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# Institutionalization of communication management in organizations

## A theoretical framework

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Development and expansion of the communication management function in organizations has lately been discussed in relation to the concept of institutionalization. Empirical evidence has illustrated that the role of communication executives and communication managers varies between organizations, and could also be subjected to change within an organization. In this paper, institutionalization of communication management is conceptualized as a process. A theoretical framework is developed, which integrates important factors that influence and regulate this process.

**Design/Methodology** – A literature review resulted in a number of factors potentially influencing the institutionalization process. These factors were attributed to three main theoretical areas and four different levels of analysis, using institutional theory as a guiding framework. The theoretical areas and analysis levels, were proposed to be mutually interdependent, and were compiled in a theoretical framework, illustrated in a model.

**Findings** – The theoretical framework includes three main areas: organizational structure, social capital, and perceptions of the profession; and four levels of analysis: the societal, the organizational field, the organizational and the individual levels.

**Originality/Value** – This paper contributes to the study of institutionalization of communication management in organizations by providing a theoretical framework, which can be used to further investigate the development of the communication function and the role of communication executives and communication managers in organizations. By conceptualizing institutionalization of communication management as a process – and exploring and defining important elements that influence and regulate this process, an important theoretical contribution to the field is made.

### **Keywords**

Institutionalization, Communication management, Theoretical framework

### **Article type**

Conceptual paper

Communication professionals have attained executive positions and engaged in fields of practice that go beyond the traditional functions that originally defined the profession. Communication executives today have more legitimacy, power and responsibility than ever before. Alongside with the development in communication management practice, research in communication management and public relations has developed significantly over the past two decades (Botan and Hazleton, 2006; Botan and Taylor, 2004). However, scholars also have recognized the need for further development of theories that can broaden the field, such as social theory (Ihlen, Fredriksson and van Ruler, 2009) and institutional theory (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2009; Tench et al., 2009; Zerfass, 2009). The integration of institutional thought in communication management theory is proposed to offer a possibility to understand its core functions better (Sandhu, 2009). However, we still lack a comprehensive theoretical framework for the purpose of studying institutionalization of communication management. A similar framework concerning the institutionalization of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has recently been proposed by Schultz and Wehemeyer (2010).

Institutionalization of the communication function in organizations has been compared to institutionalization of other corporate functions, such as finance, human resources, and information technology (Swerling and Sen, 2009). Four common indicators have been used to investigate the level of institutionalization: maintenance of a reporting line to the CEO; enhancement of senior management perceptions; integration with and acceptance by other business functions; and establishment of evaluation methods that quantify results (p. 134). The question if communication management as a profession can be regarded as institutionalized or not is debated (Sandhu, 2009; Valentini, 2009), but is not of main interest of this paper. Instead, we conceptualize institutionalization of communication management as a process and our purpose is to explore and define important elements that influence and regulate this process.

### **Conceptualizing institutionalization and communication**

We apply Zucker's definition of institutionalization (1987) as "a rule-like, social fact quality of an organized pattern of action, and an embedding in formal structures, such as formal aspects of organizations that are not tied to particular actors or situations" (Zucker, 1987, p. 444). Institutionalization of communication management is here understood as "widespread and increasing importance of PR/Communication at strategic and operational management levels of large organizations" (Invernizzi, 2008). By applying institutional theory to the field of communication management, the embeddedness of the communication function and actions of communication professionals in organizing structures, and the influence of institutional frameworks on organizations is highlighted.

Communication is pivotal to organizations and institutions in that communication creates, develops and sustains social structures and renders coordinated action possible (Heide et al., 2005; Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Communication, as dynamic and ever-changing process, aids in creating the organization and in developing systems of meanings that people use to make sense of their actions. Thus, organizational communication fosters making sense of complex situations, diagnosing organizational problems, selecting alternatives for action, and coordinating organizational events (Putnam and Poole, 2008).

Communication management includes the process of observation, analysis, strategy, development, organization, implementation and evaluation of communication processes (Bentele, 2008). Communication management<sup>[1]</sup> has traditionally included an organization's external communication efforts, such as media relations, issues management and crisis communication. Communication with internal publics was formerly limited to the management and production of information content for internal websites (intranets), newsletters and internal magazines, whereas employee communications traditionally has been

the responsibility of managers. However, the development and expansion of the communication management function has resulted in the incorporation of responsibility for the strategic planning and management of employee communications and change communication (Johansson and Ottestig, 2011). Communication executives and communication managers today perform new advisory and educational roles in their organizations, coaching and educating other managers in communication (Verčič et al., 2001).

