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An auto-communication perspective on the production of strategy texts: How structure, language, and visual symbolism exercise discursive control

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Strategy texts as auto-communication: How narrative, language, and visual symbolism exercise discursive control

Abstract

Strategy texts are an important way of communicating a strategy to a range of different stakeholders, including internal audiences as the organization communicates with itself (auto-communication). Coupling the fields of strategy-as-practice and strategic communication, we analyse two related strategy texts that were produced for auto-communicative purposes as part of a strategic storytelling initiative. Our analysis shows how narrative, visual symbolism and directive language used in the two strategy texts exercise discursive control using three main mechanisms: (1) encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure; (2) strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposeful selection of anecdotes from a shared stock of stories; and (3) defining desired actions and behaviours through visual symbolism and prescriptive language. The article not only provides rare empirical insights on the use of auto-communication in contemporary strategic communication but also demonstrates the tension between linear and dialogic communication in practice.

Key words:

Organizational identity, power, storytelling, strategic communication, strategy-as-practice

Introduction

The practice turn in strategy research (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2003) has raised scholarly interest in the discursive, textual and material practices by which organizational strategy is developed and communicated (e.g. Bencherki et al., 2021; Lundgren and Blom, 2016; Pälli, 2018; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). There is increasing recognition that ‘communication and language [are] at the heart of ... strategic phenomena’ (Vaara and Langley, 2021: 542). Yet, questions of how organizations communicate issues of long-term significance to multiple audiences are not solely the domain of strategy research but are also central to the interdisciplinary field of strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018). Winkler and Etter (2018: 388) even posit that ‘strategic communication differs from other strategic practices, as it produces a distinct ... genre ... that is narrative by nature’. Still, despite its fundamental idea to integrate these concepts, strategic communication research has had a stronger research focus on communication than strategy (Falkheimer and Heide, 2022; Werder et al., 2018).

A growing strand of interdisciplinary research relates to strategy texts, the material artefacts that bring about and communicate an organization’s long-term direction and that constitute ‘some of the most powerful resources for making and signifying an organization’s strategy’ (Balogun et al., 2014: 176). Strategy texts can take the form of documents (Pälli et al., 2009) as well as visual (Comi and Whyte, 2018) and material artefacts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). The extant research has examined the social practices by which these texts are produced (Bencherki et al., 2021; Pälli and Lehtinen, 2013), their characteristics (Cornut et al., 2012; Koskela, 2013) and the ways in which they exercise power by including some and excluding other actors (Vaara et al., 2010) as well as by legitimating strategic decisions and rebutting criticism (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). These studies demonstrate not only that strategy texts are ‘a mechanism of power’ (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 251) but also that much insight about strategic communication can be gleaned from studying them in their own right.

This article seeks to apply a communication perspective on strategy texts and complement earlier studies in two main ways. Firstly, it applies the concept of auto-communication, which derives from semiotics and refers to transmission of information whereby the sender is simultaneously the receiver (Lotman, 1977). The concept recognizes that some organizational communication is aimed at internal audiences (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983) and that externally-focused communication may be consumed by organizational actors (Christensen, 2018). It thereby acknowledges the auto-communicative potential of all communication. Importantly for our analysis, auto-communication supports the forming and maintaining of collective identity that is central to strategizing (Ravasi et al., 2020) because ‘in the process of communication with itself, the culture [of an organization] defines, rediscovers and reorganizes itself in a way that resembles the constitution of a personality’ (Christensen, 1997: 199). By foregrounding auto-communication in strategy texts, we present novel insights into how discursive control is exercised in such texts aimed primarily at an internal audience.

Secondly, the article departs methodologically from a sole focus on discourse by presenting the findings of a multi-modal analysis that examines the dynamic interplay between narrative, language, and visual symbolism. Subject of the analysis are two strategy texts that were produced by a UK organization, Hazardous Waste Disposal Ltd. (HWDL, a pseudonym) to support a strategic storytelling initiative, which sought to reinvigorate organizational actors’ professionalism. Produced primarily for internal communication, a colourful cartoon landscape symbolically narrated the organization’s past, present and envisaged future, underlined with key strategic messages. It was accompanied by a training guide for managers who were expected to have regular storytelling meetings with their teams. Storytelling here is employed

as a communication tool that engages the audience's hearts and minds by using the organization's history and mythology as shared reference points (Denning, 2005; Love, 2008; Smith, 2012) and that is increasingly used 'in developing and legitimating future-oriented strategies' (Rindova and Martins, 2022: 200).

The article contributes to the current understanding of communication practices embedded in strategy texts by showing how narrative, visual symbolism and language jointly exercise discursive control by encouraging organizational actors' active involvement in making the strategy come true. Specifically, we identify three underlying mechanisms: (1) encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure; (2) strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposeful selection of anecdotes from the shared stock of stories; and (3) defining desired behaviours through visual symbolism and prescriptive language. Additionally, the article provides rare empirical evidence of auto-communication in a strategy context, emphasizing the practical value of the concept in studies of strategic communication. We will now discuss the theoretical underpinnings of this article in terms of strategy-as-practice, strategic communication, and strategy texts, before introducing the extant research on auto-communication. Then we will explain the methodology and methods of our study before presenting and discussing the findings of our analysis.

