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Towards a better understanding of employees as communicators

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Strategic communication at the organizational frontline

Towards a better understanding of employees as communicators

RICKARD ANDERSSON

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Strategic communication at the organizational frontline

The idea of employees as important communicators has emerged in both theory and practice during the 21st century. Researchers increasingly urge managers to consider employees as important communicators, and employees' communication role is increasingly formalized as organizations, in strategies and policies, explicate the importance of all employees taking responsibility for communication. However, while researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of employees' communication role, the understanding of it is still heavily influenced by idealistic thinking of employees as organizational embodiments of a management-driven idea of what the organization is.

This thesis problematizes this idea and broadens our understanding of employees as communicators through several empirical investigations of employees' communication role and communication responsibility. Through explicating the phenomenon, the knowledge contributes to challenge widespread idealistic thinking of employees' communication role by improving and broadening our understanding of it, as well as its more problematic consequences.

The thesis calls for a perspective shift in which the constitutive role of communication and the co-created nature of organizations are acknowledged and embraced. It is not about turning employees into "living brands" as communication already is an essential responsibility of all employees in their daily work. Instead of considering what employees can do for the organization, the organization should consider what it can do for its employees to support them in their enactment of their communication roles.



Strategic communication at the organizational frontline

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of employees as communicators

Rickard Andersson



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Title and subtitle Strategic communication at the organizational frontline: Towards a better understanding of employees as communicators		
Abstract <p>The idea of employees as important (strategic) communicators has emerged in both strategic communication theory and practice during the 21st century. Researchers increasingly urge managers to consider employees as important communicators, and employees' communication role is increasingly formalized as organizations explicate the importance of all employees taking responsibility for communication in strategies and policies. However, while researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of employees' communication role, the understanding of it is still heavily influenced by idealistic thinking of employees as organizational embodiments of a management-driven idea of what the organization is.</p> <p>This thesis problematizes this idea and aims to contribute knowledge to improve and broaden our understanding of employees as communicators by empirically investigating the employee communication role and communication responsibility.</p> <p>Articles one and article two investigate how the employee communication role has emerged. These articles contribute a more profound understanding of the emergence of the phenomenon. Article three introduces the concept employee communication responsibility and investigates factors influencing employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. Article four investigates how employees relate to and experience ambassadorship to contribute a more profound understanding of the employee communication role from an employee-perspective. Finally, article five investigates the employees' communicative practice through which they accomplish a collective enactment of the organization in interactions with external stakeholders.</p> <p>The thesis provides a more profound understanding of employees as communicators by investigating: 1) why the employee communication role and communication responsibility are increasingly emphasized and explicated by organizations, 2) which internal communication-factors influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility and thereby enacting the various communication roles, employees' attitudes towards communication, and 3) their experience of the communication role and their enactment of it. Through explicating the phenomenon, the knowledge contributes to challenge widespread idealistic thinking of employees' communication role by improving and broadening our understanding of it, as well as its more problematic consequences.</p>		
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Till Linnea och Charlie

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List of papers

- Article one:** Falkheimer, J., Heide, M., Nothhaft, H., von Platen, S., Simonsson, C., & Andersson, R. (2017). Is communication too important to be left to communication professionals?: Managers' and coworkers' attitudes towards strategic communication and communication professionals. *Public Relations Review*. 43(1), 91–101.
- Article two:** Andersson, R. (in press). Being a 'strategist': communication practitioners, strategic work, and power effects of the strategy discourse. (Accepted for publication in *Public Relations Inquiry*)
- Article three:** Andersson, R. (2019). Employee communication responsibility: its antecedents and implications for strategic communication management. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. 13(1), 60–75.
- Article four:** Andersson, R. (2019). Employees as ambassadors: coping with new role demands and struggling with identity-tensions. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*. 24(4), 702–716
- Article five:** Andersson, R. (Dis)ordering at the organizational frontline: A study of frontline workers organizing from a communication-centered perspective. (Unpublished manuscript)

Introduction

One can say a dual movement has taken place: not only is everything viewed as communication, but also as strategic communication. [...] Where managers and communication specialists formerly focused on that communication which took place in formal forums and through formal channels, the strategic turn entails that informal communication within and outside the organization is also included. This sphere, which formerly escaped management's attention, is now considered relevant and important for the organization's strategy. [...] The employees, in their everyday work are now expected to comply with and redeem promises of the brand. (Torp, 2015, p. 44)

During the last decades, the way organizations approach communication has taken what Torp (2015) refers to as a “strategic turn”, meaning that almost everything related to the communication of organizations nowadays is considered and approached as *strategic* communication. Strategic communication, understood broadly as deliberative or goal-directed communication activities (Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2015), has therefore become an increasingly central mindset and organizing principle in contemporary organizations (E. Christensen & Christensen, 2018; L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). As such, it can therefore no longer be understood as a purely managerial activity or an exclusive responsibility of the communication department and communication managers. Rather, strategic communication is considered to a greater extent by organizations to be a responsibility of all employees given that organizations consider and act upon an understanding of all communication, both formal and informal, to be of strategic significance to the organization. This emerging “way of thinking” is today more common in organizational texts. Consider for example how the following text excerpts from two of the studied case organizations frame employees' role and responsibilities:

Good communication does not appear by itself, but is generated by management, managers, and all coworkers. Therefore, we all have a responsibility to make sure that

the communication policy is realized in the daily work – first then, it becomes a useful tool and not just a document. (Communication policy, Public organization)

Say the city name to a resident and that person will have a kind of perception or image on the retina. This applies regardless if we talk about the city as an organization or a physical place. This means that our brand exists regardless of whether we work with it or not. Therefore, we want to create a strong and shared expression for the city that facilitates acts and communication in the spirit of the vision [...] Branding is not a one-time effort, but a long-term work where we all contribute in our meetings with our stakeholders and with how we communicate. (Branding platform, Public organization)

These quotes illustrate how strategic communication, instead of being a responsibility of the communication department and communication managers, increasingly is framed as a responsibility of all organizational members. This way of thinking about employees is also manifest in management representatives' talk about successful, value creating, strategic communication, in which employees have gained a more prominent role:

[...] it is all about brand building and the good ambassador. It is the best we can have. Our employees are our most important resource, and they are supposed to show externally all the good things we do. (Head of communication)

In its most extreme and one-sided manifestation, employees are considered by management as ambassadors or advocates of one-sided messages praising the organization, as in the case with Amazon-employees countering critique directed at Amazon by tweeting about how fantastic it is to work there, reported by *The New York Times* (Bromwich, 2019). This type of manifestation of the employee communication role portrays it as a responsibility that has much in common with practices in totalitarian regimes where citizens have limited freedom of speech. But while this type of manifestation usually gets attention in media as well as in studies emphasizing the darker sides of this phenomenon, the communication role and communication responsibility of employees are more complex and multifaceted than these more extreme and one-dimensional manifestations do justice. There certainly are several manifestations of employees' communication role and communication responsibility that are problematic and worthy of critique. However, its increasing manifestation in managerial texts and talk calls for a broader investigation of this emerging phenomenon.

The employee communication role and communication responsibility are, however, not only encouraged top-down through managerial incentives. Employees use social media and participate in online conversations regardless whether management want it or not (Dreher, 2014). Additionally, employees themselves increasingly participate in, and even initiate, communicative practices such as taking the formal responsibility for managing the organizations' social media accounts (e.g., Cassinger & Thelander, In press). Thus, employees' communication role and communication responsibility are increasingly explicitly present dimensions of employees' work, regardless of whether or not management attempts to formalize the communication role.

Strategic communication and the role of employees

This thesis aims to engage in conversation with, and thereby contribute to, the research field of strategic communication. As a research field, strategic communication is perhaps best described as an ambitious attempt to create an umbrella term that embraces all disciplines that study goal-directed communication activities (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2015), such as public relations, corporate communication, organizational communication, marketing communication, branding, and political communication. This ambition to join all disciplines that study goal-directed communication activities into a coherent body of research with a common core is yet to be fulfilled. Nonetheless, it has contributed to make strategic communication a truly multi-disciplinary research area. This thesis specifically engages in conversation with the body of research within strategic communication that draws inspiration from organizational communication and its greater focus on internal communication and the constitutive role of communication for organizations (see Falkheimer & Heide, 2014; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018).

More specifically, the thesis engages with the body of research that strives to broaden the understanding of strategic communication as a communicative practice which not only necessitates the active participation of communication practitioners, but also managers, employees and stakeholders (e.g., Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a, 2016b; Heide, von Platen, Simonsson, & Falkheimer, 2018). This body of research has been pivotal for advancing the understanding of employees

as passive recipients of management's communication to an understanding of employees as active communicators that through their internal interactions and interactions with external stakeholders contribute both to internal communication processes and to processes of intangible value creation (e.g., Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Heide et al., 2018; J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, 2014). Calls made by seminal contributions have in turn generated a growing body of research focusing on employees' active role as communicators. This more advanced understanding of employees is important as it contributes to complexifying the idea of strategic communication by contrasting the dominant deliberate, top-down organizing logics with an emergent, participatory, one (E. Christensen & Christensen, 2018). Christensen and Christensen argue, and I agree, that bringing forth the multiple, antagonistic, tensions, which are essential to organizing, can help broaden the strategic communication theory lens and thus make it better suited for understanding strategic communication as organizing ideal and practice.

To highlight employees' active role as communicators, several studies have emphasized employees' role as external ambassadors. In these studies, employees' communication role has been described through the idea of "living the brand" to emphasize that employees *are* the brand in the eyes of stakeholders (Heide & Simonsson, 2011), as a role during crisis in which employees potentially act as both negative and positive ambassadors and therefore both can defend or further damage the brand (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Opitz, Chaudhri, & Wang, 2018), and as external communicators on social media posing both risks and benefits (Dreher, 2014). However, although ambassadorship has become a popular concept for conceptualizing employees' communication role and communication responsibility, the literature predominately departs from a management-centric approach through which employees become active communicators first when they have internalized and deliver what managers train them to deliver. This predominately manager-centric approach thus neglects how employees themselves experience this role-expectation and the included responsibilities. Thus, there is a need to approach employees' communication role and communication responsibility from an employee-centric perspective.

Other researchers have instead focused on the communication behavior that employees' communication role comprises. These studies have conceptualized

employees' communication role as a boundary-spanning role in which employees both act as "megaphones" and "scouts" (Kang & Sung, 2017; J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Given the increasing use of social media for internal communication, several studies have focused on employees' communication role and communication behavior on internal social media (Madsen, 2016, 2017, 2018; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016), and more specifically internal social media aimed to facilitate employee ideation (Gode, 2019; Gode, Johansen, & Thomsen, In press). Initially, the body of research on communication behavior focused almost exclusively on communication behavior as such. However, more recent studies have begun to investigate factors influencing employees' communication behavior, such as *position* (Lee, 2017), *motivation* (Lee, Mazzei, & Kim, 2018), *psychological enablers* and *barriers* (Gode et al., In press), and *organizational conditions* and *managerial style* (Mazzei & Quarantino, 2017). However, there are still only a few studies that have investigated how communicative factors in internal communication influence employees' attitudes towards the communication role and communication responsibility.

Furthermore, few strategic communication researchers would adhere to a pure transmission-view of communication (Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2015). In recent years, several researchers have called for researchers to embrace a constitutive and processual understanding of communication (e.g., Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a; Heide et al., 2018; Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2015). However, few empirical studies of employees' communication role and responsibility have to date fully embraced a communication centered-perspective. Thus, while interest in employees' communication role is growing, I argue that there is a need for an employee- and communication-centered perspective to complement and broaden the one-sided managerial perspective which, moreover, tends to downplay the constitutive role of language and communication.

Providing an employee-centered perspective is important as it introduces and places the spotlight on the experience and communicative practices of employees, the central but paradoxically neglected actors in previous theorizing on employees' active role as communicators. By doing so, the knowledge produced in this thesis offers a way to understand the employee communication role and communication responsibility grounded less in managerial dreams of compliant employees turning into management-sanctioned organizational embodiments, and more in the everyday experiences and practice of employees as they attempt to enact their multifaceted communication role.

Providing a communication-centered perspective is important as it places greater emphasis on the constitutive communication processes in and through which employees become active communicators and enact their role in different situations. By doing so, this thesis provides a more profound understanding of the communication role's antecedents, how it is experienced and becomes part of employees' ongoing identity work, and how it is enacted through and in communication. The communication-centered perspective thereby offers a more dynamic lens than previous research that tends to take employees' communication role as something given. By dynamic I mean that it offers a perspective that is attentive to the communicative constitution of the role as such, as well as its performative powers rather than neglecting them. Being attentive to how the role is communicatively constituted and its performative powers is important as it highlights that strategic communication management aimed at managing the communication of employees cannot be separated from identity regulation and the ambition to manage the very hearts and minds of employees (see also Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Rennstam, 2017). Through being attentive to this, the thesis thereby opens up for a more critical discussion on the employee communication role which previous research in strategic communication has neglected.

Point of departure

In this section, I intend to clarify my point of departure and explain in greater detail what it entails given that it is essential for situating the phenomenon under investigation (Van de Ven, 2016). This thesis takes its point of departure from an employee-centered and communication-centered perspective in order to offer an alternative to the predominant management-centered perspective which tends to downplay or neglect the constitutive role of communication for organizations.

The employee-centered perspective entails a point of departure from which the employees' attitudes', experiences, and practices, as well as contextual factors influencing them, are the focal point. Thus, my ambition is to contribute knowledge that not only serves the interests of managers, but also the interests

of employees and thereby broadens the current predominately management-centered body of knowledge on employees' communication role and communication responsibility.

The communication-centered perspective entails a point of departure from which communication is placed in the center. Thus, it departs from the traditional focus on the organizing of communication and instead focuses on the ordering (and disordering) function of communication (L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). In the thesis, this is done more implicitly when in articles one and three I focus on employees' attitudes towards communication and which dimensions of internal communication influence their attitudes towards taking communication responsibility, and more explicitly in articles two, four, and five where I focus on discourse, identity work, and communicative practices. However, a communication-centered approach entails more than only placing communication at the center of attention. Rather, it is an embrace of the "linguistic turn", and its philosophical parting from an understanding of communication as mirroring reality, to an understanding of meaning as produced through language and communication (Deetz, 2003; Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2018). Thus, it attempts to honor the idea that experience is created in what Deetz (2003), citing Heidegger, describes as "the tension-filled encounter between a "way of looking" and "that which is being looked at" (p. 423), i.e. through communication. I honor this by taking the point of departure that communication is incremental to the negotiation and forming of attitudes, sense of responsibility, identity, and organization and thus needs to be placed at the center of attention.

