meaningfulness of these actions supports the identification with what the managers have to expose in their presentations during the event or with what is highlighted in the email the CEO sends to key groups of people. That is the reason why these communication practices may have an impact in sensemaking processes, because many elements of this perspective are able to explain the empirical data presented in this section. Besides, the symbolism embedded in these practices help the creation of meaning and is considered part of the process of communication. However, the lack of interaction and the reduced audience (top management) participating in these practices constrains the negotiation among the many stakeholders of the organization.

Practices With High Negotiation

Communication professionals are currently applying practices that are observed to be suitable attempts to handle complexity. These approaches respect the theoretical assumptions made regarding Strategic Communication and communication as a process, and contribute to engage in sensemaking processes. In this matter, several characteristics of sensemaking are found. This said, the problem is again observed and contradictory nuances between practitioners and theory have been spotted which will be mentioned in this section and further discussed in the following sections.

The most meaningful practices among the ones described by the interviewees are seminars and workshops. In line with the cascade way in which organizations implement and communicate change, it has been noted that some organizations stand out above others when addressing elements that facilitate sensemaking. Some of them apply actions that enhance interaction between all the layers of the organization involved in the change, foster dialogue and reflection, encourage participation, and address input although in a small scale. Practitioners interviewed carry out seminars and workshops directed to all the layers of the organization. First to leaders, then to managers, and ultimately to employees. Some of the cases where these practices take place are in changes that involve a change in the business strategy. In one of them, the purpose of these workshops was to *make sure the new business model was understood and implemented* and also ensure that these different groups of stakeholders *can contribute and participate and have input on this vision*. Regardless the audience (leaders, managers, employees) the functioning of the workshop is the same:

> *They [workshop audience: leaders, managers, and employees] have to contribute actively. They have to reflect upon the vision, the way its written, and then what are the consequences for them.*

What is observed here is that workshop participants are not provided with closed messages. Instead, explanations prevail on top of descriptions which enhance the involvement in sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995). In order to foster this reflection, practitioners design the workshop in a way the audiences ask themselves individually and discuss in groups afterwards. As the interviewee explains:

There is a little set of questions they have to answer both individually, then in little groups, and then they write what they produced. What is the consequence for me, for my team, for the activity of my team, and for my goals.

This open approach leaves space for co-creation in which phenomenons like local articulation take place leading to ownership enhancement (Christensen et al., 2008). This is the result of individuals navigating through the last stages of sensemaking process. These workshops support individuals through the selection stage where stimuli and information is provided in order to connect cues of meaning from the current situation to other experiences. In this sense, when designing and facilitating the workshop, communication professionals plan activities and stimulating situations. One of the interviewees described how employees enacted the role of consumers of their product and went through the journey since the need is found until the product is bought. Thus, in line with the explanation element found in these practices, it has been observed how practitioners do not attempt to deal with uncertainty. Instead, according to the interpretation that this research makes of their statements, they develop such activities in order to face equivocality. As seen by one practitioner, one of their mission is to pursue that alignment in their messages due to *if different ideas come from different points it creates confusion*. Similarly, another interviewee explained that the input received from the workshops addresses different ways to see and interpret the facilitated vision, the practitioner stated that *we had some suggestions on modifications saying 'maybe I would write this sentence differently because when you say that it can be ambiguous or whatever'*. Both quotes show how practitioners acknowledge the existence of varied meanings and how they regard the active influence of stakeholders in their creation.

This equivocal meanings are managed in an attempt to align what has already been decided — in these cases, the new vision— with the rest of the organization. Thus, although allowing contribution, one of the blind spots of these practices is that the discussion is about something that has already been decided. As mentioned before, it is a trend among the organizations that have participated in this research that change is decided at the top of the organizations. What makes the difference between organizations that try to adapt their practices to nowadays complexity and those who do not, is the attempt to address the assumptions from the theoretical framework by enhancing participation and considering stakeholders opinions. In this regard, it has been observed that in several organizations workshops have the purpose to tackle this endeavour. In one of them, the vision is decided by an executive committee. Then a

workshop with leaders is launched in order to discuss this vision. Communication professionals gather the arguments discussed and adapt the vision formulation accordingly. Then, another workshop takes place with the next layer of the organization where the vision adapted after the leaders session is discussed. And this is repeated with employees, the latest layer. Although all the layers are engaged and given the opportunity to provide input about the new vision, they do not participate in the negotiation of the essence of the vision. As the practitioner clarifies:

> *The vision was not something democratic, the vision was decided by the executive committee. They wanted it to happen and the process was to make sure that everybody understand, that there is no ambiguity about it, and make sure that everybody can see what it implies in terms of their activity and personal job.*

This said, even though stakeholders opinions are regarded, these do not have impact on the essence of change. However, by engaging them in a discussion, meaning co-creation regarding the new situation that the change presents is facilitated. The attempt of workshops is not to involve stakeholders to agree on what organization must or must not change, instead, the purpose is to drive the audiences through sensemaking process in which understanding of change is enhanced by allowing local articulation and ownership through meaning co-creation. Hence, these practices allow a discussion on how to frame the change but not about the change, in other words, these allow modifications in the vision formulation but not in its essence. And all of this is enabled through interaction among all the stakeholders that such workshop format allows. In these events, *the whole executive committee is in the room so they answer questions they bring the vision, they are the ones who are gonna answer discuss etc., etc., so they are in the room*. Here, acknowledging its limitations and nuanced contradictions, organizations are close to successfully bridge the theoretical implications assumed by this research and practice in nowadays organizational and change settings.

In this regard, there are other actions with high meaning negotiation and co-creation potential but are not performed in the form of big and public events as workshops. Communication professionals often approach members of different stakeholders and engage with them in order to establish a network that can provide continuous flow of communication. Some organizations reach out to other countries in order to gather feedback before and after the change has been implemented. The establishment of a network of ambassadors, who most of

the times are other communication professionals, enhances the way practitioners and organizations listen to their stakeholders. Although sensemaking is not influenced at its full potential, practitioners bridge theoretical assumptions with their practices attempting to listen and address stakeholders inputs.

Communication Professionals Performing in The Backstage

It has been observed that communication professionals have an influential role in sensemaking processes during change. However, this role is not enacted directly throughout all the layers of the organization where meanings are co-created and negotiated. Instead, most of the times they are sensgivers in the background where they provide frameworks and set up situations where information is strategically disseminated in order to enhance understanding and acceptance of the organizational change at hand. This chapter will cover how the role of communication professionals is being adjusted to nowadays complex settings acknowledging the practices deployed by the practitioners interviewed and their influence on sensemaking processes.

Polyvalent Profiles Dedicated to Facilitation

As observed in the empirical material, communication professionals rely on others to guide sensemaking processes throughout the organization. The common and natural way to do this is through management. Leaders and managers are engaged in workshops and seminars where understanding of change is provided in order for them to be able to cascade the change through different layers of the organization (Kotter, 2012). Practitioners are actively involved in change but they rarely are the face of those who drive it in front of larger audiences such as employees.

> *It's not me doing the communication, the leaders are doing the communication. Leaders communicate period. That's what they do by being leaders, they communicate. Some are doing it well, others not so well but that's what they do and what we try to do is to make sure that they can communicate in the best possible way. Leadership communication is not about us communicators doing the communication.*

Supporting leaders and managers is a key responsibility for practitioners interviewed, but employees are also assisted in all type of communication endeavours. In some cases this is done by just providing advice on how to handle an issue through email communications, other times are engaged in workshops to involve them in sensemaking to enhance understanding of change, and in other situations employees become change agents responsible for driving change communications among their peers like leaders do with other groups of stakeholders. Regardless they are addressing leaders or employees, the purpose of communication professionals does not vary. In this sense, a facilitation and supportive role is again enacted to assist other individuals who may have a better impact on sensemaking processes if they are the ones communicating and driving the change as it is explained below.

> *Our role has to be just to facilitate the experience because it is not the same if someone from the corporation tells you something than if you hear it from your peer, who is someone that has already been through that change and can tell you their experience without interest. We are the supporters, we are the ones who make sure that others know what and how to communicate in order to be as successful as possible.*

This practice shows how practitioners attempt to embrace theoretical assumptions since practitioners actively regard all stakeholders as key actors in the process of communication. This cross-sectional communication initiatives evidence the awareness of organizational complexity and show how these activities produce value that can be observed by looking at the contributions they make to the business.