Strategy-as-practice, strategic communication and strategy texts

This article is situated at the intersection of strategy-as-practice, strategic communication and language. Strategy-as-practice regards strategy as 'a situated, socially accomplished activity' that is underpinned by 'those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that [decision-makers] draw upon in accomplishing that activity' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007: 7–8). The three parameters of practice theory – praxis, practices, and practitioners (Reckwitz, 2002; Whittington, 2003) – connect strategizing as it happens (praxis) and the routinized structures of strategizing (e.g. meetings, tools, artefacts) (practices) of the social actors (practitioners) involved. Due to the fundamental role of language and communication (Vaara and Langley, 2021: 542), strategizing is fruitfully regarded itself as a communicative practice (Falkheimer and Heide, 2022).

The interdisciplinary field of strategic communication, integrating older disciplines such as public relations and organizational communication, is concerned with how organizations communicate issues of long-term significance to multiple audiences, which have been conceptualized in two main ways. Firstly, strategic communication has been regarded as goal-oriented whereby a message is transmitted unidirectionally to achieve a linear and predetermined effect (Grunig, 2001), which is also known as 'communication asymmetry'. It is a professional function that is exercised by communication departments. Secondly, strategic communication has been conceived as a dialogic, two-way process of exchanging knowledge and ideas and of co-constructing new organizational realities (Küpers et al., 2012), which has been called 'communication symmetry' (Grunig, 2001). It is an institutionalized set of ideas of how to create shared (strategic) meanings in organizations. Despite its analytical value, the distinction between these two conceptualizations is blurred as Christensen and Christensen (2022) argue: 'rather than seeing transmission and sharing as possible alternatives that the communicator can choose between, we emphasize that transmission is a fundamental condition for all communication' (p. 38). Despite pertinent attempts to integrate both concepts, strategic communication research has, as mentioned earlier, traditionally prioritized communication over strategy (Winkler and Etter, 2018). Since strategy texts operate at the intersection of both these concepts, studying their discursive and symbolic features provides a fruitful way to address this imbalance.

Strategy texts bring about and communicate a strategy to inform one or more audiences, influence stakeholders' behaviour, or legitimate a decision or action. They therefore have a major role in developing, communicating and implementing strategy. One strand of research examines how strategy texts are developed, identifying three main features. Firstly, strategy texts are created in social interaction. For example, Pälli and Lehtinen's (2013) analysis of a management meeting shows how participants orient to text and talk in order to persuade others and legitimate their actions in the meeting. More recently, Bencherki et al. (2021) identify four communicative practices by which strategy is materialized – presentifying, substantiating, attributing and crystallizing – through which an issue of concern becomes strategic in interaction among decision-makers. Secondly, strategy-makers may interact in dedicated strategy workshops or away days. Hodgkinson et al. (2006), for instance, argue that such events enable decision-makers to communicate and coordinate their strategizing. Schwarz (2009) echoes these findings by identifying strategy workshops as 'forum[s] of strategic discussion' (p. 277) in which decision-makers share knowledge and seek consensus. Johnson et al. (2010) show how ritual shapes the organization and facilitation of such events as well as decision-makers' behaviours. Finally, the production of strategy texts can be supported by analytical tools, such as SWOT, PESTEL, stakeholder analysis and scenario planning (Hodgkinson et al., 2006), as well as visual tools, such as pictures, maps, spreadsheets and graphs (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) theorize that decision-makers use strategy tools to deal with uncertainty and that they select and apply such tools based on their understanding of the tools and their interpretation of the context. Examining decision-makers' interactions with visual tools in strategy meetings, Paroutis et al. (2015) identify two categories: actor contained (foreground delegates' agency) and tool-triggered (foregrounding the tool's agency). In their own way, these studies examine the dynamic interplay between the praxis, practices and practitioners that is central to strategy-as-practice.

A second strand of research might be characterized as discursive and examines strategy texts as artefacts in their own right. It is based on the assumption that 'the language that we use when talking and writing about strategy issues does matter in terms of what we produce as useful, necessary, desirable or self-evident' (Eriksson and Lehtimäki, 1998: 292). These studies treat strategy 'as a discourse which has its own specific conditions of possibility' (Pälli et al., 2009: 303). In their seminal study, Vaara et al. (2010) identify five discursive features of a strategic plan: self-authorization, special terminology, discursive innovation, forced consensus, and deonticity. They establish that strategy texts communicate the purpose and aims of the strategy and that specialist strategic terminology – including new buzz words – is at the heart of such documents. Vaara et al. further show that strategy texts portray a sense of consensus, which does not reflect the different stakeholders' varying and often competing agendas, and also that these texts were presented as a necessity. Cornut et al. (2012) argue that strategy texts are a distinct genre with an optimistic, emotive, consensual and future-oriented tone to engage the audience and encourage action. Their analysis also suggests that decision-makers purposively use language in strategy texts that enables multiple interpretations but also requires orchestrated control of the message to be communicated. Koskela (2013), in contrast, posits that strategy texts have multiple genres as they may draw on multiple discourses, such as those of strategic management, corporate communications, stock market etc., as long-term goals are defined and the organization's performance against them is assessed. Their analysis identified four different sets of discourses underpinning strategy texts, with the discourses of strategic management and corporate communication present in all, but complemented in varying configurations by a marketing discourse, a legal and stock market discourse, and an accounting discourse.

