

Communicational Capital

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Abstract

This article compiles and lists a series of studies on communicational capital, a new and vibrant subject for communication science. After examining the various meanings attributed to the term, five broad categories were proposed as a way to organize the approaches found. The text also deals with the relationship between communication and intangible assets, and between communicational capital and social capital. Although care must be taken with the polyphony (Belova et al., 2008) arising from new uses of the term, the article concludes that communicational capital is both a real advance for research on social capital and for communication science.

Keywords: communicational capital, social capital, intangible assets

Introduction

Human capital, intellectual capital, relational capital and social capital have been subjects to multiple and diverse researches. However, research on communicational capital is in its initial stages. Only recently have some researchers made headway when addressing this issue, proposing ways for its pioneering thematization and conceptualization.

Three variations to the English expression were found in the literature consulted: (a) communication capital (singular), (b) communicational capital, (c) communications capital (in the plural). For the purpose of this paper, the expression “communicational capital” is used as the common terminology for these three variations. However, since each author takes a specific look at the subject, it is necessary to get a better understanding of the concepts proposed, case by case, preferably by collecting and critically comparing them.

Approaches

It is too early to propose a single, universal structure able to define communicational capital, since the research on the topic is recent and the number of scholars dedicated to the subject matter is far from satisfactory. This research is a work in progress. However, some trends are noted in the midst of a diversity of views and concepts. At least five possible approaches to understanding communicational capital are proposed. It is important to note that some of them have been favored by most authors, while others are treated as occasional and brief.

- **Accounting Approach:** communication is seen as an asset and, it being a tangible (e.g. radios and towers) or intangible asset (e.g. processes and relationships), someone must assign a price or value to it, which must be recorded on the balance sheet.
- **Marketing Approach:** communication is considered a tool (or toolbox) for strategic thinking, as a gear in market logic and included here are branding, advertising, public relations, and press relations.
- **Managerial Approach:** communication is seen as a manageable, organizational resource, ready to be used for improving personnel, products, services, and processes, always with business value and the best interest of the stakeholders in mind.
- **Symbolic Approach:** communication is, first, a flux of symbols and negotiation of meanings, a key issue to situate people vis-à-vis others (as to political, economic, social aspects etc.).
- **Relational Approach:** communication is understood as the channel through which people establish and develop relations between themselves, a way to harmonize interests, coordinate actions, and, consequently, obtain respect and become reliable.

In the accounting approach, communication is only another line on a balance sheet, and much of the discussion is precisely the definition of methodologies for understanding communication phenomena and actions in numbers. What is this action or that communication project worth in local currency? Accountants and financiers are usually straightforward when precise figures are needed because complete and reliable financial statements are the basis of guidance for investors and shareholders.

The marketing approach is linked with the instrumentalization of practices and procedures, looking for ways in which communication will be realized in planned activities and measurable in its effects. Through a broad management perspective, marketing is to communication what engineering is to production.

The managerial approach is broader than that of the marketing approach, as the area of marketing is only one component of that institution. The managerial approach sees communication as being on the same level of production, finance, sales, etc, with each area and sector contributing to the generation of value and increase in profit.

In the symbolic approach, the social aspect can be seen as a consequence of language usage, and the emphasis has been, some would say, on the politics and economy of those symbolic practices. Here, communication can be understood as the locus and medium of itself, from which everything is defined.

The relational approach deals primarily with issues of socialization and interaction, with communication being the medium and locus of interactions. Emphasis is put less on the linguistic or symbolic system (as in the symbolic approach) and more on the network of personal contacts.

When capital is combined with communication, this points out the financial-accounting- economic-marketing aspects of the object: communicational capital will always have a sphere of “value” associated with it. The questions to ask are: what kind of value, how to represent the value, value for whom, what amount of value, and what is the sense and direction of the value (positive or negative, upward or downward)?

Table 1. Communicational Capital Approaches

| Approach | Communication is | Capital is | Value Expression |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Accounting | a priceable asset | in the budget | price, quantity and profit |
| Marketing | a strategic tool or toolbox | in the market | sales and marketshare |
| Managerial | a manageable resource | in the organization | efficiency and productivity |
| Symbolic | symbols and meanings | in the language | convergence and understanding |
| Relational | social bonds and bridges | in the people | engagement and cooperation |

Thus, as much as communication assumes a position of a market good or service, the same holds true as capital assumes a position of a communicational sign or symbol. In this paper, communication is addressed as an asset and as a resource, priceable and manageable. Capital is addressed from a subjective and human point of view, re-adjustable and open for debate. The first focus is on the sign-symbolic-value-inter-subjective aspects of the subject.