The communication management function can be given the mission to endorse the establishment and sustenance of organizational objectives, rules, values and norms. For example, during periods of organizational change, structures and processes need to be altered and management often highlights the importance of communication.

However, research has shown that the role of communication managers and executives varies between organizations (Grandien, 2008; Monstad, 2008). In a comparative case study of communication in organizational change processes in three business organizations, one of the most conspicuous results was the very different role of communication management. In one organization, the communication department was leading change in close collaboration with change management, educating and supporting managers in change communication. In another organization, the communication department had a traditional role, and was not involved in change management. In the third organization, the communication department was highly involved in the planning of communicating the specific change but not at all involved in the implementation. In conclusion, the differences concerned various aspects like organizational conditions and settings, status of the communication function within the organization, the role of the communication executive in relation to the dominant coalition, perceptions of the profession, both of the communication executives themselves, but also of members of the dominant coalition. Aspects like the actual nature of the tasks that the communication executives performed and their view on

professional knowledge and education also varied among the three organizations. The aspects listed above differentiated the organizations where communication management had a major role, from the organization where it did not have an important role. Drawing on these results, there seems to be correlation between the overall role of the communication executive in the organization and the role of the communication executive in change management. But so far there are no studies explaining this relation or these results.

Clearly, different organizational factors do affect the practice and resources available. In order to develop a conceptual framework, which includes important theories and factors that influence and explain the process of institutionalization of communication management, a literature review was undertaken. The review has been of multidisciplinary character including the fields of communication management, public relations, strategic communication, corporate communication, organizational communication and institutional theory. Journals and books from these research fields were first revised in a broad sense to map the state of the fields. In the following stage, a number of keywords were used to search and systematically cover the large amount of research in these fields. Keywords used were concepts such as professionalization, institutionalization, communication management, and public relations. Relevant publications were compiled and analyzed. This analysis and mapping led up to the structure of three overlapping theoretical areas that are believed to influence the institutionalization of communication management. The review also resulted in the multiple levels approach of analysis as implied by institutional research.

Consequently, we developed a conceptual framework, which is built around three main areas; social capital, organizational structure and perceptions of the profession and includes four levels of analysis: the societal, the organizational field, the organizational and the individual levels. By conceptualizing institutionalization of communication management

as a process, and explore and define important elements that influence and regulate this process, a theoretical contribution to the field of communication management will be made.

### **Communication management and public relations**

The concept of communication management will be used throughout the paper and replace the concept of public relations. The term communication management seems to be a common denominator for the field in Europe, both in academia and practice, while public relations seems to be more common in the USA. We agree with the European researchers van Ruler and Verčič who believe that public relations as a concept is not sufficient for steering future research in this field in Europe, mainly because of its connotations of “working with and to publics”. By employing “communication management”, communication will stand out as the key concept, and its core relationship to organizing advanced. Communication management should be viewed as a multi-dimensional concept of a managerial, operational, coaching and reflective function in or for an organization – not just as a professional function of managers and technicians. Communication management can be viewed as one way to describe or explain an organization or organizing, the same way finances describe and explain organizations from a financial perspective, or marketing from a market perspective (van Ruler and Verčič, 2008).

### **The organizational role of communication management**

The most comprehensive study of the organizational role of communication management is by many considered to be the excellence study (Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig, 1992). The study defined a set of characteristics of a communication management function that had a correlation with organizational effectiveness. The goal of the excellence study was to find indicators of best practices within communication management. One indicator of best practice is the participation in strategic management (Grunig and Grunig, 2008). However,



what the excellence approach does not fully take into account is that communication professionals are embedded into social and organizational structures that influence the practice in different ways (Scott, 2008).

### **A framework for analyzing institutionalization of communication management**

The conceptual framework proposed in this section is based on extensive reviewing and mapping of literature, and intended for analyzes of institutionalization of communication management. The framework consists of four levels of analysis and three main subject areas. First, we will suggest analyzing institutionalization of communication management at the societal level, the organizational field level, the organizational level and the individual level (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Scott, 2008). Second, we develop a theoretical framework, structured around three main areas: social capital, organizational structure and perceptions of the profession. The selection of these areas was made based on the above mentioned literature review of previous research. In each of the three areas we relate important concepts that we suggest are useful for investigating and explaining institutionalization of communication management, and more specifically, the role of communication executives and communication managers at strategic and operational levels of management in organizations (cf. Invernizzi, 2008).