A third and closely related strand of research foregrounds the mechanisms by which strategy texts may exercise discursive control as they ‘enable certain ways of acting while at the same time they restrict other actions’ (Pälli et al., 2009: 303). In an early study, Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001) show how the rhetoric used in strategy texts is indicative of traditional hierarchical power structures, despite attempts to make strategizing a more cooperative process. The five discursive features identified by Vaara et al. (2010) further elucidate issues of power as the use of specialist strategic terminology ‘affected the power positions of the various decision-makers’ (p. 692) with some being included and other excluded from strategizing. Moreover, the imperative nature of strategy texts as something urgent and important may seek to shape stakeholders’ response to the strategy. Similarly, Kornberger and Clegg’s (2011) more recent analysis of the Sydney 2030 strategy report echoes the importance of ‘speaking strategically’ (p. 143), that is decision-makers learning the vocabulary of strategic decision-making and then using this technical vocabulary to formulate and communicate the new strategy. They show how language can be used to bring together different perspectives and agendas in a shared discourse (in their case, an economic discourse), whilst navigating potentially contentious issues. Kornberger (2013: 105), further, posits that strategy reports may be ‘framed ... as [deriving from] a transparent, technocratic mechanism that would produce the right answers to the challenges ahead’, thereby depoliticizing any controversy. As such, strategy texts can create and/or exacerbate unequal power relationships in the strategy domain (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Laine and Vaara, 2007).

Despite these important insights, there is currently little appreciation of the multiple audiences at which strategy texts are directed. This is problematic because strategy texts aimed primarily at an internal audience are likely to use different communicative practices than externally-focused strategic communication. In internally-focused communication, both decision-makers and organizational actors draw on a shared organizational memory and mythology (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983) whereas external audiences will bring often very diverse and potentially competing perspectives. Moreover, we posit that when communicating with an internal audience decision-makers may attempt to control the strategic message more closely than in externally-focused strategic communication in order to enlist organizational actors’ engagement in a strategy that is arguably more pertinent to the success of a strategy than support by external stakeholders. To better understand the features and communicative actions of strategy texts aimed at an internal audience, we draw on the concept of auto-communication as discussed next.

Strategic communication as auto-communication

The concept of auto-communication derives from the work of semiotician Yuri Lotman (1977) who identified a mode of communication whereby the sender is simultaneously the receiver, which he called auto-communication. Put differently, auto-communication means that an individual, group or organization communicates with itself alongside more conventional forms of communication in which sender and receiver are different entities. In an early study, Broms and Gahmberg (1983) demonstrate that strategic planning documents and annual reports seek to communicate with external audiences whilst having ‘self-enhancing and self-confirming potential’ (p. 2). Their discussion explores specifically the mythical and symbolic aspects of organizations (Westerlund and Sjöstrand, 1979) that are captured in narratives and images which ‘open up a channel to the forgotten side of man and adds to creativity and social activity’ (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983: 488). More recent studies have indicated that auto-communication may be a by-product for senders focusing the external effect of a message and not realizing that the main impact is internal while also being employed purposively. Using

auto-communication as conscious strategic communication is not unusual in marketing communication (Christensen, 1997), for instance, when a member of the organization is used as (outward-facing) communicator in advertising campaigns with a dual effect. Firstly, it has an intended external effect, attempting to persuade an audience about something. Secondly, it simultaneously has an internal and auto-communicative effect in the form of increased pride, engagement and identity among the organizational actors that are made visible in this way.

Auto-communication has also been closely linked to sensemaking (Weick, 1977), identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985) and identification in organizations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). For example, Cheney and Christensen (2001) refer to a ‘quest for identity’ in contemporary organizations and ‘a growing need among organizational members for identification and belongingness’ (p. 19). Similarly, Kjærgaard and Morsing (2010) explore empirically how auto-communication ‘serves as a catalyst for identity construction within the organization’ (p. 93). These studies indicate that by engaging in auto-communication, organizations can achieve greater clarity of the central, distinctive, and enduring features that makes up their identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Simultaneously, auto-communication can help organizational actors to understand how the membership of an organization affects their sense of belonging to the organization (Brown, 2017), which have become central concerns in strategy research (Ravasi et al., 2020).

Hence, auto-communication may be used purposively by decision-makers to foster sensemaking and identity work (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983). Yet, it may also be used to exercise discursive control as decision-makers seek to ‘determine and redefine the power and subjectivity of various social actors’ (Vaara et al., 2010: 699) within an organization. However, these pertinent insights on discursive control have yet to inform the extant research on auto-communication as little empirical attention has been given to how auto-communicative messages are constructed and prepared for strategic communication. In this article, we therefore also respond to calls for empirical studies of power in auto-communication (e.g. Christensen, 2018; Kjærgaard and Morsing, 2010; Morsing, 2006) by we applying the concept of auto-communication to HWDL’s strategic change initiative, which we will now introduce.