However, the communication-centered perspective framing how I approach strategic communication does not suffice given that the concept of "communication" as such can be approached from various perspectives. Thus, there is also a need to more explicitly attempt to account for my philosophical position. My philosophical position is that of pragmatism, and to conceptualize communication, I mostly draw on pragmatist-influenced communication researchers, such as Gulbrandsen and Just and the "Montreal school" in CCO. I adhere to the Gulbrandsen and Just (2016b) argument that pragmatism is well suited for a multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectival research field such as strategic communication if one is to attempt to engage in constructive criticism, rather than outright rejecting, alternative perspectives. Thus, as Gulbrandsen and Just point out, the central ideas of the field of strategic communication have emerged from both

functionalist and realist perspectives, as well as social constructionist. This has resulted in that in strategic communication, as in most fields of social science, there exists an ongoing yet rarely explicit debate regarding the potential existence of one ultimate Truth, as posited by perspectives grounded more in functionalism and realism, or several competing truths, as posited by perspectives grounded more in social constructionism. While I can prefer one over the other as more credible or fruitful, a pragmatist position entails accepting both perspectives as being possible and the outlook being that we will probably never settle on one once and for all. Thus, instead of being too preoccupied with the question of “true” knowledge as such, a pragmatist position urges me to constantly reflexively consider what consequences the knowledge I produce has for our action and meaning creation in the social world, and if these consequences warrant the knowledge to be necessary.

This position should however not be interpreted as an “anything goes” position, which some contemporary versions of pragmatism have been accused of (see Denzin, 2012). Instead, it should be understood as a position which I consider encourages me to engage in constructive dialogue (and criticism) with perspectives other than my own instead of emphasizing their incommensurability and attacking them as invalid. As pointed out by Gulbrandsen and Just (2016b), our social world is to some extent “both objective and relative because that is how we continuously act in it and talk about it” (p. 47). I will elaborate more on my pragmatist position in the chapter *Methodology and empirical material*.

Defining the employee communication role and communication responsibility

Before I present the overarching aim and research questions of the thesis, the concepts of *communication role* and *communication responsibility* deserve some special attention given their central role in the thesis. In the following, I will therefore define communication role and communication responsibility to make clear what I mean by these concepts.

In this thesis, communication role and communication responsibility are considered as central dimensions of employees’ role as active communicators (e.g., Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Mazzei, 2014). The concepts should be understood as tightly interwoven. With a certain role follows a responsibility that on

the one hand is attributed by someone, but on the other hand must be acknowledged and internalized by the employee for the role to be performed or enacted. In contrast to other concepts that have been used to conceptualize employees' role as active communicators, such as ambassador and advocator, communication role and communication responsibility are broader concepts that enable a richer and multifaceted conceptualization and discussion of the employee communication role. Therefore, I consider the two concepts suitable for achieving the thesis aim which is to contribute knowledge that broadens our understanding of the employee communication role.

To define employees' communication role, I partly draw upon Madsen and Verhoeven's (2019) definition of it as "a set of communication activities that an employee is expected to perform" (p. 146) to capture the formal nature of roles, produced through managerial expectations. However, as emphasized by scholars such as Mead (1934/2015) and Goffman (1982), roles are also produced through social expectations beyond those of managers. Thus, I also understand employees' communication roles as socially produced personas that employees enact and revise as they, in their work, engage in interaction with managers, colleagues, and external stakeholders (see also Andersson, 2019b). This dual understanding of role is useful as it takes into account both the formal and social dimension of roles and is in line with my overall aim to broaden our understanding of employees' role as communicators.

The second concept used to conceptualize employees' role as active communicators is communication responsibility. The reason that I regard it as a central dimension of employees' role as active communicators is because it is increasingly used in practice when describing and formalizing employees' active role as communicators. For example, The City of Stockholm, one of the organizations studied in this thesis, frames employees' role as communicators in the following way in its communication program:

All employees, supervisors, and managers matter in the communication. Therefore, we all have a responsibility. [...] Employees have a decisive role in the communication of the organization, both internally and externally.

This example illustrates how the concepts of role and responsibility are tightly interwoven in organizational texts in which management explicates employees' communication role-expectations. However, while role is an established concept

in strategic communication research, responsibility has yet received scant attention.

Influenced by how responsibility is approached in moral philosophy, employees' communication responsibility is in this thesis both understood as attributed responsibility, i.e. when organizations make employees accountable for their communication behavior in interactions, and employees' own, internalized, sense of responsibility for communication that influences their observable communication behavior (see also Andersson, 2019a). This definition of communication responsibility takes into account both the extrinsic and intrinsic dimension of responsibility (see also A. M. Smith, 2015).

Aim and research questions

This thesis aims to contribute knowledge to improve and broaden our understanding of employees as communicators by empirically investigating the employee communication role and communication responsibility. More specifically, the thesis provides a more profound understanding of employees as communicators by investigating: 1) why the employee communication role and communication responsibility are increasingly emphasized and explicated by organizations, 2) which internal communication-factors influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility and thereby enacting the various communication roles, employees' attitudes towards communication, and 3) their experience of the communication role and their enactment of it.

This knowledge has several implications for both strategic communication theory and practice. For strategic communication theory, the employee-centered perspective broadens the current understanding of employees as communicators which predominately originates from a management-centric perspective that tends to neglect the experiences and practices of employees. Furthermore, the communication-centered perspective highlights the constitutive role of language/communication for organizations/organizing as well as for individual employees' identity work. By doing so, it deepens our understanding of aspects of the employee communication role, such as the performativity of such role-expectations, that previous research in strategic communication has neglected. This is important as the one-sided management-centered state of current knowledge,

and the neglect of the constitutive role of communication, risks producing unrealistic assumptions and ideals about employees' communication role and communication responsibility that neglect its more problematic consequences. This knowledge thereby risks placing unrealistic and unnecessary burdens on employees as it becomes embedded into organizational practices. By providing knowledge grounded in the experiences and communicative practices of employees, this thesis helps mitigating this by deepening our understanding of the risks from an employee perspective, and also what the communication role and communication responsibility actually entail for employees as they enact it. It also points out concrete factors in internal communication that are relevant for managers to address, such as internal communication climate openness and immediate supervisor communication. Thereby, the thesis offers concrete and empirically grounded insights useful to organizations that deliberately work with raising employees' awareness about their important and multifaceted role as communicators.

To achieve the overarching aim, the following four research questions will be investigated in the articles:

1. How can the emergence of employees' communication role and communication responsibility in organizational texts and talk be understood? (**Article one, article two**)

This research question is investigated in articles one and two in which focus is directed towards how the employee communication role has emerged. These articles contribute a more profound understanding of the emergence of the phenomenon. Thereby, the first two articles complement the following three articles which instead offer a more profound understanding of the phenomenon by focusing on its antecedents, how employees' experience it, and how it is enacted in practice. Article one investigates managers' and employees' attitudes towards communication and communication practitioners. Article two investigates communication practitioners' understanding of themselves and their work to create a more profound understanding of what power effects the strategy discourse has on practitioners "way of seeing" themselves and their practice.

2. What intra-organizational factors influence employees' attitudes towards their communication role and towards taking communication responsibility? (**Article three**)

The second research question is investigated in article three which aims to deepen our understanding of employee communication responsibility by introducing the concept of communication responsibility and thereafter proposing and testing a model containing four internal communication-factors that were hypothesized to influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility.

3. How do employees experience these increasingly formalized communicative role-expectations communicated in organizational text and talk? **(Article four)**

Research question three is investigated in article four which aims to contribute a more profound understanding of the employee communication role from an employee-perspective by investigating how employees relate to and experience ambassadorship. Previous research has predominately approached the employee communication role from a managerial perspective and has thus neglected the employee perspective. Given that the "ambassador" metaphor is one of the most prominent ways of conceptualizing and discussing employees' communication role in the strategic communication literature, the article focuses on this role-expectation, but approaches it from an employee perspective.

4. How is employees' communicative practice (i.e., manifestation of the communicator role and communication responsibility) enacted and how can it be understood? **(Article five)**

Research question four is investigated in article five which aims to contribute a more profound understanding of how employees enact their organization in interactions with external stakeholders, and how a unified enactment is collectively negotiated and accomplished. To do so, I investigate the communicative practice through which employees accomplish a collective enactment of the organization in interactions with external stakeholders.

Overall, the five articles thus provide different, but complementing, perspectives on employees' communication role and communication responsibility. Articles one and two aim to create a more profound understanding of the emergence of the employee communication role as an increasingly formalized role-expectation. Article three aims to create a more profound understanding of its intra-organizational antecedents. And lastly, articles four and five aim to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon through investigating employees' own experiences and communicative practice.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of two main sections – the *Introductory section* and the *Paper section*. The *Introductory section* contains six chapters: 1) the *Introduction*, already presented, in which I contextualize the thesis, specify the problem, point of departure, define central concepts, and present the aim and research questions, 2) the *The employee as communicator* in which I provide an overview of the literature and previous research this thesis engages with, 3), the *Theoretical framework* in which I introduce and discuss the main theoretical foundations relevant for this thesis, namely communication and strategy, the communication-centered perspective on role, and communication responsibility, 4) the *Methodology and empirical material* section in which I elaborate and discuss my philosophical position and explain and reflect upon the overarching research design, choice of methods and how I collected and analyzed the empirical material, 5) the *Summary of articles* in which I summarize the procedures and main findings from the five studies, and finally, 6) the *Concluding discussion* in which I summarize the thesis' overall contribution to strategic communication research and practice, and provide suggestions for future research.

The *Paper section* contains the thesis' five articles in the following order:

1. Is communication too important to be left to communication professionals?: Managers' and coworkers' attitudes towards strategic communication and communication professionals.
2. Being a 'strategist': communication practitioners, strategic work, and power effects of the strategy discourse.
3. Employee communication responsibility: its antecedents and implications for strategic communication management.
4. Employees as ambassadors: coping with new role demands and struggling with identity-tensions.
5. (Dis)ordering at the organizational frontline: A study of frontline workers organizing from a communication-centered perspective.

The employee as communicator

Employees' active role as communicators has been approached by several research fields interested in goal-directed communication activities. Therefore, my review of previous research spans across the research fields of strategic communication, public relations, and corporate communication. However, I begin the overview in brand management given that this research field was among the first to place the spotlight on the role of employees. Then I provide an overview of the body of research in strategic communication which has contributed to knowledge on employees' communication role. This overview is structured chronologically, and I present three phases: the critical phase, the perspective challenging phase, and the maturation phase, in order to situate the different contributions in a coherent narrative that shows how knowledge on employees' communication role has evolved over the years. For this overview, I have mainly focused on research on employees' active communication role published in the main journals relevant to strategic communication researchers, such as *Corporate communications: an international journal*, *International journal of strategic communication*, *Public relations review*, *Journal of communication management*. However, I have made an effort to identify relevant research on the employee communication role published in journals covering related topics that are of interest to strategic communication researchers.

Employees as walking brands

The idea of employees as brand ambassadors who ideally "live the brand" began emerging in academic texts and management books in the early 21st century (e.g., Harris & De Chernatony, 2001; Ind, 2001). These ideas followed the general trend within marketing and brand research, where ideas such as the service logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and co-created nature of brands (Prahalad &

Ramaswamy, 2004), contributed to place the interactions between consumers and employees, and the role of employees, in the spotlight. During the first two decades of the 21st century, the interest in employees' role as brand embodiments literally exploded, as researchers seemingly competed in inventing new concepts for talking about employees' role as brand embodiments. Therefore, beside the most common conceptualizations of brand ambassadorship (e.g., Gelb & Rangarajan, 2014; Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013) and "living the brand" (e.g., Ind, 2001; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Morhart, 2017; Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2011, 2013a), employees' delivery of the brand in interactions with consumers has also been conceptualized as brand supporting behavior (e.g., Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009; Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2013b), branded service encounter (e.g., Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013), brand building behavior (e.g., Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Rudd, 2013), brand champion behavior (e.g., Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009; Wallace & De Chernatony, 2009; Yakimova, Mavondo, Freeman, & Stuart, 2017), brand strengthening behavior (Morhart, 2017), and brand promise delivery (Punjaisri, Wilson, & Evanschitzky, 2008).

Although these previous conceptualizations focus extensively on employees' brand behavior and tend to touch upon communication in a more implicit way, communication lies at the core of brand delivery. For example, Gelb and Rangarajan (2014) conceptualize the brand ambassador as an employee who represents, gathers information, and defends the organization and by doing so depicts brand ambassadorship as a wholly communicative practice. Furthermore, in their study of what makes employees' "living the brand", Maxwell and Knox (2009) defined it by drawing upon organizational citizenship behavior, impression management, and organizational unique behavior and thereby capturing a communicative dimension through the concept impression management. Lastly, Zhao, Yan, and Keh Hean (2018) found that employees who display positive emotions evoke positive emotions in customers and increase their participation which further stress the communicative dimension of employees' delivery of the brand. This more or less explicit communicative dimensions of employees' brand delivery is the key factor that these ideas have been picked up by advocates of the idea of employees as active communicators, as it enables strategic communication researchers to conceptualize employees' role as actors in goal directed communication activities.

Another reason that the ideas of employees' brand delivery within brand management appeals to strategic communication researchers is because brand management researchers have elaborated upon the connection between employees' brand delivery and intangible value, a connection which strategic communication researchers have also highlighted as a main reason why organizations should understand their employees as active communicators (e.g., Heide et al., 2018; Mazzei, 2014). King and Grace (2009, 2010) introduced the concept of employee base brand equity (EBBE), which they argue enhances customer satisfaction and financial performance. Poulis and Wisker (2016) later tested EBBE's impact on organizational performance and their findings conclude that it has a positive impact.

