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Corporate communication has developed as a domain of management theory, embracing fields like public relations, marketing and management communication. Most research on the topic has so far concentrated on positivist approaches, leading to a limited view of corporate communication as a set of communication tools and instruments.

It is now common knowledge how communication programs can be effectively planned and executed. The challenge for communication managers, however, remains to explain and deliver proof of how successful their work supported the company’s strategy. Extant theory, however, delivers little insight into how corporate communication activities unfold their performative capacity in this sense.

The purpose of this study is to review extant corporate communication theory from strategy-as-practice and discourse perspectives. This makes it possible to expand the existing picture of corporate communication theory by more ‘communicational’ aspects. The review takes an interdisciplinary approach and particularly draws on social constructionist research in strategic management and organisational communication fields.

Following an ethnographic case study approach, the study is based on an extensive pool of discourse fragments (naturally occurring talk, text and interviews), collected over a period of 15 months. These fragments represent corporate communication discourse at Intech, a major international conglomerate, based in Germany. Data was structured and analysed, supported by ATLAS.ti computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. Additionally, methods of discourse analysis were applied in order to identify and explain concrete communication practices.

An integrative framework – allowing insight into key practices driving the performative capacity of corporate communication – is proposed as a key contribution to and extension of extant corporate communication theory. This framework incorporates seven propositions which are developed on the basis of the key findings.

As part of these, corporate communication is re-defined as a set of participatory and context-sensitive practices. A strong focus is put on the local lens through which corporate communication needs to be managed. It is argued that legitimising processes, involving peer-to-peer communication,
should be implemented throughout the company in order to increase the performative capacity of corporate communication. Overall, it is suggested to move in emphasis from communication tools and instruments to managing corporate communication in the form of strategic practices enacted in specific genres.

This book makes the case for an alternative theory of corporate communication. The value of its contribution, however, will emerge and gain in its actual use and refinement. Researchers may adopt the alternative view of corporate communication proposed in the integrative framework and test or apply it in further case studies or in more large-scale, perhaps quantitative research projects across companies or even cultural boundaries. Gradually, this will lead to an increased sophistication of the integrated framework of alternative corporate communication.

Additionally, practitioners can benefit from knowledge about the effects and effectiveness of corporate communication which is created throughout this study. The book explores in detail how individual projects reached relevance at Intech, describing the emergence of intended as well as unintended outcomes. This way, it helps corporate communication managers to reflect on their own strategies. Additionally, the integrative framework can be applied as a strategic tool or grid, for example, when it comes to prioritizing practices and processes that need to be considered when launching a new communication programme. As such, it can be used by managers as a reference point for making decisions in a concrete organizational setting.

Munich, 
October 2006

H. Hübner
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