Methodology and methods

This article is situated in the constructionist tradition of strategy research (e.g. Eriksson and Lehtimäki, 1998) and addresses what Rindova and Martins (2022: 201) call ‘firm-centered world-making narratives that articulate a firm’s preferred future and its role in creating it’. We mobilize the empirical case of UK organization HWDL (a pseudonym) that specializes in the safe disposal of the world’s most hazardous substances. The organization had been the industry flagship for decades before serious accidents affected its reputation, future prosperity and survival. Decision-makers therefore sought to inspire organizational actors to make HWDL an industry flagship once again through a strategic change initiative entitled ‘Towards an Excellent Future’ (TAEF, a pseudonym). The strategic communication tool was storytelling, an approach using narrative to shape organizational actors’ perceptions in accordance with a pre-defined ideal. Storytelling is widely advocated among management practitioners and consultants (e.g. Denning, 2005; Love, 2008; Smith, 2012) as a natural and intuitive way of communicating complex and abstract information (e.g. Allan et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2005) that has been studied in a strategy context (Küpers et al., 2012; Rindova and Martins, 2022).

At the heart of our multi-modal analysis were two connected strategy texts – a colourful cartoon landscape and the accompanying 36-page training guide prepared for managers that HWDL decision-makers commissioned from a specialist management consultancy to support

the new strategy. TAEF told the story of the organization's successful past, its present difficulties, and its desire to become successful again. It was structured into six chapters, which the cartoon told visually and symbolically to encourage dialogue between managers and their teams about who HWDL was, how it operated, and where it was going. In the spirit of a dialogic co-construction of the organization's new strategy, decision-makers sought to involve all managers – predominantly scientists and engineers – in storytelling meetings with their teams to reach all 10,000 HWDL staff. A training guide was devised to orchestrate these efforts, replicating the key messages and visual features of the cartoon landscape so that the two texts could be used in conjunction. A copy of the cartoon landscape and the training guide were given to the first author as part of a larger research project (Author) and subjected to a multi-modal analysis for this paper.

Our analysis focused on the structure, plot, and storyline of HWDL's strategic narrative; an analysis of the visual symbolism in the cartoon landscape; and an analysis of the language used in the training guide to aid facilitation of the storytelling meetings by managers. The analysis started with repeated perusal of the cartoon landscape and multiple readings of the training guide to examine how 'meanings are made, [and] distributed ... through representational and communicative modes' (Jewitt, 2017: 15) as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

First, we analysed HWDL's strategic narrative because it underpinned the organization's change initiative, considering the key narrative features of structure, plot, and storyline (Browning, 1991; Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 1998, see also Author) to understand their purpose in seeking to 'make the story come true'. Next we turned to the visual symbolism of the cartoon landscape (Prosser, 1998) as the story unfolded through varying landscapes, the portrayal of people and their behaviours as well as the elements of the organization's metaphoric journey into the future that were foregrounded in this text. Then, we analysed the language through which HWDL managers were instructed to facilitate the storytelling meetings with their teams. In a final step, we critically interrogated the exercise of discursive control through dynamic of the narrative, visual symbolic, and linguistic features of the two texts. It became apparent that, in contrast to the playfulness and dialogic potential inherent in a storytelling approach, organizational decision-makers sought to tightly control communication of the new strategy by prescribing a detailed structure for the storytelling meetings that defined often minute timings and instructed managers to engage in basic social practices such as saying 'thank you' as discussed next.

Strategic storytelling 'towards an excellent future'

The cartoon landscape: Narrative structure and visual symbolism

HWDL's strategic narrative telling the organization's prospective journey 'towards an excellent future' (TAEF) was structured into six chapters with organizational actors being collectively portrayed as protagonists. Each chapter contained specific strategic messages that were represented symbolically in the cartoon landscape.

Chapter 1 described the organization's successful past as an industry flagship, which was depicted in the cartoon landscape as the plant in a landscape that was typical for the region in which HWDL was based with technical and clerical staff outside. Chapter 2 emphasized the organization's present difficulties by referring to a loss of trust, to condoning poor

performance, and to damage to its reputation. The cartoon landscape depicted a mountain that groups of technical and clerical staff climbed in apparent disarray. Chapter 3 was about the imperative that HWDL staff ‘must demonstrate that we are professionals’ to create a more prosperous future for the organization and, due to its status as the biggest employer in an otherwise relatively deprived area, the wider community. This message was depicted in the cartoon landscape through a cliff edge and a bridge under construction over the gorge, in front of which staff study a placard signalling an interest in the new strategy.