Recently, Ind (2017) argued that organizations nowadays are giving up on the idea that they can control the brand and instead acknowledge that the brand is co-created by both customers and employees. Simultaneously, he argues that the touchpoints where employees and external stakeholders interact are growing in number as the employee–stakeholder interact is taking place on digital platforms, in professional networks, as well as in other contexts online and offline. Due to this, Ind proposes that:

To be judged positively, the organization has to recognize it cannot dictate exactly how employees should behave in all these contexts, and should rather work to create an environment that stimulates people to think for themselves and to respond to situations as they arise. (Ind, 2017, p. 5)

But while Ind suggests that employees should think for themselves and be creative, the premise of the book is that strong leadership, clear purpose and values, and getting employees to “freely” engage with the purpose and values are the key for creating a strong and consistent brand. This double meaning of internal branding is brought up by more critical accounts which highlight both the empowering and control dimension of the internal branding-rhetoric (e.g., Kornberger, 2010; Müller, 2018).

While brand management can be understood as a discipline interested in goal-directed communication activities and thereby should fall under the umbrella term of strategic communication, it is most often understood as a distinct research field and as a sub-discipline of marketing. As a distinct field yet closely related field, it has influenced strategic communication research because conceptualizations of employees as ambassadors and as “living brands” fit nicely into

the narrative of the body of research which forwards the idea of employees as active communicators. Thus, while I saw it as necessary to provide an overview of how brand management has conceptualized employees' brand delivery due to its influence on how employees' role as active communicators has been conceptualized within strategic communication, it is now time to shift attention to the research field of strategic communication as such.

Towards a pluralistic understanding

The interest in employees' role as active communicators in strategic communication can be divided into three phases: the early *critical phase* around 2000 to 2010, the *perspective challenging phase* around 2010 to 2015, and the current *maturation phase* starting around 2015. In the following section I will review the major contributions during these three phases to provide an overview of how employees' role as communication emerged and developed into a distinct body of research within strategic communication.

The critical phase

The first phase, which I have labelled the critical phase, is perhaps best summarized as a critique towards the enthusiastic ideas put forth by brand management research that were reviewed in the previous section. In general, researchers within brand management approach employees' brand delivery from a managerial approach and present the ideas of turning employees into brand ambassadors and "living brands" as a matter of creating the right preconditions such as a strong and clear culture and strong leadership. As these ideas began gaining widespread popularity in organizations, a small number of researchers began challenging these optimistic ideas.

In a very early critique, L. T. Christensen and Cheney (2000) point out that while organizations in contemporary societies provide important symbolic capital for employees to draw on in their identity work, employees are seldom as invested in strategic communication symbolism as management hopes. By pointing this out, they encourage managers and researchers to be skeptical towards the dominant assumption underlying ideas such as "living the brand", namely that employees are deeply committed in the narratives created by top

management, and that they willingly will embody and realize them if they understand them.

Related to this critique, Karmark (2005) pointed out that attempts at making employees "live the brand" are problematic as such efforts often are implemented by managers with a "one size fits all" approach, that managers often overestimate employees' willingness to "live the brand", and that "living the brand" often means a one-sided focus on positive aspects of living, such as passion, commitment, and a disregard of unpleasant life experiences. Morsing (2006) even suggests that attempts to align employees with the brand so that the organization speaks with one voice can backfire as this form of normative control can make employees disengaged rather than engaged.

Lastly, L. T. Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney (2008) argue that as strategic communication has become a central organizing concern, its central ambition of coordinating and controlling communication has expanded to include all communication. Thus, while ideas of employees as ambassadors "living the brand" in brand management theory often are framed to indicate a perspective in which employees are invited to participate in the co-creation of the organizational brand, it must also be acknowledged as a disciplining maneuver as it encourages employees to "live the brand" when interacting with stakeholders, but in a version that is authorized by management. Ideas such as brand ambassadorship and "living the brand" can thus be understood as a new form of normative control, i.e. indirect control which targets the hearts and minds of employees (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Rennstam, 2017).

Although this early body of research in strategic communication focused almost exclusively on the problematic sides of the ideas put forth by brand management, it was followed by a phase which again focused more on the potential of recognizing employees as active communicators. However, while most research up until then focused mostly on the employees' role as brands, the research in the perspective challenging phase, which I will overview next, is characterized by an ambition to broaden the scope and understanding of employees not only as potentially "living brands", but as active communicators in most communication taking place, internally as well as externally, and in daily operations as well as during extraordinary situations such as crises.

The perspective challenging phase

The second phase, which I have labelled the perspective challenging phase, began around 2011 as several texts around this time instead began describing employees as active communicators whose communication contributes to constitute the organization, influence intangible assets such as the image and brand, and contributes competitive advantage (e.g., Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen, 2011; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2011; J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, 2010). Up until this point, most research areas interested in goal-directed communication activities still tended to either neglect the role of employees altogether, or frame them as passive recipients of information and communication activities even though ideas of employees “living the brand” forwarded by brand management had begun making their way into the research discourse of strategic communication, as shown in the previous section. However, by the seminal contribution mentioned above, employees’ role as communicators reached a more widespread audience within the research field.

The foundational contributions during this phase mainly focused either as employees’ role as ambassadors of the organization/brand (e.g., Aggerholm et al., 2011; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2011), or their communication behavior (J.-N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, Dell’Oro, & Kim, 2012). While the latter direction still predominately focuses on employees’ contribution to external communication, the former, while still drawing inspiration from brand management ideas of “living the brand” and “co-creation”, also acknowledges that employees “formulate messages, make critical interpretations, and influence colleagues, managers and customers” (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 202), and by doing so contribute to constitute the organization. Thus, apart from arguing for the necessity of an employee perspective in strategic communication, this body of research has, since its emergence, been one of the main proponents for a communication-centered perspective in strategic communication. However, it is important to point out that while this body of research often sympathizes with the CCO ontological view of organizations as constituted and negotiated in and through communication, it rarely adheres to all the strict ontological and epistemological premises put forth by CCO advocates (see Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011).

Following these seminal contributions, a growing number of studies began acknowledging and giving attention to employees’ role as communicators. While

they show that employees to a greater extent are acknowledged as active communicators, they also highlight the prevalence of the managerial perspective. For example, Mazzei (2014) found in her study of how managers in Italian and American companies value employees, that they value employees as communicators. Additionally, Zerfass and Franke (2013) further stressed the importance of perceiving employees as active communicators, but focus on how communication managers can support managers and employees. Furthermore, Dreher (2014) describes employees as powerful brand ambassadors online, but mainly focuses on prescribing how communication practitioners should manage employees to cultivate their potential.

While the managerial perspective still prevails even within studies of employees' role as communicators, there has also emerged a body which instead takes an interest in what employees do when they participate in strategy making, thereby further stressing the strategic importance of employees by acknowledging their strategizing, and empirically studies how they contribute to strategic processes. Aggerholm, Asmuß, and Thomsen (2012) exemplified how employees actively participate in strategizing when they interpret strategy texts – an interpretation often resulting in either acceptance, ambiguity, or rejection of the strategy. While organizations often are stuck in a traditional hierarchical way of managing employees through rules and regulations, Leah (2012) instead showed how inviting employees into the strategic decision-making enabled employees to vent their frustration for being excluded, and to provide input. Another such attempt to make employees participate in strategizing is studied by Aten and Thomas (2016) who show that new technology enables employees to participate in strategizing regardless of potential time and space restrictions. In the neighboring field of organizational communication, Kopaneva and Sias (2015) study notes that employees contribute to organizational missions and vision, but showed that employees' and organizational versions of mission and vision substantially differ from those of managers. While not drawing on strategy theories, Gulbrandsen and Just (2013) show how employees contribute to the meta-narrative of the organization Novo Nordisk.

It was during these formative years that employees' role as communicators emerged as a distinct body of research in strategic communication. And while the seminal works such as Heide and Simonsson (2011) and Aggerholm et al. (2011) still drew much inspiration from brand management, the above review

shows that the scope broadened to include the concept of communication behavior, the idea of communication as constitutive of organizations, and employee strategizing, i.e. their doing of strategy. As will be evident in the next section, these ideas were further developed in what I call the maturation phase, where they were complemented by additional approaches and concepts.

The maturation phase

The maturation phase symbolizes the stage where the body of research interested in employees' role as communicators can be said to have been established as a sub-area within strategic communication, devoted to deepening our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility. It is also during this phase that this thesis has been written, starting in October 2015. While continuing the avenues staked out during the perspective challenging phase, this phase is also characterized by greater attention to employees' communication behavior online and on social media given these communication platforms' increasingly central role in contemporary organizations and society.

One of the most researched concepts in relation to employees' role as communicators is employees' communication behavior (ECB) conceptualized and operationalized by J.-N. Kim and Rhee (2011). ECB consists of employees' information sending and gathering as well as their micro-boundary spanning, i.e. employees function as bridges between environment and organization and this is measured through self-reporting surveys sent out to employees. In their study, Kim and Rhee identified symmetrical internal communication and organization-employee relationships as antecedents to positive employee communication behavior. In succeeding studies building on Kim and Rhee, Kang and Sung (2017) confirmed that symmetrical communication is an important factor for ECB. Furthermore, Krishna and Kim (2015) showed in their study of employees' posts on Facebook that employees' communication behavior mainly was motivated by positive factors such as pride, nostalgia, gratitude, and negative such as anger, and frustration. Lastly, Lee (2017) showed that high-level employees are more likely to be active communicators, and that it is important to manage relationships differently depending on which level the employee is at.

As previously mentioned, a growing sub-branch of investigations into employees' communication behavior is their communication behavior on social media. In their studies on employees' communication behavior on internal social

media (ISM) platforms, Madsen (2016) and Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) showed that employees actively contribute to constituting the organizational identity, and that they, through self-censoring strategies, improve the quality of their communication. Additionally, from a managerial perspective, Madsen (2017) identified four challenges when introducing internal social media, such as a lack of employee' understanding, employee self-censorship, that social media were not part of employees' daily routines, and that managers supported ISM in words but not in action. Furthermore, Madsen (2018) found that truly participatory communication on ISM capable of changing the organization only develops when employees genuinely feel that they are allowed to voice their critique. In a recent study on employee voice on ISM, Madsen and Johansen (2019) identified eight discursive tactics employees use to move operational issues to the strategic level thereby making them visible to managers and other employees. In another study on employees' communication on ISM, Gode (2019) identified three dialogue strategies employees tend to use when generating ideas on social media. In a related study, Gode et al. (In press) identified psychological conditions that either enable or constrain employee engagement on ISM. In a study of employees' social media behavior during crises, Opitz et al. (2018) found that employees pose an equally severe threat for the reputation of the organization as do customers and other stakeholders, which indicates that organizations must take the "threat" (as they define it) of employees seriously. Similarly, Ivens, Schaarschmidt, and Könsgen (2019) found that job demands are positively associated with turnover intention, which in turn increases employees' bad-mouthing on social media. Lastly, B. G. Smith, Stumberger, Guild, and Dugan (2017) found that perceived power and stake influenced employees' engagement on social media.

As highlighted here, this sub-body of research has contributed an employee perspective, as well as several in-depth case studies which have contributed a more profound understanding of employees' communication role and behavior. Studies taking a managerial perspective are still frequent. For example, Ewing, Men, and O'Neil's (2019) study of how communication managers use social media to engage employees, identified several best practice strategies for managers to use. Similarly, Walden (2018) identified three patterns used by communication managers to guide employees' social media use: these being technical support for the employees, supporting employees attending organizational approved events, and monitoring employees.

One newly introduced concept that has gained significant attention is the concept of employee advocacy (Men, 2014b; Men & Jiang, 2016). It is defined by Men (2014) as a “the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by an employee externally” (p. 262), and focuses exclusively on employees’ role as positive advocates. As such, it explains part of employees’ communication role. However, this dimension of employees’ communication role, when emphasized in isolation, is problematic given its one-dimensionality and strong emphasis on promoting and defending one’s organization. Thus, while it aptly captures one side of employees’ communication role, it also contributes to portraying employees’ communication role in a similar manner to the New York Times story on Amazon employees mentioned in the introduction.

While concepts such as employee advocacy have been introduced during the current maturation phase, the phase has so far mainly been characterized by the collective effort by researchers to create a more pluralistic understanding of employees’ communication role that sheds light on the practice, antecedents, and consequences from several perspectives, both managerial and employee. The most comprehensive overview to date is provided by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) who conducted a state of the art review of how employees are conceptualized in public relations, strategic communication, corporate communication, and brand management. They identified around 29 different conceptualizations of employees’ active communication behavior, and reduced them into an ideal typology consisting of eight roles that employees are expected to fulfill: embodiment, promotor, defender, scout, sensemaker, innovator, relationship builder, and critic, and is to date the most diverse conceptualization of employees’ communication role.

But while the spotlight is increasingly placed on employees’ communication role, and it can be argued that this has emerged as a particular sub-body of research of strategic communication due to its growing number of contributions, the research field of strategic communication still tends to be overly focused on the practice and contribution of communication managers and thereby neglecting the contribution of all organizational members (Heide et al., 2018). Heide et al’s call for researchers to embrace the CCO perspective on communication and organizations, and the even more radical ideas put forth by Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a) who encourage researchers to embrace a purely processual and relational understanding of organizations and strategic communication are however yet to be answered.

For example, within the greater body of research on internal communication, which the research of employees' communication role either is situated within or related to, it is not until recently that researchers have started to pay attention to the active communication role of employees. Even in newer studies, focus is often on how internal communication increases employee satisfaction and engages them (e.g., Men, 2014a; Tkalac Verčič & Pološki Vokić, 2017; Welch, 2011, 2012). Researchers interested in strategic internal communication often study concepts such as engagement (e.g., Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2014; Kompasno & Sridevi, 2010), commitment (e.g., Goodman & Gianluca, 2014; Hill, Seo, Kang, & Taylor, 2012), identification (e.g., Broch, Lurati, Zamparini, & Mariconda, 2018; Maier & Aggerholm Andersen, 2017), involvement (e.g., Ashish, Bishop, & Dow, 2012), and intent to stay (S. Kim, Tam, Kim, & Rhee, 2017). Hence, there is still a strong focus on depicting employees as recipients who should become emotionally involved and committed through strategic internal communication, rather than a depiction of employees as active communicators.