Intangible Capital

There is a wide range of technical literature on intangible assets, a topic that has interested researchers, administrators, economists, accountants, etc. Intangible assets do not have a physical representation (such as equipment, property, industrial buildings), but still generate and aggregate market value – to the institution, the institution's business and/or persons related to it. In the words of França (2008): “Intangible assets are classified into four basic categories: environmental, structural, relational and intellectual. These topics include such factors as technology, innovation, design, patents, communication, and reputation” (p. 22).

There has been an effort to classify, measure and quantify the impact of intangible assets vis-à-vis tangible assets for institutions: since 1998 the UK has adopted an accounting treatment for the capitalization of intangibles, the U.S. have been doing this since 2001, and Brazil was about to pass legislation in this regard in 2008 (Nunes, 2008). Also, the BNDES (Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (National Bank for Social-Economic Development) has developed in partnership with UFRJ (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), a method of analysis for granting credit to specific intangible assets. One of the technicians of the BNDES, Fingerl, wrote (2004, p. 28-29):

Careful research and consultation work (...) considers the existence of the 12 most important intangibles: 1) Leadership, 2) Strategy, 3) Communications, 4) Brand; 5) Reputation; 6) Networking and Partnerships; 7) Technology; 8) Human Capital; 9) Organizational Culture; 10) Innovation; 11) Intellectual Capital; and 12) Adaptability (Free translation from Portuguese).

Malmelin (2007) supported the understanding of communication as an organizational intangible asset, and goes further - proposing it as communicational capital. Gaines-Ross (2001) stated that communicational capital is responsible for transforming the intangible assets in market leadership; it shall therefore consider, evaluate, prepare, and communicate them. Finally, Luoma-Aho (2005) saw communicational capital as one of the various forms of intangible assets introduced by the neo-capitalist theories.

What interests the writers of this paper, first, is to highlight the presence and importance of communication as an intangible asset and, second, to show the search for capitalization of intangibles in general and the capitalization of communication in particular. The capitalization of communication results in being the source and synonym of communicational capital. Thus, communication assets compose communicational capital, and this helps to compose the intangibles that reflect on organizational value and businesses.

Communicational Capital

Thurlow (2001, 2003, 2005) and Jeffres (2007a, 2007b) address communicational capital from a symbolic point of view. Thurlow seems to mention the expression incidentally, because his research is mainly devoted to the language of adolescents. He applies the expression without profound meaning and seems to understand communicational capital as a skill and power necessary for young people to deal with a highly semioticized (Thurlow & Marwick, 2005) contemporary reality, especially in its interactions with adults.

Jeffres (2007b) goes further, even considering the importance of symbolic communicational capital, the author is more concerned with its ability to induce civil mobilization among people. For him, civically connecting people and facilitating the solution of community problems seems to be at the same time cause and consequence of communicational capital. His concept of communicational capital includes four dimensions (Jeffres, 2007b, p. 8):

1. Interpersonal discussion of social problems and programs across contexts that include family and friends, the workplace, the neighborhood and community;
2. Discussion of social problems and programs in the non-work organizational context;
3. Attention to public issues and business in the media; and
4. Surveillance uses of the media.

At the other extreme, the cities of San Jose and Tompkins, respectively in the states of California and New York, in the United States, use the term communicational capital in a non-symbolic way. In both cases, they understand the term communicational capital as investment in towers and equipment, such as the purchase of mobile radios and data systems (see bibliography). It does not seem to be wrong to view this as an accounting approach, as it assigns numerical values to prices and quantities of goods, presented in a kind of project or program.

Two other institutions, the House of Representatives (2005) and the National Communication Association (2007), also have a peculiar view on communicational capital. For them, communities with a stock of communicational capital are more connected, comfortable and secure; communities that are, in short, resilient. The House of Representatives defines a resilient community as one prone to develop a compassionate, empathic, respectful, and communicative climate.

Ortiz (2006) and Berthon (1996) approach communicational capital in terms of marketing. For both, communicational capital is summarily treated as marketing investment. Still in the marketing approach, Gabriela and Marcel (2007) present the “brand” and the organizational identity-culture as components of communicational capital to create and consolidate the image; and Murphet (2006) attributes the American media with the ability to rule and manage collective fantasies, which is its communicational capital. Murphet is at the intersection of marketing (media relations), managerial, and symbolic approaches.

