

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

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## Communication management under the spotlight – A literature review

Marianne Grove Ditlevsen

Associate Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark

[mgd@cc.au.dk](mailto:mgd@cc.au.dk)

Trine Susanne Johansen

Associate Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark

[tsj@cc.au.dk](mailto:tsj@cc.au.dk)

### Abstract

**Purpose:** Although communication management is a widely used term, little emphasis is given to understanding it as a concept in its own right. The paper aims to establish a foundation for acknowledging communication management as a distinct concept through charting its multiple understandings in order to identify its defining features.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A systematic review of understandings of communication management in public relations, corporate communication, strategic communication, and integrated communication literature was performed. Out of a total of 113 sources 40 were reviewed through a narrative synthesis.

**Findings:** There is widespread and ambiguous use of the term rooted in two main strands of literature and a third, less coherent, strand. In addition, the different understandings point to central features linking communication, management, and strategy.

**Theoretical and practical implications:** To make fully use of the potential of communication management as a unifying concept within and across different communication fields, it is suggested to view it at the intersection of, and through the lenses of, the features identified as central to existing understandings of communication management, i.e. communication, management, and strategy. Such conceptualization would lay the foundation for developing communication management as a concept that is useful for empirically exploring the social phenomenon to which it refers.

## Keywords

Communication Management, Corporate Communication, Public Relations, Strategic Communication

## 1 Introduction

Managing communication activities, processes and procedures is considered a central task within corporate communication (e.g. Cornelissen, 2017; van Riel, 1995), public relations (e.g. van Ruler and Verčič, 2008; Grunig et al., 2002; Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig, 1992), and strategic communication (e.g. Hallahan et al., 2007). Van Riel (1995, p. 26) thus defines corporate communication as “an instrument of management” while Cornelissen (2017, p. 5) suggests it to be “a management function”. To public relations scholars, communication management is regarded as an important dimension for the profession and practice. Grunig and Repper (1992, p. 191) thus claim that public relations needs to be a “strategic managerial function”. Finally, communication management is highlighted within strategic communication which emphasises the intentionality, deliberateness and goal-oriented nature of communication (Hallahan et al., 2007). Viewing communication as purposeful implies managerial intent and highlights the importance of knowledge of how to manage.

While emphasis is placed on managing communication, there seems to be little attempt to explore what communication management is and does. Consequently, few scholars have explicitly sought to address communication management as a distinct concept taking an interest in its development. Examples include Grandien and Johansson’s (2012) work on the institutionalization of communication management as a process as well as Nothhaft’s (2010) discussion of the communication management function. Similarly, a number of encyclopaedia entries are devoted to the concept (e.g. Hallahan, 2013; Brønn, 2008; Gregory, 2018). However, also within this body of literature little emphasis is given to understanding the concept which is often addressed in a taken-for-granted or matter-of-fact manner. This is evident in a lack of definitions or in the use of broad, all-inclusive definitions suggesting communication management to simply mean managing communication. Despite diverse scholarly interest in the management of communication, communication management is seemingly not regarded as a concept in its own right. Rather is it suggested to function as a term that can stand in the place of other communication concepts. As Brønn (2008) points out: “For some communication management is a special way of managing; for others it is the steering of all communications in the context of the organization; for yet others it is the same as Public Relations (PR), i.e. managing communication itself.” Raupp and van Ruler (2006, p. 24) suggest that an accumulation of knowledge is needed to further the understanding and development of the concept as research may not be “oriented at the development of a coherent body of knowledge for the field as a whole.” Consequently, there is a call for a systematic approach to conceptually articulating the phenomenon of communication management.

The purpose of this paper is to establish a foundation for acknowledging communication management as a distinct concept. The need for conceptual acknowledgement requires articulation: if we are to study and understand a phenomenon, we need to firstly develop and articulate a terminology related to that phenomenon. Developing clear concepts is important in order to create a solid foundation for empirical research of phenomena. For instance, in a logical-empirical tradition, such theoretical developments are typically presented in the form of hypothesis generation leading to empirical testing and to the confirmation or rejection of hypotheses. Alternatively, a social constructivist tradition frequently suggests a different role for theoretical and conceptual development (Esmark et al., 2005). Social constructivist research does not attempt to test theory, but rather begins by establishing a theoretical lens or perspective by way of one or more concepts to guide and sustain the study of social phenomena. Developing a theoretical framework is a question of unfolding concepts that offer specific optics and thus make a difference in relation to constructions of social reality (Esmark et al., 2005). This line of scientific reasoning directs attention to how researchers shape the socially constructed reality and phenomena in and through the concepts they use. In this light, the conceptual development of communication management is a prerequisite for exploring the concept’s research use and implications. The conceptual development is conditioned by theoretical exploration and synthesis.