However, this is changing within this body of research as well. Omilion-Hodges and Baker (2014) talk about employees as important organizational ambassadors and highlight how managers create negative employee talk which has consequences for the organizational identity. Spear and Roper (2016) noted the important contribution employees make to sensemaking process in organizations, and argued that both positive and negative stories are opportunities for management interventions. Suh and Lee (2016) proposed a way of segmenting employees to better account for internal diversity to improve internal communication so that employees fulfill mission and stay in the organization. Thus, also within the body of research on strategic internal communication, employees are increasingly depicted as active communicators.

Another concept that is gaining significant attention in strategic communication research focusing on internal communication and the employee communication role as well as the employee communication role in general, is the concept of employee voice. Employee voice has previously been given significant attention in human relations research (e.g., Cox Edmondson, 2006; Miles & Mangold, 2014), but is increasingly utilized by strategic communication researchers due to its empowering potential framing the voice of employees as important for the organization. For example, Ruck, Welch, and Menara (2017) explore employee voice as an antecedent to employee engagement and found that

if employees are allowed to have a say internally, they become more engaged. Recently, H. Kim and Leach (2020) identified communication climate as a significant antecedent to employee voice. In another recent study, Wæraas and Dahle (2020) demonstrated that organizational attempts at creating a monophonic corporate voice by internal reputation management where employees, for example, are encouraged and trained to act as ambassadors, risk restricting employee voice. As shown by these studies, employee voice is a promising concept for talking about the employee communication role in a way in which employees truly are conceived as active communicators whose voice is important instead of being reduced solely to an instrument for management.

Concluding the overview

These three phases capture the central stages in the development of the growing body of knowledge on employees' communication role. The idea of employees as active communicators initially emerged in the critique towards ideas forwarded in brand management. Then around 2011, employees' role as communicators was staked out as a distinct body of research by several seminal studies arguing for the importance of a perspective shift on employees. Since then, the body of knowledge has continued to grow, and the recent study by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) highlights that the current body of research is quite pluralistic both in terms of perspectives and methods. However, while it would be misleading to claim that the body of research is dominated or paralyzed by one perspective or one specific method, some preferences can be pointed out.

Firstly, the management-centered perspective is still predominant in strategic communication. In recent years, there has been an increase in studies interested in taking an employee-perspective, such as studies of employee voice or employee participation in strategic decision-making. However, these are still a small minority compared to studies that prescribe how managers should foster employees' active communication behavior in line with a management desired brand, and thereby turn them into "living brands".

Secondly, although calls have been made for researchers to embrace an understanding of organizations as constituted in and through communication (e.g., L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a; Heide &

Simonsson, 2011; Heide et al., 2018), those who embrace it tend to focus on employees' communication behavior, but downplay the relationship between employees' communication and organizing about how employees' communication contributes to organizing processes through which the organization is ongoingly accomplished and negotiated. Secondly, the studies that actually have embraced a communication-centered perspective of employees' role are scarce. Instead, the role is often used as a heuristic explanation for the various responsibilities employees' have as regards communication. Thus, little is known about how employees' communication role as such is commutatively constituted.

Thus, my point of departure in an employee-centric and a communication-centric perspective is an ambition to improve and broaden the current body of knowledge, and to answer some of the calls made in previous research.

Theoretical framework

In strategic communication, there is a small but growing body of research calling for strategic communication researchers to embrace emerging perspectives on communication and strategy. More specifically, they encourage researchers to take into consideration the constitutive function of communication and to disregard the idea of strategic communication as purely a managerial activity to simulate a broader understanding of how strategic communication can be understood (L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016a; Heide et al., 2018). Ideas put forth by proponents of this body of research have influenced me in taking my employee-centric and a communication-centric point of departure in this thesis. In the following chapter, I will explain in more detail how my adherence to a communication-centered understanding of strategic communication has guided how I have approached employees' communication role.

As will be apparent from my framework, communication acts as a metatheory in this thesis and thereby shapes how I approach strategic communication, as well as the concepts strategy, organization, and role which are important to my project.

A communication-centered perspective

While a more constitutive understanding of communication was acknowledged by the editors of *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015), the latest attempt of leading researchers to define the field does however show the doubt still existing regarding the viability of such an understanding. Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, and Werder (2018) argue that emerging ideas such as the constitutive role of communication risk contributing to obscure the differences between strategic communication and other disciplines and thereby prevent the creation of a distinct body of research. However,

while being skeptical towards such an understanding of communication, the authors do not reject it altogether as long as there is a focal entity “for whom the conversation or issue is strategic” (p. 493).

This shows that the constitutive perspective on communication has made a mark and is taken into consideration by the main proponents of the field. However, it also shows that it is still to a great extent a rather marginal and contested perspective within the main body of strategic communication research. This view is shared by van Ruler (2018) who on the one hand has witnessed a development in which constitutive perspectives on communication are increasingly common and accepted, but on the other hand argues that the concept of communication is used without further explanation and that it still, to a large extent, is thought of as a one-way process at worst and a two-way process at best. From van Ruler’s viewpoint, strategic communication as a research field should embrace the constitutive understanding of communication as metatheory for strategic communication.

Van Ruler’s viewpoint has also been promoted by Heide and Simonsson (2011), Heide et al. (2018), and L. T. Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) who all have advocated the usefulness of the CCO perspective for broadening the scope of strategic communication and understand it as a collective effort instead of a concern for communication managers. Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a, 2016b) have to date provided the most elaborated alternative definition to what they describe as traditional understandings of strategic communication rooted in modernist thinking. Their definition of strategic communication, which I adhere to, entails an understanding of strategy as an ongoing “messy” communication process of co-creation involving actors unable to step out of the process, and who thus simultaneously condition and are conditioned by the process. Embedded in this definition of strategic communication is an understanding of strategy which requires one to place communication in the center, and thereby motivate the communication-centered point of departure which I take in this thesis.

My understanding of communication is heavily influenced by the Montreal version of CCO’s pragmatist-influenced understanding of communication as action (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). According to Cooren, one of the main proponents of the Montreal school, communication implies at least two actors, an agent and a recipient, who are “acting on behalf of, in the name of, or for someone or something else” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 290), a principal. This principal can be an organization, but it can also imply everything from concrete

“things,” such as a strategy or a uniform, to abstract “things” such as an emotion or the idea of a planning meeting. Central to the CCO version of CCO is thus that not only humans communicate, but also “things” such as objects and feelings. According to Cooren (2018), materiality is central for understanding how things come to act in and through communication. He argues that we should understand materiality as a “matter of degree”, where some things, such as a uniform, have a greater degree of materiality than other things, such as an idea. However, both must be made present through communication by an actor to be able to act in a communication event.

In the following, I will briefly elaborate upon how in this thesis I understand two central concepts related to strategic communication, namely strategy, and organization.

Strategy from a communication-centered perspective

My take on strategy, or strategizing, is influenced by the larger “turn” towards understanding strategy as a micro-level social activity which takes into consideration the strategic aspect of organizing (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2015). From a strategy-as-practice perspective, strategy can be understood as “a situated, socially accomplished activity” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007, p. 7). This socially accomplished activity is often conceptualized by strategy-as-practice researchers as *strategizing*, which can be understood as “those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, pp. 7-8). Thus, instead of the traditional understanding of strategy as something the organization “has” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), strategy-as-practice researchers instead emphasize that all organizational members contribute to strategy-making, i.e. strategizing. In an attempt to explain strategy from a practice perspective, Whittington (2006) offered a framework in which he proposes that strategy consists of three “components”: 1) *practices* as “shared routines of behavior, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using “things” (p. 619), 2) *praxis* which refers to the activity, i.e. the actual doing of strategy, and 3) *practitioners* which refers to those who do strategy (Whittington, 2006).

In recent years, a growing number of researchers have highlighted the constitutive, or performative, function of strategy and thereby placed communication at the fore also in strategy research (e.g., Fenton & Langley, 2011; Vargha, 2018;

Vásquez, Bencherki, Cooren, & Sergi, 2018). By doing so, they have not only brought together the closely related perspectives of strategy-as-practice and CCO, but also further shown the usefulness of departing from a communication-centered perspective for investigating the complex accomplishment of organizing.

Understanding strategy as a socially accomplished activity and negotiated in communication was for me the main reason that I selected to study employees. Therefore, strategy as a socially accomplished activity should, like my understanding of the constitutive role of communication, be understood as a metatheory which on a more general level has guided me especially at the formative phase of this thesis project. It is important to point out however, that I do not reject the idea of strategy as an object as it can serve as such in an interaction where an employee or manager refers to “our strategy” to influence the interaction in a specific way (see also Cooren, 2018).

Organization from a communication-centered perspective

To understand why employees should matter to strategic communication researchers, it is also necessary to explain in more detail how I approach the concept of organization in this thesis.

The concept “organization” was for a long time taken for granted as the smallest unit of analysis in strategic communication (L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011), and it was self-explanatory to define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an *organization* to fulfill its goals (Hallahan et al., 2007). However, as more and more disciplines were incorporated under the umbrella term of strategic communication, the idea of the formal organization as the unit of analysis was no longer considered satisfactory. While attempts to broaden the understanding by introducing the concept of “communicative entity” were made, a growing number of researchers have called for a reconsideration of the idea of entity-thinking altogether.

Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a) argue that the idea of organizations as entities must be abandoned altogether in favor of an understanding of organizations as relational networks constantly re-formed. According to Gulbrandsen and Just, the concepts of *structure*, *process*, and *purpose* are useful for defining the networked organization. A networked organization is made up of a structure consisting of the various relationships that are formed and re-formed; it is made up

of procedures which constrain the actions of its members through their roles and positions in their network, and it is defined through a unifying purpose which directs the members' actions towards a common aim or else the network would lose its *raison d'être*.

I largely agree with Gulbrandsen and Just's definition of an organization, with the only difference that I, when it comes to conceptualizing organization, lean more towards the both and neither perspective suggested by Taylor (2014), one of the leading figures within the Montreal school within the CCO strand of organization theory. Taylor suggests that if we understand the basis of communication as transactional¹, then process (organizing) and entity (organization) "become merely artefacts of the constructive communicational logic (Taylor, 2014, p. 35). Important here is to understand that identities of both individuals and organizations are constructed by the communicative process, but also that "process [...] has no meaning in the absence of an encounter of entities" (Taylor, 2014, p. 35). Thus, while I at large agree with Gulbrandsen and Just's (2016a, 2016b) notion of organizations as networked socio-material constructs, I still consider the idea of the organization as an entity evoked in interaction by participating actors as an important part of understanding the function of organizations in communication processes. Explained differently, while I view organizations as constituted in communication, I also view them as necessary entities that interactants must make present as a significant symbol/ordering device to be able to have a meaningful conversation. Thus, my understanding of organization is also grounded in CCO, and especially the Montreal school's pragmatist influenced version in which communication is understood as what holds beings, whether human or non-human, together through a third being (e.g., organization) (Cooren, 2018). This idea, usually called *unit of co-orientation* (also depicted as A–B–X) is the foundational building block of organization. This idea further

¹ Simpson (2009) explains transaction in the following way: while meaning is shared by actors in interaction, the actors are the continuously emerging meaning in transaction. Simpson builds on Mead and his notion that through a "conversation of gestures" we come to "understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted" (p. 1334). Through our gestural conversations social meanings emerge. Here, Mead's idea of the "me" is central, as it is the "me" which represents the collective social meanings that a person has reflexively acquired through transaction, and that the "I", the other part of the self, can respond to. Taylor himself gives examples of marriage and buying a product as situations which over time have been "ascribed" certain meanings which frame the interactions taking place. Here, the concept of "significant symbols", similar to Cooren and Caidor's (2019) notion of "ordering devices", such as "priest" and "parents in law" during a wedding, is essential as they facilitate our understanding by enabling us to make use of symbols that we hold more or less in common.

shows the importance of also understanding organization as the meaningful entity which A and B are oriented towards. A and B can refer to two employees, but also to an employee and a customer, which are the actors and type of interaction that I study in article five.

Role from a communication-centered perspective

In this thesis, the concept of role is used, as it has become an established concept for explicating employees' various communicative "functions" essential for negotiating and accomplishing organizing and organization. As explained in the introduction, I define role partly as Madsen and Verhoeven (2019), i.e. "a set of communication activities that an employee is expected to perform" (p. 146) to capture the formal nature of roles, produced through managerial expectations, and partly as that which emerges through social interactions and expectations beyond those of managers. This dual understanding of role is useful as it takes into account both the formal and social dimensions of roles and is in line with my overall aim to broaden our understanding of employees' role as communicators.

Most contemporary conceptualizations of *roles* can be said to originate from two theoretical traditions: social psychology and symbolic interactionism (Martin & Wilson, 2005). In recent decades, critical and postmodern influences have however developed role theory. One influential definition of role was made by Linton in his book *The study of man* (1936) where he defined role as the responsibilities associated with a position or status. Linton considered interaction to be governed by what was expected by a specific position, which gave rise to what usually is referred to as structural role theory (Martin & Wilson, 2005). This theory assumes that shared expectations on different roles an agent can enact through its position or status are inscribed into the culture, and thereby govern interaction. Another influential contributor to structural role theory was Parson, who conceptualized role as an essential social mechanism positioning individuals in the social structure (Martin & Wilson, 2005). I do however to a greater extent embrace the understanding of roles emanating from symbolic interactionism which disregards the structural role theory's idea of roles as something stable, and instead conceives them as emerging and evolving through and in interaction. Thus, while I believe that ideal typologies such as Madsen and Verhoeven's

(2019) are useful from a theoretical viewpoint as they provide clarity regarding some important communication responsibilities employees carry out in their work, I believe that it is important to go beyond these strict typologies when empirically exploring employees' communication role and to understand that roles, just as identities, are constantly negotiated, contested, and evolving.