In this matter, regardless the framework used to observe the roles the participants develop in their organizations, the result is always that communication professionals take on a wide variety of roles and perform different types of tasks. Looking simultaneously at the data and the theoretical frameworks of Communication Manager Roles Grid (CRG) and Communications Contributions Framework (CCF) (Volk et al., 2017), it is noted that communication professionals interviewed combine both strategic and operational roles and work on the different types of contribution listed. However, it is observed the trend detected in previous literature which addresses a shift from "executor to a consultant, and from a producer of communication materials to a business supporter" (Volk et al., 2017, p. 9). As seen in the last example, the practitioner highlights that communication professionals are not

the ones who communicate. Instead, their current role is dedicated to assist during communication processes.

In this regard, in order to further explain the impact of other developed roles and contributions, the research refers to the aforementioned practices of participatory workshops and events to share best practices (analysed in the previous section) as example to picture the following analysis. The involvement of communication professionals in such activities requires strategic engagement when narrowing the new vision and planning the approach to implement it in the workshops. They also carry out operational tasks since they are the ones who execute and facilitate the workshop, performing tasks such as writing materials or even choosing and booking the venue where these events take place. When it comes to the most important contributions, looking to the activities practitioners do during the workshops, these are based on asking questions to make individuals reflect by challenging them. Thus, communication professionals contribute to align the vision throughout the organization and multiply its effect on different stakeholders (Volk et al., 2017).

Practitioners engage in challenging activities with top management and employees indistinctively. However, there is an important difference in the role they take when asking challenging questions to these two stakeholders. Whereas when challenging employees practitioners take a multiplication and alignment role, when doing so with the management, the role is only advisory. This is due to the purpose of engaging with the board is not to align the vision but to advise on the best way their decision can be applied throughout the organization. The fact that communication professionals only enact an advisory role when interacting with the board indicates that aligning efforts are not performed from the bottom to the top of the organization. Instead, aligning contributions are only carried out from the top to the bottom in order to establish the decided changes. This observation sheds light to the struggle of practitioners to fully embrace theoretical assumptions of nowadays complexity. This issue will be further tackled in the following sections.

The Role of Communication Professionals in Decision-Making

It has been a trend the fact that practitioners talk about the designers of the change referring to top management who has taken the decision to implement such change (*They decided that our professionals need...*). The practitioner refers to the board and the organization as the subject

that took the decision to implement the change. The practitioners acknowledge that the decision is taken at the top of the organization and then it is communicated downwards towards the bottom of the organization. When this trend was spotted, the inquiry that followed was both to know when and how the communication professionals get involved in the project, how do they listen to receivers of the change messages, and which impact does their input have. Regarding to this matter, the involvement of the communication practitioners and their roles in the board varies. The roles communication professionals enact range from not participative ones which are those who are not even present in the discussion and those who have the chance to give input. As one of them acknowledges, *we don't really have access to that discussion. It's more like 'this will happen'. That's when we come in and say 'okay so how will this happen in the best possible way*.

However, although in the scenarios where communication professionals can participate in the discussion, the input they can give is mere advisory based, without direct impact on the decision. This means that they are able to express their takes on the different possibilities about the change but they do not have a say when a decision must be taken. Regarding to this, the interviewees opinions on whether communication professionals should be an active part of the decision or not is commonly shared when they state that it is important at least to be present in the discussion from the beginning of the change and have the chance to provide advice from a communication perspective.

> *I've been observing that when communication is called once the decisions are taken it is a real mess because often the decision has been taken without a lot of inputs or maybe is not very well formulated. So you have always to do it again afterwards but when communication is involved at the very beginning of the process is much easier.*

One of the reasons why high involvement of communication professionals in decision making is important is because they argue that they have the full picture. This is due it is assumed that communication professionals have the full picture and the soft skills needed to transmit information among departments in an attempt to align project efforts, ensure project progress, and reduce the possibility of doing mistakes due to overlooking facts as a consequence of poor interdepartmental communication.