----- Take in Figure 1. here -----

The model illustrates that the three areas of organizational structure, social capital, and perceptions of the profession are overlapping and interrelated, and that analyses of institutionalization can depart from one or several of the analytical levels proposed. The overlapping of the three areas is important to illustrate and articulate since we want to

emphasize the role of these areas as a way of organizing and categorizing theories without proposing that they are closed circuits. For example, research about the role of the communication executive can be categorized under any one of the three areas depending on the approach. Concepts and theories in each area are related to concepts and theories in other areas. The model thus is intended to capture the complex reality in organizations, where the attitudes and interactions of agents shape and change structures which influences institutionalization (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). In the following section we will develop and discuss these levels and areas to a greater extent.

### **Multi-level analysis**

Institutional theory can be described as a way of thinking about formal organizational structures and the nature of social processes through which these structures develop (Scott, 2008). Early organizational studies to the most part focused on the single organization, its inner workings, the behavior of the organizational members, and how the environment affected that organization. This changed when the importance of environment became apparent to scholars, the focus shifted into studying organizational populations and fields. As Scott (2008, p. 216) describes it: “Attention shifted from the organization in an environment to the organization of the environment”. Scott (2008) stresses that the study of different analytical levels covering organizations’ external environment is crucial to fully grasp the process of institutionalization. According to Scott, the least familiar, but most significant to institutional theory is the organizational field level. Drawing from institutional theory, we suggest four levels of analysis for studying the institutionalization of communication management; the societal-, organizational field-, organizational- and, individual levels.

**Societal level**

A central aspect of institutional theory is the emphasis on the social context in which organizations operate. The societal level represents an overarching political, economic and social system within which norms and values are established and diffused to members of that society (Dillard et al., 2004). Institutional researchers stress the importance of the societal level for the process of institutionalization, which for example is related to the societal acceptance of a profession (Scott, 2008). Analysis on the societal level can focus on for example how education and the labor markets shape the roles of communication professionals, or how societal appreciations of the profession influence role enactment and status.

**Organizational field level**

An organization is not a system in isolation but rather embedded in larger systems or fields comprised of organizations that influence and imitate one another. Accordingly, the institutionalization process of communication management is not only taking place within the organization. Organizational fields are complex and difficult to define. DiMaggio and Powell's classical definition (1983, p. 148) formulates that the organizational field consists of "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life". A central concern in institutional theory has been to explain the isomorphism in organizational fields and the establishment of institutional norms (Kondra and Hinings, 1998). These norms deal with appropriate domains of operation, principles of organizing, and criteria of evaluation, which means that values and beliefs external to the organization may play a significant role in determining organizational norms. Conformity to the norms of the field may depend on organizations' need for increasing their legitimacy, resources, and survival capabilities (p. 744).

The organizational field has proved to be critical as a bridge between the organizational and the societal levels (DiMaggio, 1986). A field-level focus provides us with the tools to analyze an organization's behavior by seeing it in the context of the larger action and meaning-system in which it participates (Scott, 2008). Organizational fields are created at different times and under varying circumstances and they evolve at different speeds (Powell, 1991, p. 195). Isomorphism is closely associated with the organizational field level and it has been argued that homogenization occurs out of the structuration of organizational fields, and that highly structured organizational fields provide a context that results in a homogeneity in structure, culture and output as a result of individual acts of dealing rationally with uncertainty and constraint (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

### **Organizational level**

Empirical research on the organizational level has examined how institutional systems shape the organization, and documented the influence of social and symbolic forces on organizational structure and behavior. But, even though it is clear that their environments affect organizations, they are also capable of responding to these attempts to influence. Hence, most modern organizations are not only creations of their environment but constituted as active players (Scott, 2008).

The organizational level of analysis is prevalent within research in organizational communication and communication management. For example, the importance of different factors at the organizational level for determining the role of the communication executive in strategic management is discussed by Johansson and Ottestig (2011). Analysis at the organizational level is also important when multi-level analysis is considered. Then, the organizational level establishes the link between other levels, such as the individual level, the societal level or the organizational field level.