As a consequence, the point of departure is a systematic mapping of existing understandings of communication management in extant literature. The intention is to chart the different definitions and uses within existing communication scholarship. Through mapping the plethora of literature where communication management is referenced, the contradictions, challenges and complexities that seemingly characterise the concept are identified. The contribution is twofold: firstly, to chart multiple understandings of communication management, and secondly, to identify tentative defining features based on these multiple understandings as a point of departure for further conceptual development.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the methods are outlined by describing how the literature has been selected and subsequently reviewed through a narrative synthesis. Second, the findings of the review are presented which reveals three perspectives on communication management, i.e. as equal to public relations, as the European

equivalent to public relations and as an assorted concept. Based on the findings, the similarities and differences between the perspectives are discussed. In conclusion, the defining features of communication management are identified as the foundation for further elaboration and exploration.

## 2 Methodology

This section introduces the literature review approach. The review is based on a systematic review following formalised steps including procedures for searching for and selecting literature as well as designing protocols for synthesizing the selected literature (Bryman, 2016). The search for literature was based on the berry-picking model (Bates, 1989). Once identified, the literature was reviewed through a narrative synthesis (Bryman, 2016). Each process is outlined below.

### 2.1 Searching for and selecting literature

To provide an overview over uses and understandings of communication management, a search was undertaken in academic journals, anthologies, and textbooks. The search model Berry-picking (cf. Bates, 1989) was used. The Berry-picking model acknowledges both rational and irrational elements of information retrieval. It recognises thus both a more linear, rational search behaviour based on a defined need of information and a planned search for literature and a more flexible, dynamic and improvised search behaviour (cf. Kastberg et al., 2007). A metaphor often used to describe the basic idea behind the Berry-picking model is that you do not find all your answers (the most delicious berries) in one place (one branch), but one at a time and scattered throughout a much larger area (the whole bush) (cf. Kastberg et al., 2007). In this way, the model reflects much better the real behaviour of information seekers (cf. Bates, 1989). Applying the Berry-picking search model means that the search for sources of information is dynamic, ongoing, and improvised rather than purely rational (cf. Kastberg et al., 2007). Consequently, additional literature was identified and added to the corpus during the entire review process. The process applied a wide range of search strategies (cf. Bates, 1989; Ellis, 1989) in the search for relevant literature as can be seen from the following detailed account in table 1.

**Table 1. Applied information seeking strategies**

Starting	Initially, literature was drawn from a project on organizing communication (2012-2013) that gave rise to our focus on exploring the concept of communication management as a promising topic for a review, and further from a prior preliminary search on communication management (late 2012 – early 2013). Finally, the entries by Brønn (2008) and Hallahan (2005, 2013) on the term “communication management” in the two well established encyclopedia of communication “The international encyclopedia of communication” (Donsbach, 2008) and “The Encyclopedia of Public Relations” (Heath, 2005, 2013) were used as point of departure for further search for literature.
Chaining	Throughout the whole process, promising references from all relevant literature have been followed up on. The reading of Grunig, 2013, for instance, gave rise to including Grunig, 1992, Dozier et al. 1995, and Grunig et al., 2002. Similarly, the reading of van Ruler & Verčič, 2003 gave rise to including Long & Hazleton Jr., 1987, and Siano et al., 2013 to Steyn, 2003.
Browsing	Relevant sources of information, both monographies, journals, and articles, have been identified via several systematic searches in the State and University Library database in general and in selected journals’ databases in particular, including <i>Journal of Communication Management</i> , <i>International Journal of Strategic Communication</i> , <i>Corporate Communications – an International Journal</i> , and <i>Public Relations Review</i> . Most searches were based on the search word “communication management”. Well established communication textbooks, including van Riel, 1995, Cutlip et al., 2000, Cornelissen, 2017, Tench & Yeomans, 2014, Wilcox & Cameron, 2014, were also consulted.
Monitoring	Awareness of the developments of the field of communication management were maintained by monitoring selected journals (see above).
Author searching	After having identified key contributors to the discussion of the concept of communication management, specific searches by author, e.g. Betteke van Ruler and Dejan Verčič, were carried out.

Apart from the search strategy “Starting” that was used initially, the search strategies are not listed in any chronological order as the strategies overlap and intersect during the iterative and dynamic information seeking process. The result of the information seeking process was an initial gross list of communication management literature with a total number of 113 references. From this gross list, a selection was undertaken by assessing the potential of each of the references based on the following questions:

- 1) Is the term “communication management” used in the reference (title, keywords and / or body of text)?
- 2) Is the concept of communication management a theme?

As a result, 40 references were selected for the review of literature on communication management (see reference list).