Someone has to have the bigger picture and that's my role, to understand all the different things. For instance, tech department has to change something and it has an impact on the design of the layout of the office. They don't know it but I have to know it so I have to check in which way it affects the others the thing that they are doing, so I have the general view and I ensure that everything is going together.

Whereas the former example refers to steering and managing contributions (Volk et al., 2017). The following focuses on broader responsibilities affecting to aligning and advisory practices with strategic roles focused on preserving and enhancing intangible assets by having a global vision in order to handle complex environments. As seen below, practitioners are aware of the importance of these considerations and their connection to sensemaking processes upon they can instill meanings.

They [communication professionals] are among the very few people in the company who are able to have this global vision. I understand my communication job as a position in which you can have different glasses. You need to have the glasses of your customers, but also your customers customers[...]It's the same internally because there are many different jobs in the industrial industry, different locations in Spain, England, US... If you are in a plant or in the marketing department with direct contact with the customers, we absolutely need to consider this to be able to give meanings and meanings means something that everyone can understand and can translate in his everyday jobs.

As it can be observed in the last sentence of the quote, facilitation is the main responsibility that drives the majority of practices practitioners apply and roles they enact. It must be acknowledged that facilitation is materialized in practices that fall into both transmission and process models of communication. The impact of such practices have been already analysed in the previous section. The contradictions that represent the struggle of communication professionals to fully adapt facilitation to practices aligned with theoretical assumptions will be regarded in the following section.

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The Practitioner Contradiction

The interviewed practitioners showed understanding of nowadays organizational complexity and the assumptions this research makes regarding co-creation and negotiation of meanings. Their understanding of such setting and its characteristics follows the same trend with some different nuances. The common approach that most of them acknowledge and share is connected to the active role all stakeholders play in organizations having an important influence on its processes.

> *Complexity comes having different stakeholders, having different points of view.*
> *But the problem is that also a big company sometimes moves to slow to answer to*
> *the changes in the market, in lifestyles, in the way people interact with society and*
> *products.*

As it has been described, the theoretical explanations and approaches to tackle this complex scenario is not fully considered in practice. Communication professionals struggle when adapting their roles and practices to these settings. This gap between theory and practice is the problem that this research is attempting to tackle. In this sense, relying on previous literature it can be interpreted that there is a gap between research and practice. However, the observations made on this show the interesting issue of that practitioners fully embrace research and theory but are not able to take everything into account when applying practices in change projects. The main contradictions reside on the use of practices that fall into traditional models of communication, practice with low co-creation and negotiation, and as a consequence of these two, the lack of relevant mechanisms to listen to stakeholders in nowadays organizational settings during change situations.

Institutions Hindering Negotiation

When looking at the analysed practices with the sensemaking lens, contradictions have been found in the three types of practices already stated. The most relevant issue relies on the second and third categories that account for meaningful practices with low negotiation and practices with high negotiation and co-creation. As it has been observed in the analysed practices within the second category, there is a high mediation between what is going to be said in the events where best practices are shared. Likewise, such tight control from practitioners and management and the low impact on decision making have become the main

issue to be addressed. In this matter, as stated in one of the example introduced before, decisions and change are not democratic. However, practitioners recognize the importance of considering stakeholders participation.

We talk about the importance of having a dialogue with your team, but sometimes a dialogue can't really happen because the decision is made. Then you have to find what we can actually discuss, and come up with a great solution together, but not about this because the decision is made.

In a similar way, the same limitations are acknowledged:

There's no way of us changing that, but 'this box here', this is our room of discussion. We can't go outside because it doesn't matter, we can say whatever we want. We can't change it, but this here is for us to decide. That's when a manager needs to understand how things work and how they can work with the team in the best possible way. And this is not easy, that's why we train them in our trainings but we reach very few.