Given that role theory is used extensively in public relations, I feel the need to briefly relate my understanding and pragmatic use of the concept of role in relation to this body of research. The theory of public relations and communication manager roles was firstly introduced by Broom and Smith (1979) as they argued that "practitioners approach their jobs differently and have different types of relationships with their clients" (p. 47), meaning that practitioners' roles are socially defined. In their study, Broom and Smith identified and tested four roles: the expert prescriber, the communication facilitator, the problem solver, and the communication technician. In a later article, Dozier (1984) argued that these roles can be collapsed into two; the manager and the technician. Especially the dichotomy between managers and technicians has had a very strong influence on both public relations theory and on practitioners' understanding of the job, as it has acted as a normative framework for explaining the desired role of public relations practitioners and communication managers. Role theory is still relevant today in both public relations theory and strategic communication. For example, Steyn (2002, 2009, 2018) has written extensively on the roles of public relations practitioners, and recently Zerfass and Franke (2013) suggested that strategic communicators internally take on the roles as consultants and enablers when interacting with other organizational members.

To understand the assumptions underlying the understanding of roles in public relations, one has to return to Broom and Smith (1979) and their original article, as studies often simply refer to their article instead of providing their own definition of roles that practitioners take on. While Broom and Smith have a quite elaborated and interaction-based definition of role, which shows in their understanding of role as both an approach to one's job and as a specific relationship one has to another person, the resulting typology of roles prescribed by Broom and Smith and their followers obscures the contested and processual nature of roles. Thus, while role theory is useful for conceptualizing and presenting certain facets of how employees embrace and enact communication roles, the dominance of this way of conceptualizing role in public relations and subsequently strategic communication thus obscures the ongoing negotiation and

constitution of identities that is important for gaining a more profound knowledge of communication roles.

Therefore, while I use the concept of role established in strategic communication, I draw extensively on the concepts of identity and identity work for my own understanding of role. Self-identity is one of the most researched concepts in social science. However, despite that, there still exists no unified understanding of identity. However, according to Gioia, this is because:

[...] that is just the way most people prefer it. Maintaining a certain optimal amount of ambiguity in defining myself grants me some latitude over time and context to harbor a wide range of opinions, beliefs, and values; to engage in many varied actions; and to see myself as an adaptive individual. (p. 20)

In recent years, postmodern ideas have further developed how we view identity. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) introduced the “crystallized self”, a metaphor that captures the self’s multidimensional character that develops into “different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained.” (p. 186). Their conceptualization of identity enables a broader understanding and enables richer explanations of how identity is formed and shaped over time by different discourses in society and at work.

In line with a more constitutive and processual understanding of identity, the concept of identity work has gained popularity during the last decades. The most frequently used definition was given by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), who defined it as when people engage in “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (p. 1165). Their definition focuses on the internal process of reflection, but others, such as Watson (2008), have emphasized that identity work also is a social process where people form their identities together with others, and by engaging with organizational discourses.

It is in this more processual and discursively influenced way that I understand and conceptualize employees’ communication role. Employees’ communication role in relation to their work and position is not a real set of fixed responsibilities. Rather, they are constructed through the interplay of an employee’s identity work, organizational and managerial discourses and interactions with other people. Thus, as managerial discourses play greater emphasis on employees’ communication role and communication responsibilities, it is reasonable to assume that

employees start to engage with these expectations more actively in their identity work, either embracing or rejecting them.

Concluding the theoretical framework

In this chapter, I have presented my theoretical framework in more detail. I have explained what I mean with a communication-centered perspective, i.e. a perspective that has communication as metatheory and which subsequently shapes my understanding of strategic communication, strategy, organization, and role. In this chapter, I have also clarified my position within strategic communication, and explained that I join previous research that departs from a “communication perspective” on strategic communication. This entails that I view strategy as a socially accomplished activity, organizations as constituted through communication, and role as a communicative but rarely stable accomplishment.

Methodology and empirical material

In this chapter, I will firstly explain my pragmatist position. The initial reflexive philosophical discussion is then followed by a method section in which I explain how I have collected and analyzed my empirical material. In this latter method section, I also reflect upon the matters of quality and ethics as an understanding of these matters in relation to one's method is vital for assessing the knowledge produced.

A pragmatist position

Strategic communication as a research field has both developed from and embraces perspectives ranging from functionalism and realism to social constructionism. In such a pluralistic research community, it is difficult to thoroughly engage in conversations without at least accepting the *possibility* of the simultaneous existence of both one Truth and/or several truths, and without accepting the prospect that we will probably never settle on a definite view of truth(s) once and for all. In line with the pragmatist perspective suggested by Gulbrandsen and Just (2016b), in this thesis I embrace the possibility that the social world might simultaneously be objective and relative, what Gulbrandsen and Just describe as an:

“[...] empirical existence consisting of different layers (truths, meanings, traditions, etc.), some objective, some subjective, some a mixture of both. Moreover, some apparently objective layers may turn subjective and vice versa. And all of this happens in the social, inter-subjective process of trying to understand what is at hand.”
(Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016b, p. 48)

Gulbrandsen and Just argue that a pragmatist perspective entails an accommodating and tolerant stance towards other perspectives than one's own. In such a

pluralistic field as strategic communication, this can create a more constructive conversation in the research community as committing to it entails that you consciously attempt to maintain an openness to others and avoid the counterproductive tendency of digging methodological trenches. Instead, it encourages you to strive to engage and maintain a constructive, although sometimes critical, dialogue with all perspectives. I strongly agree with Tsoukas (2009) when he writes that constructive conversations between different theoretical lenses are essential for a research community as they refine the debate that keeps the research community's conversations alive and thereby aid our understanding of the studied phenomena. Thus, while pragmatism is but one perspective among others, I sympathize and adhere to its aspiration to be open-minded. However, this should not be misunderstood as an "anything goes" approach that some interpretations of the pragmatist perspective have been accused of (Denzin, 2012). Rather, it should be understood as an aspiration to accept competing perspectives and an ambition to constructively engage with them instead of simply rejecting or disqualifying them due to a disagreement regarding the nature of their Truth/truths claim(s).

A pragmatist perspective does however entail another commitment besides the acceptance of the "anti-representational view of knowledge" (Rorty, 1999, p. xxvi), which entails that the desire to represent reality in the most accurate way (subjectively or objectively) is not considered the main aim of science. The second commitment that the pragmatist perspective entails is ascribing to its basic premise, namely that the meaning (and importance) of ideas should be evaluated based on their consequences rather than their causes (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011), or as Peirce phrases it in what today is considered the originating maxim of Pragmatism:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Peirce, 1878, p. 293)

This, in short, means that we should consider the potential consequences of our knowledge and evaluate knowledge on the basis of whether it is "useful" or not. Pragmatism entails an assumption that knowledge of the world is inseparable from agency in it (Legg & Hookway, 2019), and as we are all participants (practitioners) in our social world, no matter if we are researchers or practitioners, we all "continuously construct and re-construct the social meanings that shape our

thought and actions” (Simpson, 2009, p. 1333). By accepting this, and directing attention to in what way knowledge can be “useful” to a particular group, one thereby brings the discussion “closer” to the social world that is being studied and simultaneously opens up for the critical discussion on what the knowledge we produce *does* as we, as active participants in our social world, contribute to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of meaning through the research we conduct. While this give rise to a new question, namely how to evaluate the practical consequences of knowledge production, I take inspiration from the *phronetic* approach suggested by Flyvbjerg (2001) where you as a researcher attempt to contribute to the reflexive analysis and discussions of values and interests in order to contribute to a more enlightened debate on a certain topic. Research guided by phronesis thus strives “to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 140). My responsibility as a researcher is then to reflect upon how I can produce knowledge which informs relevant actors how and why things might and perhaps should be done differently. In my case, providing an employee-centric and communication-centric perspective on employees’ role as communicators enables me to contribute such knowledge as it places the employee in the center and thereby challenges the current “way of thinking” of the employee communication role which has emerged predominately out of management-centric research. The insights regarding how this idea has emerged, how employees experience these role-expectations, and how they are communicatively practiced, produced by this thesis thereby benefit both employees and managers as they favor and offer a “way of thinking” of employees concretely grounded in employees’ actual experiences and practice instead of unrealistic managerial ideals of employees “living the brand”.

Studying employees’ communication role

The purpose of this section is to show how I have planned, designed, and conducted my thesis project to fulfill the project’s overarching aim to contribute knowledge which improves and broadens our understanding of employees as communicators by empirically investigating the employee communication role

and communication responsibility. In this chapter, I will explain my overarching research design for the project as a whole, while simultaneously refraining from mixing methods in each sub-study. I will also explain and discuss my collection and analysis of the empirical material. Finally, I will also reflect upon the matters of quality and ethics in relation to my studies.

Overarching method strategy

Given my aim to contribute knowledge which improves and broadens our understanding of employees as communicators, I identified a need to approach the phenomenon broadly and investigate potential communicative antecedents, employees' communicative practice, and how their communication role is understood and experienced by employees as well as by other relevant actors. To concretize the purpose of the overall thesis project, and in line with the conventional view on research strategy (Bryman, 2007), I formulated initial research questions to guide the following decisions regarding how to design my project to deepen our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility.

It is however important to point out that my research questions have evolved and changed during the thesis project. As pointed out by Bryman (2007), the idea of the fundamental role of research questions for guiding the early stages of the research design can be considered somewhat of a normative ideal, and has been questioned by more qualitatively oriented researchers who instead argue that research questions gradually emerge during the research project rather than being fixed at the start. While formulating initial research questions in the early stages of the thesis project enabled me to concretize the overall purpose and to plan the method strategy, the thesis project has simultaneously been characterized by an emergent strategy as new insights have emerged and as various emerging possibilities and constraints have influenced my project along the way.

Another factor influencing the research design is the matter of *access*. Tracy (2020) describes the initial stages of a research process as a "dance" between one's research questions and one's access to empirical material. In my case, my involvement in the research project *Communicative organizations*, a four year research project studying the importance of communication for the success and goal-attainment of organizations, gave me access to several case organizations who had

agreed to participate in both quantitative and qualitative studies. This access enabled me to maintain my broad approach in which I intended to conduct both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore employees' communication role and communication responsibility from different perspectives. It also provided me with great amounts of material which would have been impossible to collect on my own. However, this possibility also meant that I had to make some adjustments to my initial plan as the project of collecting all this data posed different types of challenges both to me and my thesis project, as well as to my colleagues.

Besides the identified need to approach the phenomenon of study broadly and from different perspectives, I also identified that a mixed method design would be the best strategy for the overall thesis project given that combining quantitative and qualitative methods is appropriate when one has identified a need for "using different methods for different inquiry purposes" (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989, p. 259). Using a mixed method approach as my overall method strategy enabled me to collect material based on what I conceived would be most suitable for answering each research question. For example, employees' attitudes towards communication and their communication role as well as the exploration of potential antecedents to employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility were deemed suitable for investigating through quantitative methods as in my case I was more interested in gaining an understanding of employees' general attitude patterns towards the communicative dimensions studied. However, as I also identified the need to explore the phenomenon of employees' communication role and communication responsibility in-depth, both how employees experience it and the communication practice as such, I also identified that some research questions were explored through qualitative methods given that they are usually considered suitable when the purpose is to explore a group and population and when there is a need for providing a complex and detailed understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Given the different characteristics of the quantitative and qualitative research processes, it is important to mention is that those sub-studies in which I, or my colleagues, used qualitative methods to collect material (articles two, four, and five) had more of an emergent strategy as the research questions were refined during the research process. In contrast, the sub-studies in which I used quantitative methods to collect empirical material (articles one and three) had a more fixed strategy as the research questions resulted in hypotheses which were then

tested. I will return to the method strategy for each individual article later on. Now, however, I will explain how I have employed mixed method as overarching research design.

A note on my mixed method research design

Good social science is problem driven and not methodology driven in the sense that it employs those methods that for a given problematic, best help answer the research questions at hand. More often than not, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will do the task best. Fortunately, there seems currently to be a general relaxation in the old and unproductive separation of qualitative and quantitative methods. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242)

As explained in the previous section, I considered a mixed method design the most suitable for achieving my overarching aim to empirically explore and deepen our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility from different perspectives. This was partly due to the realization that the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting empirical material would enable me to fulfill my aim to contribute knowledge to improve and broaden our understanding of employees as communicators, and partly due to the possibilities of access.

However, researchers using mixed methods have been critiqued by developers of the approach for their inability to: 1) express how their research fits into current mixed methods research, 2) describe how they understand mixed methods, 3) describe how the approach was applied in their own research, and 4) describe their philosophical approach (Leech, 2010). Therefore, I intend to briefly explain how I have employed the mixed method approach as an overall approach in my thesis project, and how this strategy has enabled me to achieve my aim to explore and deepen our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility.

The influence from both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms has resulted in that it is now difficult to define mixed method in a narrow sense, meaning that the label of mixed methods accommodates research designs ranging from QUAL+quan (predominately qualitative), QUAL+QUAN (equally qualitative and quantitative), and QUAN+qual (predominately quantitative). Within the body of research using mixed methods there is an ongoing debate regarding the relationship between qualitative and quantitative approaches and whether

they are commensurable or not (Denscombe, 2008). While some researchers argue that it is possible to identify common ground between quantitative and qualitative methodologies and emphasize the similarities of the approaches (e.g., Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Reichardt & Rallis, 1994), and some mixed method advocates are explicit with their disregard of epistemological concerns (e.g., Bryman, 2009), others are more skeptical towards the commensurability of quantitative and qualitative approaches given their often varying philosophical premises (e.g., Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Morse, 2003).

As previously explained, I adhere to pragmatism and thereby accept the *possibility* of the simultaneous existence of both one Truth and/or several truths and embrace the possibility that the social world might simultaneously be objective and relative. Pragmatism has been popular among proponents of the mixed method approach as a way to bridge the paradigm chasm between the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (e.g., Denscombe, 2008; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Morgan, 2007). The uptake of pragmatism by mixed method proponents has however been heavily critiqued by Denzin (2012) who argue that pragmatism is mistaken by mixed method researchers as a methodology of “whatever works” which thus obscures the incommensurable differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This fear is visible in my research design as well. My adherence to the pragmatic position and its openness towards the possibility of the existence of both one Truth and several truths should not be understood as an “anything goes” approach to methodology. While through my pragmatic position I embrace what Fay (1996) calls “interactionism”, namely that you should strive to engage other perspectives by focusing on what unites you rather than differentiates you and instead direct attention towards what knowledge *does*, I do not believe in the unreflexive mixing of methodologies within one study. Therefore, I have utilized a mixed method approach as an overarching method strategy, but with one methodology, either quantitative or qualitative, in each specific sub-study. However, given my own belief that you do not measure an accessible reality through quantitative methods, I simultaneously agree with Schwandt (2000) in his statement that “[a]ll research is interpretive, and we face a multiplicity of methods that are suitable for different kinds of understandings” (p. 210). Thus, although I use both qualitative and quantitative methods in this project, my opinion, formed out of my reading of pragmatism and phronesis, is that these should ultimately be evaluated based on how well the knowledge contributes to the reflexive analysis and discussions to

contribute to a more enlightened debate on a certain topic, rather than on their suitability for explaining the social world.