## 2.2 *Synthesizing literature*

A synthesis can be defined as “the stage of a review when the evidence extracted from the individual sources is brought together in some way” (Mays et al., 2005, p. 7). Inscribed in a social constructivist research tradition and continuing the combined focus on rationality and irrationality applied in the search and selection process, the synthesis of literature is made transparent by explicating the protocols, as recommended in the systematic review approach. The review produces a narrative synthesis of findings in the form of a summation of differences and similarities (Bryman, 2016). Bryman (2016) distinguishes between two types of literature reviews: systematic reviews and narrative reviews. Whereas narrative reviews are designed to provide an overview of a given area of study, typically to produce a background or platform as a prelude to empirical research, a systematic review adopts formalised procedures and steps to systematically synthesise what is known about a given topic (Bryman, 2016). Typical steps range from procedures for searching for and select literature to designing protocols for synthesizing the selected literature. Our synthesis approach reflects an adapted version of the systematic review. The systematic review frequently adopts the scientific ideals of rationality and objectivity as it originally sought to create meta-analyses of quantitative studies (Bryman, 2016). However, as stated, we approached the search for and selection of literature as a combined rational and irrational process and thereby inscribe ourselves into an interpretivist research tradition. In continuation, we adhere to the notion of making the synthesis of literature transparent by explicating our protocols, as recommended in the systematic review, but we do not adopt the goal or intention of producing a rational, unbiased and objective account. Therefore, we seek to produce a narrative synthesis of our findings, i.e. providing a summation of differences and similarities, rather than a quantifiable meta-analysis (Bryman, 2016). In addition, we divert from the traditional use of a systematic review in terms of our research focus. Whereas systematic reviews seek to synthesise findings from previous research studies, i.e. meta-analysis of quantitative studies or meta-ethnography of qualitative (combined with quantitative) studies (Bryman, 2016), our focus is to synthesize definitions and understandings applied in existing literature.

In order to ensure transparency in the narrative synthesis, a protocol consisting in three questions derived from the research interest has been set-up:

- 1) In what contexts does communication management appear?
- 2) How is communication management defined within these contexts?
- 3) What underlying understandings of management of communication are articulated in relation to the different definitions of communication management?

The first question needs to be addressed in order to map the different settings where communication management appears. Given that communication management seemingly is used in different contexts, any attempt to provide a genealogy of its meaning has to also include the contexts in which it appears. The second question springs from the core interest of the paper; i.e. to understand what definitions of the term exist in extant literature. The first and second questions are interrelated as definitions and contexts potentially are interconnected. The third question reflects the interest in the management of communication. As noted in the introduction, corporate communication, strategic communication, and public relations suggest that there is a link between communication and management. Explicating this link by investigating what management means in relation to communication helps further our understanding of how communication management is understood.

### 3 Synthesizing communication management

The review of the identified literature on communication management revealed three separate contexts for understanding and articulating the concept (see table 2). The first is based on the strand of research produced as part of the excellence theory of public relations (Grunig, 1992; Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig et al., 2002). The second also refers to a research strand namely that born out of the European public relations body of knowledge (EBOK) project (van Ruler et al., 2000; Verčič, 2000; van Ruler, 2000; Verčič et al., 2001; van Ruler & Verčič, 2008). The third context does not fall within, or relate to, a specific research strand. This contextual category can be labelled diversification as it represents a multiplicity of different, incoherent understandings (e.g. Elving et al., 2012; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Hallahan, 2005, 2013; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012). Below we explain and explore each of the three contexts. The point of departure is the three questions from the protocol.

**Table 2. Result of narrative synthesis**

Strand	Literature
<i>Excellence theory</i>	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Grunig, 1992 Grunig & Repper 1992 Dozier et al., 1995 Grunig & Grunig 2000 Grunig et al., 2002 Steyn, 2003 Grunig, 2006 Steyn, 2007 Grunig & Grunig, 2008 Steyn, 2009 Grunig, 2013
<i>EBOK project</i>	van Ruler, 2000 van Ruler et al., 2000 Verčič, 2000 Verčič et al., 2001 Raupp & van Ruler, 2006 van Ruler & Verčič, 2008
<i>Diversification</i>	Long & Hazelton, 1987 Cornelissen, 2000 Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002 Van Ruler & de Lange, 2003 Van Ruler & Verčič, 2003 Brønn et al., 2005 Hallahan, 2005 Moss et al., 2005 Brønn, 2008 Szyszka, 2008 Wehmeier, 2008 Nothhaft, 2010 Moss & DeSanto, 2011 Elving et al., 2012 Grandien & Johansson, 2012 Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012 Gregory, 2013 Hallahan, 2013 Siano et al., 2013 Cornelissen, 2014 Verčič & Zerfass, 2016 Gregory, 2018

#### 3.1 The excellence theory

The first strand of communication management literature draws on the excellence theory of public relations developed through the excellence study that began in 1985. The study asked: “What are the characteristics of an excellent communication department? How does excellent public relations make an organization more effective, and how much is that contribution worth economically?” (Grunig, 1992, p. xiii). It resulted in numerous publications, e.g. Grunig, 1992, Dozier et al., 1995, Grunig et al., 2002.

