

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

## Conceptualising sustainable communication at the intersection of ethics, reflexivity and critique

Marianne Grove Ditlevsen

*PhD, Associate Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University*  
[mgd@cc.au.dk](mailto:mgd@cc.au.dk)

Trine Susanne Johansen

*PhD, Associate Professor, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University*  
[tsj@cc.au.dk](mailto:tsj@cc.au.dk)

### Abstract

This paper addresses sustainability as an overarching principle for strategic communication reflecting a changing organisation-society interface where organisations are seen as political actors with citizenship obligations. Such a change calls for a responsabilisation of communication and for communication, itself, to be sustainable. Based on this, the paper sets out to present the theoretical concept of sustainable communication as a foundation for making communication responsible. Sustainable communication refers to communication practices which benefit not only organisations, but also people and society at large. An integrated framework for sustainable communication is developed based on three mindsets which are considered the central foundations, i.e. the ethical, the reflexive and the critical mindset, respectively. Taken together, the three mindsets lay the foundation for explicating the communicative implications and consequences associated with the changing roles of organisations in society by highlighting central relational aspects. Ethics orients attention towards how organisations address the other, i.e. organisational stakeholders, in the communication process. Reflexivity connects to the active recognition and investigation of organisational assumptions regarding the other and the organisation-other relationships. And the critical approach directs awareness towards the inherent, frequently implicit, or invisible, power dimensions characteristic of organisations-other relationships. Further, implications for theory, education and practice are discussed. Moreover, a process and dialogue tool in the form of a cobweb is offered as an inspiration for addressing sustainable communication issues in practice. Finally, it is suggested that sustainability has the potential to develop into a third turn to accompany the communicative and the strategic turns that have already taken place within communication scholarship.

### Keywords

Sustainable communication; strategic communication; ethical mindset; reflexive mindset; critical mindset

### 1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to address sustainability as an overarching principle for strategic communication reflecting current societal and organisational challenges. For decades, organisations have taken great lengths to communicate regarding their initiatives and progress in relation to implementing sustainable social, cultural and environmental activities. This organisational

focus has been mirrored in scholarship where increasingly nuanced understandings of how to deal with the complexities and paradoxes involved in communicating about sustainability have been developed turning sustainability communication into an established, interdisciplinary research field (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Weder et al., 2021).

Whereas organisational sustainability is considered an important object within strategic communication, little attention has been paid to the sustainability of strategic communication as such. This is surprising for two reasons. First, as communication is increasingly considered a strategic endeavour both in theory (Torp, 2018) and practice (Edelman, 2023), the roles and responsibilities of the communication profession in organisations are growing. As a result, greater emphasis should be paid to how communication professionals shape organisational strategy. Second, as the organisation-society interface is shifting towards placing business organisations in political roles (Scherer, 2018), the communication profession is required to address increasingly complex issues. Consequently, communication professionals need to be conscious of the impact and consequences of their actions. This argument has previously been put forth by Gulbrandsen and Just (2020, p. 334) who suggest that “it is imperative that communication is, itself, sustainable”. In line with Gulbrandsen and Just (2020), we argue that strategic communication should be developed based on an overarching principle of sustainability. Consequently, we propose *sustainable communication* as a theoretical concept referring to communication practices which benefit not only organisations, but also, and more importantly, people and society at large.

In order to develop a conceptualisation of what sustainable communication is and build a theoretical foundation to support its development, we draw on three existing elements within communication scholarship: first, an emphasis on communication as an ethical undertaking (e.g. Bowen, 2018; Lair, 2017; Pearson, 1989a); second, the need for communication and communication practitioners to practice reflexivity (e.g. Cunliffe, 2004; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Holmström, 2018); and third, the importance of power, ideology and voice as articulated within critical perspectives (e.g. Deetz & McClellan, 2009; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). These three mindsets have been chosen because they each potentially reflect the role of communication as a key strategic activity in the context of the changing organisation-society interface.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we address the growing strategic responsibility assigned to the communication profession in light of a changing interface between business organisations and society as a background for sustainable communication. Second, we outline the three mindsets which are said to function as the central foundations of sustainable communication i.e., the ethical mindset, the reflexive mindset and the critical mindset. The three mindsets are presented based on existing communication scholarship from within the related, yet distinct, disciplines of strategic communication, public relations, corporate communication and organisational communication as well as organisation and management studies. Third, we develop a framework for sustainable communication which integrates the three mindsets, and discuss the framework’s implications for strategic communication theory, education and practice. Finally, we offer our conclusions.

## 2 Background: strategic communication and the organisation-society interface

The purpose of this section is to motivate the need for developing a sustainable approach to strategic communication. The motivation is rooted in the changing perception of the role of business organisations in society as well as the increasing strategic role assigned to communication within organisations. We argue that these changes also call for a change in perception when it comes to how organisations approach their strategic communication. The section is organised as follows: first, we outline definitions and understandings of strategic communication and briefly address the perceived importance of the organisation’s relationship to its environment within the discipline; second, we highlight the changing nature of this relationship with reference to different perspectives on the business organisation-society interface; and finally, we address the potential implications of the changing nature of the interface for strategic communication as a push towards sustainable communication.

### 2.1 Strategic communication

According to Torp (2018; 2014), strategic communication can be understood in relation to two interrelated turns within communication scholarship. Turns are understood as retrospective descriptions of altered “scientific perceptions, understandings, or paradigms” which “fundamentally change or challenge our existing ways of looking at things” (Torp, 2018, p. 1). The two turns that have influenced strategic communication are, not surprisingly, the communicative and the strategic turn. The communicative turn, also labelled the linguistic turn (cf. Rorty, 1992), breaks with the idea of language as a neutral medium for objectively describing reality. The turn thus assigns a privileged status to communication as meaning creation rather than meaning transmission (Torp, 2014). Following the communicative turn, the strategic turn entails a view on communication as “central and decisive in relation to the operations of organizations” (Torp, 2018, p. 7). As Torp (2018, p. 13) writes: “So not only is everything perceived as communication – everything is perceived as strategic communication.”

Scholars have put forth definitions rooted in different conceptualisations of ‘strategy’ and ‘communication’ as well as in different understandings of how the two intersect. The definitions can be placed on a continuum ranging from those building on classic, i.e. functionalist or instrumental, conceptualisations of the two concepts to those building on processual conceptualisations. One classic definition is offered by Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 3), in their seminal article marking the first issue of *The International Journal of Strategic Communication*, “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”. This definition, which has laid the foundation for subsequent definitions (cf. e.g. Falkheimer & Heide, p. 2018; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Zerfass et al., 2018), mainly views communication as transmission of meaning from an active

(organisational) sender to a passive (stakeholder) audience. Moreover, strategy is viewed as a stable point of departure for communication. As suggested by Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015, p. 4): “The strategic communication process typically is a process that follows from an organization’s strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in enabling the organization’s goals and objectives.” The classic understandings frequently distinguish between strategic and non-strategic communication, arguing that routine, operational or tactical communication activities are not substantial enough to have strategic impact (e.g. Zerfass et al., 2018).

In contrast, other scholars (e.g. van Ruler, 2018) suggest that communication constitutes strategy. Consequently: “For some, strategic communication is focused on presenting and promoting goals and strategies; for others, it is also focused on driving its development. In other words, for some, strategy precedes strategic communication; for others, strategic communication also constitutes strategy.” (van Ruler 2018, p. 373). Van Ruler (2018, p. 367) argues in favour of conceptualising strategic communication as “an agile management process” and suggests that strategic communication both presents strategy and builds, as well as rebuilds, it. This view is supported by a focus on an “amalgam of ongoing communication processes” characterised as omnidirectional and diachronic rather than by a focus on a one-way transmission process from the organisation to audiences (van Ruler, 2018, p. 379). At the process end of the continuum, we also find Gulbrandsen and Just (2016; 2020) who, similar to van Ruler (2018), base their understanding on Mintzberg’s (1987) thoughts on strategy as both planned and emergent. Consequently, “strategies are collaborative and networked flows of shared decision making” (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016, p. 229). In order to emphasise the processual and performative nature of strategic communication, they use the term “strategizing communication” defined as “the stream of purposeful decisions made and actions taken over time regarding how, when and with whom to communicate in order to fulfil an organization’s goals” (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020, p. 22). In other words, strategizing communication is “the process of making communication work strategically for an organization” (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020, p. 34).

In addition to the growing emphasis on the strategic role played by communication, strategic communication scholars have taken an interest in how the organisation relates to society. There has been a call within strategic communication literature to acknowledge the complexity of organisations and their environments (e.g. Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020) as well as to address the strategic role and responsibility of communication in the organisation-society interface. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) argue that strategic communication can be understood in light of the structural changes in society which are driven by technological, political, economic and cultural factors. Strategic communication’s disciplinary emergence is said to coincide with societal developments such as globalisation, diversity, mediatisation and activism which have impacted business organisations. The relationship between the business organisation and society can be conceptualised differently and is much discussed within disciplines focused on sustainability and legitimacy most notable in connection with corporate social responsibility (CSR) (cf. e.g. Gond & Matten, 2010). Recently, these discussions have taken an interest in the changing role of business in society; changes which potentially also have implications for strategic communication.

## ***2.2 The business-society interface***

The business-society interface has been conceptualised through various perspectives and concepts, frequently within the discipline of CSR. The goal with this subsection is not to provide an overview of all concepts, but to pinpoint a few central ones which are useful in shedding light on some of the changes in how the societal role of the business organisation is understood; namely, creating shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2006; 2011), political CSR (Scherer, 2018; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Scherer et al., 2016) and corporate citizenship (Matten & Crane, 2005; Matten et al., 2003; Moon et al., 2005).

In light of the growing pressures on businesses to demonstrate their societal responsibilities, the notion of shared value was first introduced by Porter and Kramer (2006) in connection with developing a link between business and societal benefits. They argue that “CSR can be much more than a cost, a constraint, or a charitable deed – it can be a source of opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage” (Porter & Kramer, 2006, p. 79). This leads them to suggest that CSR efforts should be guided by the principle of shared value by equally providing social benefits to society and economic benefits to the organisation (rather than viewing such efforts as a trade-off between doing good and making money). Porter and Kramer (2011) further develop the idea of creating shared value as an alternative to CSR. Their point of departure is that businesses face a legitimacy crisis in light of increasing public demands for CSR. In order to solve this crisis, businesses need to integrate responsibility activities into their value creation. It is a question of “creating economic value in a way that *also* creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges” (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 64). It is stressed that creating shared value is “a new way to achieve economic success” (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 64).