**Individual level**

Research within institutional theory has mostly focused on how the institution shapes the individual and not vice versa. Institutional theorists focus their analysis on the larger drama rather than focusing on the individual player. The debate about agency versus structure in the social sciences is an example of the different assumptions scholars make about human nature. In organization studies for example, assumptions about the human nature are central, since human life often is the main subject and object of analysis (Battilana, 2006). As a part of the research of institutional change, the role of the individual has been highlighted through active agency, often in terms of institutional entrepreneurship. Recent research on institutions give more attention to individuals and also organizations' power to innovate, act strategically and contribute to institutional change (Scott, 2008).

The ability of actors to distance themselves from institutional pressures is somewhat controversial since actors are supposed to be institutionally embedded. The question whether the individual is an active agent or not will not be further explored here. The use of the term "individual" is not a suggestion that every individual, communication executive, or communication manager should be analyzed as a separate unit, rather that actions of single communication professionals should be analyzed as institutionally embedded (in organizations, fields and societies).

**Three main areas of institutionalization**

We propose that the process of institutionalization of communication management is particularly related to the following main areas: social capital, organizational structure and perceptions of the profession. These three areas are overlapping and interrelated, and the theoretical framework suggested here should be interpreted as an attempt to outline and summarize research and theories relevant for the institutionalization of communication

management. As described above, these three areas should not be understood as closed circuits but rather as an attempt to organize a variety of theories into an applicable frame. In the next section we discuss important theories and concepts in these areas.

### **Social Capital**

Social capital can be understood as “the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action” (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p. 17). The source of social capital lies in the social structure, and the network of social relations in which the actor is located. Different types of relations, such as market relations, hierarchical relations, and social relations can be distinguished (Adler and Kwon, 2002). There are numerous definitions of social capital, that can be separated by for example the focus on the nature of the actors’ relationships, as either external, internal or both (Adler and Kwon 2002). However, the group of definitions worded as being neutral to the external/ internal dimension has its advantages and will be adopted in this paper. It is our firm belief that the internal and external dimensions cannot be considered as mutually exclusive.

The effects of social capital flow from the information, influence and solidarity that it makes available to the actor (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p. 23). Thus, we propose that social capital, consisting of goodwill and social relations of communication executives, is an important factor influencing the process of institutionalization. We also consider social capital as the overarching concept, incorporating theories concerning legitimacy, power, and influence. This compilation is suggested since social capital can be manifested through legitimacy, power and influence.

### **Legitimacy**

The importance of organizational legitimacy has been substantiated within both institutional theory (Powell and DiMaggio, 1983) and in the field of communication management (Grunig, 1992; Metzler, 2001; Merkelsen, 2011). The concept of legitimacy addresses forces, both normative and cognitive, that constrain, construct, and empower organizational actors (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is defined by Suchman as a generalized perception or assumption that something is desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (1995, p. 574).

Within the field of communication management, the question of creating and maintaining organizational legitimacy in relation to management, publics and in society has been much debated (L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006). Legitimacy of the organization in society is an important issue for communication management (cf. Merkelsen, 2011), but of even more interest in this paper is: what factors serve to legitimize the communication function in organizations? We need to distinguish between legitimacy in the public, external legitimacy, and legitimacy within the organization, internal legitimacy.

Johansson and Ottestig (2011) studied communication executives in a number of Swedish organizations and conclude that their internal legitimacy has been strengthened in recent years, and that communication executives have seen their role change from production-oriented to more strategic. Moreover, communication executives acknowledged that organizational leaders' understanding of the importance of communication has increased. Communication executives were found to have a distinct strategic managerial role in their organizations based on two dimensions: organizational leadership and communication leadership. Although executives perceived high external legitimacy, their internal legitimacy, status and formal position varied between organizations (Johansson and Ottestig, 2011). Important to note is that the role of the communication executive is dynamic, and can both

improve and deteriorate over time. This lack of stability can be a sign of a communication management function in a process of institutionalization but far from a stable institution.

### **Power**

Legitimacy is related to the concept of power mainly because of the assumption that external and internal legitimacy can lead to increased power. However, perceived power does not necessarily implicate high legitimacy. Both concepts have been researched within the field of communication management (Berger, 2005; Merckelsen, 2011). Many communication management researchers share the belief that the communication executive must be part of the organization's dominant coalition to be able to work strategically and to influence decision-making (Dozier and Broom, 2006). L'Etang and Pieczka (2006) believe that the young profession is striving to win recognition and legitimacy in the organization. They also emphasize the importance of the head of communications as part of the dominant coalition, in order to be able to influence strategic decisions.