The excellence theory is “a general theory of public relations as a theory of communication management” that “specifies how public relations makes organizations more effective, how it is organized and managed when it contributes most to organizational effectiveness, the conditions in organizations and their environments that make organizations more effective, and how the monetary value of public relations can be determined” (Grunig, 1992, p. 27). The term “excellence” refers to the intention of the involved researchers to identify best practices within public relations and communication management inspired by Peters and Waterman’s (1982) book “In Search of Excellence” (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). Excellence in public relations is defined as “a set of attributes and practices” that can build sustainable relationships with strategic constituents (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 328).

The goal of public relations is to build relations with publics located among diverse stakeholder groups with different, perhaps diverging, demands. The means used to build relationships is to facilitate or manage communication (Grunig et al., 2002). The excellence theory thus understands public relations as the “management of communication between an organization and its publics” (Grunig, 1992, p. 4 – citing Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). Grunig (1992, p. 4) subsequently argues that the excellence definition “equates public relations and communication management”. Consequently, communication management (and public relations) is defined as “the overall planning, execution, and evaluation of an organization’s communication with both external and internal publics” (Grunig, 1992, p. 4).

How to define management is not discussed at any great length amongst excellence scholars. However, Grunig and Repper (1992) argue that to manage means to think ahead and plan, emphasizing that management is not manipulation and control. While management, as an independent concept, is not addressed extensively, what is of interest to the excellence theory scholars is management as a strategic activity. Thus, the excellence theory “has evolved into a general theory of public relations as a strategic management function” (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 327). The argument is that management of communication should be strategic in order for communication to contribute to organizational effectiveness: “Strategic management is extremely important to excellent public relations because it describes how public relations should be practiced if it is to contribute the most to the success of an organization” (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 308). Strategic management is defined by Dozier et al. (1995, p. 28) with reference to relationships with publics as follows: “By *strategic management*, we mean the balancing of internal processes of organizations with external factors. The overall strategic management of organizations is inseparable from strategic management of relationships, traditionally the responsibility of the public relations department.” Strategic management, within the context of excellence theory, means balancing activities internal to the organization with external factors building on the idea of symmetry. Moreover, strategic management of public relations is envisioned as a series of steps (cf. e.g. Grunig & Repper, 1992). Drawing on the notion that to manage is to plan, strategic management is seemingly synonymous with strategic planning.

The strategic management of communication, or publics, is addressed on two levels (see e.g. Grunig & Repper, 1992): at the organizational level as pointed out by e.g. Dozier et al. (1995) and at the departmental or functional level (Grunig et al., 2002; Grunig & Grunig, 2000). Firstly, public relations is seen as a strategic management function operating at the organizational or corporate level, i.e. as a function that participates in decision-making and goal setting as part of the dominant coalition in an organization. Public relations is considered a bridging function that brings diverse publics into organizational goal setting activities, rather than a buffering function that shields the organization from its publics (Grunig, 2006, 2013). As pointed out by Dozier et al. (1995, p. x): “*Communication excellence* describes the ideal state in which knowledgeable communicators assist in the overall strategic management of organizations, seeking symmetrical relations through management of communication with key publics on whom organizational survival and growth depends.” At the functional or departmental level, public relations is said to be responsible for the strategic management of public relations programs aimed at different publics (e.g. Grunig, 1992). Such programs should be developed strategically, i.e. proactively, to address emerging or potential issues within a given public (Dozier et al., 1995). Moreover, the programs, in order for them to be managed strategically, should be research based, have measurable objectives and be evaluated (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

The multiple levels of public relations have inspired later work by Steyn (2003; 2007; 2009) on the strategic role of public relations. Steyn (2009) distinguishes between public relations management (or communication management) and strategic public relations management (or strategic communication management). Based on this distinction, three levels are articulated: the macro level, the meso level, and the micro level. The macro level corresponds to the corporate, or organizational, level identified above, whereas the meso level reflects the functional, or departmental, level. Steyn’s work moreover points to an additional level of public relations addressed in the excellence study related to the concrete tasks and activities performed by public relations professionals. In Steyn’s work the levels are transformed in to a focus on the role played by public relations professionals. With reference to the three levels, she identifies the following three roles: firstly, the public relations strategist who is assigned a strategic role as part of top management involved in developing corporate strategy. Secondly, the public relations manager belonging to middle management and responsible for developing the public relations strategy. And finally, the public relations technician who implements the public relations strategy.

In summation, one understanding of communication management has its disciplinary roots in a particular strand of public relations theory, i.e. the excellence theory. The excellence theory of public relations was developed based on a theoretical model that was supplemented with knowledge from practice. Communication management is defined as public relations or as the managing of communication. The embedded understanding of management is argued to be a little vague. However, management is closely associated with strategic planning at the organizational level as well as at the functional and operational levels. Moreover, it has been linked to the different roles played by the public relations professionals at each of these levels.