Sampling and selection strategies

Given that the empirical material analyzed in this thesis project to empirically explore and deepen our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility from different perspectives originates from three different sources: the research project communicative organizations in which I was a member, an interview study conducted by me, and an observation study conducted by me, I will explain the sampling strategies for each project individually starting with the Communicative organizations project. Overall, there are mainly three circumstances which have influenced and shaped the sampling strategy and which therefore will be discussed in the remainder of this sub-section. These circumstances are: 1) my participation in a research project in which we co-collected data, 2) the two-step and double-level case selection process involving an initial selection of case organizations for achieving the aim of the research project *Communicative organizations* of which I was a member, and a subsequent selection of case organizations and individuals for achieving the aim of my own thesis project and my specific sub-studies, and finally 3) my choice of mixed method as overarching thesis project method strategy which entails the utilization of both random sampling and purposive sampling depending on whether the sub-study utilized a qualitative or quantitative method.

After deciding that a mixed method approach would enable me to fulfill my aim in the most satisfying way, I then progressed to deciding what type of cases that would enable me to collect relevant and information rich material. Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) argument that the selection of a case is "a matter of identifying the sort of setting that would be more appropriate for investigation of the research problem as currently formulated" (p. 79), while mainly intended for an audience interested in ethnography, aptly summarizes the basic selection criteria. Furthermore, similarly to the initial step of formulation of tentative research questions, the issue of *access* plays a part in the case selection process, something which has been noted in those writings on method which address the research process reflexively and transparently (e.g., Czarniawska, 2007; Tracy, 2020), in comparison to those who depict the research strategy and design process as strictly linear consisting of a number of methodological and method

choices that it is possible to decide upon regardless of potential constraints such as access, time, and ethics (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Most text books on method recommend a *purposive* sampling strategy for a qualitative approach to enable the identification of *information-rich* cases (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2020), and a *probability* sampling strategy for quantitative approach for ensuring a truly random, statistically representative, sample that will allow for *generalization* (Patton, 2015); my approach has, given the circumstances of belonging to a research project, followed a somewhat different logic to some extent, while still adhering to them as much as possible.

Sampling strategy in The Communicative organizations project

I became a member and entered the research project *Communicative organizations* after the design of the research project was completed and I did not participate in the initial case selection process. Thus, some of the case organizations from which I have used empirical material were already selected when I began drafting my own project design. Given the overlaps between the overall aim of the research project and the aim of my thesis project, I considered the material gathered in the project useful for my own aim to explore and deepen an understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility, and therefore I combined the material we collected together with material that I collected on my own. The overall aim of the research project *Communicative organizations* was to increase knowledge about the importance of communication for strategic goal achievement in organizations. This aim was further broken down into various more concrete sub-themes with specific research questions (e.g., Falkheimer et al., 2017). Based on these overall themes, the sub-themes, and their research questions, three of my colleagues then reached out to potential cases that were considered to be information-rich in relation to the aim of the research project. In the end, eleven of the organizations approached wanted to participate. Thus, while the organizations to some extent were self-selected, the sampling strategy for the overall research project follows an intensity sampling approach that manifest the phenomenon intensely and thus provide information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Given that the participating organizations volunteered to participate in the study, and contributed both time-wise and financially, it can be argued that they are more interested in the knowledge produced by the research project than the average organization, and that the participating organizations therefore deviate from the typical organization. However, even

though the volunteering case organizations to some extent can be considered deviating in the sense that most of them have external and internal communication issues high on their agenda, the possibility to gain access to five potentially information rich cases, to me, outweighed the drawbacks of not adhering to a purposeful sampling procedure in the strictest sense.

Besides the sampling strategy for the overall research project communicative organization, the project consisted of one initial quantitative phase and one qualitative phase. For the quantitative phase, we chose a sampling strategy partly based on standard procedure, namely simple random sampling within the whole organization. However, as some participating organizations had specific preferences, the sampling strategies for the quantitative phase in the research project was the following (see also Falkheimer et al., 2017):

- simple random sample within the whole organization,
- simple random sample within one geographic area of the organization,
- simple random sampling and total population sampling within several different divisions/units in the organization (the latter kind of sampling was conducted in units with rather small populations; less than 1,000 employees),
- total population sampling within the whole organization (only conducted in the smallest organization with 250 employees).

After the quantitative phase of the research project was finished, the qualitative phase commenced. At this stage, insights from the quantitative study and interviews with key personnel enabled us to select what we considered to be cases that would provide us with information-rich material on different themes. One of the themes that we wanted to explore deeper was ambassadorship, and the material that was collected on this theme material was then used by me in article four.

Selection of informants for the interview study

In my interview study with communication managers, I was interested in how the practitioners' engagement with, and adoption of, the strategy discourse enable and constrain their understanding of themselves and their work. To better understand how communication practitioners engage with the strategy discourse is important given that "strategic skills" today are considered a hygiene competence for communication practitioners (see Rosén, 2014), and since it is im-

portant to understand the power effects of the strategy discourse in order to understand why employees increasingly are understood and framed as strategic communicators in organizational texts and talk. Altogether, I used a mix of what is best described as a mix of a purposeful/theoretical intensive sampling, and a purposeful snowball sampling. Initially, I purposefully contacted a number of heads of communication as I considered it inevitable that in their work they have had to engage with the strategy discourse. However, I also considered that I was following a theoretical sampling rationale as I purposefully approached practitioners who I believed would engage with the strategy discourse given their position and/or title, and thus would provide me with information rich cases. After each interview, I asked the interviewees if they could recommend additional people to interview. This was done deliberately as I reasoned that the heads of communication that I initially interviewed were likely to recommend people who they considered worked strategically, and who thus had engaged with the strategy discourse. In those cases where I believed that the recommended practitioner could provide me with relevant material, I followed the recommendation. Although it can be argued that this strategy increases the likelihood that the sample supports my argument (Silverman, 2015), my aim was to produce a better understanding of how practitioners engage with the strategy discourse rather than to investigate *if* practitioners engage with the strategy discourse or not. Given that previous research has showed that strategic skills are considered essential skills requested in job advertisements (Rosén, 2014), I considered it more important to get information-rich cases that could contribute to a deeper understanding of practitioners' engagement with the strategy discourse.

Selection of case for the observational study

For the observation study, I initially searched for what is usually referred to as an intensive case (Patton, 2015) in the sense that I was searching for an organization in which the employees' main work task entailed that they interact with stakeholders. This would ensure that I collected information-rich material. However, after some test observations in two organizations, I realized that I had to find an extreme case in the sense that the employees I observed had to have stakeholder interaction as their main job responsibility, or otherwise I would spend more time than I could afford waiting for the type of interaction I was interested in observing. I therefore decided to refrain from doing the study in two organizations that kindly granted me access given that I realized that the

employees did not interact with stakeholders to the extent necessary for me to be able to collect information-rich material. In the end, I managed to identify and gain access to a suitable extreme case, extreme referring to the fact that it was brimming with employee–stakeholder interactions.

While I prefer to describe my observation technique as shadowing rather than ethnography, I still drew inspiration from ethnographic method literature when designing my study. At first, ethnography as method can seem very simple and straightforward (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Although it is difficult to know what one will experience in “the field”, and although the research design process tends to be emergent in character, I still began sketching a preliminary research design to begin reflecting on what I needed to do, and to avoid the most obvious mistakes related to shadowing. In this early stage of the study, I was granted access to one organization where I was able to test-shadow some employees. This test-shadowing gave me some invaluable insights which were useful later on in the study, and which enabled me to realize the importance of identifying and gaining access to an extreme case. Following the insight that I needed to gain access to an extreme case, I started searching for a suitable organization. The process of identifying and gaining access to a suitable case organization took me nearly two and a half years, as several of the organizations I reached out to turned down my request after internal discussions. The reason that they turned down my request was mainly due to the ethical dilemma of how I would ensure informed consent of all the customers that I potentially could observe during my study. I will return to the question of informed consent in my analytical and ethical reflection related to article five later on in this chapter.

The empirical material used in the thesis: summary and reflections on epistemology, ethics, transcription quality, and contextual embeddedness

In this sub-section, I will firstly present an overview of the empirical material resulting from the three studies. After that, I will discuss some questions related to the characteristics of the empirical material and how it was collected.

Table 1 below summarizes the empirical material collected in the three studies and used in the five articles:

Table 1: Overview of empirical material

<i>Article</i>	<i>RQ</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Study object</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Collected between</i>
1	1	Survey	Attitudes	6 486 responses	Oct 15 – Sep 16
2	1	Interviews	Understandings	26 interviews, average 45 min	Mar 15 – Nov 15
3	2	Survey	Attitudes	4 726 responses	Oct 15 – Sep 16
4	3	Interview, Focus groups	Experiences	28 interviews, average 1 hour	Aug 16–Mar 17
5	4	Observation	Communicative practice	1,5 months, 96 hours	May 18 – Jun 18

As explained, part of the empirical material was collected jointly by the researchers in the research project Communicative organizations, and part was collected solely by me in an interview study and an observation study. In the Communicative organizations project, I had the main responsibility for collection of the material in the quantitative phase. In the qualitative phase however, while we conducted approximately 150 interviews, I only conducted three focus group interviews in this phase as I focused instead on finding a suitable extreme case for my observation study, and negotiating access.

One issue in need of discussion is the use of secondary, or project material, and primary data and the mix between them. I have analyzed empirical material that I did not collect or transcribe myself in two of the articles (article two and four). Thus, I will discuss four potential problems with using secondary data and account for my decisions and reasons in relation to these. The four aspects I will discuss are: epistemological concerns, ethical concerns, transcription concerns, and contextual embeddedness.

Firstly, the use of secondary data gives rise to epistemological concerns (Irwin, 2013). Irwin points out that qualitative interviews usually entail an approach to material collection in which the material is constructed during the interview in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee and part of the meaning creation and interpretation are conducted *in situ* as the interviewer and interviewee respond to each other's questions and accounts. Thus, part of the interpretation has already been made during the interviews. Irwin furthermore points out that the characteristics of qualitative research pose an epistemological challenge given that the construction of the empirical material during the interview

is shaped by the research questions, the interviewer's own assumptions, theoretical and methodological preferences. I was aware of this when I decided to use it in my own articles.

However, as pointed out by Irwin, the method of semi-structured interviews, which was used in the research project *Communicative organizations*, has greater transparency than other types of qualitatively collected material as the primary researcher's own role and assumptions are more visible, which make secondary analysis possible and even potentially productive from Irwin's viewpoint. Additionally, I was participating in the research design and formulation of the research questions, and thus had a good understanding of my colleagues' assumptions and ambitions with the empirical material. We continuously discussed what we considered relevant to study, and collectively agreed on what to zoom in on. Furthermore, the interview material that I have used for articles two and four has been collected solely by researchers belonging to the research project. This material was thus collected following a design which we collectively agreed on and with topics that we collectively discussed and agreed on. The ambition with the interviews was to gain employees' own accounts and experiences of ambassadorship, and while I did not collect the majority of the empirical material, I stayed true to the original aim with the interviews in my later analysis, except for my decision to use identity work as theoretical lens (see article four). Furthermore, I agree with researchers such as Hammersley (2010) and Bishop (2009) in their questioning of the privileged awareness of the primary researcher and their belief that the distance of the secondary researcher has the potential to contribute analytical and critical distance.

Secondly, the use of secondary data gives rise to ethical problems related to informed consent. Interviews are usually produced under circumstances involving trust and ethics of care (Irwin, 2013). For example, while one is able to renegotiate informed consent during an observation study as the theoretical focus changes, it is difficult to do this when one is about to analyze secondary interview data, as contacting all interviewees again would be a very time consuming process. We followed the standard procedure and informed the interviewees that we would use the interview material in the research project, and got consent. While I did not conduct all the interviews myself, my participation in the design of the study and in deciding what topics to investigate ensured that my analysis was aligned with what we informed the interviewees we were interested in studying.

Thirdly, the use of secondary data makes transcription quality an important issue. As noted by Poland (2002) transcripts can differ extensively from what has actually been said during the interviews. To some extent, this can vary depending on the accuracy and care of the transcriber. However, this shows that the interpretation process, although commencing already during the interview, continues during the transcription phase. Poland argues that the detailed process of conversation analysis produces the most rigorous, transparent, and credible type of transcriptions, thereby reducing the influence of the quality of transcription. However, transcribing to fulfill the requirements of conversation analysis is painstaking, and might be unnecessary depending on the purpose of the transcription (Poland, 2002). Poland suggest that in large sample sizes where the aim with the interview is to catalogue experiences rather than naturally occurring talk, the rigor of conversation analysis might be unnecessary. In the research project, we conducted verbatim transcriptions of the interviews as we considered this important to be able to analyze how different actors (managers, employees, and communication managers) experience and make sense of the topics we were interested in, such as ambassadorship, internal communication. However, we did not transcribe pauses, emphases, or any other additional information that could disclose how the interviewees talked about certain topics. Given that in articles two and four I was interested in the interviewees' experiences and understandings rather than the conversation as such, I judged the quality of the secondary data verbatim transcriptions (as well as my own primary data) to be sufficient for my purposes as they enabled me to produce the knowledge I aimed for.