According to Gond and Matten (2010), Porter and Kramer (2006) exemplify a business-centric and instrumental approach which seeks to position CSR as a source of increased financial revenue rather than as a moral responsibility. Moreover, Crane et al. (2014) develop a counterargument to the shared value idea raising a number of critiques relating to the assumptions of Porter and Kramer (2011). Amongst their points of critique is the focus on the interest of business organisations. They suggest that redefining CSR as a source of profit for businesses potentially drives organisations towards investing in easily fixable issues at the expense of engaging with broader, structural societal problems. Instead, they argue in favour of a societal approach which grounds the responsibility of businesses in the common good of society, and not in profit opportunities (Crane et al., 2014). Crane et al. (2014, p. 144) suggest that the role of business organisations have moved beyond using CSR in order to gain legitimacy and demonstrate legal compliance, rather they have “become active players in the wider governance of societies alongside governments.” As a consequence, businesses are seen to be in a position where “their decisions are not just related to the pursuit

of economic goals, but also to the interest and rights of those who are governed by those decisions” (Crane et al., 2014, p. 144). Hence, the business organisation is viewed as a political actor. This view has laid the foundation for the conceptual development of the two related terms ‘political CSR’ and ‘corporate citizenship’ which both address “the role of business firms in providing public goods and defining and enforcing public rules” (Scherer, 2018, p. 389).

The idea of the business organisation as a political actor lies at the heart of the concept of political CSR (Scherer, 2018; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Scherer et al., 2016). The point of departure is ‘deliberative democracy’ (cf. Habermas, 1996; 1998) which is said to be in contrast with a liberal model of democracy where there is a clear line between private economic activities and public political activities (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007) as visible in the separation of the two in relation to the concept of shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2006; 2011). In line with the notion of deliberative democracy, a central tenant of political CSR is to “(re)establish a political order where economic rationality is circumscribed by democratic institutions and procedures” (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, p. 1097). A major implication for business organisations is that they shift from reactively complying with societal legal and moral standards to actively engaging in shaping and reshaping those standards (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Thereby, businesses are political actors co-creating their environment (Scherer et al., 2016). As political actors, businesses are “engaging in public deliberations, collective decisions, and the provision of public goods or the restriction of public bads in cases where public authorities are unable or unwilling to fulfil this role” (Scherer et al., 2016, p. 276).

Based on conceptualisations of citizenship from within political theory, corporate citizenship literature (Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005), similar to political CSR, holds a critical view on the role of business in society (Scherer, 2018). It is also rooted in the notion that nation states and governments can no longer be sole providers of citizen responsibilities and rights, and that business organisations, consequently, become involved in responsibility not as voluntary behaviour, but as an unavoidable necessity (Matten et al., 2003). The idea behind corporate citizenship is that businesses are powerful societal actors who have a responsibility to respect, protect, facilitate and defend the social, civil and political rights of citizens (e.g. Matten et al., 2003; Matten & Crane, 2005). Business organisations are regarded as administrators of citizenship rights, not as citizens themselves (Matten & Crane, 2005).

### ***2.3 Implications for strategic communication – the sustainable communication imperative***

In classic approaches to strategic communication, where the role of communication is to communicate strategy, the implications of the changing role of businesses may be less visible. Here, the change may imply a change in strategy, and thereby, an altered point of departure for communication activities; but the activities themselves remain unchanged. In processual approaches to strategic communication, however, the implications are greater. A central premise of the processual approaches is that communication is performative meaning that communication is more than a means of expressing organisational strategies and goals, it is also a means of setting, challenging and changing these strategies and goals (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020; van Ruler, 2018). It follows that strategic communication and strategic communication professionals hold active roles in securing strategic practices which mirror the new role of organisations in society. Therefore, strategic communication must examine its own responsibility in the context of the organisation as a political actor and corporate citizen.

As an additional note, although the role of the business organisation is in focus, the political shift naturally also holds implications for other types of organisations such as public institutions and non-governmental organisations (e.g. Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Accordingly, the shift also influences strategic communication within non-business organisations. Having described the societal and organisational background that supports a call for greater responsibility within communication as strategic discipline, we proceed by outlining the foundational principles of sustainable communication.

## **3 The foundations of sustainable communication**

Sustainable communication refers to communication practices which benefit not only organisations, but also people and society. In other words, as suggested by Gulbrandsen and Just (2020), strategic communication is sustainable when it is socially and environmentally responsible, and not purely oriented towards organisational goals and profit maximation. The call for making strategic communication sustainable and responsible has been associated with the growing focus on organisations as engaged in collaboration, interaction and participation (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016). This has led Gulbrandsen and Just (2016, p. 233) to the suggestion that: “Just as communication has been strategized it must be responsabilized.”

In this section, we develop the foundations supporting the conceptualisation of sustainable communication by introducing three central mindsets: an ethical mindset, a reflexive mindset and a critical mindset. These three mindsets have been chosen because they each potentially reflect the role of communication as a key strategic activity in the context of the changing organisation-society interface. Each of the three mindsets represent existing scholarly efforts within communication research aimed at addressing the responsibilities and duties of the communication profession in an organisational setting. Moreover, each mindset introduces central elements which can help build an integrated framework to underpin these responsibilities and duties. The mindsets already overlap as visible in e.g. Cunliffe and Jun’s (2005) articulation of critical reflexivity as a particular form of reflexivity which seeks to uncover inherent, implicit ideologies and power relations in organisations (in line with the critical mindset, cf. e.g. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). Moreover, critical reflexivity is seen as an ethical practice as it fosters examination of moral assumptions and guidelines as the basis for enacting responsibility in relationships (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Consequently, there is potential for combining these – separate yet overlapping mindsets – into a coherent framework.

### **3.1 An ethical mindset**

The first key mindset supporting the notion of sustainable communication is *ethics*. Ethics has been extensively debated and discussed within multiple academic areas, contexts and disciplines. In relation to organisations and their societal role, business ethics scholarship has developed to address overall ethical questions and concerns related to organisational moral responsibilities (cf. e.g. Crane et al., 2019). In communication scholarship, ethics – loosely defined as doing or acting “right” (cf. e.g. Bowen, 2018; Lair, 2017) – has been explored within the context of multiple, related disciplines including public relations (e.g. Bowen, 2016; Pearson, 1989a; 1989b), strategic communication (e.g. Bowen, 2018) and organisational communication (e.g. Cheney et al., 2011; Lair, 2017; Seeger, 1997). Below, we explore the importance of, and attention to, ethics across these related disciplines; its multiple, abstract definitions; and its different applications within communication scholarship. We conclude the section by reflecting on how an ethical mindset can help lay the foundation for sustainable communication.

Ethics is described as vital within public relations, strategic communication and organisational communication (cf. e.g. Catellani et al., 2015). An ethical focus “helps organizations to resolve dilemmas, as well as to be effective and socially responsible” (Bowen, 2016, p. 564). In its capacity to act strategically, communication has the ability to define issues, identify potential solutions and implement policies at both organisational and societal levels. This implies a particular responsibility to communicate ethically (Bowen, 2018). Thus, the centrality of ethics is linked to the interplay of organisation and society “both because complex organizations simultaneously include and transcend individual actors and because the ramifications of organizational action can have such widespread consequences” (Lair, 2017, p. 1). Ethical communication “allows for the creation of meaning between stakeholders, organizations, and social systems” (Bowen, 2018, p. 1). Since ethical communication is associated with all stakeholders, it equally has an internal and an external focus directed at issues pertaining to different stakeholder groups. Seeger (1997) categorises organisational communication ethics according to internal, micro, issues and external, macro, issues. Micro issues relate to dilemmas that arise from responsibilities, rights, and values related to employees, whereas macro issues are associated with dilemmas that arise from interactions with the organisation’s external stakeholders. Ruck (2022) argues that although employees are among the most crucial stakeholders of an organisation, strategic communication favours ethical principles such as truth and accuracy in external communication while ignoring them in internal communication. To make up for this oversight, Ruck (2022, p. 351) suggests “employee voice, listening to employees, and dialogue in the workplace” as central ethical concerns for internal communication.

While recognised as being of extreme importance both in theory and practice, ethics is seemingly given limited explicit attention in communication scholarship. Ethical issues are often treated as an afterthought (Cheney et al., 2011; Meisenbach, 2017), i.e. “as an adjunct to a main focus of inquiry; ethics appears frequently as a consideration in the discussion section of articles or as a last chapter of a textbook.” (Lair, 2017, p. 2). Alternatively, ethics is discussed in specially dedicated journals and textbooks separate from general communication scholarship (Meisenbach, 2017), e.g. Seeger’s (1997) book on ethics and organisational communication and Cataellani et al.’s (2015) edited anthology on communication ethics in public relations and organisational communication. Moreover, it has been suggested that it is a potential subject of attention at times when businesses are doing well and thus can “afford” to allocate resources to ethical issues and questions (Cheney et al., 2011, p. 245). Summing up on these oversights, Meisenbach (2017) has argued that the treatment of ethics in communication scholarship is fragmented and needs to be developed in its own right.

Defining ethics in the context of communication is not an easy task. As frequently pointed out (e.g. Bowen, 2016; Lair, 2017), the concept is surrounded by terminological confusion and vagueness. Consequently, definitions tend to be abstract and general. In the words of Lair (2017, p. 3): “In the most general sense, ethics is commonly understood as referring to “right conduct”, but beyond such generalities, scholars interested in the relationship between organisational communication and ethics rarely offer a more precise definition for “ethics”.” Such a general definition is offered by Bowen (2018, 1): “Ethics of strategic communication refers to that which is morally worthy in the communication context. Right versus wrong communication, furthering an innate good, serving the greater good and facilitating social discourse are all perspectives that can be used to define morally worthy communication.” Similar to business ethics (cf. Crane et al., 2019), communication ethics are linked to doing what is morally acceptable, right or good in concrete situations and contexts. However, as pointed out by Bowen (2018, p. 3), acceptable, right or good can be defined in multiple ways making it difficult to offer an exact assessment.

Elaborating on definitions of ethics in the context of communication requires an understanding of various ethical perspectives and their application in communication scholarship. The intersection of ethics and communication both entails so-called descriptive and normative approaches (Lair, 2017). Whereas the descriptive approach seeks to explore the connection between communication and ethical behaviour and action in organisational contexts, the normative approaches address “the ethicality of communication behaviors themselves” (Lair, 2017, p. 4). Normative approaches are typically divided into three different perspectives: virtue ethics, utilitarian ethics and deontological ethics (Bowen, 2018; Lair, 2017). Each of the three different approaches define and understand ethical communicative behaviour from a different stance. Virtue ethics, frequently associated with Aristotle, addresses the ethicality of the participants or actors engaging in the communication behaviour (Lair, 2017). Utilitarian or teleological ethics, known from the thinking of e.g. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, views actions as ethical if they maximise happiness and minimise unhappiness for the largest number of people (Lair, 2017). Utilitarianism focuses on the consequences of actions: a communicative behaviour is ethical if and when its outcome benefits the organisation and its stakeholders (Bowen, 2018). Deontological, or duty-based, ethics considers the ethicality of specific communicative actions as measured against existing, shared norms for good behaviour (Lair, 2017). Deontology is frequently associated with Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative which entails the formula of universal law prescribing a duty to “act only according to that

maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law” (quoted in Lair, 2017, p. 5). As such, “communication is only morally worthy when initiated with good intention or goodwill” (Bowen, 2018, p. 8). The different approaches and their inherent understandings of when something can be considered ethical, i.e. morally right, mirrors general debates within ethics scholarship. Indeed, as argued by Seeger (1997, p. 18), the “ethics of organization and communication are not distinct from ethics in other contexts. Organizations and organizational communication, however, present some unique problems and emphasize some ethical issues over others.”