When inquiring about the extent that change can be negotiated, it was observed that practitioners resort to factors beyond their scope of influence. This fact leads the analysis to think about regarding the possibility of an existing 'out there' reality that influences individual meaning processes. This 'out there' factors are addressed with the neo-institutional theory in order to explain such phenomena. Hence, it is observed that when practitioners try to justify the lack of negotiation in their practices, their arguments are based in taken for granted facts. Thus, when they use arguments such as *there's no way of us changing that*; *the decision is made*; *it's not democratic*; it is noted that "structural elements", acknowledged as institutions, act as regulatory and normative forces in organizations influencing communication professionals practices. Namely in this case, hindering the adaptation of their role to nowadays organizational settings and widening the gap between theoretical views and their application in practice.

Practitioners seem surprised when asked about this issue, showing that it is fully accepted and not even questioned. These institutional logics are deeply rooted and maintained by members of the organization through institutional work. This is interpreted as a symptom of

institutionalization since there is an influenced action by unseen factors which apparently has been carried out unconsciously. As Schön (2003) puts it "we behave according to rules and procedures that we cannot usually describe and of which we are often unaware[...]there are actions, recognitions, and judgements which we know how to carry out spontaneously; we do not have to think about them prior to or during their performance" (p. 54). This supports the observation of institutional work that helps to maintain established institutions which in this case are formal structures, norms that provide information about boundaries, and assumed procedures. Actors such as communication professionals legitimate these institutions when they develop their work accepting and assuming such reality.

Institutionalized Negotiation

The trend observed is that the groups at the top (managers and leaders) are paid more attention than wider audiences. On one hand, this is due to practicalities, since those groups at the top are smaller it is easier. On the other hand, organizations highly rely on managers in order to communicate and drive the change through lower layers. This is done in workshops, trainings, and supporting activities where communication professionals play an active role. The practitioners interviewed emphasize how they craft the flow of communication downwards which is stated in clear practices, strategies, and systems. However, when asked about the audiences opportunities to express their opinion, the answer is less concrete. It is perceived that in some practices that will be further analysed, employees are engaged, sometimes to great extent. Nevertheless, besides the lack of concreteness that obscures how organizations are listening to employees, the input has few chances to cause an impact in the design of the change.

> *We try very hard to get comments on articles that we write and stuff like that but normally the same person wouldn't normally go out and criticize so much in an internal media where everyone can see who does it, so we don't get that many comments and we don't expect to get that many comments.*

This shows that transmission models of communication characterized by lack of interaction are not suitable to such organizational settings due to the communication flow is hindered. In this regard, many factors must be taken into account, for instance the fear to sanctions when publicly speaking up. Regardless the factors may affect such cases, this discussion is based on

the barrier that communications from traditional models present. The chance to have an aha moment or that click that suddenly change the mind of an individual involved in change has not been observed in the data collected. Conversely, when these two references have been mentioned, such situations took place during practices with high negotiation and co-creation, namely workshops and seminars.

In addition to this, as seen in aforementioned cases too, communication practitioners refer to split the change in two parts. On one hand they assume what cannot be changed. On the other hand, they address what can be modified in order to engage members of the organization and facilitate sensemaking.

> *In every change you have a red part and a blue part, so the red part is the part in which you don't have leverage, it is the part in which you need to accept for example the strategy which is decided by the top management, but you need to be clear with the team, what is the blue part and the blue part is the part where we can have some leverages.*

This refers to the practices seen in second and third categories. It has been shown how practitioners influence sensemaking by engaging audiences in local questions drawn from an established starting point. This starting point is the *red part* of the change that cannot be modified, that is what has already been decided and must be spread throughout the organization. This is related to the discussion about giving space for co-creation what has been observed as being suitable practices to enhance sensemaking processes. However, this is also a way of institutional work that legitimate and maintain structures imposed by top management through practices based in translation. That is to introduce institutional and managerial ideas throughout different context of an organization (Fredriksson et al., 2013). For instance, some examples of these managerial ideas are the already decided new vision or new organizational values that form the changes that must be implemented in some of the organizations the practitioners interviewed have worked.

When individuals attempt to reflect and modify what they are allowed to discuss emphasizing what it is in for them, they engage in local articulation. Local articulation is a concept that covers how "organizational identification is associated with the ability of members to articulate their own interpretation of the organization's identity" (Christensen et al., 2008, p.