In a confluence of relational and managerial approaches, Mulholland (2005) focuses on spoken face-to-face interactions, proposing to rename "talk at work" (p. 5) as communicational capital. For her, even the briefest interpersonal conversation may have relevance to the business. Accordingly, Aggestam (2006) emphasizes who said what to whom, how, when, why and with what effects. The point is what the organizational actors say and do together.

Aggestam also highlights two other characteristics of communicational capital: the fact that it is a social process that can be seen through a network bias and the fact that it is an essential element of corporate responsibility for the creation and leverage of knowledge and know-how (and of other intangible assets as well). Csepeli and Csere (2004) argue that communicational capital can be measured by standards of social network. Similarly, Smith (2001) seems to see communicational capital as interactional capital, and Coutant (2007) combines it with the interactive skills.

There is a fine line in the transition from the relational approach to the managerial approach, and from the latter to the accounting approach. This line is more subtle in how interactional aspects are coupled with the managerial issues, and less subtle in how to translate managerial processes into concrete results. For example, while Levinson (2005) defines communication as information flows that improve the organizational capacity to learn and innovate, Donath-Burson-Marsteller (2003) want to know what results communicational capital will bring for business. The communicational capital model of Hartman and Lenk (2001) also searches for an effective-efficient use of resources (including people) to achieve the desired results.

Furthermore, Malmelin (2007) offers an enlightening passage on the subject when he presents the components of his communicational capital model. He leads one to consider another approach (the sixth), the communicational approach, where he works with both internal and external communication, and with the physical and relational aspects as well as communicative competence.

Communication capital is understood here broadly as an asset and resource for the whole organization. The model of communication capital includes both internal communications within the organization and communications with stakeholders and other groups outside the organization. In addition to the physical assets of communications, communication capital comprises communication systems, communication competencies and relations. These include both inter-organizational interactions and relations with stakeholders outside the organization. (Malmelin, 2007, p. 301)

Silván (1999) makes an interesting reading of communicational capital; at the same time relating both to relational and symbolic approaches. Referring to an author named Smith; there are three types of "collective goods" to approach virtual communities: social network capital, knowledge capital, and communicational capital - the latter defined as "psychological / spiritual support from people who share common joys and trials" (p. 28). It is remarkable that an author specifically binds psychological and spiritual aspects to communicational capital, characteristics more attuned to symbolic approach.

Table 2. Communicational Capital Definitions and Keywords

| Author | Definition | Keywords |
|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| San Jose/Tompkins | investment in towers and equipment, such as mobile radios and data systems | towers and equipment |
| Malmelin 1 | physical assets of communications | physical assets |
| Hytönen | communicational structures, occupational/communicational competence, and organizational culture | structures, competence and culture |
| Malmelin 2 | communication systems, communication competencies and relations | systems, competencies and relations |
| Gabriela/Marcel | brand and organizational identity-culture to create and consolidate the image | identity, culture and image |
| Malmelin 3 | documented information; the organization's culture and management systems | information, culture and systems |
| Smith/Coutant | interactional capital, interactive skills | interaction |
| Mulholland | spoken face-to-face interactions | to talk |
| Thurlow | skill and power necessary to deal with a complex contemporary reality | skill and power |
| House of Representatives/NCA | compassionate, empathic, respectful and communicative climate | community resilience |
| Aggestam | creation and leverage of knowledge and know-how | knowledge and know-how |
| Csepeli/Csere | can be measured by standards of social network | social network |
| Murphet | ability to rule and manage the collective fantasies | collective fantasies |
| Jeffres | connecting people and facilitating the solution of community problems | connection and community |
| Silván | psychological/spiritual support from people who share common joys and trials | support and share |

Communicational capital can then be defined as the following: a conjunction of assets/structures/systems that in contributing to the institution and promotion of identity/image/culture, create an environment of sharing and mutual support where information/relationships/conversations are generated in a way that develops competencies and knowledge of the collective /community/social character, where the final objective is the creation of value for all stakeholders. In summary, it is the material and symbolic bases to generate value through participatory and interactive social processes, with such processes being manageable.

Dimensions

The integrated model of communication capital of Hytönen (2005) has the following dimensions: social and technical communicational structures, occupational and communicational competence, and organizational culture. For Gaines-Ross (2001) communicational capital is seen as the fifth dimension in a scheme with four other dimensions: market capital, human capital, structural capital and relational capital.