Research about power is extensive and stems from many academic disciplines. There is research about power within both the field of institutional theory and communication management. It has long been recognized that institutions reflect and reproduce power relations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Seo and Creed, 2002).

The power structure of organizations needs to be taken into account in all communication management research, according to Berger (Berger, 2005). Different roles of practitioners, the technician, the strategist, and the activist have been assigned different positions in, and possibilities to influence the organizational power structure (Berger, 2005). The technician has an important function of producing information but the role does not allow access to the organizational level where the strategic decisions are made. The strategist might easier find access to the dominant coalition, but it is not certain that the strategist is able to



influence the decisions and discussions in a constructive way. Berger suggests that taking on an activist role, will make it possible to challenge and change structures of power within the organization.

### **Influence**

As mentioned above, the concepts of power and influence are interdependent. How communication professionals define and how they find influence is the topic of an article by Reber and Berger (2006). They explain the interdependence in a distinct way: “If power is the capacity or potential to get things done, then influence is the use, expression, or realization of power” (p. 237). Influence is defined as “...the ability to get things done by affecting the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, decisions, statements, and behaviors of others.” (p. 237). Findings suggest that communication professionals define influence in terms of shaping decisions, having access, and being heard. They perceived themselves most influential in crisis situations and when preparing communication messages or plans. They acknowledged less influence in strategic decision making, when perceived as technicians, and in interactions with senior executives (Reber and Berger, 2006).

### **Organizational Structure**

The formal structure is what organizations often define in charts. It is often hierarchical and present titles and job descriptions. What is presented in the formal organizational chart is often not equal with who actually performs a certain task or knows about certain things, rather, this can be found in the informal structure of the organization. When analyzing institutionalization of communication management we believe it necessary to take various organizational related aspects into consideration since the communication professional is embedded in the larger system of the organization, which has impact on how the role is manifested.

**Formal structure**

The organizational field in which the organization is institutionally embedded influences the development of an organization's formal structure. Individual organizations are obliged to conform to these structural rules in order to gain support and legitimacy (Scott and Meyer, 1983). By designing a social structure that follows the norms, values and beliefs of the surrounding environment, the organization legitimizes its existence (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The adoption of an institutional practice by an organization is referred to as isomorphism, as described earlier in the paper (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Sewell argues that structures are constituted by mutually sustaining cultural schemas as sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action (Sewell, 1992). Agents are empowered by structures, both through knowledge about cultural schemas that enables them to mobilize resources and through the access to resources that enables them to enact schemas. A broad range of dimensions related to organizational structure is presented and discussed by McPhee and Poole (2001).

There are other different perspectives on the explanation of structure. Contingency theory, in short, emphasizes structural relationships between the organization and its environment (Cancel et al., 1997). Organizations adapt their formal organization structure to factors in the environment. Power control theory states that the structure of the organization is partly determined by environmental factors but also, even more importantly, affected by managerial choices (Grunig, 1992; Grunig and Hunt, 1984).

**The communication department within the organizational structure**

Closely connected to the general structure of the organization is the role of the communication department within the organization. How the communication function is

structured within the organization varies, depending on for example organizational size, background and sector or field. Some even go as far as saying that the strategic use of corporate communications stands or falls with an effective structuring of communications in the form of a consolidated function with access to the decision-making coalition (Cornelissen, 2008). Within the research field of communication management, there has been an ongoing discussion about structural dimensions of the communication function, mainly through contingency theory and the power-control theory (explained above). The relationship between structure, communication, culture and employee satisfaction are presented in a power-control model of organizational communication (Grunig, 1992).

### **Informal structure**

Alongside with the formal structure there is an informal structure. The informal structure consists of adjustments of the distribution of tasks and responsibility that take place spontaneously between organizational members. The informal structure is often regarded as a positive complement to the formal structure, but can also be destructive and work against efficiency, creativity and the ability of adjustment (Bruzelius and Skärvad, 2004, p. 181). There is often some sort of stability also in the informal structures where participants generate informal norms and patterns of behavior regarding for example status, norms, communication networks, social networks and working arrangements. Irrespective of the formal structure, individual organizational members bring with them individually shaped ideas, expectations and agendas. Informal organizational structures are vital to organizations because a formal structure is difficult, or even impossible, to design in a way that will function in all different types of situations and be adaptable to processes of change (Scott, 2008).