Within communication scholarship, ethics have been discussed in relation to different situations, contexts and approaches. Overall, Lair (2017, p. 6) suggests that organisational communication scholars tend to draw on ethical debates rather than contribute to them. In drawing on ethical debates to address communication in organisational settings, communication scholars are said to focus on three different intersections between communication and ethics: “communication behaviors occurring in and by organizations, organizations themselves as constituted by communication, and the influence of communication in shaping organizational contexts” (Lair, 2017, p. 7). As previously noted, scholarship tends to either adhere to the descriptive or the normative approaches. The descriptive approach is potentially visible in scholarship that addresses communication as playing a critical role securing and furthering the ethical conduct of the organisation per se, e.g. Bowen (2016; 2008) who suggests public relations hold an ethical counsel role. As such, communication practitioners guide managers and decision makers on ethical issues in order to help ensure that organisations live up to their obligations as responsible corporate citizens (Bowen, 2008).

The normative approaches, on the other hand, frequently lead to discussions on the practices, activities and conduct of communication professionals (cf. e.g. Seeger & Kuhn, 2011) along with a focus on the formulation of a code of ethics governing professional actions (cf. e.g. Meyer, & Leonard, 2014). The latter focus is also pronounced in practice, e.g. the International Association of Business Communicators’ Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators (IABC, n.d.). The code is said to serve the association’s members as “a guide to making consistent, responsible, ethical and legal choices in all of our communications”. Moreover, within public relations in particular, the normative ethicality of communicative actions has been equalled to symmetrical communication and dialogue (e.g. Bowen, 2018; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). According to Taylor and Kent (2014, p. 388), dialogue “is considered one of the most ethical forms of communication because it serves to mitigate power relationships, values individual dignity and self worth, and tries to involve participants in conversations and decision-making.” Emphasising dialogue means acknowledging the inherent value assigned to all participants as active contributors to the communication process (e.g. Botan, 1997; Pearson, 1989a). As argued by Pearson (1989a), the dialogical approach is ethical, compared to a monological approach, because it seeks to treat all participants in the communication process as ends rather than means. Treating participants as ends in themselves can be traced to another of Kant’s formulas of the categorical imperative, also referred to as the “Formula of Humanity”: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as only a means” (Kerstein, 2019). To Pearson (1989a; 1989b), dialogue is associated with, among others, the work of Habermas (1984) and associated with the equal opportunities of all participants to initiate and maintain communication, to offer explanations or interpretations, to act freely without domination or control and to be in an equal power relationship. However, while dialogue is considered to be ethical communication placing emphasis on relationships, Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 24) warn that a dialogical approach “cannot force an organization to behave ethically”.

In terms of sustainable communication, ethics can be argued to form its foundation. The rationale for approaching communication with an ethical mindset links the organisation to the surrounding society and highlights the responsibility of, and role played by, communication in the context of the organisation-society interface. Ethics becomes a necessary condition or prerequisite for acting sustainably within communication. Strategic communication is seen as an inherent moral action which suggests the importance of recognising not only the organisation itself but also internal and external stakeholders, as participants in their own right rather than as means for furthering organisational goals. Speaking of ethics within communication can be connected to critical perspectives and their focus on e.g. power and voice (cf. Lair, 2017; Meisenbach, 2017; Ruck, 2022). In addition, ethicality is linked with reflection and reflexivity (cf. Bowen, 2018; Pearson, 1989b). Pearson (1989b) argues that ethical communication presupposes reflectiveness of participants in relation to the rules supporting and steering communicative acts. Reflection, in the form of addressing questions about what “the rules are for talking about and changing the rules” of communication (Pearson, 1989b, p. 78), ensures the autonomy and equality of participants. Thus, an ethical mindset is closely intertwined with reflexive and critical mindsets, which are also intertwined with each other, as is explored in the sections to follow.

### **3.2 A reflexive mindset**

The second key mindset supporting the notion of sustainable communication is rooted in the concept of *reflexivity*, broadly understood as the ability and willingness to examining one’s underlying assumptions (Cunliffe, 2004); i.e., a process where one exposes and questions one’s ways of thinking and acting (Hibbert et al., 2010). Contrary to ethics, reflexivity and the related notion of reflectivity have not been discussed at great length within communication scholarship with few, notable exceptions (e.g. Falkheimer et al., 2016; Falkheimer & Heide, 2016; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). However, reflexivity has been addressed and conceptually developed within organisational and management scholarship (e.g. Cunliffe, 2004). Consequently, in introducing reflexivity as a founding principle of sustainable communication, we turn to literature from outside the communication fields. We begin the section by providing an overview of how reflexivity and reflectivity have been addressed within communication scholarship. Second, we offer definitions and explanations of reflectivity and reflexivity before we expand on the notion of

reflexivity. Finally, we conclude the section by addressing reflexivity as a central, foundational principle of sustainable communication.

As initially mentioned, reflexivity and reflectivity are not principles that explicitly have found their way into communication scholarship to any great length. Nevertheless, the concepts have been addressed by a few scholars within the strategic communication and public relations disciplines (Falkheimer & Heide, 2016; Falkheimer et al., 2016; Holmström, 2004; 2005; Marsh, 2010; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005; Willis, 2019). The concepts' applications by different scholars point to different understandings and usages. One scholar that has explicitly addressed reflectivity in the context of communication is Holmström (2004; 2005) who has developed the idea of a reflective paradigm for public relations and strategic communication. Whereas the central tenants of Holmström's understanding of reflectivity are presented below, here we briefly address her view on how reflectivity relates to communication. According to Holmström (2004; 2005), public relations should be regarded as organisational legitimation. Organisations are seen as embedded in complex societal and social contexts which require them to enter into dialogues and partnerships with multiple stakeholders in order to navigate conflicting expectations and demands. The reflective paradigm describes the process of how an organisation can, or rather should, view itself through the eyes of society and stakeholders (or publics) and suggests communication to play a key role in this process. Holmström's understanding of reflectivity has inspired Marsh (2010) to argue in favour of expanding the macro-level, or societal, focus with a micro-level, or individual practitioner, focus from a rhetorical perspective. In addition to Holmström's reflective paradigm, Marsh draws on the idea of reflective communication management. Developed by van Ruler and Verčič (2005), reflective communication management, similar to the reflective paradigm, focuses on viewing an organisation from a societal or public view and is linked to legitimation and to the role played by communication within organisational legitimatisation processes.

In contrast to the focus on reflectivity, Falkheimer and Heide (2016) and Falkheimer et al. (2016) have embraced the concept of reflexivity as central to public relations and strategic communication research. Highlighting what they label the "reflexive turn", Falkheimer and Heide (2016, p. 163) call for an approach which articulates the active role of communication scholars in constructing the reality that they research. In addition, they argue in favour of taking a reflexive approach to public relations practice by integrating social and organisational theories. Falkheimer et al. (2016) equally develop an argument in favour of taking a reflexive approach to communication scholarship and practice. Reflexivity is defined with reference to Alvesson and Spicer (2012) as "an ability and willingness in an organization to question rules, routines and norms rather than follow them unquestioningly" (Falkheimer et al., 2016, p. 145). Following an interest in communication practice, Willis (2019) seeks to apply "a reflexive lens to leadership practice in public relations" arguing that: "A reflexive orientation to the professional challenges of leadership should be encouraged amongst leaders to help offset the normative and essentialist tendencies predominating in existing research, as well as the rhetoric of leadership promoted in contemporary organizations, both of which have an impact on how leadership identities are constructed." In this context, reflexivity is understood as questioning assumptions and perceptions in order to create a space for new insights to develop (Willis, 2019).

As made apparent above, multiple terms, understandings and usages appear in communication scholarship. Generally, however, two main streams of thought can be identified: a reflectivity-oriented stream developed by Holmström (2004; 2005; 2010; 2018) and a reflexivity-oriented stream developed by Cunliffe (e.g. 2003; 2004; 2016). We proceed by outlining the two perspectives beginning with an overview of reflectivity before addressing the notion of reflexivity more extensively as this concept subsequently is used as the foundation for sustainable communication.

Holmström (2004; 2005; 2010; 2018) has developed a reflective paradigm of management within public relations and strategic communication taking a point of departure in organisational legitimation and the role of the organisation in society, as mentioned above. Reflection is defined by Holmström (2018, p. 3), with reference to Luhmann's (1995) social systems theory, as a second-order mode of self-observation which implies "observation of the premises of one's own observations". From this follows that a reflective organisation "sees its observations exactly as observations, and grows attentive to the preconditions of its observations. Consequently, the reflective organization sees its decision-making premises as contingent, resulting from choices that it could have made differently and therefore must take responsibility for and continuously adjust and improve" (Holmström, 2018, p. 4). Moreover, the organisation sees itself as if from the outside and as part of a larger societal context which, in turn, is argued to suggest viewing the organisational stakeholders as elements to be respected and acknowledged in their own right rather than as elements to be managed by the organisation (Holmström, 2010). Holmström (2010, p. 262) uses the term reflectivity in contrast to reflexivity which is said to imply "a narcissistic perspective from within, a perspective from where decision premises are taken for granted and are applied blindly, and from where what is seen with this perspective is taken to be the one reality, the only truth". Accordingly, Holmström prefers reflectivity because it is said to imply an outside-in point of departure where the organisation's environment is to be respected rather than managed (Holmström 2005; 2010; 2018). In addressing this distinction between reflectivity and reflexivity raised by Holmström, Falkheimer and Heide (2016, p. 167) argue "we do not really see any clash between reflexivity and reflectivity". We adopt their perspective and therefore equally draw on work related to both concepts. However, we prefer the term reflexivity as we base a substantial part of our understanding on the work of Cunliffe (e.g. 2003; 2004; 2016) where reflexivity is used as the central concept. We base our understanding mainly on Cunliffe's notion of reflexivity as it, in contrast to Holmström's macro-level focus on the organisation in relation to its environment, has both an individual and organisational focus as explicated below.

Cunliffe (2003) calls for reflexive research within organisational and management studies in which scholars question the normally taken-for-granted philosophical and methodological underpinnings of research by addressing assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge. Moreover, she suggests reflexivity as a central tenant of management practice (Cunliffe, 2004; 2016). Reflection is viewed as a "mirror image" whereas reflexivity involves actively acknowledging one's beliefs as well as how

they may influence one's actions (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 226). Reflecting on her understanding of reflexivity, Cunliffe (2016, p. 741) suggests that reflexivity "means examining our own assumptions, decisions, actions, interactions, and the assumptions underpinning organizational policies and practices and the intended and potentially unintended impact." Here, reflexivity is defined as: "Questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted – what is being said and not said – and examining the impact this has or might have" (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 741). This understanding of reflexivity runs parallel to what Holmström (2018) labels as reflectivity since it highlights the importance of identifying, acknowledging, and exploring underlying understandings and in particular questioning taken-for-granted assumptions.