Lastly, the use of secondary data makes the contextualized nature of empirical material important to discuss. Irwin (2013) reflects on the possibility to mix empirical material collected in different projects by taking one of her own research projects as examples. In this, Irwin and her colleagues asked "if we could enable a meaningful analytic conversation across datasets" (p. 303). This was a question that I asked myself when I was about to use material from my own interview study which I had conducted prior to the project, together with material that I and my colleagues had collected in the Communicative organizations project. This could pose a potential issue given the contextualized nature of empirical material. However, after assessing the material collected in the two studies, I realized that the contextual embeddedness could instead be seen as a strength.

This was due to the fact that I was able both to analyze accounts on how practitioners engage with the strategy discourse in a study where I explicitly asked them about strategy, and in a study where strategy was not the main focus, but nevertheless was present in the interview accounts. Thus, as recommended by Irwin, I took the contextual embeddedness of the material into consideration, and considered it possible to enable a meaningful analytical conversation between the material I collected on my own, and the material collected by my colleagues.

Zooming in on the five articles: analytical and ethical reflections

Article one

In this study, the project group was interested in managers' and employees' attitudes towards communication and communication practitioners, as this could deepen our understanding of how organizational members perceive communication. Rather than focusing on communication practitioners, which is common in strategic communication, we considered managers and employees as a more suitable sample for investigating the status of communication and communication practitioners in organizations, given that status to a great extent is an interactional accomplishment, for example discernable through the popularity of an individual (Collins, 2004), or group of individuals. Thus, investigating other organizational members' attitudes towards communication and communication practitioners is important to provide a more profound understanding of how others' view communication and communication practitioners. This is due to the fact that it complements previous studies' investigation of the status of communication and communication practitioners which predominately ask communication practitioners to estimate their own status and the status of their work.

The respondents were informed that the survey was voluntary, and were given the standard information one should provide, such as name of the organization conducting the survey, sponsorship, purpose of the study, and anonymity and confidentiality (Fowler, 2014). We did not inform the respondents that by answering the survey they gave their consent, something that we in hindsight should have done. However, if respondents would have reached out to us and asked us to delete their answers, we would of course have complied with their request and their right to always change their mind regarding participation. As I was responsible for administering the survey, I also ensured that all those who e-

mailed or contacted me in other ways and asked me to delete them from the list of respondents were granted their request.

During both the creation of the survey and the presentation of the findings, we took measures to ensure that we did not create questions or present data for a small category of people who because of that might be identifiable (Fowler, 2014).

Article two

In this study, I was interested in understanding how communication practitioners engaged with the strategy discourse to make sense of themselves and their practice. My approach is best described as a combination of life-story interviewing with a conventional interview style that shared similarities to a discursive interview approach. In hindsight, I would have chosen to combine a type of life-story interview with a discursive interview to gain a better understanding of how the practitioners engaged with the strategy discourse both when talking about themselves and their career journey, and when talking about their work. Discursive interviews are an approach to the interview in which you are interested in how certain discourses enable and constrain practitioners (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Tracy, 2020). Today, I have come to the conclusion that choosing a discursive approach from the start might have enabled me to gain even richer material as I would have actively considered its unique aspects, such as the importance of encouraging variety in response, allowing for diversity, and considering the interviewee as an active participant (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). However, at the time of the study, I did not approach strategy as a discourse (as in article two) and therefore did not approach the interviews as discursive interviews. As pointed out by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) however, all interviews are discursive by nature and engage various discourses. The open-ended character of my interviews, where I only had four themes and some back-up questions, and my effort to let the interviewees take charge by encouraging them to talk about strategy in relation to their own career and concrete challenges in their work, did however provide me with varied, diverse and co-constructed material which I considered suitable for a form of discursive analysis, since it had similar characteristics to material constructed during discursive interviewing. After inspecting the secondary material that my colleagues had collected I decided that it was suitable as well, since it shared similar characteristics to my own.

Given my discursive approach, it is important to clarify (as I do in article three) that I do not understand discourses in the traditional structuralist way, but rather acknowledge the interplay between agency and structure. I consider this distinction especially important in relation to the ethical problem with discursive analysis pointed out by Hammersley (2014). Hammersley points out that the discrepancy between discursive interviewers' ambition to give account of specific discourses, and the interviewees belief that the interviewer will document and report their experiences and feelings makes discursive interviewing a deceptive and ethically questionable type of interviewing. However, my acknowledgement of the interviewees agency, and my aim to not only trace the discourses, but to try to understand how the interviewees consciously engage with one of the central discourses in the profession, reduces the deceptive nature somewhat. As it was clear to the interviewees that the interviews revolved around strategy, as I explained to them that I was interested in how they understand strategy in relation to their work, I consider the interviewees to be informed of my intent even though they were not fully aware of my intent to understand *how* the strategy discourse contributes to construct their understanding of themselves and their work.

Article three

Same as for article one.

Article four

In this study, I aimed to contribute an employee perspective on ambassadorship by exploring how employees experience this emerging role-expectation. This would enable me to produce knowledge to complement and problematize existing assumptions predominately originating from a managerial perspective where employees, even though most researchers acknowledge them as active communicators on their own behalf, still are conceptualized as purely organizational resources.

For this study, I used secondary interview material collected by my colleagues, and first hand focus group material produced by myself. The interviews conducted with employees in the Communicative organizations project are best described as conceptual interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) in the sense that the purpose was to explore how employees understand and experience certain concepts such as ambassadorship. A similar approach was taken in the focus

group interviews, although we were aware that focus groups, in contrast to single interviews, produce socially constructed knowledge suitable when you want to understand both group processes and individuals' understandings of, for example, an unexplored topic (Cyr, 2019).

Besides the three focus groups conducted by myself, I exclusively used secondary material in this article. As I already have discussed the issues related to secondary material, I will not do it here.

Article five

In this study, I was interested in investigating employees' communicative practices to contribute a more profound understanding of how employees enact their organization in interactions with external stakeholders, and how a unified enactment is collectively negotiated and accomplished. This knowledge is important given that our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility currently is dominated by assumptions originating from research fields such as brand management that tends to depart from a management-centered perspective and neglects the actual communicative practices of employees.

One issue important to discuss in relation to this study is the aspect of my authority as a researcher. The time when ethnographers could claim that they went out in the field and identified the "true" essence of a culture is long gone. Both postmodern and feminist critique against such knowledge claims – from a single, often white western male, point of view – has shifted attention from the doing of research to the writing about it (Davies, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Thus, contemporary ethnographers, observers, and "shadowers" must be attentive to how their writing on a phenomenon contributes just as much as their actual study of it. Nonetheless, it is still important to remain grounded in practice (Davies, 2008), but remain reflexive throughout all phases of the research process both in the field and when writing up the study. Concern about representation is continuously present when one conducts shadowing. In Czarniawska's (2007) point of view, the entanglement of the researcher is a strength as it makes it hard to objectify the people one is studying. As I discuss in article five, shadowing entails that you, together with the people you study, foreground and background, are different things. My theoretical lens of CCO and (dis)ordering made me foreground the communication events.

To me, the main issues in this study were the ethical issues of informed consent and confidentiality (Davies, 2008). Given that I attempted to study interaction between employees and stakeholders, the issue of informed consent was of utmost concern. How could I ensure that I gained consent from all the people that I would observe during my fieldwork? This question was the main reason that I was denied access to two of the organizations that I contacted and negotiated access to. To the organization that finally gave me access, I explained how I planned to ensure informed consent and confidentiality. Given that I aimed to focus on employees, I explained that my field notes would not contain any detailed information about the customers visiting the office, and that I would anonymize the place and people in my field notes so that it would be difficult to know which office I had conducted my study in. Prior to the study, I informed all the employees and the managers about the purpose of my study and the method I planned to use. I also explained that the nature of observation or shadowing, which is a method with rather open research questions, entails that the research questions can change as you as a researcher gains better understanding of what you are observing, which might result in that the theoretical focus might shift (Davies, 2008).

Davies (2008) furthermore mentions the common question of having to renegotiate informed consent. I was faced with this early on in the study as I and the staff had decided to try to inform every customer about my study. However, we quickly realized that it would interfere with the work of their staffs, *and* also be more confusing for the customers than it would be informative. Given that I did not take detailed notes on the customers' ways of talking and acting, we collectively decided that it was better only to inform them if they specifically asked about who I was, and then explain that I was a researcher conducting a study of the staff.

Summary of articles

In this section, I summarize the articles by highlighting how they contribute to the aim of the thesis to empirically explore employees' communication role and communication responsibility in order to contribute knowledge to broaden our understanding of employees' role as communicators.

Article one

The first article investigates managers' and employees' attitudes towards communication and communication practitioners. This was done through a survey distributed to managers and employees in ten Swedish public and private organizations. In total, 6,486 respondents answered the survey. It shows that both managers and employees perceive communication to be important for individual and organizational success, but that they perceive the role of communication practitioners to be unclear. The findings from the study thereby contribute a more profound understanding of the emergence of employees' communication role and communication responsibility by demonstrating that managers and employees perceive communication as important regardless of the perceived contribution of communication practitioners. This article thus provide a deeper understanding of the emergence of employees' communication role and communication responsibility which is investigated in depth in articles three, four, and five.

Article two

The second article instead investigates the communication practitioners' engagement with, and adoption of, the strategy discourse and what impact this adoption has had on practitioners' understanding of themselves and their work. The empirical material consisted of 26 semi-structured interviews with communication practitioners. Firstly, the study shows that the strategy discourse empowers

communication practitioners to produce accounts of themselves as strategists whose strategic work and expertise in the strategic management of communication is essential to their organization. The discourse enables practitioners to rationalize their self and their work and to distinguish between “worthy” subjectivities and subject positions “unworthy” used to describe less successful practitioners and “ways of working”. Secondly, the study also shows that the strategy discourse empowers practitioners to claim greater intra-organizational power and power over others. This is exemplified by how practitioners produce accounts of themselves as strategic experts coaching other organizational members into becoming skilled communicators, which is considered essential to organizational success. Engagement with key ideas and concepts of the strategy discourse thus provides practitioners with a vocabulary and confidence to claim and justify a more central intra-organizational role through which they exert greater influence over the everyday practices of other organizational members. Through the findings, the study provides a deeper understanding of the emergence of employees’ communication role and communication responsibility which is investigated in-depth in articles three, four, and five.

Article three

The third article investigates communication responsibility by introducing the concept of *employee communication responsibility*, and testing potential antecedents in internal communication that potentially influence employees’ predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. The empirical material used originates from a survey sent out in eleven Swedish public and private organizations. Data were collected from 4,726 employees working in ten Swedish organizations. Half the sample was used for exploratory factor analysis that enabled the identification of a smaller number of factors to construct a model with four hypotheses, and half the sample was used to test the proposed model. The model contained the factors *internal communication climate openness*, *immediate supervisor communication*, *top management–employee communication*, *perceived importance of communication*, and *employee communication responsibility*. The study shows that internal communication climate openness, immediate supervisor communication, top management–employee communication, and perceived

importance of communication influence employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility, and thereby contribute a more profound understanding of antecedents in internal communication relevant for managers to consider. Through the findings, the study provides a deeper understanding of antecedents to communication role and communication responsibility.

Article four

The fourth article instead takes an employee perspective and investigates how employees experience this new role-expectation. The empirical material consisted of 28 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with employees. The study shows that employees embrace the role of ambassador, but that it simultaneously produces identity-tensions which can result in that employees refrain from acting as ambassadors for their organization. Most employees see the ambassador role as part of their work role and as a responsibility of a professional employee. However, the ambassador role can give rise to straining identity-tensions. It is experienced as straining during work at times when employees experience that their preferred self and the self they experience that they have to enact in their work when they interact with external stakeholders differ, for example when the organization has been involved in a scandal. The ambassador role is also experienced as straining off work when employees experience that they have to enact it in situations when they would prefer to enact their "private self", such as when they interact with their family or at parties. Through the findings, the study provides a deeper understanding of the employee communication role from an employee perspective.

Article five

The last article instead investigates frontline workers, i.e. employees whose main task is to interact with external publics/stakeholders, to increase our understanding of their communicative practice, and their enactment of the communication role. The main empirical material consists of field notes collected during 96 hours of shadowing over a period spanning one and a half months. Drawing on CCO as main theoretical framework, and the theory of (dis)ordering in particular, the

study shows that successful ordering of employees to deliver their main task as a unified “face” outwards cannot simply be explained as depending on how successfully management controls or aligns the employees to realize the intended strategies/purpose/primary task. Rather, the ordering of frontline employees must be understood as a complex communicative practice in which the employees in ongoing conversations attempts to fix meaning to avoid disorder and to satisfyingly collectively agree on how to enact the organization in a unified way. The analysis demonstrates that the presence/absence of authority, purpose, and consubstantialization in front office and back office interactions trigger shifts in (dis)ordering. These shifts in turn have consequences to the frontline workers’ accomplishment of their main tasks as the absence of authority, purpose, and consubstantialization generates a fragmented, inconsistent, front office enactment of the organization. Through the findings, the study provides a deeper understanding of employees’ enactment of the communication role and communication responsibility.

Concluding discussion

The idea of employees as important (strategic) communicators has emerged in both strategic communication theory and practice during the 21st century. Researchers increasingly urge managers to consider employees as important communicators, and employees' communication role is increasingly formalized as organizations explicate the importance of all employees taking responsibility for communication in strategies and policies. However, while researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of employees' communication role, the understanding of it is still heavily influenced by idealistic thinking of employees as organizational embodiments of a management-driven idea of what the organization is.

This thesis has problematized this idea and broadened our understanding of employees as communicators by empirically investigating employees' communication role and communication responsibility. Through explicating the phenomenon, the knowledge contributes to challenge widespread idealistic thinking of employees' communication role by improving and broadening our understanding of it, as well as its more problematic consequences.

In the concluding chapter, I will summarize and discuss the contribution of the thesis as a whole. Firstly, I elucidate and discuss what the promoted communication-centered perspective entails. Secondly, I return to the four research questions posed in the thesis and summarize what knowledge they have contributed and discuss what this knowledge implies for strategic communication theory and practice. Thirdly, I summarize the contribution of the thesis, before lastly providing some final implications for organizations.

As I do not believe in simple quick-fix solutions, my ambition with this chapter is to suggest an alternative perspective that encourages researchers and practitioners to approach employees' communication role and communication responsibility in a more reflective and informed manner. It is my conviction that this will reduce the risk that employees' communication role becomes another management "mirage" that produces unrealistic hopes and wishes that cannot be achieved.