### **Organizational background and history**

Organizational structure, both formal and informal, and social capital within an organization are related to the organizational background and history, since structures are

dynamic and constantly evolving, and social capital also is dependent on actions and events, which have occurred in the organization. Also factors like organizational type, size, maturity, and culture can be linked to the institutionalization of communication management (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). In smaller organizations, the communication function often has limited resources, is multi-functional and dependent on purchasing services that are too time consuming or that there is a lack of competence to perform. In large or multi-national organizations, on the other hand, the communication function can consist of a well manned and specialized staff (Tench and Yeomans, 2009).

The work orientation and roles within the communication management function will also depend on the age and maturity of the organization. A startup organization may focus on external communication and the company's growth and sales, and in such a case, the role of communication management will be organized to supporting sales. In a mature organization the communication function usually has a wider variety of assignments (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). It is therefore important that communication is tailored to the organization and situation-specific context for it to be meaningful (Goodman and Truss, 2004).

### **Organizational culture**

In order to discuss the roles and functions of communication professionals and the institutionalization of communication management, organizational culture is an important factor since culture has a large impact on many parts of the organization. Organizational culture is closely related to both formal and informal structure, since it is developed and sustained in structured contexts. Informal structure and organizational culture may be difficult to differentiate. Also social capital is closely related to these concepts, since organizational structure and culture influence social capital of organizational members and functions. Welch and Jackson discuss organizational culture in relation to internal communication. They argue

that all internal communication is affected by the organization's current communication climate and culture. Communication is also influencing, shaping, and enhancing the organization's culture. For example, the way meetings are held in an organization, or the way the intranet is used, conveys culture (Welch and Jackson, 2007).

### **Perceptions of the profession**

Communication management practice has developed away from information production into an increasingly strategic role within many organizations. Grandien discussed that communication managers have changed their titles and work orientation from information technicians to communications strategists (Grandien, 2008). According to annual member surveys of the Swedish Public Relations Association from 1999 to 2009, respondents believe that strategic planning will become increasingly important. The surveys also show that the professional role has been both strengthened and broadened within the organizations.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Research specifically dedicated to exploring the practice of communication management is obviously related to the overall question about the institutionalization of communication management. More specifically, different perceptions of the profession can be of importance since these perceptions illustrate the overall understanding of the role of communication management, both by the professionals themselves but also by for example the organizations they function in or as an illustration of norms within different organizational fields.

### **Appreciation of the profession**

How communication executives value the profession and the importance of communication management is another important factor in the theoretical framework. For example, if the communication executive views the profession as mainly consisting of typical journalistic traits, then the role in strategic change management might be a more traditional

role of managing information. Also, what the communication executive appreciates as important attributes of the role might have an impact on the role enacted and the process of institutionalization. If the communication executive values organizational knowledge, and business understanding as important assets, the role will be different from the communication executive who does not value these aspects. How the CEO or other organizational leaders value the communication management function and the communication executive is another important input to the issue of institutionalization of communication management, which has been illustrated in empirical research (cf. Swerling and Sen, 2009). Is it natural in the organization to trust the communication executive with strategic management issues or not? These attitudes can be formed at all levels from the individual level to the societal level.

Moreover, at the core of evaluating the communication management function and the communication executive role is ultimately different perceptions of communication. For example, communication during a change process can be categorized under two broad objectives, namely, transmission of information and sensemaking (Elving, 2005). The various roles described above show that both the informative and sensemaking professional roles are needed and that one does not exclude the other.

### **Perceptions and performances of communication leadership**

Research concerning roles and their performance is connected with the question of power, but also forms a separate research area within the field of communication management. Johansson and Ottestig (2011) differentiate between three performances of the communication executive role: the “organizational leader”, responsible for all strategic decisions, the “communication leader”, responsible for communication issues within the dominant coalition, and the “communication manager”, responsible for communication but without a seat in the senior management group. The communication manager was not

considered to have equal power to executives from other corporate functions, and could thus not be said to be a truly executive role (Johansson and Ottestig, 2011).