207). In this sense, practitioners interviewed which organizations operate in different countries, argue that great part of the change is locally modified. Therefore, local articulation is not only applied at an individual level in which managers and employees can reflect on what the change means for them, but also at a departmental and country level which widens the impact of institutionalization. Thus, despite enhancing sensemaking processes, one of the outcomes of these practices is that institutions embedded in the *red part* of the change that cannot be modified are legitimized in different contexts by members of the organization through processes of translation and institutional work.

An Open Door For Change and Disruption

In the same way that institutions hinder communication professionals adaptation to nowadays organizational settings, these may also become a way to disrupt established ones in an attempt to institutionalize new norms and values. This will lead to complete transformation processes that update organizations to nowadays settings. Always having in mind that, as observed, the existing institutions that are imposed to members of the organization are maintained and reproduced by them at the same time. Cultural transformations where the practitioners interviewed have participated have pursued the establishment of similar values. Big words such as engagement, participation, learning, inspiring, curiosity, flexible, agile, and empowering are widely used to refer to those concepts that nowadays organizations attempt to establish. In order to attain this endeavour, organizations face the institutions that are already guiding behaviours and sensemaking processes. The hierarchical and rigid structures of organizations with social norms and sanctions that do not allow mistakes are now attempted to be disrupted and abolished to install new institutions that may drive organizations to fulfill their self-legitimation purposes.

Conclusions

This chapter resumes the findings and the final conclusions of the research. It emphasizes the contributions to research and practice and acknowledges its the limitations. Finally, this may inspire future research in the field of change studies from emergent perspectives of Strategic Communication.

This thesis has attempted to explore how communication professionals adapt their roles and practices to nowadays organizational complexity in situations of change. This complexity has been regarded by an emergent perspective of Strategic Communication relying on CCO as a metatheory which has introduced other theoretical views such as communication understood as a process. This theoretical framework provides explanations for nowadays social world leading to take assumtions that address complex organizational settings. The main assumtions considered are that transmission models of communication do not attain complexity in today's organizations, that all stakeholders have an active role and great influence on organizational processes such as change, and that organizational realities are co-created and negotiated through meaning processes (Heide et al., 2018; Guldbrandsen & Just, 2016).

Acknowledging these theoretical explanations and assumptions of nowadays social world introduced by academic field, it is observed that practitioners struggle when attempting to embrace such theoretical implications when developing communication practices during change situations (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Thereby, considering that the functioning of organizations is based on meaning processes highly influenced by communication, a sensemaking lens has been applied to observe how practitioners apply communication practices in these settings.

The analysis of the data obtained by interviewing 15 communication professionals has shown that practitioners are aware of these theoretical assumptions and even share and support them. However, although they agree with academy on this, the analysis shows that they are still carrying out practices that fall into transmission models of communication. Their practices

are, in different extents, not adapted to nowadays organizations and present contradictions with what the theory states. This finding has been named *the pracitioner contradiction* which observes that the main contradictions are found in practices that do not involve interaction and that do not take into account stakeholders active and participative role during change. As a consequence of this, it has been proved how these practices hinder sensemaking processes which may lead to failure in the understanding of change.

In order to find a better explanation to the practitioner contradiction, institutionalism with emphasis on neo-institutionalism approach has been applied as alternative lens to observe the data. This has lead the research to spot another important finding that explains that institutions based on formal structures, established norms, and procedures hinder the adaptation of communication professionals roles and practices to nowadays organizational complexity. Change is not fully negotiated and realities are not fully co-created. This is decided at the top of the organization. It is worth to highlight that some practices that engage stakeholders in quality sensemaking processes have been spotted. These are workshops and seminars that allow to co-create local meaning but on top of what have been already decided.

Furthermore, when digging into the practitioners role, the main remark has been that communication professionals acknowledge that they are not the ones who communicate during change. Instead, they enact supportive roles. In this matter, addressing the evolution of the roles, it has been noted that practitioners are taking responsibilities based on consulting and advising, but most importantly facilitating as it has been already discussed in recent studies (Volk et al., 2017; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

Contributions to Research and Practice

On one hand, this research enhances understanding in emergent approaches of Strategic Communication using CCO as metatheory combined with sensemaking perspective and institutionalism. This thesis has created academic knowledge within this theoretical framework about communication professionals as a main research topic in contexts of change. Besides, it brings insights on the evolution of communication professional roles. Likewise, it enhances literature in organizational change providing a Strategic Communication approach to handle change in complex scenarios without relying on overused managerial approaches in this field and introducing an emergent approach.