### 3.2 *The EBOK project*

The second strand of communication management literature is based on the European public relations body of knowledge (EBOK) research project that was initiated in 1998 (van Ruler et al., 2000; Verčič, 2000; van Ruler, 2000; Verčič et al., 2001; van Ruler & Verčič, 2008).

The purpose of the project was to shed light on public relations in Europe as a reaction to a public relations field that was, until then, otherwise dominated by North American scholars and practitioners, so it was argued. As part of the project, a Delphi study was conducted in three rounds amongst both academics and practitioners representing between 17 and 23 European countries. The study resulted in a description of how public relations was defined from a European perspective. Four dimensions of public relations were identified that together define the domain of European public relations: managerial, operational, reflective, educational. In relation to the managerial dimension, the study revealed that public relations, according to the participants, is both “managing communication” and “managing relationships” (Verčič et al., 2001, p. 380f.). The former also referred to as “management of communication” and “communication management”. Even though it is stated that “being a management discipline can mean anything, from a tool of marketing via planned activity to leading organisational philosophy” (van Ruler et al., 2000, p. 13), the discussion of the concept “communication management” is not related to the meaning of the concept, but becomes a question of whether to call the studied discipline “public relations”, “communication management” or something else.

The Delphi study reveals a high degree of diversity with respect to the perception of the discipline and the concepts used to describe the discipline across the European countries. In order to strengthen the field of communication management, Van Ruler et al. conclude by calling for “an urgent debate” (2000, p. 26) of used concepts and contents. Drawing on the multiple insights of the Delphi study, Raupp and van Ruler (2006) argue in favour of a more refined, i.e. country specific study. Consequently, their study addresses the state of the art and the trends in communication management research based on PhD research in Germany and the Netherlands. Within this context, Raupp and van Ruler (2006) define communication management as a heading for the integration of all communications and as an occupation at the strategic level.

In the most recent publication related directly to the EBOK project, van Ruler and Verčič (2008) contribute further to the debate. In line with prior literature, it is suggested to use the term “communication management” for European Public Relations both for practical reasons as it is widely used in Europe and for theoretical reasons in the sense that the focus is on communication as a professional management function. Moreover, communication management is still seen as a multi-dimensional concept of a managerial, operational, coaching (educational) and reflective function in or for an organization that is not easy to define and as a way to describe and explain an organization (cf. Deetz, 2001). Based on this, van Ruler and Verčič further describe communication management as a strategic process of viewing the organization from the “outside”, i.e. from a public view, turning the organization’s inclusiveness and its preservation of the “license to operate” into its primary concerns. From this perspective, communication management encompasses both relational and communicative aspects as well as legitimacy and elements of reflectivity (of organizational behavior). The debate seems to end with this contribution and consequently the concept of communication management stemming from the EBOK project has not been object of further examination and / or refinement.

In summation, this understanding of communication management has its roots in a Delphi study of how European public relations academics and practitioners describe their discipline. Based on this, communication management can best be described as a multi-faceted concept for European public relations with managerial aspects. The understanding of management is vague. However, due to the broad perception of communication management, it seems to be associated with activities at all organizational levels.

### 3.3 *The diversification category*

In addition to the two dominating, singular strands of communication management literature identified above, numerous other definitions are in use. A wide range of conceptual and empirical literature exists that relates to communication management in different ways, e.g. Elving et al., 2012; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Hallahan, 2005, 2013; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012; van Ruler & de Lange, 2003. Whereas both dominating strands are associated with public relations, the other definitions open up the scope of the concept as well as highlight its ‘messiness’. As the literature is diverse, it cannot be given a unified, identifying label and is therefore described as diversification. Whereas the strands originating from the excellence study and the EBOK project are distinct strands, each of which is fairly homogenous and monophonic, the diversification strand is thus heterogeneous and polyphonic. It differs along a number of parameters: the first difference lies in whether the literature treats communication management as the object of study or the object of study is something else. The second relates to whether the literature explicitly defines communication management

or simply uses the term. And finally, a distinction can be made when it comes to whether communication management is seen as separate from or equal to other communication concepts.