Another important indicator that could explain the role of the communication executive is if the role is perceived as either a tactical short-term function, or a more decision-oriented function with strategic intent. Swerling and Sen argue that the more strategic role and higher acceptance of the function within an organization, will lead to a higher level of institutionalization of communication management (Swerling and Sen, 2009).

### **Perceptions of education in communication management**

In the discussion of professionalization or institutionalization of the communication management profession as a whole, education and the role of professional organizations have been important issues (Ehling, 1992; L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006). We believe that the question of education is central in the context of institutionalization of communication management as well. The communication executive with a communications background, necessarily is better suited to manage communication in strategic organizational change (van Ruler and de Lange, 2003). Also, on societal and field levels, the status of the profession, education in communications and the role of professional associations and their ethical guidelines could influence the formation of organizational structures.

### **Discussion and implications for further research**

Development of the communication function in organizations, and the expansion of responsibility of communication professionals is an important field of study in communication management. The role in strategic management that the communication executive adopts varies between organizations and is subjected to change (Johansson and Ottestig, 2011). Also the practice of communication professionals, for example during organizational change, differs to a large extent in different organizational settings (Johansson

and Heide, 2008a). This variance signifies an ongoing process of institutionalization of communication management. Interrelated concepts, theories and factors influencing this process are the main focus of this paper. Our aim has been to provide a potentially fruitful framework for analyzing the institutionalization of communication management.

The framework incorporates multiple analytical levels, derived from institutional theory, which is important if we want to understand interaction and interdependence between actors and forces (Scott, 2008). Four institutional levels: the societal level, the organization field level, the organizational level and the individual level, all of which can be analyzed separately depending on the research question, are included. The concepts and theories of the framework are structured in three main areas; social capital, organizational structure and perceptions of the profession that in part overlap each other. These areas should be interpreted as general frames within which a more precise selection of theories can be organized. We suggest such a selection, but we advocate an interpretation of the areas that does not limit additional or alternative theories. Selected concepts and theories are drawn from both institutional theory and communication management theory. The concept of social capital incorporates theory on the goodwill available to individuals or groups through social structures and relations, and theories on legitimacy, power, and influence. Organizational structure, both formal and informal, influences the role of the communication executive and therefore communication management, depending on both the informal and formal position within and outside the organization. Perceptions of the profession also influence the enactment of communication management; here more specific communication management role theories are summarized. How different actors perceive the role of communication management and the role of the communication executive has bearing on the way the role is enacted.



The crucial role of communication management in relation to organizational effectiveness and survival has been emphasized and argued extensively both within research and practice (Botan and Hazleton, 2006; Botan and Taylor, 2004). However, this perceived development towards an institutionalization of communication management differs highly between organizations. We suggest a next step could be to shift focus from arguing the necessity of communication management to further explore what constitutes these differences between organizations. If the overarching goal for the practice of communication management is an institutionalized profession with high external and internal legitimacy (Sandhu, 2009; Zerfass, 2009) it would be of interest to further explore how and why this process manifests itself with such variance.

An important research question for communication management scholars has been, and still is, the importance of access to the dominant coalition and participation in strategic management and many scholars have focused on the strive of the profession to win recognition and legitimacy (Dozier and Broom, 2006; Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig, 1995; Grunig and Grunig, 2008; L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006). Consequently, a major issue for research about communication management has been to find arguments for legitimacy, and empirical evidence of the importance of communication. However, research does not explore the social and organizational embeddedness of communication management that influences the practice in different ways. Organizational members, such as communication professionals and top management are embedded in social structures that both enable actions through shared meanings and routines, but these agents also reproduce structures that results in conformity within and between organizations. An organization is not a system in isolation but rather embedded in larger systems or fields comprised of organizations that influence and imitate one another. Applying institutional theory to analyze organizational fields can provide new tools to explain an organization's behavior by the context of the larger action and

meaning-system in which it participates (Scott, 2008). Associated with organizational fields is the concept of isomorphism. In short, this concept implies that homogenization occurs out of the structuration of organizational fields, and that highly structured organizational fields provide a context that results in a homogeneity in structure, culture and output (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The organizational field in which the organization is embedded influences the development of an organization's formal structure. Individual organizations are obliged to conform to these structural rules in order to gain support and legitimacy (Scott and Meyer, 1983).