Cunliffe (2016) argues that reflexivity functions at two levels: self-reflexivity and critical reflexivity. Where self-reflexivity refers to reflecting on one's own individual beliefs and values as well as on our relationships with others and how we communicate with them, critical reflexivity refers to addressing "organizational practices, policies, social structures, and knowledge bases" (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 741). Both concepts are explored in greater detail in Cunliffe and Jun (2005). Here it is suggested that: "The central thread of both forms of reflexivity is the need to question our natural and often taken-for granted attitudes such as our prejudice, bias, thought, and habits" (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 226). Self-reflexivity is explained as connected to understanding our own individual role in relation to constructing social and/or organisational realities and thus reflect the individual's subjective role in creating meaning. Being self-reflective suggests that an individual does not simply perform routine tasks and problem solving within the context of an organisation. Instead, the individual is conscious about his or her role in the organisation and engaged in overcoming paradoxical aspects such as control and autonomy, power and powerlessness as well as voice and silence (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Self-reflexivity can also function at a social level when "organizational members question their assumptions, practices, and actions and their impact on the organization and the community at large" and involves different teams and departments recognising differences in ideas and experiences (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 233).

Critical reflexivity refers to exploring taken-for-granted assumptions within an organisational and/or societal setting (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). A critical reflexive practice "embraces subjective understanding of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 407). Engaging in critical reflexivity means that practitioners "can reveal opposing and multiple perspectives and offer alternative ways of thinking about these practices" (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 232). Thus, it "offers a way of critiquing ideologies, normalized practices, and their consequences. It offers a way of reformulating and expanding the bounds of social and organizational practice by highlighting systemic control structures that reproduce themselves in our discourse and practice" (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 232).

When it comes to sustainable communication, a reflexive mindset underscores the importance of emphasising the ability and willingness of communication practitioners individually and collectively as they act on behalf of organisations to question their own practices and the assumptions upon which these practices rest. Reflexivity as a communicative approach implies constant awareness during the decision-making processes involved when communicating strategically. As highlighted by Cunliffe (2016) and Cunliffe and Jun (2005) reflexivity can be addressed at both the individual and the organisational level. For the individual communication practitioner, the notion of self-reflexivity underscores the importance of being mindful in terms of one's own role as a communication professional and aware of the social and organisational realities that one produces and reproduces when communicating. This involves, among other things, examining and evaluating each communication situation and problem without resolving to routine problem solving (cf. Cunliffe & Jun, 2005) as well as questioning rules, norms and routines (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). At the organisational level, communication practitioners and the communication function as such need to recognise the existence of multiple versions of, or perspectives on, reality both within and outside the organisation.

Holmström (2010) argues that a reflective paradigm for strategic communication involves recognising stakeholders as equal partners to be engaged in relationships and dialogue. This sentiment mirrors one of the central premises of the ethical mindset, i.e., that stakeholders are to be viewed as participants in their own right and not as instruments or means that can be managed in order to promote organisational goals. Being reflexive is a prerequisite for ethical thinking and behaviour. According to Cunliffe (2004, p. 408), reflexivity should be an integrated part of management education "because by thinking more critically about our own assumptions and actions, we can develop more collaborative, responsive, and ethical ways of managing organizations." In her later work, Cunliffe (2016, p. 741) explicitly articulates the link between reflexivity and ethics: "I am now even more convinced that reflexivity offers a way of foregrounding our moral and ethical responsibility for people and for the world around us". She moreover highlights self-reflexivity and critical reflexivity as "important in working toward ethical, responsive, and responsible organizations" (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 741). In addition to supporting an ethical ethos of communication, reflexivity is connected to taking a critical stance as it directs attention to issues of power and voice. Cunliffe and Jun (2005, p. 228) suggest that critical reflexivity involves, in part, the examination of "who may be excluded or marginalized by policy and practice". This, in turn, points towards issues of asymmetrical power relations which is central to critical management, organisation and communication scholarship. Below we unfold the foundations and implications of an inherent critical mindset.

### **3.3 A critical mindset**

The third, and final, mindset, the critical mindset on organisations, has been widely discussed within academic fields and disciplines like sociology, organisational studies and management studies and has most importantly led to the emergence of "a scholarly community" (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 14) or "a movement" (Alvesson et al., 2009, p. 1) known as critical management studies (CMS) (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). With its origin e.g. in works by Marx (e.g. Marx, 1906; 1964; Marx & Engels, 1947) and in the Frankfurt School represented by e.g. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth and more recently Hartmut Rosa, CMS "questions the authority and relevance of



mainstream thinking and practice” of management and organisations (Alvesson et al., 2009, p. 1) and “proceeds from the assumption that dominant theories and practices of management and organisation systematically favor some (elite) groups and/or interests at the expense of those who are disadvantaged by them; and that this systemic inequality or interest-partiality is ultimately damaging for the emancipatory prospects of all groups” (Alvesson et al., 2009, p. 7).

With regards to communication scholarship, a critical approach has been developed especially within the research field of organisational communication (e.g. Deetz, 1992, 1995a; Mumby, 1988; 2013, Cheney, 1999; Ashcraft, 2001). As a discipline, critical organisational communication is best described as eclectically grown with wide-ranging and multidisciplinary influences (Ganesh, 2009, p. 230; cf. Mumby & Stohl, 1996). Maybe for that reason, few publications offer a coherent, comprehensive overview over and introduction to the wide field of the discipline. One example is Mumby 2013 *et passim*, with the most recent edition by Mumby and Kuhn (2019) which we will use as an overall reference. Mumby and Kuhn present four basic assumptions about organisations seen as communicative phenomena (2019, pp. 51-54). These assumptions not only build a starting point for critical organisational communication studies, but more importantly they form and direct the main issues of interest for critical organisational communication scholars. The first of the four basic assumptions is that organisations are political sites of power. In line with the basic thoughts of CMS, applying a critical perspective to communication, broadly speaking, means to see organisations as political systems “where different interest groups compete for organizational resources (Morgan, 2006)” (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 32). Consequently, the notion of power becomes a focal point of critical organisational communication studies as it “provides an epistemic frame through which the dynamics of organizational life can be understood” (Mumby, 2019, p. 430). Not only does power provide an epistemic frame, power is also studied at great length as an important communication phenomenon in its own right (e.g. Deetz, 1992; Mumby, 1988; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). For that reason, power aspects of communication processes will be dealt with in more detail below after a more general introduction to the critical mindset within organisational communication studies.

The second assumption is that organisations are socially constructed through communication processes (cf. the CCO-approach, i.e. Communication Constitutes Organisations; Ashcraft et al., 2009; Coreen et al., 2011). This means, i.e., that the production and reproduction of organisational structure and behaviour based on underlying, common sense-thinking and taken-for-granted assumptions are (re-)constructed via communication processes. The third assumption is that organisations are seen as key sites of human identity formation in modern society. To explain this, Deetz (1992) has introduced the concept of corporate colonization to refer to “the unobtrusive ways corporate meanings, instrumental logics, and managerial values come to dominate the ways we understand, think, and act in everyday life” (McClellan, 2017). By dominating our ways of understanding, thinking and acting in everyday life, organisations dominate our lifeworld (Habermas, 1984; 1987) and our identity formation to a far larger extent than e.g. the family, the state/government, the education system or the church (Deetz, 1992).

The fourth, and final, assumption presented by Mumby and Kuhn (2019) is that organisations are important sites of collective decision making and democracy. One might argue that this assumption relates closely to the three other assumptions, but also to the more basic perception of organisations (see above) as not being primarily economic entities, but rather political actors with a responsibility of commitment to the individual and society at large and thus to the overall aim of critical organisational communication studies to make organisations more democratic and participatory in the best interest of everybody. In line with this, it is the overall aim of critical organisational communication studies to make “organizations more participatory and democratic structures that are more responsive to the needs of their multiple stakeholders” (cf. Deetz, 1995a, in Mumby & Kuhn 2019, p. 32; see also Cheney, 1995; Deetz, 1992; Deetz & McClellan, 2009; Feldner & Fyke, 2018). Studying organisational communication from a critical perspective means that the focus is on the individual in the triad of the individual, the organisation and society (cf. Cheney, 1995; Feldner & Fyke, 2018), and not on the organisation as is often the case within the fields of corporate communication and strategic communication with a more expressed management view on communication. Workplace democracy is linked to a concern for the individual, but also for society as a whole (cf. Deetz, 1995a; 1995b). Deetz (1995a; 1995b) argues that organisations can no longer be seen as purely economic entities; they are affecting the lives of individuals and the society in fundamental ways and therefore they must take on greater responsibilities. Instead of seeing organisations “as a tool enabling a few to make money and guide social choices” (Deetz, 1995b, p. 278), they could be seen as “positive social institutions providing a forum for the articulation and resolution of important social conflicts regarding the use of natural resources, the production of meaningful goods and services, and the development of individuals” considering stakeholders as legitimate parts of the organisation (Deetz, 1995b, p. 267). Deetz (1995b, p. 275) concludes that “[c]reating corporations that are economically and socially sound begins with a mutual commitment to the whole, to the entire set of stakeholders”. This is what today is often referred to as the necessity for organisations to have a stakeholder perspective and not a shareholder perspective. Moreover, it is closely related to the overall perception of organisations as political actors, cf. above.

From a communication perspective, participation and democracy at work is enhanced through free and open communication and the Habermasian notion of the ideal speech situation (e.g. Habermas, 1974; 1984; 1987), i.e. “a situation in which everyone would have an equal chance to argue and question, without those who are more powerful, confident, or prestigious having and unequal say” (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 178); an ideal that resembles the generally accepted communication ideal of two-way-symmetrical communication with its emphasis on dialogue, relationships and mutual understanding, as introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984) within public relations studies. More specifically, however, the concept of voice, i.e. the possibility of speaking (up) and being an active communication actor (for more on voice, see below), becomes a key concept within critical organisational communication studies. To have a voice as members of an organisation not only contributes to workplace democracy, but for the members individually it also means to be legitimate in the eyes of the organisation, or as Logan and Tindall (2018, p. 6) put it: “To have a voice is to be legitimate in the eyes of society. Conversely, not

having a voice is to be “something less than,” as the tragic past experiences of the enslaved, the indigenous, women and other traditionally oppressed groups have demonstrated prior to emancipation, suffrage, and other meaningful, liberating social changes.”

Based on the above, what concerns critical organisational communication scholars is “the extent to which the assumptions upon which [organisational issues like] identification are based is both open to examination and freely arrived at” (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 52). From a democracy perspective, this is crucial as decisions made by and in organisations “affect people’s lives in often fundamental ways” (cf. Mumby, 2013, p. 49) and therefore individuals in organisations like employees should also have the possibility of contributing to decision making processes and structures in organisations and/or of questioning organisational decisions made (cf. above). Within communication disciplines with a point of departure in communication from a management perspective like corporate communication or the classic approaches to strategic communication (see section 2.1), this is an issue that is mostly neglected, instead the basic assumption here seems to be that to achieve the overall goals and objectives of organisations, all employees are expected to align their identity with that of the organisation and to act as ambassadors for the organisation, living the organisational values – or the brand, as it were (cf. Cornelissen 2020). So, even though concepts and notions of e.g. participation and organisational listening are dealt with within communication disciplines with a management perspective, they are here widely seen as an instrument of management for the achievement of engagement as a way of reaching the organisation’s overall strategic goals and thus as an instrument serving the interest of management/the organisation and not the interests of the members of the organisation as people (cf. e.g. Heide & Simonsson, 2018).