The focus of the narrative then shifted towards the future. Chapter 4 encapsulated the improvements that HWDL’s strategic change programme was expected to achieve in terms of the three key indicators of safety, reliability, and predictability. This was visually depicted in the cartoon landscape by the end of the bridge started in Chapter 3 and another mountain with staff carrying banners stating TAEF as well as the three key indicators. The message is clear: decision-makers foresaw challenges in their journey towards an excellent future that organizational actors could only muster collectively. Chapter 5 emphasized the behaviours through which decision-makers envisaged HWDL becoming ‘the workforce of choice’ for industry stakeholders, specifically, excellence, teamwork, reliability, continuing improvement, and ongoing skill development. These desired behaviours were depicted by the end of the mountain by staff descending in an orderly fashion and by senior staff carrying banners at the foot of mountain, signalling collective action. In Chapter 6, HWDL arrived at their ‘excellent future’ which was depicted by a bigger, brighter and modernized plant. A schematic representation of the cartoon landscape is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

HWDL’s strategic narrative followed the traditional narrative structure of beginning (Chapter 1), middle (Chapter 2), and end (Chapters 3-6). The middle of a story typically depicts ‘conflicts, predicaments, trials and crisis which call for choices, decisions, actions and interactions, whose actual outcomes are often at odds with the characters’ intentions and purposes’ (Gabriel, 2008: 283). It is notable that three of the six chapters of HWDL’s strategic narrative are devoted to the future, which has also been called ‘prospective storytelling’ that enables social actors to ‘formulate a joint medium- and long-term vision’ (Kryger, 2017: 4). In HWDL’s strategic narrative, Chapters 3 to 6 were designed to define how organizational actors were expected to achieve the envisaged ‘excellent future’, which resonates with Rindova and Martin’s (2022) notion of ‘futurescape’. The storyline can be characterized as ‘ascending’ (Browning, 1991), encompassing an upward trajectory and leading to a positive outcome.

These elements of HWDL’s strategic narrative were underlined by the visual and symbolic features of the cartoon landscape, drawing on commonly used metaphors. The stable state at the beginning and end of the traditional narrative structure was depicted by a relatively flat and uneventful landscape in Chapters 1 and 6. The organization’s present difficulties, depicted in Chapter 2, were symbolized by staff climbing a mountain, and the gap between current and required / envisaged behaviours were symbolized by a cliff edge and gorge in Chapter 3. The expected challenges en route to creating a more prosperous future for HWDL were depicted by another mountain, straddling Chapters 4 and 5.

The detail included in the cartoon landscape (which is not adequately represented in the schematic representation in Figure 1) provides insights into the communicative actions of these narrative and visual features. For example, HWDL’s present difficulties were depicted through a variety of undesirable behaviours: by two staff members worshipping an idol (item 1 in Figure

1), four staff members' being evidently lost (item 2 in Figure 1), two staff members busy firefighting (item 3 in Figure 1), and two workers lying idly in the sun (item 4 in Figure 1). A balloon bears the slogan 'effort without result is nothing' (item 5 in Figure 1). We interpret these messages as seeking to instil both repentance among organizational actors for a lack of care at work and encouragement to amend their ways by increasing their professionalism. It is notable that as the narrative progressed, staff were portrayed in a more orderly fashion, walking in groups, and talking to each other. Senior managers carrying placards symbolize leadership and are dutifully followed by organizational actors, reproducing traditional conceptions of strategy as a hierarchical exercise (e.g. Eriksson and Lehtimäki, 2001).

Together, the coordinated interplay between these elements indicates that decision-makers took great care in compiling these texts and that they sought to control the strategic message by referring to shared meanings (see Broms and Gahmberg, 1983). Although at first glance the colourful cartoon landscape may indicate playfulness, our analysis suggests that the underlying message is more serious: it is an orchestrated attempt to shape organizational actors' interpretations of the organization's current testing situation and to encourage them to join the metaphoric journey 'Towards an Excellent Future' by emulating the desired behaviours represented in the cartoon landscape. These efforts to exercise discursive control are further apparent in the prescriptive language used in the training guide, which sought to instruct HWDL managers in how to facilitate storytelling meeting in their teams, as discussed next.

The training guide: Careful orchestration and tight prescriptions

The training guide consisted of two parts. Part 1 explained the rationale of the storytelling approach to strategic change and the envisaged outcomes. A key feature of the text was a focus on 'engaging and connecting our people to this story' (p. 3). Managers were specifically told to 'personalise the key messages', 'illustrate the key messages with stories', and 'include supporting facts' (p. 4). The training guide also stated specific steps that managers were to follow in the storytelling meeting together with the expected outcomes and duration for each. For example, in relation to Step 2, 'the connection conversation' in which managers and their teams were expected to discuss the cartoon landscape, the outcome was defined as follows: 'I understand that I have a part to play in our journey'; duration: 30mins (p. 6). There was also more detailed guidance about how much time was to be spend on each chapter of HWDL's strategic narrative (p. 10) and answering preprepared questions (p. 12). As such, Part 1 of the training guide seems to have been written for an audience unfamiliar with storytelling in an organizational context, providing guidance about the content, structure, and objectives of the storytelling meetings.

Part 2 consisted of a workbook, in which two pages were dedicated to each chapter of HWDL's strategic narrative and linked to the cartoon landscape as depicted schematically in Figure 2.

Figure 2

In keeping with HWDL's storytelling approach, managers were expected to relate anecdotes from the organization's stock of stories in the storytelling meetings. On the left-hand page for each chapter, an anecdote from the organization's central stock of stories was provided, and on the right-hand page, there was space for managers to note down team-specific examples that they could use to replace the given example. Although the use of anecdotes from the past to

illustrate the future seems strange, the selected incidents focused on how the desired behaviours of excellence, teamwork, reliability, continuing improvement, and ongoing skill development had been employed previously. Following [Author], we propose that these anecdotes were purposively selected to emphasize that the required changes were within organizational actors' capabilities, thereby providing encouragement and motivation for the challenges in the journey ahead.