Moreover, applying institutional theory to the development of communication management practice raises questions about how it is emerging in fields of practice outside of the traditional ones. Research shows that in some organizations, communication departments achieve increasingly important roles in communication management of organizational change (Johansson and Heide, 2008a), which is why the question of institutionalization is particularly relevant in this area. Change management is an important strategic question for most organizations, and researchers emphasize the importance of communication during organizational change (Elving, 2005; Johansson and Heide, 2008b). Organizational change is considered of strategic importance to management, and literature, academic and popular, about organizational change is abundant. However, communication aspects of change are often overlooked and communication is valued low or too late (Johansson and Heide, 2008a). Recent research development urges communication executives to take part in the strategic management of organizational change, something that simultaneously poses a challenge, since this field of practice is not traditionally part of the communication management profession. Organizational change has been regarded as a management process where communication sometimes is treated as a determining factor, and sometimes neglected. Communication executives are facing an emerging field of practice, in which organizational leaders, and

communication executives, differ in their definitions of communication, and the role that they assign to the communication management function. Thus, in this context, the process of institutionalization of communication management is an important field of study.

Differences between communication management during change in the tree organizations described in the Grandien study (2008) could be further analyzed by using the framework presented in this article in order to finding larger patterns related to institutionalization. For example, the three organizations stems from different organizational fields. Mapping communication management in a larger number of organizations within these organizational fields, analyzing the significance of social capital, organizational structure and perceptions of the profession to find convergence within different fields and characteristics of connections, could shed more light on the process of the institutionalization of communication management. Results from the Grandien study indicate that analysis of organizational fields would be a useful first step when operationalizing the framework. The analysis can then be expanded with more levels.

When applying the theoretical model, some general methodological issues to consider is first if research questions relate to one ore more levels of analysis, second if one or more of the theoretical areas should be integrated. Qualitative studies, such as case studies may integrate several levels and theoretical areas, since this type of studies can be designed in a more holistic way. Survey research, on the other hand, may is more suited to study relationships between the individual level and one or more of the theoretical areas. Other methods, such as content analysis and discourse analysis may be used to study perceptions of communication management at the societal and field levels.

The proposed theoretical framework is a first step towards an operationalization of concepts in order to find empirical explanations of the differences between the very different roles that communication professionals play in organizations. We advocate that the

framework is further developed and tested in future research and hope that our discussion will inspire empirical studies in this field, which can contribute to further development of the concepts and their relationships to the process of institutionalization. In this way we can develop our understanding of the core functioning of communication management in different societal contexts, institutional settings and organizations in the future.

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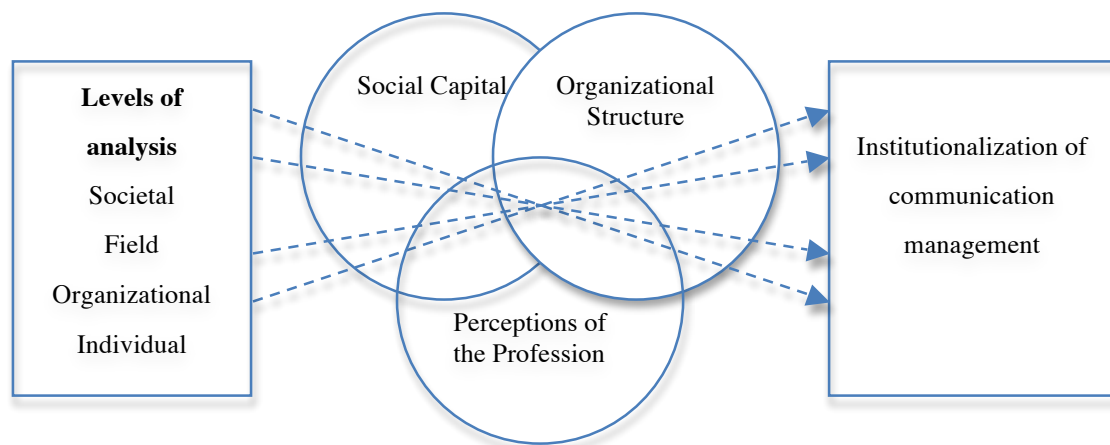


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Figure 1. A framework for analyzing institutionalization of communication management



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<sup>i</sup> The concept of communication management will be used throughout the paper and replace the concept of public relations. A definition of the concept and reasoning about the use can be found later in the paper.

<sup>ii</sup> See (<http://www.sverigesinformationsforening.se>)