The first major distinction lies in if communication management is the central object of investigation. Research using the term frequently has an interest other than communication management, e.g. the institutionalisation of communication (Grandien & Johansson, 2012), the centralization and departmentalization of communication (van Ruler and de Lange, 2003), the communication department, gender issues and encroachment of the communication profession (Elving et al., 2012), communication excellence (Verčič & Zerfass, 2016), or integration (Cornelissen, 2000). Few of the identified sources take an explicit interest in communication management as a phenomenon in its own right. One example is literature on what has been termed *reflective* communication management (i.e. van Ruler & Verčič, 2002; van Ruler & Verčič, 2003; and Brønn et al., 2005). As a point of departure, communication management is here used in the sense of the European understanding of public relations (cf. EBOK strand above). Compared to the EBOK studies, more emphasis is explicitly put not only on the notion of communication and management, but on a combination of the two (e.g. Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002) which potentially brings more value to the understanding of communication management. In addition, reflective communication management is said to be characterised by taking a societal or public view on the organization, i.e. to practice reflectivity at the organizational level (van Ruler & Verčič, 2003). As reflectivity places legitimacy high on the agenda, communication management is regarded as “a function of management per se” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2003, p. 23). In this context, communication management as a specialization takes on an advisory role in relation to (other) organizational members. However, as the topic of interest mainly is reflective communication management, as a new view of practical public relations (van Ruler & Verčič, 2003), a conceptual discussion of communication management is largely missing.

The second difference relates to whether or not the concept is defined when it is used. Parts of the identified literature use communication management without offering a definition (e.g. Cornelissen, 2000). Common to much of the literature that defines the concept, is a shared understanding that communication management is implicitly or explicitly seen as a strategic management function and/or activity (e.g. Elving et al., 2012; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012; van Ruler & de Lange, 2003). However, this body of literature is also characterized by definitional fogginess as scholars cite several different understandings. In an encyclopaedia entry, Hallahan (2005, p. 161) offers three seemingly different definitions stating that communication management is “a set of techniques used in public relations and related activities”, “is the preferred term for traditional public relations” in Europe, and “is consistent with the umbrella term of *strategic communication*.”

Adding to the list of definitions offered, Hallahan claims that communication management “is an umbrella concept that suggests public relations can be one of several communication functions” (2005, p. 161). These different definitions illustrate, on the one hand, the wide scope of the multiple definitions given, and on the other hand, the contradictory nature of some of the definitions in use. Moreover, it also links some of the literature placed in the diversification category to the previously identified main categories. The second definition offered by Hallahan (2005) thus illustrates the influence of the EBOK study on communication management conceptualizations whereby it is seen as a European term for, or version of, public relations. This is mirrored elsewhere, e.g. in Grandien and Johansson’s (2012, p. 212) suggestion that it is a “common denominator for the field in Europe”. Another definition of communication management is found in Moss and DeSanto’s (2011) book on public relations. They define communication management as “the application of management principles and practices in the organizational communications context” (Moss & De Santo, 2011, p. 24). The definition highlights the managerial dimensions of public relations and communication practice. The book is dedicated to managerial aspects of public relations and other kinds of organizational communication, including managerial skills and competencies, strategy and planning. Most importantly, a “model of communication management” (p. 42) is presented. This framework for public relations as a management function is based on four principle stages of the management process (management analysis, choice, implementation and evaluation) and includes tools and techniques for each stage. The model of communication management resembles a communication planning model. It adds little to the understanding of communication management as a concept in its own right and does not treat it conceptually. For that reason, Moss and DeSanto’s most valuable contribution is the strong focus on managerial dimensions of communication practice (cf. also Moss et al., 2005). Similarly, Siano et al. (2013) develop a model of corporate communication management which references planning, coordinating and organizing. In addition, they suggest also addressing issues relating to resources and decision-making when it comes to communication activities.

Finally, a distinction can be made based on whether communication management is treated as a clearly distinguishable concept or as a replaceable concept. Common to a large part of the identified literature is the suggestion that communication management can be used interchangeably with business communication, corporate communication, strategic communication, integrated communication, organizational communication, public relations and other communication concepts (see e.g. Elving et al., 2012; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Hallahan, 2005, 2013; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012; Wehmeier, 2008). An illustrative example of this conceptual discussion is found in Wehmeier (2008) who takes an interest in communication as a strategic management function dealing with all managed communication of