It is possible that 'typical' HWDL managers – predominantly scientists and engineers – may not have been naturally skilled storytellers and therefore may have benefitted from the content of the training guide. However, the level of detail prescribed for the delivery of these storytelling sessions is surprising, nevertheless. For each step of the storytelling meeting, exact timings were imposed, sometimes down to the level of two minutes, limiting managers' autonomy to respond to the needs of their team. Although some of the language used in the training guide could be regarded as suggestions (e.g. 'you may wish'), commands (e.g. 'personalise key messages') were also widely used together with prescribed outcomes (e.g. 'people should leave this meeting understanding ...'). Illustrative excerpts from the language used in the training guide are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Some content in the training guide seemed particularly odd: HWDL managers were specifically instructed to 'applaud the stories when they are shared in the room' (Chapter 1 and 6) and 'don't forget to thank your audience for their contribution. Ensure they are clear on the role they play in making our journey a success.' The prescriptions of such mundane social practices associated with polite acknowledgement (applauding and thanking) imply an assumption that HWDL managers needed to be told how to behave politely in social interaction – even though they are likely to be highly trained professionals and experienced managers. As such, we posit that the training guide was produced to facilitate a tightly controlled and carefully orchestrated approach to communicating the strategic message in a largely one-directional manner, which contradicts the creative and dialogic potential of narrative and visual symbolism of the two strategy texts.

Discussion

HWDL's strategic storytelling initiative is an example of strategic communication that can provide novel insights into the textual and discursive practices of auto-communicative strategy texts. It may be an unusual example in that organizational decision-makers committed significant resources to having the storytelling initiative and accompanying artefacts of cartoon landscape and training guide produced by a specialist management consultancy, giving all managers basic training in storytelling as a communication tool, and having storytelling meetings delivered to all of HWDL's 10,000 staff. Our multi-modal analysis has identified the following three mechanisms behind the dynamic interplay of narrative, visual symbolism and language used in these auto-communicative strategy texts.

Firstly, paraphrasing Christensen (1997: 199), the two texts were designed to generate collective engagement with a prospective organizational narrative and anecdotes from the organization's collective memory to rediscover, reorganize and reapply the processes and behaviours that had made HWDL successful in the past and that were expected to make them successful again. Although there is a future-oriented aspect in other strategy texts (Rindova

and Martins, 2022), we posit that in auto-communicative strategy texts use different mechanisms to engage internal audiences than external audiences. The extant research has shown that strategy texts imply elements of consensus and necessity (e.g. Vaara et al., 2010) through which stakeholders might be persuaded to lend their support. In our case, it appears to be the careful selection of anecdotes from HWDL's stock of stories and managers' collective memories in Part 2 of the training guide that seeks to engage organizational actors through reference to organizational memory and mythology (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983; Westerlund and Sjöstrand, 1979) that external audiences are unlikely to have. The first mechanism we therefore call *encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure*.

Secondly, HWDL's strategic storytelling initiative has been designed as an exercise of prospective collective sensemaking with the aim to create a brighter future for the organization. An organizational narrative spanning past, present and future and the depiction of organizational actors as collective protagonists are key features of the cartoon landscape. The traditional narrative structure of beginning, middle and end underlines the future focus as organizational actors are encouraged to resolve the organization's current problems. Moreover, since HWDL is the largest employer in an otherwise isolated area, the message that 'we are in this together' might strike a real cord with organizational actors. Such attempts at mobilizing managers and staff are understudied in the extant research with its focus on the underlying social interaction (e.g. Bencherki et al., 2021; Pälli and Lehtinen, 2013) and strategy documents generated for diverse (and mainly external) audiences (e.g. Eriksson and Lehtimäki, 2001; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011; Vaara et al., 2010). We posit that the visual and symbolic messages communicated in the cartoon landscape sought to strengthen organizational actors' emotional engagement with the organization and encourage them to join in the journey 'towards an excellent future', which may be less pertinent in externally-focused strategy texts. We therefore call the second mechanism *strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposive selection of anecdotes from the shared stock of stories*.

Thirdly, the visual symbolism in the cartoon landscape and the language used in the training guide indicate the level of discursive control that the two strategy texts were designed to exercise. For example, the way in which organizational actors were depicted in the cartoon landscape defines acceptable and unacceptable actions and behaviours, thereby seeking to shape organizational actors' future behaviours at work. The symbolic features seem to have been chosen purposively to depict behaviours that are generally regarded as unacceptable (e.g. lying idly in the sun whilst at work) and therefore may be difficult to critique or dispute by the audience (see Kornberger, 2013). Similarly, the content of the training guide indicates tight control of HWDL's strategic message and the instructive language used suggests careful orchestration of its delivery across the organization (see Cornut et al., 2012). Contrary to the traditional associations of storytelling as creative, intuitive and dialogic, our analysis indicates that the two strategy texts exercise significant discursive power. We therefore call the third mechanism *defining desired behaviours through visual symbolism and prescriptive language*.