What characterises applying a critical mindset to organisational communication, is generally to expose the hidden taken-for-granted and to create the best basis for acting and making decisions in the best interest of all people and thus to question so-called common sense (Cheney et al., 2011, p. xvi; Deetz & McClellan, 2009, p. 449; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, pp. 32f.). In line with the basic idea within CMS to “question [...] the authority and relevance of mainstream thinking and practice” (cf. Alvesson et al., 2009, p. 7; see above) and the overall goal being not to destruct, but to (re-)construct (cf. Feldner & Fyke, 2018), it calls for new perspectives on and insights into organisational practice in order to “find new understandings that might sponsor alternative values and more creative and mutually beneficial solutions” (Deetz & McClellan, 2009, p. 449). If we do not question taken-for-granted assumptions and instead accept common sense-thinking and -acting, we only reproduce the status quo (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 33). Moreover, practices become transparent, as Cheney et al. (2011, p. 4) put it, which basically means that we look right through what is right in front of us because it is familiar to us. Organisational practices are based on underlying interests, values and assumptions (cf. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 52) that are hidden or transparent. Moreover, “a group’s interests will be best served if those interests become a part of the taken-for-granted meaning formations that structure organisational life [because o]nce these interests become part of the organisational structure, then that structure reflexively mediates in, and reproduces, those interests” (Mumby, 1987, p. 116). For that reason, critical organisational communication scholars are interested in questioning the taken-for-granted underlying assumptions of organisational behaviour as it can help expose new opportunities for action and understanding.

Being critical is often mistaken for being “against management” (Mumby, 2019, p. 432) or for not accepting and understanding organisational life and its conditions. An obvious reason for that is probably that a critical approach to organisational communication has its origin in works by Marx and by the Frankfurt School and in ideas from CMS, to which a clear (political) ideology seems to pertain (cf. above). However, critical organisational communication scholars tend to have a wider understanding of critical, setting out to be “[critical in spirit] but lacking the moniker” as Mumby and Ashcraft put it (2017, p. 15) and to give “attention to the social “logic” and dynamics of the organization” (Cheney, 1995, p. 170). As an example of a wider understanding of the critical perspective within organisational communication, it is widely acknowledged that organisational members’ identification with the organisation is necessary for the organisation to be successful (cf. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 52) and that power- and control-issues are inherent phenomena of organisational life (cf. Deetz & McClellan, 2009, p. 449). Moreover, it is also acknowledged that “communication cannot always be free and open and asymmetrical power relations [...] will always be part of organizational life” (Deetz & McClellan, 2009, p. 449) – a statement that contrasts with the otherwise applied Habermasian notion of the ideal speech situation (cf. above).

After this general introduction, we will now turn to the concept of power, including control and resistance, and the related concept of voice as key concepts of critical organisational communication. It is widely accepted that power is an inherent feature of all organisations (e.g., Cheney et al., 2011; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). The notion of power has developed into different understandings of power (Cheney et al., 2011; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019; Mumby, 1987; Lukes, 1974; Zoller & Ban, 2020) that is being expressed in Lukes’ three-dimensional model of power. The one-dimensional view on power (cf. Dahl, 1957) sees power as direct influence where “power is exercised when one person or group is able to influence directly (and measurably) the behavior of another person or group” (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 177). The two-dimensional view on power (cf. Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) sees power as both decisions and non-decisions where power is exercised “both when someone persuades another person to engage in behavior he or she otherwise *would* not have, but it is also exercised when someone *prevents* someone else from doing something he or she otherwise *would* have done” (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 178). Finally, the three-dimensional view on power (cf. Lukes, 1974), as opposed to the two first views on power, does not see power as behavioral, but as a more subtle phenomenon. As Mumby and Kuhn (2019, p. 180) conclude: “[t]he existence of a consensus amongst different groups does not mean that power is not exercised. Instead, this view sees power operating at a deep-structure level, shaping people’s very interests, beliefs, and values.” Based on this, power is here understood as the ability or capacity to achieve a goal even against the interests, will or resistance of others (Cheney et al., 2011, p. 254; cf. Lukes, 1974).

From a communication perspective, the three-dimensional view on power seems to be the most interesting as it, due to its focus on the shaping of people's very interests, beliefs and values, relates to an understanding of power as a meaning-based process (cf. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 177). In this way, power is deeply connected to communication processes (cf. Cheney et al., 2011) and highlights (different kinds of) relationships as the sources of power (see e.g. French & Raven, 1959). An important insight with regards to sources of power is the fact that the relationship between two people is fundamentally important and that a person's perception of the alter's powerfulness determines to which extent the alter has power over that person (cf. Cheney et al., 2011, pp. 261f.).

Based on the above, power is here seen as (1) relational, as it is being "exercised through dynamic processes in which relations of interdependence exist between actors in organisational settings" (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 176); (2) interactional and dynamic, being an aspect of social relationship that is negotiated (cf. Cheney et al., 2011) and where a struggle over the management of meaning occurs (cf. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019); and (3) communicative (cf. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019; Cheney et al., 2011; Zoller & Ban, 2020). Being communicative in nature, power is also (4) performative and, thus, power is something we do, cf. the constitutive view on communication in general as expressed in the CCO-perspective on organisations (see above); and finally it is (5) dialectical (cf. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory) which means that power is "viewed as simultaneously constraining and enabling, productive and repressive, enacted and institutionalized, allowing or inviting both conformity or compliance and resistance" (Conrad & Sollitto, 2017, p. 23).

Having established that power is exercised through communication and enacted in interaction, we shall now focus on the elements of the communication situation that are highly relevant for studying power from a communication perspective. In general, aspects of the communication processes that contribute to exercising power and that are fairly easy to identify include "what is said or not said, [...] definitions of key terms, [...] who is talking, [...] who is excluded from the conversation, and [...] how the rules for communication are established and applied in each particular context" (Cheney et al., 2011, p. 268). However, other more subtle ways exist in which power can be exercised; for instance, via discursive closure (Deetz, 1992) or hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Mumby, 1997). Discursive closure occurs "whenever potential conflict is suppressed" in interaction (Deetz, 1992, p. 187), "often without participants in the discussion being aware of [it]" (Cheney et al., 2011, p. 269). Cheney et al. (2011, pp. 269f.) point to several ways in which discursive closure may be enacted e.g. points of view may be neutralized, disqualified, naturalized or legitimated. Hegemony refers to "the [discursive] struggle over the establishment of certain meanings and ideas in society" (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 52) and "the ways a dominant group is able to get other groups to consent actively to the former's conception of reality. Hegemony operates when the taken for granted system of meanings that everyone shares functions in the best interests of the dominant group" (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 182).

Power is, together with control and resistance, considered "the endemic and defining features of 'human behavior in organizations'" (Mumby, 2019, p. 430). Control is intertwined with power as exercising power – or doing power cf. above – means to control (or influence) others; power and control are further intertwined with resistance, i.e. responses to power and control (cf. Mumby & Plotnikof, 2019). For that reason, it is widely accepted to apply a dialectical approach to control and resistance to "better understand the ways in which the two are mutually implicative and coproductive" (Mumby, 2005, p. 21) as part of "the ongoing, necessarily situated struggle that occupies most critical organization scholarship" (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 17).

Control is exercised in various ways (for an overview, e.g. Barker, 1993; Cheney et al., 2011). From a communication perspective, bureaucratic and concertive control are the most interesting control forms because they highlight unobtrusive ways in which control is exercised. Bureaucratic control, presented by Edwards (1979) as a control system next to the simple and the technical form of control, institutionalises the exercise of hierarchical power within the organisation and "establishes the impersonal force of 'company rules' or 'company policy' as the basis for control" (Edwards, 1979, p. 131). Concertive control was introduced by Tompkins and Cheney (1985) as an extension to the work by Edwards (cf. Ganesh, 2009) and can be thought of as "a form of internalized oppression" (cf. Nicotera, 2020, p. 52) where "the explicit written rules and regulations are largely replaced by the common understanding of values, objectives, and means of achievement, along with a deep appreciation of the organisation's 'mission'" (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p. 184).

Within critical organisational communication, resistance is mostly "considered in localized, interpersonal terms" (Ganesh et al., 2005, p. 169), dealing with "the routine practices of workers as they engage with the everyday control mechanisms and disciplinary practices of organizational life" (Mumby, 2005, p. 29). Employees are seen as active, creative participants with autonomy and agency (cf. Mumby, 2005); and as Mumby and Kuhn (2019, pp. 186f.) state, it is widely recognised that "employees have a great deal of insight into the daily routines and practices of organizational life, and organization members frequently make sense of their organizational lives in subversive ways that run counter to the dominant corporate ideology." The ways in which resistance takes form, is sometimes overtly as outright resistance, but in most cases it "involve[s] either undercover forms of resistance ([e.g. 'hidden transcripts'] Scott, 1989; 1990) or else subtle efforts to co-opt dominant meanings to serve alternative purposes (e.g. Knights & McCabe, 2000)" (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 187). A wide range of other discursive tactics can be added to the list when resistance is seen as a discursive practice, including irony, cynicism, disidentification, humour and joking, 'bitching' and gossip, mimicry, parody, modes of dress and discursive distancing (Mumby, 2005, p. 32). Zoller and Ban (2020, p. 236) point to the many "[c]omplications of understanding resistance". For instance, "Larson and Tompkins (2005) observed that what appears to be resistance may reflect employee uncertainty about what management actually wants. In another example, some scholars view employee cynicism as a form of resistance to managerial directives and the colonization of employee identity (e.g., the customer is always right, service with a smile, we are a family). Others, including Fleming and Spicer

(2003), argued that although employee cynicism demonstrates the partial and incomplete nature of managerial influence, many cynical employees still follow organizational rules and norms in their behaviors” (Zoller & Ban, 2020, p. 236).

Before concluding this section on the critical mindset of sustainable communication, we will turn to voice as another important aspect of critical organisational communication (cf. above). Not only is voice “entangled with the concept of power” (Logan & Tindal, 2018, p. 1); moreover, voice is an important aspect of workplace democracy (cf. above) and therefore of general interest to critical organisational communication scholars. Within communication studies, it is widely accepted to view voice – or more precisely employee voice as opposed to the corporate voice (e.g. Logan & Tindall, 2018) – as upward employee communication aiming at changing an objectionable state of affair (cf. Hirschman, 1970). A more recent definition is offered by Morrison (2011, p. 375) in which employee voice is defined as “the discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning”. Voice has originally been seen as a theory of dissatisfaction (cf. Gorden, 1988). Today, voice is “conceived more broadly and proactively as any critical effort to improve a work situation (Coombs, 1986)” (Gorden et al., 1988, p. 102). Employee voice as speaking-up is best characterised as a re-active, instrumental and problem-solving phenomenon, historically associated with trade union membership and collective bargaining. From a critical communication perspective, voice is of particular interest due to the overall aim of critical organisational communication to democratise the corporate world where voice is seen as inherent part of an ongoing discursive struggle. Consequently, voice is not about speaking up, but about speaking in the first place (cf. Kastberg & Ditlevsen, 2023). From this perspective, voice is communicatively constituted, as is both voicer and the content voiced.