A communicative perspective

Conceptualizations of employees' communication role as "living the brand" and the acknowledgement of employees' communication show that previous research to some extent has acknowledged the constitutive role of communication. However, the predominant top-down management-centered perspective shows that the full implications of what a communicative perspective entails are yet to make their mark on theorizing on employees' communication role and strategic communication in general. A communicative perspective on organizations and strategic communication requires more than acknowledging that employees have an important communication role. Instead, it requires an embracement of organizations as constituted in and through communication, and strategic communication as the "practice of a network of actors (assemblages), who are enabled and constrained by possibilities for action (affordances), possibilities that are realized in concrete instances of action (agency)" (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016b, p. 323). With this understanding of organizations and strategic communication it follows that the top-down approach to employees communication role does not suffice, as it echoes a traditional understanding of strategic communication as a concern for communication practitioners and top management whose main responsibility is to ensure that employees comply with and enact their understanding of the organization. The communicative perspective instead stresses that organizing and strategic communication are a collaborative and co-created activity.

The question of communication responsibility thereby becomes even more central from a communication-centered understanding of organizations as it changes the understanding of communication as a question for the top management and communication function, to a responsibility of all organizational actors. This has previously been emphasized by Gulbrandsen and Just (2016a) who argue that communication responsibility is an important avenue for future research given that the multiple actors of organizations "carry responsibility in delivering and maintaining the assemblage" (p. 233), and that "[j]ust as communication has been strategized it must be responsabilized" (p. 233). This thesis has responded to this call through its five studies, improving and broadening our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility. By doing so, it has also answered other calls for an expanded understanding of strategic communication that goes beyond the work of communication practitioners (Heide et al., 2018).

Another contribution of the thesis is its use of CCO as theoretical lens for studying the employee communication. This has been encouraged by researchers who argue that it can expand our understanding of strategic communication (e.g., L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Heide et al., 2018). Yet, CCO has still mostly been used to indicate an ontological position where organizations are understood to emerge from communication instead of being understood as pre-given entities, rather than researchers fully embracing the epistemological premises put forth by CCO advocates. However, in article five, the study contributes such a lens and by doing so shows communication strategizing in practice through employees' collective deliberative enactment of the organization and how such an enactment is made possible.

In the next section, I will switch focus to explaining how the four research questions of the thesis have been answered.

The emergence of employees' communication role in organizations

The first research question addressed how the emergence of employees' communication role and communication responsibility in organizational texts and talk can be understood. This was investigated in article one and article two.

Article one shows that managers on all levels and employees perceive communication to be important both for individual and organizational success, but that the role and contributions of communication practitioners are unclear. By doing so, the findings support the case made by previous research that strategic communication as an organizing principle is shared and practiced not only by top management but by several actors both in and around the organization (L. T. Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). The findings also contribute to problematize the current focus on communication practitioners in strategic communication research. While communication practitioners certainly have an important responsibility for communication, the title of article one, "Is strategic communication too important to be left to communication professionals" poses a thought provoking question in line with the overall argument of this thesis. The answer to the question given by the thesis as a whole, as stressed in the previous

section, is that strategic communication is not the sole responsibility of the communication department or the top management team, but a responsibility of every organizational actor due to the co-created nature of organizations.

The second article contributes a deeper understanding of why employees' communication role has emerged by providing an understanding of the strategy discourse's influence on communication practitioners' understanding of themselves and their work. It has showed that communication practitioners have adopted the strategy discourse, and by doing so have been enabled to construct an understanding of themselves and their work as central to the organization. One implication of this is that communication practitioners thereby understand themselves to have a legitimate claim to define rules and practices that other organizational actors should adhere to, as this is essential for the success and goal attainment of the organization. The strategy discourse provides a vocabulary with which practitioners are able to evaluate themselves and their work, and to make the uncertainty ridden work of communication management somewhat more understandable and predictable as it is made intelligible by the discourse of strategic management.

However, with this follows that strategic communication as organizing principle is characterized more by the logics of classical strategic management, such as goal attainment and control, rather than communicative logics such as participation, co-construction of meaning, and negotiation. The predominance of this top down thinking in strategic communication theory, which is consolidated by the predominance of the classical strategic management perspective in strategic communication, is however challenged by the employee-centered and communication-centered perspective promoted in this thesis as it directs attention to other actors in the organization and places the constitutive role of communication in the center of attention.

The vital internal communication

The second research question concerns which intra-organizational factors influence employees' attitudes towards their communication role and towards taking communication responsibility. This question was investigated in article three.

The findings highlight the importance of internal communication for employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility. This further contributes to contest the idea that it is sufficient that the top management formalize their hopes and wishes into explicit expectations of employees regarding their communication responsibility. Instead, the findings indicate that employees' predisposition to take communication responsibility begins inside the organization. The findings show that it depends on the communication climate openness, the immediate supervisor's communication, the top management communications with employees, and employees' perception of the importance of communication. If employees, for example, perceive that they have a voice and are listened to, and can express critique, they seem to be more inclined towards taking communication responsibility. Thus, creating role expectations does not suffice, as employees' predisposition towards taking communication responsibility instead seems deeply intertwined with organizational communication processes overall. The study thus contributes to show that if organizations want to work deliberately with employees' communication role and communication responsibility, this work must begin with a communicative perspective on the organization as a whole, rather than explicating hopes and wishes in strategies and policies regarding employees' communication role.

The employee perspective

The third research question instead addressed how employees themselves experience these increasingly formalized communicative role expectations communicated in organizational text and talk. This question was investigated in article four.

The analysis shows that employees do embrace the ambassador role and often see it as a responsibility of a professional employee. However, it also shows that communication role expectations can create straining identity-tensions. This highlights the more problematic side of formalizing role expectations that assign employees an explicit responsibility for communication. As pointed out already 28 years ago by Deetz (1992), personal identity has increasingly come under the control of organizations. Surges of this kind of normative control, i.e. the attempt to control the hearts and minds of employees, have taken various forms throughout the modern history of management and organizations (Barley &

Kunda, 1992). As highlighted in article four, it is precisely this experience of having to enact another self, an organizational self, both on and off work that employees experience as straining with certain enactments of the communication role. This highlights the communication role's political and power dimensions and highlights that it must be approached in a more critical manner in future research, and in a more reflective manner by practitioners.

As strategic communication becomes an increasingly central organizing principle taken into account by organizations, more problematic sides of the employee communication role must be given greater attention also within strategic communication research. Early efforts were made by researchers that I, in my *Research overview*, situated within the "critical phase" of research on employees' communication role. Now, more research must do the same in relation to the idea of employees as communicators to highlight the more problematic sides of this phenomenon. While employees have important communication roles in various situations, and these must be understood, the apolitical nature of contemporary knowledge on employees' role as communicators obscures how the formalizing of communication roles and communication responsibilities can have problematic consequences for employee voice and identity work. While this is gaining increasing attention in other research fields (e.g., Müller, 2017, 2018; Wæraas & Dahle, 2020), strategic communication researchers have yet to "politicize" the employee communication role and view it as a political and power laden performative speech act with constitutive implications both for the organization, in terms of who is authoring it, and the involved individuals, in terms of how they should understand themselves.

By directing attention to employees' identity work and the implications of the attributed and experienced sense of responsibility, the thesis provokes an important question: namely what is reasonable to demand from employees in terms of various role expectations associated with the communication role. Some of the roles presented by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019), such as the sensemaker and the innovator are more clearly related to a work context, and the responsibility to carry out certain communication behaviors can thus be restricted to work hours – even though the traditional notion of "work hours" denoting an eight to five job is dissolving. Some of the other communication roles, such as the embodiment, promotor, scout, relationship builder, are however responsibilities that are much harder to only restrict to work hours. It is here that communication role expectations and responsibility become problematic. What should it be

reasonable to demand from employees on work and off work? And what liberties should organizations have to make identity-claims, when these identity-claims infringe on employees private selves? These moral questions are becoming increasingly relevant as role expectations that encourage employees to enact certain communication roles and take communication responsibility become increasingly common in contemporary organizations. Here, I do not want to imply that employees are helpless victims in the claws of an evil management team, as the problems following the communication roles and responsibilities are equally relevant for managers as well. Instead, what I encourage is a more informed approach to communication roles and communication responsibility that takes the more problematic sides of them into account. A vague theoretical and practical understanding of employees' communication role risks making it boundless. By improving and broadening our understanding of employees' communication role and communication responsibility, this thesis has contributed to concretizing it and making it more explicit, and by doing so making it possible to discuss and approach in a more reflective and informed manner.

Employees' communicative practice

The fourth and last research question addressed how employees' communicative practice can be understood. This question was addressed in article five.

The analysis shows that employees take their communication responsibility by collectively negotiating and deciding upon how the organization should be enacted in interactions with non-members. This is an ongoing negotiation, taking place front office in interactions with customers, and back office in interactions with colleagues and managers. In these interactions, the ongoing acquiring and accomplishment of authority, the "presentification" of purpose, and the ongoing accomplishment of "consubstantialization", or common ground, enable a collective and unified enactment of the organization front office. In turn, the absence of authority, purpose, and consubstantialization in the (dis)ordering generates a fragmented, inconsistent, front office enactment of the organization. The consistent front office enactment was identified by the frontline workers as an important prerequisite for accomplishing their main task in a satisfying manner.

The situated observation of employees makes it possible to observe how several voices, employees, managers and customers, participate in the ongoing negotiation through which organizing is accomplished. Thereby, article five shows how observation as method contributes a perspective on strategic communication that makes it possible to move beyond simple top-down or bottom-up perspectives on strategic communication in favor of a perspective which can deepen our understanding of how the human voices of management, employees and customers, and the non-human “voices” of strategies, other texts, and office space, negotiate and collectively co-author employees’ enactment in frontline interactions with customers. Thereby, it contributes an understanding that goes beyond managements’ hopes and wishes by providing a more profound understanding of how strategic communication is practiced on the micro-level and how strategic communication as an organizing principle influences employees organizing.

I argue that this detailed understanding of employees’ communicative practice is important as it contributes to improve more abstract notions of employees as strategic constituents and strategic communicators by offering a way to understand how employees make the organization present, and how they are able to do so in a coherent yet co-constructed manner. Observation as method for studying employees’ communication role is promising as it can contribute to a bottom up theorizing that takes its point of departure in the experienced reality of employees and their observable communicative practice instead of adopted concepts from related fields which might be useful, but are insufficient when it comes to contributing a more profound understanding of employees’ multifaceted communication role. To do so, strategic communication researchers must continue to develop their own theories rooted in close-up studies of what employees do when they enact various communication roles in their work. Just as Barley and Kunda (2001) once called for management and organization researchers to bring back work into theories on organizing through detailed studies of work, I call for more researchers to bring in the detailed study of employees communicative practices into theorizing of strategic communication at large as it can produce a situated understanding of how strategic communication, as organizing principle, contributes to organize the work of organizational actors.

I now switch focus to summarizing the main contribution of the thesis.

Dispersing the mirage

In the introductory paragraph of this chapter I wrote, somewhat provocatively, that faith in, and expectations of, the employee communication role risks turning it into another management mirage. However, I also claimed that offering an alternative perspective grounded in employees' experiences and communicative practice would counteract this as it would offer an improved and broader understanding of employees' communication role that departs less from managerial hopes and wishes, and is more in the social reality of employees. Through the contributions of this thesis, the more profound understanding of 1) the emergence of the phenomenon, 2) the vital importance of internal communication, 3) how employees' experience it, and 4) employees' communicative practice, this has been achieved.

The thesis has shown that expressing a desire that employees consider themselves as "brand ambassadors" and "living brands" does not suffice. Rather, understanding employees' communication role calls for a perspective shift in which the constitutive role of communication and the co-created nature of organizations are acknowledged and embraced. This entails that organizations must understand that it is not about turning employees into "living brands", but that employees already *are* co-creators of the organization and their work, and that the communication role in relation to such an understanding of communication and organization is an essential responsibility of all employees.

Moreover, the thesis has shown that the communication role and communication responsibility are not something that can be solely defined by the organization in a top-down manner. Instead, management must invite employees to co-create what the communication role and communication responsibility entail, as they are individually experienced and practiced by each function, role, and individual in an organization.

Implications for organizations

Lastly, I want to provide some additional implications for organizations in the form of tools for reflection.

Firstly, consider how employees' opinions and experiences can be taken into account when formulating strategies, policies, and regulations that specify their communication responsibilities in given situations. A morally attuned approach

towards employees' communication role and communication responsibility implies not only to consider what employees can do for the organization, but also what the organization can do for its employees. This means that ideas of employees that "live the brand", act as "ambassadors" and "advocators" must be balanced by a management that considers employee voice, how to support employees in their communication roles, and sets clear boundaries between work responsibilities and off-work responsibilities related to communication.

Secondly, consider how strategies, policies, and regulations that specify employees' communication responsibilities can be grounded in the communicative practice of employees, instead of abstract ideas such as "living the brand". Try to translate the idea of "living the brand" into what this entails from the perspective of the nurse, administrator, or banker, and support the employee in enacting the communication role given the specific circumstances and broader set of responsibilities following a role or position.

Thirdly, acknowledge that formalizing communication responsibility and explicating communication role expectations are not enough to make employees take communication responsibility. Employee communication responsibility starts in internal communication. How can this be improved? Is the communication climate open? Are managers communicative? Is the top management visible, and do employees perceive that their voice is heard and that they are listened to? Without functioning internal communication, exhorting employees to take communication responsibility will be a fruitless endeavor.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, there are no easy quick fix solutions for getting employees to take responsibility for communication. Improving internal communication is a massive and complex undertaking involving everything from working with the abstract communication climate to improving the prerequisites for middle-managers so they to a greater extent can act as facilitators of sensemaking instead only as information disseminators. Furthermore, "tangibilizing" communication roles and responsibilities by co-creating specifications grounded in employees' concrete experience and practices and where the involved actors reflect upon its more problematic sides is not something which is done overnight. However, it is my conviction that an acknowledgement of the fundamental role of communication for organizing and organization is where this process and work must take its point of departure.

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