As such, HWDL's storytelling initiative seems, at least from the managerial side, to be an example of conscious, purposive auto-communication. From a strategic communication perspective, it illustrates the delicate balance between communication symmetry and asymmetry. On the one hand, the initiative used storytelling as a tool to create engagement and conversation among co-workers about the way ahead for the company (symmetry). This method implies that decision-makers sought to protect openness, understanding and participation in making the strategy come true. On the other hand, the storytelling initiative might be interpreted more as a controlled attempt to influence and persuade the participants about what had already been decided (asymmetry) – the organization's journey 'towards an excellent future' and the desired behaviours underpinning it. There is little, if any, room for

open interpretations or divergent opinions. As such, the way in which HWDL approached strategic communication in these two strategy texts is a typical example of when the strategic focus conquers the communication focus (McNamara, 2022), and possibly when a linear transmission model of communication is disguised as a dialogic sensemaking process.

Our analysis therefore illustrates how problematic the normative division between the transmission and reciprocity models of communication is in actual strategic communication because it combines both models. HWDL's strategic initiative using storytelling, playfulness, and conversations is at one level aligned with a reciprocal model of communication, focusing on sharing and participation. But as discursive control is exercised visually in the cartoon landscape and linguistically in the training guide through prescriptive language and minute timings, the initiative is also an example of communication as transmission where decision-makers try to control the delivery of the strategic message. As such, it is an example of what Christensen and Christensen (2022) mean when they propose that there is always an element of transmission in communication, and more so in strategic communication when there is a clear intention and mission.

Conclusion

The article contributes to the current understanding of the communicative practices used in auto-communicative strategy texts. Our multi-modal analysis shows how narrative, language and visual symbolism interact to produce a strategic message that seeks to encourage organizational actors' active and collective involvement in making the strategy come true. It identifies three mechanisms by which discursive control is exercised in the two strategy texts studied: (1) encouraging action through future-focused narrative structure; (2) strengthening emotional attachment with the organization through purposeful selection of anecdotes from the shared stock of stories; and (3) defining desired behaviours through visual symbolism and prescriptive language. In this way, our analysis has highlighted the interplay between narrative and visual symbolism in generating the content and process of auto-communication that frames – and thereby constrains – the message to be communicated (e.g. Pälli et al., 2009) to organizational audiences. In contrast to Cornut et al.'s (2012) findings, there was little ambiguity and scope of multiple interpretations in HWDL's strategy texts. Additionally, it provides rare empirical evidence of auto-communication in a strategy context. The tension between a focus on engagement, sharing and openness in storytelling and the expected delivery rooted in a transmission model with discursive control being exercised at a very detailed and controlled level is particularly insightful as in practice different (and potentially competing) conceptualization of communication may be combined.

A key limitation of our analysis is that, due to the extremely hazardous nature of HWDL's operations, access to the organization is largely restricted. We were therefore unable to conduct empirical research to examine the social interactions in the production of the two strategy texts, how managers facilitated the storytelling sessions with their teams and how organizational actors responded to them. Similarly, we were unable to fully understand through the limited news coverage available to what extent the strategic change initiative led to the expected results. Such a social and situated analysis encompassing all three elements of practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Whittington, 2003) would enable a better understanding of the wider context in which the strategy texts were developed, and it is something that we encourage future research to do. Nevertheless, the unusual nature of the two strategy texts and their focus on auto-communication has provided important insights into the communicative practice used.

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Table 1: Summary of discursive and visual analysis (drawing on Jewitt, 2017: 15)

Representational mode	Construction of text	Functions
Narrative	Traditional story structure of beginning, middle / climax, end	Mapping strategic direction, providing coherence across past, present, and future
	Ascending storyline	Positive tone, implying progress and success
Visual symbolism	Colourful and playful	Generating critical dialogue around incidents depicted in cartoon landscape
	Detailed, situated imagery (e.g. organizational logos)	Situating strategy texts in organizational memory and mythology
	Common symbolism (e.g. mountain = challenge)	Strengthening strategic message
Language	Structure and timings	Explaining the rationale and storytelling approach and instructing managers to employ storytelling with team
	Anecdotes to share in storytelling meetings	Invoking shared organizational memory and mythology
	Prescriptions, commands, and suggestions regarding the delivery of the storytelling meetings	Orchestrating large-scale internal strategic communication initiative