To conclude this section, a critical mindset on communication offers an alternative view on organisations and communication with a change in the understanding of oneself as organisation and a rethinking of the corporation-society relation (cf. Deetz, 1995a). Most importantly, organisations are no longer seen primarily as economic entities, but rather as important sites of decision-making and democracy (e.g. Deetz, 1992), which explains the overall aim of critical organisational communication to make “organizations more participatory and democratic structures that are more responsive to the needs of their multiple stakeholders” (cf. Deetz 1995a, in Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 32). With this change, (a) the traditional main concern for the organisation is replaced by a concern for the individual, including the employee, the customer, the supplier and the citizen; and (b) a corporate centred view on relationships as dyads is replaced by seeing oneself as part of assemblages. Further, to have a critical mindset basically means to fight the taken-for-granted, commonsense understandings in order to expose the hidden sides of organisational life. Exposing the hidden and taken-for-granted meanings in organisational settings makes a valuable contribution to management and decision making in organisations because it helps us being aware of and understanding the (re-)construction of social relationships and life worlds and thus contributes to building a valuable basis for making better decisions and finding alternative solutions to otherwise wicked problems and situations related to individuals and social relations in organisations. In this way, a critical mindset on communication connects well with the suggested reflexive mindset of sustainable communication as getting beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions and commonsense-thinking calls for a reflexive approach.

It also connects well with the suggested ethical mindset, as the critical approach to organisational communication implies the most explicitly stated value commitments and most explicit attention to moral and ethical issues compared to other approaches to communication (cf. Deetz, 2001; Feldner & Fyke, 2018). Like the ethical mindset, implying serving the greater good and the importance of recognising not only the organization itself, but also internal and external stakeholders, as participants in their own right rather than as means for furthering organizational goals (see section 3.1), the critical mindset has a focus on the ‘other’, or the ‘alter’ (cf. Luhmann, 1987, pp. 199f.), highlighting the responsibility of and the role played by communication in the context of the organisation-society interface (see above).

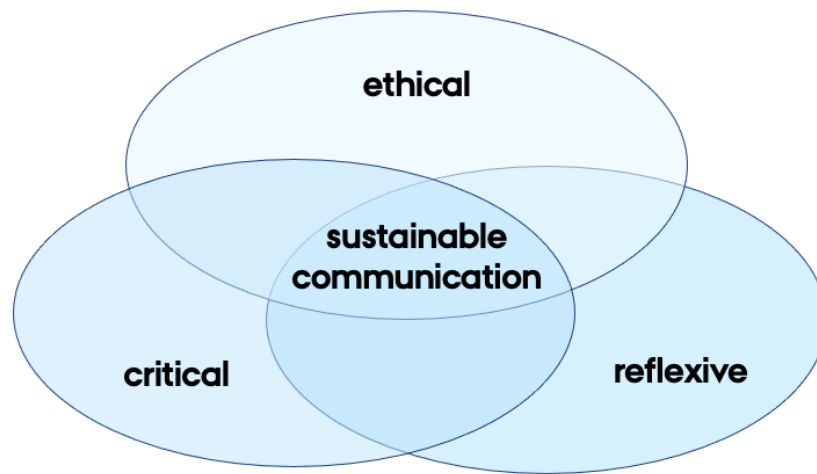
## **4 Framework and implications**

As previously argued, changes in the organisation-society interface have brought about changes in perceptions of organisations as political actors with citizenship obligations. These changes have resulted in growing emphasis on strategic communication as responsible for negotiating these new organisational obligations and a subsequent call for responsabilisation of communication (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2016). However, the call for responsible, or sustainable, communication has yet to be explicated, i.e. what does it mean for an organisation to practice communication sustainably? We suggest that the answer may be rooted in a combined focus on ethics, reflexivity and critique. Having presented the three mindsets that underpin this conceptualisation of sustainable communication, we develop an integrated framework by focusing on the intersections of the mindsets. Moreover, we discuss the potential implications of the framework for strategic communication scholarship, education and practice.

### **4.1 Framework for sustainable communication**

By drawing on the intersections between the ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets, it is possible to construct an integrated framework to underpin the conceptualisation of sustainable communication. As previously suggested by Cunliffe (2016) and Cunliffe and Jun (2005), the three mindsets overlap as reflexivity both implies or presupposes critical thinking and promotes ethical behaviour. Below we develop the framework by addressing the nature of the overlaps between the ethical, the reflexive and the critical mindsets (cf. figure 1).

Figure 1: Sustainable communication at the intersections of ethics, reflexivity and critique



Drawing on the above explications of the three mindsets, their overlaps and possible implications for strategic communication, it is possible to offer the following central foundational elements in conceptualising sustainable communication based on the intersections of the mindsets.

The ethical/reflexive intersection highlights how communicating ethically presupposes a reflexive mindset. Reflexivity is addressed by ethical communication scholars as necessary in relation to investigating and agreeing on rules for communicating (Pearson, 1989b). This agreement on rules is central in order to ensure the autonomy and equality of participants by viewing them as ends rather than means (Pearson, 1989a). Favouring dialogue and equal participation as the main ethical form of communication is contingent upon reflective practice and the recognition of the other (e.g. Holmström, 2005; 2018). Accordingly, reflexivity is considered to be the precursor to developing collaborative, responsible and ethical ways of communicating (Cunliffe, 2004; 2016; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

The reflexive/critical intersection addresses how reflexivity is combined with the ability to practice critical thinking in order to become aware of, and potentially alter, existing normalised structures and understandings that govern communication in an organisational context. Both the reflexive and critical mindsets point to the importance of openly examining organisational conventions by exposing and addressing taken-for-granted assumptions in the organisation (Cunliffe, 2004) and questioning mainstream, common sense-thinking (e.g. Deetz & McClellan, 2009; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). The overlap between the two mindsets is further explicated in the idea of critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005) which entails acknowledging (and critiquing) ideologies and normalised practices in order to reveal multiple, opposing perspectives and offer alternative ways of thinking.

Finally, the critical/ethical intersection highlights how critical thinking potentially promotes ethical actions and communication. As suggested by Bowen (2018), acting ethically requires or implies critical thinking. Moreover, power (cf. e.g. Mumby & Kuhn, 2019) is acknowledged as an ethical issue within communication (Lair, 2017; Meisenbach, 2017) in relation to voice (e.g. Ruck, 2022). Within the ethical mindset it is suggested that dialogue (which is considered to be the ideal ethical communication practice) is a question of all participants having the ability to act freely without domination and control (Pearson, 1989a; 1989b). This is potentially mirrored in the critical perspective's focus on stakeholder participation as a democratic endeavour involving viewing other participants as equals (Deetz, 1995a). Democracy involves rethinking the organisation-society interface (away from a corporate-centric view) which suggests treating stakeholders as ends rather than means to further corporate or organisational goals (Pearson, 1989a). Moreover, it is suggested that to have a voice is to be acknowledged as legitimate (Logan & Tindall, 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that where the ethical mindset highlights dialogue and symmetrical communication as central to discussions on voice (e.g. Bowen, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014), the critical mindset questions dialogue and symmetry arguing that communication cannot always be free, open and asymmetrical (Deetz & McClellan, 2009).

#### **4.2 Theoretical, educational and practical implications**

The proposed integrated framework for sustainable communication potentially holds theoretical, educational and practical implications for strategic communication. In terms of theoretical developments, scholars are given a coherent framework to use as a point of departure for addressing communication as a responsible organisational function. Moreover, it offers an additional dimension in relation to which goals and interests should form the foundations for communication practices. Strategic communication rests on the assumption that communication plays a central role in the realisation of an organisation's goals (e.g. Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020). However, if strategic communication is to be sustainable communication (and consider other interests than the organisation's own), it potentially suggests that the organisation's goals cannot be the only

goals governing communicative practices and decisions. Rather we must expand current definitions and understandings to also reflect stakeholder and societal goals.

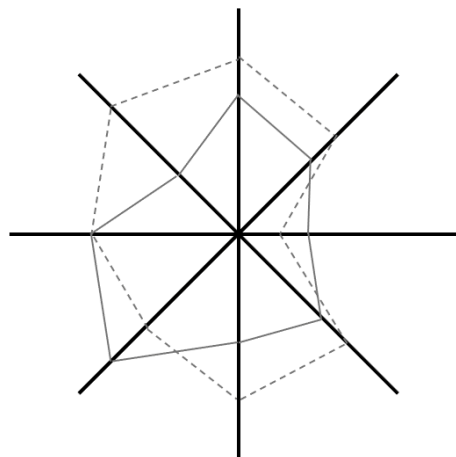
The potential research implications also point towards future research avenues to be pursued within strategic communication. Such research avenues could involve further conceptual development of sustainable communication as well as empirical explorations designed to assess current strategic communication practices' application of ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets. These empirical explorations could involve quantitative and qualitative insights into how communication professionals address responsibility in relation to their profession and practice, e.g. which issues, challenges and paradoxes are communication professionals faced with in everyday communication activities? Where are the issues, challenges and paradoxes visible? And how are communication professionals navigating amongst the issues, challenges and paradoxes? In short, we need to engage with practice in order to develop insights which can further conceptualisations of sustainable communication. As pointed out by Falkheimer and Heide (2016), strategic communication scholarship can most fruitfully be advanced through constructive conversations with practitioners.

Focusing on sustainable communication also potentially entails a new perspective on educational practices within strategic communication and related communication disciplines (public relations, corporate communication and organisational communication). The different mindsets (ethical, reflexive and critical) are currently addressed within different areas of the communication disciplines. Ethical discussions, although often treated as afterthoughts or as separate from other areas, are visible within a range of communication disciplines. Similarly, reflexivity is discussed tentatively within public relations (as reflectivity) and within organisational and strategic communication (as reflexivity). However, whereas ethics and reflexivity seem to be addressed in different disciplines, the critical mindset, so far, is only addressed within the organisational communication discipline with inspiration from organisation studies. By bringing ethics, reflexivity and critique together in a coherent framework, educators potentially have a single point of departure for addressing strategic communication as responsible practice without necessarily having to draw on neighbouring fields. Moreover, as noted in connection with the ethical mindset, it has been pointed out that discussions related to the fair and moral conduct of communication professionals are frequently treated as an afterthought or as an area separate (or isolated) from other aspects of the communication professions (e.g. Cheney et al., 2011; Meisenbach, 2017). Sustainable communication suggests responsibility in communication as the starting point and governing principle for strategic communication, i.e. placing it at the beginning of textbooks and not at the end.

For strategic communication professionals, the sustainable communication framework offers a point of departure for thinking about how strategic communication is carried out as an everyday organisational practice. It can promote conversations about the strategic role played by communication and the responsibilities associated with the communication profession to not only further organisational goals and interests (a defining feature of strategic communication), but also to further the goals and interests of all stakeholders (internal as well as external) and of the society to which the organisation belongs.