Practice can benefit from the insights offered in this dissertation to acknowledge their constraints unveiled by institutionalism and deal with established institutions by institutionalizing new values through disruption. As seen in the analysis, this can be tackled by enhancing sensemaking processes and engaging stakeholders in meaning co-construction.

Limitations

The study has not taken into account variable factors that could have an influence in the role of communication professionals and their participation in meaning processes. The qualitative nature of this study allows to take a holistic approach towards organizational change and change communication without looking at how factors such as the type of industry, the type of organization, or their structure may influence the work of communication professionals and the process of meaning co-creation and negotiation. In this sense, the results are aimed to be generalized since these have shown that despite the variety of the collected material, the same themes have appeared. However, this research do not provide specific conclusions and recipes focused on particular factors and situations shaped by its idiosyncratic characteristics which may have important influence on the observed elements this research focuses on.

Future Research

This paper sets the path to keep researching about Strategic Communication and organizational change from a perspective that embraces nowadays complexity. It is encouraged further research on the role of communication professionals during change taking approaches that assume communication as a process. In this sense, it would be interesting to observe the process itself with a longitudinal process study that focuses on how this process unfolds, which roles communication professionals develop, and how practices applied influence sensemaking processes. It will also be interesting to look at these issues from a Strategic Communication scope but from an employee perspective. Besides, studies challenging assumptions regarding best practices in an attempt to seek efficiency must always be encouraged in an attempt to unveil overlookings in such a complex social world individuals and organizations live in. Likewise, it is necessary to seek understanding in academy and practice about the organizations constraints that hinder the development of sensemaking processes during organizational change. In this sense, it is required to approach

this issue from different and opposing theoretical perspectives to conflict existing theories and challenge blind spots to find better explanations to complex organizational issues and situations. Thus, positivist and social constructionist approaches are needed as much as for instance, structuralism which may attempt to unveil existing structures in organizations that may cause the constraints shown in this research.

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Appendix

In this appendix it can be found the semi-structured interview with some guiding questions and topics to cover and the invitation letter sent to the prospected and actual participants.

Interview Guide

Digging into the communication professional's role

- What do you spend your time with along a change project in a daily/weekly/monthly/project basis.

Practices

- Tell me about what changes have you participated what practices have you applied. Argue why did you plan it like that, how the implementation developed?

Strategic - Model/flow of communication (top-down? bottom-top? Feedback?)

- How stakeholders' internal audiences (managers, employees) have the chance to talk and be listened? What are the existent mechanisms to do so?

- How communication professionals have the chance to communicate and listen to internal audiences?

- What impact have their inquiries in the change? What process does it follow?

- What do communication professionals do in all these processes?

What happens in workshops?

- Is characterized by information distribution purposes? Passive audience or these are designed to foster reflection?

- Is there participation? Who participates? To do what? Resistant people? Suggestions?

Invitation Letter

Stockholm, February 2019
Strategic Communication Master's Degree
Lund University

To communication professionals involved in change communication,

I am David Gil, **Strategic Communication** Master's student at **Lund University**, currently writing my thesis about change communication.

Many organizations are tackling nowadays organizational change issues with communication practices based on leadership, high participation, and dialogue. Communication professionals are taking a role focused on coaching instead of directing, facilitating instead of imposing changes and meanings. Research on these specific type of practices deployed during **change processes** is still underdeveloped and these approaches are extremely interesting. Thereby, I'm looking to interview communication professionals involved in these type of practices to gather data for my thesis project which aim is the following:

I seek to increase understanding about the role of communication professionals during meaning co-creation and negotiation among internal stakeholders in change processes.

The interview will consist of **one hour conversation** where we dig into the interviewee specific communication practices and experiences.

If you want to participate you can contact me at gar******dgil@gmail.com or +34 69******
to set a date for one hour interview. Do not hesitate to ask any questions.

Sincerely,

David Gil Garcia

LinkedIn