Figure 1: Schematic representation of cartoon landscape

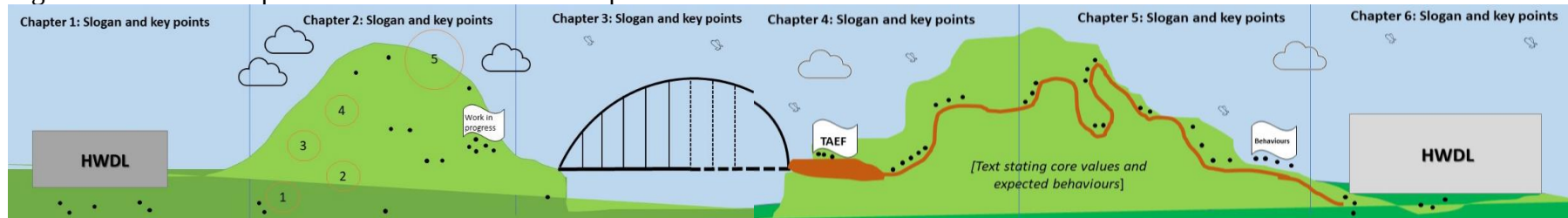


Figure 2: Schematic representation of workbook part of training guide

Chapter x – example		Chapter x – my notes	
Purpose of this chapter [Explanatory text]		Tip: Don't forget that you can also use the visual elements on our story graphic to help engage our people in the journey. As you reflect on the visual elements, make the connection back to the key messages in the chapter.	
[Picture from cartoon landscape] Suggested time: [...]		[Picture from cartoon landscape]	
1	Introduce the headline [Headline in colour used for the chapter in cartoon landscape]	1	Introduce the headline [Headline in colour used for the chapter in cartoon landscape]
2	Introduce and bring to life each of the chapter's messages [Representation of key messages] [Examples for each key message]	2	Introduce and bring to life each of the chapter's messages [Representation of key messages] My facts [space for notes]
3	Inspire your audience with a story [Story from the organization's collective memory]	3	Inspire your audience with a story [space for notes]
4	As your audience to participate in an exercise Ask your group to: [Instructions about process] Tip: Allow ten minutes for this conversation. Applaud the stories when they are shared in the room.	4	As your audience to participate in an exercise [space for notes]

Table 2: Illustrative examples of instructions (verbatim excerpts from training guide)

Four-step process	Explanation	Instructions
1. Make the story of our journey your own	‘Using the [workbook] [...], prepare how you will personalise the story of our [journey into the future] with your own illustrative stories and facts. This will help our teams to connect with our story, and understand the role they can play in making our journey a success.’	‘For each chapter think about the unique messages and stories you want to share with our people, making them relevant to their roles. You can do this in three ways: ‘<u>Personalise the key messages</u>: Talk about each chapter from the perspective of your audience. We have provided some additional messages and suggestions that you can also use to help personalise your presentation. You can also use the visual elements on the [cartoon landscape] to help you bring our journey to life. ‘<u>Illustrate the key messages with stories</u>: Using real stories will help us to engage the hearts and minds of our people; help our people connect the principles of our journey to their everyday lives; challenge and shape our people’s beliefs and behaviours; demonstrate that our people are the heroes of our journey, and that all have a part to play in its success. ‘<u>Include supporting facts</u>: Facts will support the key messages and rationally shape our people’s beliefs.’
2. Set up your story meeting	‘We’ll be working with you to determine how best to connect our people to the story through face to face meetings. [...]	‘Designing the meetings: The story meeting agenda is made of up to three steps. Each step has a clear outcome and supporting tool(s): ‘<u>A. Presenting the story of our journey</u> – outcome: I understand and believe in our journey (80mins)

		‘<u>B. The connection conversation</u> – outcome: I understand that I have a part of play in our journey (30mins) ‘<u>C. Making the story your own</u> – outcome: I understand my role in engaging others in our journey, and I have prepared my own facts and illustrative stories to help our teams understand what our journey means for them (60mins) ‘The steps can be combined in a single meeting, or run as separate meetings. [...]’ ‘All colleagues should experience Steps A and B. Only colleagues who need to bring the story to life for others will need to experience Step C.’ <i>Author comment: These instructions were followed by a page on ‘principles for planning your meetings’ and a page detailing the ‘meeting toolkit’ (including the cartoon landscape, a PowerPoint presentation, story capture sheets, documents for activities and a feedback form as well as the meeting guide and planner.</i>
‘3. Deliver your story meeting	‘Using the [cartoon landscape] to help you, present your personalised version of [our journey], bringing it to life for our teams with your own illustrative stories and facts. Using the connection tool, help our teams understand what the journey means for them, and the role that they can play. [...]’	‘Our people should leave this meeting: ‘Clearly understanding and believing in our journey and our destination [...]’ ‘Understanding what it means for them. ‘Understanding the role they can play to make a difference. ‘Excited and engaged in our journey.

		‘Don’t forget: All colleagues need to have been engaged in a story presentation and taken part in a connection conversation.’ <i>Author comment: These instructions were followed by agendas for an 80-minute story presentation (A), a 30-minute connection conversation (B) and a 60-minute making the story your own conversation that stipulated agenda items and their suggested duration.</i>
4. Keep the story alive.	‘It’s important that after the meeting we keep the messages of our journey alive. Page [...] gives examples of how you can ensure effective and ongoing dialogue about our [journey].’	‘How might you keep the story of our journey alive for your teams? Here are some suggestions: ‘Find ways of displaying the [cartoon landscape] in your work area. ‘Refer to our journey and the key messages in your meetings. As decisions are being made, test them to make sure they’re in support of our journey. ‘Ask for feedback on our journey. ‘Plan for some visible improvements or quick wins locally that will demonstrate to your team that our journey is real. ‘Find opportunities to share stories of how colleagues are making a difference to our journey. Celebrate these stories as “the way we do things around here”.’