Such conversations could be inspired by various brainstorming and discussion tools to be used among strategic communication managers and employees within an organisation. One example could be the cobweb method. The cobweb method was originally developed by Bernstein (1986) to facilitate managerial discussions on the identity of an organisation (cf. e.g. van Riel, 1995; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). The method consists of a pragmatic tool for managerial discussions (cf. figure 2) on how to characterise the desired identity of an organisation (van Riel & Balmer, 1997). First, managers name attributes that they each believe have played, and will continue to play, a decisive role in the organisation's development. Second, the managers jointly decide on eight attributes which are the most relevant and the attributes are placed at the end of the spokes in the web. Each spoke is seen as a nine-point scale with zero at the centre of the web (van Riel, 1995). The managers then discuss their perceptions of how the organisation is rated by the public in relation to each attribute as well as how they themselves rate the attributes. The diagram then allows for discussions on gaps between the two rates and for decisions to be made in relation to if and how to modify the organisation's identity. Although developed for addressing identity, the method may function as inspiration for reflections on other issues, e.g. sustainable communication, as well.

Figure 2: Sustainable communication at the intersections of ethics, reflexivity and critique



Inspired by Bernstein's original method, communication managers and employees can engage in discussions to a) reflect on individual and shared perceptions about sustainable communication; b) assess current strategic communication policies and practices in light of these perceptions; and c) discuss goals and priorities for future policies and practices. Employed as a tool for discussing current communication policies, the discussions could be organised around the following six steps:

- 1) What attributes are considered to be central for working sustainably with strategic communication?
- 2) Which eight attributes are considered most relevant and important for the organisation's strategic communication policy?
- 3) How do we rate our current policy in relation to the eight attributes?
- 4) How would we ideally like for our policy to be rated?
- 5) What gaps can we identify between the current and the ideal policy?
- 6) Which gaps do we want to focus on closing? And how can that be reflected in our policy and practices.

In the first phase of the discussion, managers and employees focus on identifying as many attributes as possible that characterise their understanding of what sustainable communication entails. As a source of inspiration, they could draw upon some of the central tenants reflected in the ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets, e.g.: The categorial imperative of never treating others as means to an end; upholding ethical principles of truthfulness, openness and transparency; constantly questioning communicative practices and their underlying assumptions; emphasising dialogue; facilitating participation and the exercising of voice; and being aware of power and control as ever present aspects of communication. In the second phase, the various attributes are discussed in order to reach consensus on the eight attributes that should serve to guide the sustainable communication policy in the organisation. Managers and employees could e.g. consider the organisation's industry and products, its history and its communication function. When having agreed on the eight attributes, the discussions turn to rating the performance of the current communication policies (or policy) in relation to each attribute followed by a discussion on what the ideal rating would be in order to establish goals for each attribute. In the final phases, the gaps between the current and ideal ratings (or goals) are identified and it is discussed what gaps to prioritise in order to ensure and improve the organisation's sustainable communication.

Accordingly, professional communicators are given an additional point of orientation for evaluating the merits of strategic communication efforts asking that they not only orient themselves towards organisational aims, but towards stakeholder and societal aims as well. Whereas the importance of a stakeholder-orientation has already been recognised within strategic communication, and related communication disciplines such as corporate communication and public relations, it needs to be readdressed in light of the changing organisation-society interface (cf. section 2). When organisations are viewed as political actors with citizenship responsibilities and seen as involved in shaping legal, social and moral standards, strategic communication professionals take on a role as co-constructors of stakeholder relationships.

## 5 Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to address sustainability as an overarching principle for strategic communication. The central argument is that the growing emphasis on the strategic function of communication in organisations along with changing roles for communication in light of the increasing political role assigned to organisations necessitates implementing sustainability as an explicit principle for strategic communication. Accordingly, it could be argued that sustainability has the potential to develop into a third turn to accompany the communicative and strategic turns that have already taken place within communication scholarship. With the communicative turn, communication is assigned a reality constituting role, and with the strategic turn communication is viewed as central to organisational operations (Torp, 2018; 2014). As argued by Gulbrandsen and Just (2016), the strategisation of communication requires that communication is made responsible or sustainable. Consequently, we have contributed to developing such a principle by offering a tentative definition of and framework for sustainable communication.

Sustainable communication is defined as strategic communication practices which benefit not only organisations, but also people and society at large. Communication is, in other words, sustainable when governed by social and environmental considerations to balance organisational self-interest. In order to further conceptual development, we suggest that the conceptualisation of sustainable communication can rest on three mindsets previously developed within communication scholarship (the ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets). Taken together, the three mindsets lay the foundation for explicating the communicative implications and consequences associated with the changing roles of organisations in society by highlighting central relational aspects. Ethics orients attention towards how organisations address the other, i.e. organisational stakeholders, in the communication process. Reflexivity connects to the active recognition and investigation of organisational assumptions regarding the other and the organisation-other relationships. And the critical approach directs awareness towards the inherent, frequently implicit, or invisible, power dimensions characteristic of organisations-other relationships. In short, sustainable communication is a matter of reflexively and critically addressing the assumptions organisations make about the stakeholders they communicate to and with as well as the assumptions held by the stakeholders, and how these assumptions influence strategic communication practices.



## References

- Alvesson, M., Bridgman, T., & Willmott, H. (2009). Introduction. In M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman, & H. Willmott (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies* (pp. 1-26). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199595686.013.0001>
- Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2000). Taking the linguistic turn in organizational research. Challenges, responses, consequences. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 36(2), 136-158.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886300362002>
- Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2012). A Stupidity-Based theory of organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 49(7), 1194-1220.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2012.01072.x>
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (1992). *Critical Management Studies*. Sage.
- Ashcraft, K.L. (2001). Organized dissonance: Feminist bureaucracy as hybrid form. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, 1301-1322.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3069402>
- Ashcraft, K. L., Kuhn, T. R., & Coreen, F. (2009). Constitutional amendments: "Materializing" organizational communication. *Academy of Management Annals*, 3, 1-64.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520903047186>
- Bachrach, P., & Baratz, M. (1962). Two faces of power. *American Political Science Review*, 56, 947-952.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1952796>
- Barker, J.R. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, 408-437.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2393374>
- Bernstein, D. (1986). *Company Image and Reality: A critique of corporate communications*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Botan, C. (1997). Ethics in strategic communication campaigns: The case for a new approach to public relations. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 34(2), 188-202.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002194369703400205>
- Bowen, S. A. (2008). A state of neglect: Public relations as 'corporate conscience' or ethics counsel. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20(3), 271-296.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260801962749>
- Bowen, S. A. (2016). Clarifying ethics terms in public relations from A to V, authenticity to virtue: BledCom special issue of PR review sleeping (with the) media: Media relations. *Public Relations Review*, 42(4), 564-572.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.03.012>
- Bowen, S. A. (2018). Strategic communication, ethics of. In R. Heath & W. Johansen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0074>
- Cataellani, A., Zerfass, A., & Tench, R. (2015). Introduction. In A. Cataellani, A. Zerfass, & R. Tench (Eds.), *Communication Ethics in a Connected World. Research in Public Relations and Organisational Communication* (pp. 11-16). Peter Lang.
- Cheney, G. (1995). Democracy in the workplace: Theory and practice from the perspective of communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 23, 167-200.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00909889509365424>
- Cheney, G. (1999). *Values at work: Employee participation meets market pressure at Mondragón*. Cornell University Press.
- Cheney, G., Christensen, L.T., Zorn, T. E., & Ganesh, S. (2011). *Organizational communication in an age of globalization: Issues, reflections, practices*. Waveland Press.
- Conrad, C., & Sollitto, M. (2017). History of Organizational Communication. In R. S. Craig & L. K. Lewis (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc097>
- Coombs, T. (1986). *Heeding Galbraith's advice: Looking beyond identification to the development of critical involvement* [Paper presentation]. Central States Speech Association Conference, Cincinnati, OH.
- Coreen, F., Kuhn, T., Cornelissen, J. P., & Clark, T. (2011). Communication, organizing and organization: An overview and introduction to the special issues. *Organization Studies*, 32(9), 1149-1170.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840611410836>
- Cornelissen, J. P. (2020). *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. (6<sup>th</sup> edition). Sage.
- Crane, A., Matten, D., Glozer, S., & Spence, L. J. (2019). *Business Ethics. Managing Corporate Citizenship and Sustainability in the Age of Globalization*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198810070.001.0001>
- Crane, A., Palazzo, G., Spence, L. J., & Matten, D. (2014). Contesting the value of "creating shared value". *California Management Review*, 56(2), 130-153.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2014.56.2.130>
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2003). Reflexive inquiry in organizational research: Questions and possibilities. *Human Relations*, 56(8), 983-1103.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267030568004>



- Cunliffe, A. L. (2004). On becoming a critically reflexive practitioner. *Journal of Management Education*, 28(4), 407-426.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562904264440>
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2016). On becoming a reflexive practitioner redux: what does it mean to be reflexive?. *Journal of Management Education*, 40(6), 740-746.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562916668919>
- Cunliffe, A. L., & Jun, J. S. (2005). The need for reflexivity in public administration. *Administration & Society*, 37(2), 225-242.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399704273209>
- Dahl, R. (1957). The concept of power. *Behavioral Science*, 32, 201-215.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303>
- Deetz, S. A. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. State University of New York Press.
- Deetz, S.A. (1995a). *Transforming communication, transforming business: Building responsive and responsible workplaces*. Hampton Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00942839>
- Deetz, S. A. (1995b). Transforming Communication, Transforming Business: Stimulating Value Negotiation for More Responsive and Responsible Workplace. *International Journal of Value-Based Management*, 8, 255-278.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00942839>
- Deetz, S. A. (2001). Conceptual foundations. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication. Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods* (pp. 3-46). Sage.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986243.n1>
- Deetz, S. A., & McClellan, J. G. (2009). Communication. In M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman, & H. Willmot (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of critical management studies* (pp. 433-453). Oxford University Press.,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199237715.003.0021>
- Edelman (2023). *The Futures of Corporate Communications Study*. Edelman.
- Edwards, R. (1979). *Contested terrain. The transformation of the workplace in the twentieth century*. Basic Books.
- Falkheimer, J., & Heide, M. (2016). A reflexive perspective on public relations: On leaving traditional thinking and uncovering the taken-for-granted. In J. L'Etang, D. McKie, N. Snow, & J. Xifra (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical public relations* (pp. 162-172). Routledge.
- Falkheimer, J., & Heide, M. (2018). *Strategic communication. An introduction*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315621555>
- Falkheimer, J., Heide, M., Simonsson, C., Zeffass, A., & Verhoeven, P. (2016). Doing the right things or doing things right? Paradoxes and Swedish communication professionals' roles and challenges. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 21(2), 142-159.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-06-2015-0037>
- Feldner, S. B., & Fyke, J. P. (2018). Organizational communication. In R. Heath & W. Johansen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0123>
- Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2003). Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance. *Organization*, 10(1), 157-179.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508403010001376>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). Strategic communication. In C. R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc194>
- French, J. R. P., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150-167). Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.
- Ganesh, S. (2009). Critical organizational communication. In S. Littlejohn & K. A. Foss (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (pp. 226-231). Sage.
- Ganesh, S., Zoller, H., & Cheney, G. (2005). Transforming resistance, broadening our boundaries: Critical organizational communication meets globalization from below. *Communication Monographs*, 72(2), 169-191.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750500111872>
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration*. University of California Press.
- Godemann, J., & Michelsen, G. (2011). Sustainability Communication – An Introduction. In J. Godemann & G. Michelsen (Eds.), *Sustainability Communication* (pp. 3-12). Springer, Dordrecht.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1697-1>
- Gond, J. P., & Matten, D. (2010). *Rethinking the business-society interface: Beyond the functionalist trap* (Paper No. 47-2007). International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility Paper Series,
- Gorden, W. I. (1988). Range of employee voice. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 1(4), 283-299.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01556937>
- Gorden, W. I., Infante, D. A., & Graham, E. E. (1988). Corporate conditions conducive to employee voice: A subordinate perspective. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 1(2), 101-111.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01385039>

- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. International.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Gulbrandsen, I. T. & Just, S.N. (2016). In the wake of new media: Connecting the who with the how of strategizing communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 10(4), 223-237.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2016.1150281>
- Gulbrandsen, I. T., & Just, S. N. (2020). *Strategizing communication: Theory and practice*. Samfundslitteratur.
- Habermas, J. (1974). *Theory and practice*. Translated by John Viertel. Heinemann.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action. Volume 1. Reason and Rationalization of Society*. Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action. Volume 2. Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason*. Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms*. MIT Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1564.001.0001>
- Habermas, J. (1998). Three normative models of democracy. In C. Cronin & P. De Greiff (Eds.), *The inclusion of the other. Studies on political theory* (pp. 239-252). MIT Press.
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., Van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 3-35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244>
- Heide, M., & Simonsson, C. (2018). Coworkership and engaged communicators: A critical reflection on employee engagement. In K. Johnston & M. Taylor (Eds.), *Handbook of communication engagement* (pp. 205-220). John Wiley & Sons Inc.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119167600.ch14>
- Hibbert, P., Coupland, C., & MacIntosh, R. (2010). Reflexivity: Recursion and relationality in organizational research processes. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 5(1), 47-62.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641011042026>
- Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Harvard University Press.
- Holmström, S. (2004). The reflective paradigm of public relations. In B. van Ruler & D. Vercic (Eds.), *Public relations and communication management in Europe* (pp. 121-133). De Gruyter.
- Holmström, S. (2005). Reframing public relations: The evolution of a reflective paradigm for organizational legitimization. *Public Relations Review*, 31(4), 497-504.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2005.08.008>
- Holmström, S. (2010). Reflective management. Seeing the organization as if from outside. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 261-276). Sage Publications.
- Holmström, S. (2018). Reflective Management: a reflective paradigm. In R. Heath & W. Johansen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0145>
- Holtzhausen, D., & Zerfass, A. (2015). *Strategic communication. Opportunities and Challenges of the Research Area*. In D. Holtzhausen & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (pp. 3-17). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203094440>
- International Association of Business Communicators (n.d). *IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators*.  
<https://www.iabc.com/About/Purpose/Code-of-Ethics>
- Kastberg, P., & Ditlevsen, M. G. (2023). Voices in the Employee Magazine: A Critical Investigation. In B. Beeler, G. Gaibrois, P. Lecomte, & M. Vigier, M. (Eds.), *Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Multilingualism in Professional Contexts: Advances in Language-Sensitive Management Research* (pp. 189 – 204). Edward Elgar.  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789906783.00025>
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public relations review*, 28(1), 21-37.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(02\)00108-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(02)00108-X)
- Kerstein, S. (2019). Treating persons as means. In E.N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/persons-means/>)
- Knights, D., & McCabe, D. (2000). 'Ain't Misbehavin'? Opportunities for Resistance under New Forms of 'Quality' Management. *Sociology*, 34(3), 421-436.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0038038500000274>
- Lair, D. J. (2017). Ethics. In C.R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc075>
- Larson, G., & Tompkins, P. (2005). Ambivalence and resistance: A study of management in a concertive control system. *Communication Monographs*, 73(4), 406-433.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0363775052000342508>
- Logan, N., & Tindall, N.T.J. (2018). Voice. In R.L. Heath & W. Johansen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0199>
- Luhmann, N. (1987). *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Suhrkamp.

- Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.
- Lukes, S. (1974). *Power. A radical view*. MacMillan Education.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-02248-9\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-02248-9_6)
- Marsh, C. (2010). Precepts of reflective public relations: An Isocratean model. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(4), 359-377.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10627261003801396>
- Marx, K. (1906). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. Translated by S. Moore and E. Aveling. Modern Library.
- Marx, K. (1964). *Economic and political manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by M. Miligan. International.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1947). *The german ideology*. International.
- Matten, D., & Crane, A. (2005). Corporate citizenship: Toward an extended theoretical conceptualization. *Academy of Management Review*, 30(1), 166-179.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2005.15281448>
- Matten, D., Crane, A., & Chapple, W. (2003). Behind the mask: Revealing the true face of corporate citizenship. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 45, 109-120.
- McClellan, J. (2017). Corporate colonization. In C.R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc046>
- Meisenbach, R. J. (2017). Integrating ethics and responsibility into organizational communication research: Issues and new directions. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 31(1), 146-152.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318916676891>
- Meyer, A. L., & Leonard, A. (2014). Are we there yet? Enroute to professionalism. *Public Relations Review*, 40(2), 375-386.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.11.012>
- Mintzberg, H. (1987). The strategy concept I: Five Ps for strategy. *California Management Review*, 30(1), 11-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/41165263>
- Moon, J., Crane, A., & Matten, D. (2005). Can corporations be citizens? Corporate citizenship as a metaphor for business participation in society. *Business ethics quarterly*, 15(3), 429-453.  
<https://doi.org/10.5840/beq200515329>
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. Sage.
- Morrison, E. W. (2011). Employee Voice Behavior: Integration and Directions for Future Research. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 373-412.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2011.574506>
- Mumby, D. K. (1987). The political function of narrative in organizations. *Communication Monographs*, 54(2), 113-127.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758709390221>
- Mumby, D.K. (1988). *Communication and power in organisations: Discourse, ideology and domination*. Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Mumby, D. K. (1997). The problem of hegemony: Rereading Gramsci for organizational communication studies. *Western Journal of Communication*, 61(4), 343-375.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319709374585>
- Mumby, D. K. (2005). Theorizing resistance in organization studies. A dialectical approach. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19(1), 19-44.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318905276558>
- Mumby, D. K. (2013). *Organizational communication. A critical approach*. Sage.
- Mumby, D. K. (2019). Work: What is it good for? (Absolutely nothing) – a critical theorist's perspective. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 12, 429-443.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.69>
- Mumby, D. K., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2017). Critical approaches. In C. R. Scott & L. K. Lewis (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of organizational communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc051>
- Mumby, D. K., & Kuhn, T. R. (2019). *Organizational communication. A critical introduction*. Sage.
- Mumby, D. K., & Plotnikof, M. (2019). Organizing power and resistance. In J. McDonald & R. Mitro (Eds.), *Movements in organizational communication research. Current issues and future directions* (pp. 35-55). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203730089-3>
- Mumby, D. K., & Stohl, C. (1996). Disciplining organizational communication studies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 10(1), 50-72.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318996010001004>
- Nicotera, A. M. (2020). Developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In A. M. Nicotera (Ed.), *Origins and traditions of organizational communication: a comprehensive introduction to the field* (pp. 45-70). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203703625-4>
- Pearson, R. (1989a). Business ethics as communication ethics: public relations practice and the idea of dialogue. In C. H. Botan & V. Bazleton, Jr. (Eds.), *Public Relations Theory* (pp. 111-131). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Pearson, R. (1989b). Beyond ethical relativism in public relations: Coorientation, rules, and the idea of communication symmetry. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 1(1-4), 67-86.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0101-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0101-4_3)
- Porter, M. E. & Kramer, M. R. (2006). Strategy & society. The link between competitive advantage and corporate social responsibility. *Harvard Business Review*, 84(12), 78-92.
- Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2011). Creating shared value: How to reinvent capitalism – and unleash a wave of innovation and growth. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(1-2), 62-77.
- Rorty, R. M. (1992). *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Methods*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ruck, K. (2022). Ethical internal communication. In J. Falkheimer & M. Heide (Eds), *Research Handbook on Strategic Communication* (pp. 348-365). Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800379893.00031>
- Scherer, A. G. (2018). Theory assessment and agenda setting in political CSR: A critical theory perspective. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(2), 387-410.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12137>
- Scherer, A. G., & Palazzo, G. (2007). Toward a political conception of corporate responsibility: Business and society seen from a Habermasian perspective. *Academy of management review*, 32(4), 1096-1120.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.26585837>
- Scherer, A. G., Rasche, A., Palazzo, G., & Spicer, A. (2016). Managing for political corporate social responsibility: New challenges and directions for PCSR 2.0. *Journal of Management Studies*, 53(3), 273-298.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12203>
- Scott, J. C. (1989). Everyday forms of resistance. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 4, 33-62.  
<https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v4i1.1765>
- Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.
- Seeger, M. W. (1997). *Ethics and organizational communication*. Hampton Press Inc.
- Seeger, M. W., & Kuhn, T. (2011). Communication ethics and organizational contexts. Divergent values and moral puzzles. In G. Cheney, S. May, & D. Munshi (Eds.), *The Handbook of Communication Ethics* (pp. 166-189). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203890400.ch11>
- Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (2014). Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts. *Journal of public relations research*, 26(5), 384-398.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2014.956106>
- Tompkins, P. K., & Cheney, G. (1985). Communication and unobtrusive control in contemporary organisations. In R. D. McPhee & P. K. Tompkins (Eds.), *Organisational communication: Traditional themes and new directions* (pp. 179-210). Sage.
- Torp, S. M. (2014). The strategic turn in communication science. On the history and role of strategy in communication science from ancient Greece until the present day. In D. Holtzhausen & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (pp. 34-52). Routledge.
- Torp, S. M. (2018). Turns. In R. Heath & W. Johansen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0195>
- van Riel, C. B. M. (1995). *Principles of Corporate Communication*. Prentice Hall.
- van Riel, C. B. M., & Balmer, J. M. T. (1997). Corporate identity: the concept, its measurement and management. *European Journal of Marketing*, 31(4), 340-355. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb060635>
- Van Ruler, B. (2018). Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 367-381.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452240>
- Van Ruler, B., & Verčič, D. (2005). Reflective communication management, future ways for public relations research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 29(1), 239-274.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2005.11679049>
- Wallace, R. A. & Wolf, A. (1999). *Contemporary sociological theory: Expanding the classical tradition*. Prentice Hall.
- Weder, F., Karmasin, M., Krainer, L., Voci, D. (2021). Sustainability communication as critical perspective in media and communication studies—an introduction. In F. Weder, L. Krainer, & M. Karmasin (Eds.), *The Sustainability Communication Reader* (pp. 1-12). Springer VS.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31883-3>
- Willis, P. (2019). From knowing to doing: Reflexivity, leadership and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 45(3), 101780.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.05.001>
- Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic Communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 487-505.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485>
- Zoller, H. M., & Ban, Z. (2020). Power and resistance. In A. M. Nicotera (Ed.), *Origins and traditions of organizational communication: a comprehensive introduction to the field* (pp. 228-249). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203703625-15>