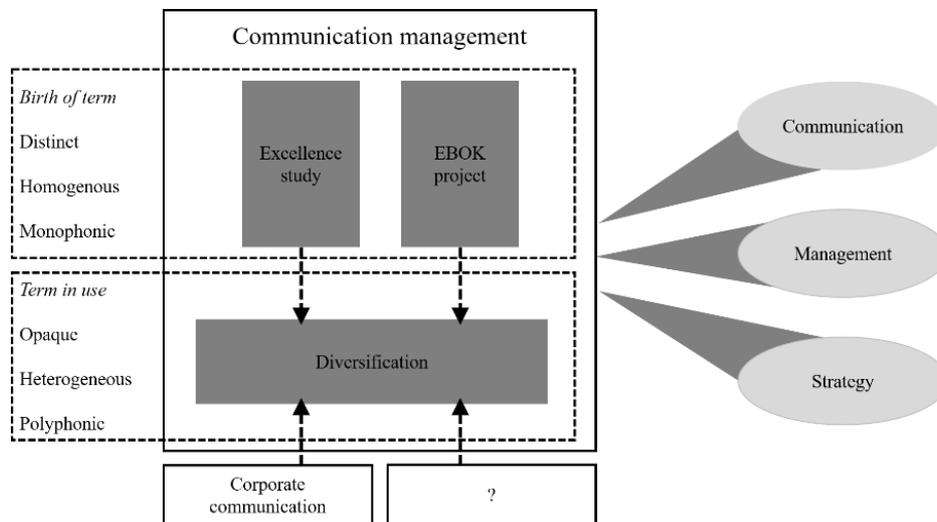
and in organizations. In a terminological discussion, it is acknowledged that “the terms and academic fields of public relations, communication management, and organizational communication coexist, differ, and overlap” (Wehmeier, 2008, p. 220). Moreover, it is suggested that communication management has the potential to absorb the term integrated communication as it refers to the combination of all organizational communication functions. Communication management is presented as a widely-used term that a) displaces public relations (cf. EBOK project above), b) puts forward the idea of reducing complexity in planned and strategic communication by including the term management, c) signals management orientation of the communication discipline, and d) cannot be externally and internally holistic. As such, it is unclear what communication management is and how it is distinguishable from other communication concepts.

While large parts of the literature see communication management as interchangeable with other communication concepts, few scholars tentatively argue that communication management should be treated as a concept in its own right. Szyszka (2008), for one, sees communication management as different from public relations and as the general communication function of organizational management. Public relations management - as one of three understandings of public relations - is defined as a type of communication management. However, the term communication management is not explained in more detail. Thus, what is understood by communication management, other than something different from public relations (management), is unclear. Moreover, communication management in practice is said to be the same as integrated communication and corporate communication (Szyszka, 2008, p. 105) suggesting that communication management is still not recognized as a concept in its own right. To Gregory (2013), communication management is something other than public relations as well. In addition, it is not corporate communication either as these concepts refer to “functional specialism formally charged with relationship building and reputation management in organizations” (p. 82). In a later discussion, Gregory (2018) adds strategy communication to the list of speciality functions different from communication management. Rather communication management refers to “the process which determines how communication is organized and managed” (Gregory, 2013, p. 81) or to “how communication can make a strategic contribution at every level of the organization and how it is organized structurally” (Gregory, 2018, p. 216). As such, communication management is understood as concerned with the function of communication at different managerial and strategic levels (the where and what) as well as the organization or form of communication (the how) (Gregory, 2018). The main focus of Gregory’s work lies in linking strategy, management and organizational structure to communication.

In short, an ambivalence towards communication management is found in large parts of the diversification literature. On the one hand, scholars recognize that communication management is conceptually distinct, but on the other hand they fail to explicate what makes it distinct.

## 4 Discussion

The review set out to explore three questions: 1) in what contexts does communication management appear?; 2) how is communication management defined?; and 3) what underlying understandings of management of communication are articulated? In relation to the contexts, the review revealed three different, yet intertwined, streams of literature. The first stream consists of literature based on the excellence study. The second stream consists of literature based on the EBOK study. The third stream of literature is not associated with any one research study, instead, it is born out of a number of different perspectives. The different strands are visualised in figure 1. The figure shows the development of the term communication management starting with its birth within the two parallel strands of the excellence study and the EBOK project where it appears as a relatively distinct, homogeneous, and monophonic term. As the term evolves and becomes diversified in use, its meaning seems to be more opaque, heterogenous, and polyphonic building not only on the two strands but also on additional communicative perspectives, e.g. corporate communication. These differences aside, there seems to be a shared emphasis on communication, management, and strategy as explicated below.

**Figure 1. Overview of communication management**

The discussion focuses on similarities and differences between the three streams in relation to definitions and understandings addressing questions 2 and 3. Looking at the definitions, it is possible to identify some areas of agreement, but also a number of differences. The excellence theory equates communication management with public relations (Grunig, 1992) and defines it as “the overall planning, execution, and evaluation of an organization’s communication with both external and internal publics” (Grunig, 1992, p. 4). The EBOK stream similarly stems from public relations research and highlights this link by suggesting that communication management is the term used for how public relations is practiced in Europe. In that sense, communication management is seen not as a public relations synonym per se, as in the excellence stream, but as a particular version of public relations. In this context, communication management becomes a question of explaining and describing “how to manage an organization and how to communicate accordingly” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2002, p. 279). Finally, the diversification stream, true to its name, offers a variety of definitions when definitions appear. Amongst the definitions in use are both those which consider communication management as having affinity to public relations, and those who suggest the term to be something different (e.g. Gregory, 2013; 2018). Moreover, there are definitions which link communication management to additional communication terms, e.g. strategic communication, integrated communication, and corporate communication. In this literature, communication management is associated with numerous different terms. In short, the existing literature offers a plethora of definitions.

When it comes to the underlying understandings of management (of communication) articulated by the three streams, there are considerable differences and complexity. The excellence study addresses management in terms of different levels of communication planning, e.g. corporate and functional. Parallel to the excellence study’s emphasis on ‘managing’ as ‘planning’, the EBOK inspired literature seems to have little explication of what is understood by management. Although this literature does take an interest in managerial issues (e.g. van Ruler et al., 2000), it does not discuss what management means in relation to communication. Another distinction between the EBOK and the excellence streams seems to be that parts of the excellence literature give particular emphasis to strategic management, e.g. Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig & Repper, 1992. The strategic emphasis is visible in a dual focus on balancing internal and external organizational factors as the means to securing organizational effectiveness (e.g. Dozier et al., 1995).

Although they address the issue, both the excellence and EBOK streams are vague and implicit in their dealings with management, however, the diversification stream is even less explicit. One exception is Wehmeier (2008, p. 226) who suggests: “management in a basic sense means to plan, to organize, to co-ordinate and to control in a strategic way”. Another is Moss and DeSanto (2011) who address managerial aspects and link management to communication planning. In the remainder of this vastly differentiated body of literature, authors who take an explicit interest in articulating communication management appear to be less focused on understandings of management. However, they do share the view that communication management is a strategic management function or activity (e.g. Elving et al., 2012; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012; van Ruler & de Lange, 2003). Implicitly, this suggests that management is understood

as linked to strategy. Moreover, Gregory (2018, p. 216) argues that management relates to “how communication can make a strategic contribution at every level of the organization”. In sum, the various bodies of literature that address communication management vary in their articulations and understandings of management in relation to communication. However, there seems to be a partially shared view across the three streams that management relates to different levels from operational, functional levels until strategic levels.

## 5 Conclusion and future research

This paper set out to establish a foundation for acknowledging communication management as a distinct concept in order to develop its usefulness as a conceptual lens or optic. This has been done, firstly, by charting the multiple understandings of communication management in extant literature, and secondly, by identifying tentative defining features as a point of departure for further conceptual development.

The review reveals widespread use of and interest in the concept of communication management. In particular, the synthesis highlights two main strands of literature and a third, less coherent, strand. The review also points to considerable conceptual confusion and overlapping definitions between communication management and other communication concepts, e.g. public relations and integrated communication. Thus, the concept of communication management is still used ambiguously, referring implicitly to different notions of the concept. Such ambiguous use potentially diminishes its usefulness as a conceptual lens. In order for the concept to serve as a guiding perspective for research, clarity is needed, not because it allows for empirical testing, but because the social phenomenon of study needs to be conceptually constructed, before it can be observed: conceptualisation precedes observation.

The confusions and vagueness aside, the review also reveals central features that permeate existing literature on communication management. These central features centre on the link between communication, management, and strategy. Managing communication is a question of planning, executing, and evaluating (e.g. Grunig, 1992). By effectively managing communication, communication becomes a key tool in reaching organisational goals and hence it takes on a strategic role (e.g. Grunig & Grunig, 2008). Here management and strategy become inseparable as communication management is a strategic management function (e.g. Elving et al., 2012; Raup & Hoffjann, 2012; van Ruler & de Lange, 2003). Strategic management is further linked to the balancing of internal and external processes and factors (e.g. Dozier et al., 1995). Consequently, it is also connected to publics and relationships (e.g. Ruler & Verčič, 2008). However, despite the inclusion of and focus on these central features, there is a lack of exploration into what these features entail when seen in relation to communication management as a concept in its own right. Thus, Raupp and van Ruler’s (2006, p. 24) comment on the absence of a “coherent body of knowledge” still seems to have some merit more than 10 years later.

Based on the above, it is clear that neither the meaning nor the terrain of the concept of communication management can be characterised as constant. Thus, to make fully use of the potential of communication management as a unifying concept within and across different communication fields there is a continued need for further developments (cf. Cornelissen, 2000, on the notion of integration within different communication fields).

One possible step towards developing communication management as a unifying, clear concept is to use the central features identified in the literature review as stepping stones. Inspired by a paper by Thomas and Stephens (2015) on developing the field of strategic communication, it is here suggested to view communication management at the intersection of and through the lenses of communication, management, and strategy. Applying different combinations of the three lenses offers an infinite number of paths for studying communication management (cf. Thomas & Stephens, 2015). This makes the approach suitable and valuable for exploring the concept. Studies and discussions of relevant issues and topics related to (intersections of) the three lenses will then serve as basis for suggesting a unifying, clear conceptualization of the phenomenon of communication management. More specifically, one starting point could be to further explore the three central features by reviewing the sources upon which the literature on communication management explicitly and implicitly rests. Moreover, such exploration should include specific communication, management, and strategy literatures. This would lay the foundation for developing communication management as a concept that is useful for empirically exploring the social phenomenon to which it refers.

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