Finally, for Malmelin (2007) communicational capital consists of four factors or dimensions: juridical capital, organizational capital, human capital and relational capital. In his words (Malmelin, 2007):

An organization's communication capital thus consists of juridical assets and assets containing documented information; the organization's culture and management systems; the skills and competencies of the people working in the company; and the organization's relations with customers and stakeholders. (p. 302)

It is worthwhile observing how the different dimensions attributed to communicational capital converge or not, depends on the authors. In general, there is a link between the different types of capitals: market, human, structural, relational, juridical, organizational, social, intellectual, and communicational. For example, there are authors who relate communicational capital with intellectual capital (Hartman and Lenk, Keenan), and those who relate it with social capital (Mulholland, Malmelin). Keenan (2000) argues that intellectual capital includes three sets of assets: core capitals, communicational capitals, and social capital.

Social Capital

Hartman and Lenk (2001) argue that communication can enhance the social capital and achievement of business goals, communication being (an intangible asset) the contributor to social capital (another intangible asset). But according to these authors, the modeling of strategic communicational capital would be viable by the conjunction of social capital literature and management quality.

Mulholland (2005) also proposes combining the study of communication with social capital in order to understand how people (employees) contribute to organizations. Here it is the theory and practice of social capital showing how communication can act as an asset to business: it is the social capital used as a platform for the analysis of business communication. For her, interpersonal conversation is as much a relevant activity to the business as it is a part of the organizational social capital, and "talk at work" (p. 5) could be renamed as communicational capital.

Jeffres et al. (2007b) examine the role of communication in the development of social capital: interpersonal communication is seen as the (internal) component of capital, and mediated communication is seen as the (external) factor that affects social capital. As they are interested in engagement and civic action, the authors have proposed to integrate research in communication, social capital and civic engagement in order to define communicational capital as "communication patterns that facilitate social problem solving in the community" (p. 7). In principle, any pattern of communication would be a candidate for social capital, and all forms of communication able to connect people to the solution of social problems would be relevant.

For Keenan (2000), organizations are communicative systems of relationships. For him, social capital is attached to the organizational actors' capacity of leveraging knowledge and know-how in order to create and add value for stakeholders. The various organizational actors are immersed and involved in communities of knowledge-feeling, and these communities would be the product and producers of the communicational capital in organizations.

Luoma-Aho (2005) quotes Lehtonen who proposes that communication can be seen as the catalyst that makes intangible capital productive, and defines communicational capital as "such knowledge on the part

of citizens, such communication structures, and such a communication climate that together support civil dialogue between citizens, various organizations and the officials” (p. 135). And ends quoting Lin: "social capital is understood to include communicational capital” (p. 136). The author’s thoughts seem to have been based on Viherä and Viukari (2003), for whom the skills and inclination to participate in public affairs (a form of intangible capital necessary to enable social dialogue) can be called communicational capital. Also for these authors, social capital in society is always equal to communicational capital.

Conclusion

First, it is important to highlight the not yet fully defined character of the expression “communicational capital.” In the words of Aggestam (2006), the expression can have multiple meanings depending on the social-economic context and environmental shocks. This author sees communicational capital as an umbrella concept, expanding to include 'new' and 'old' sets of skills and knowledge. Malmelin (2007) also considers the terminology confusing and sees little difference in meaning between the concepts of knowledge capital, human capital, intellectual capital, social capital, and why not say communicational capital as well.

Second, it is important to stress the theoretical and practical effort already put in place to account for the phenomenon. From the theoretical point of view, interdisciplinarity is reflected in the proposed joint-combined-integration of various research and studies (see the section on social capital). On the practical side, the phenomenon's locus is found mostly at the organizational environment level (but not exclusively), specifically in profit driven companies. Locate the communicational capital in a market environment, and it functions as a double cornerstone: one can observe and study the phenomenon in real action (not theoretical), and, under management rules it usually results in efficient use and effective results (practice translated into numbers).

Third, in addition to the features generally associated with capital (resources, quantifiers, targets, results) and communication (information, flow, conversation, debate), there exists an optional but welcome correlation between communicational capital and social capital. It was precisely this movement that empowered the communicators as people (not only people as communicators) and communities to regard their aspects of humanity (not only those of assets and capital). Confidence, imagination, and "psychological / spiritual support" are at the very basis for collective mobilization-engagement-action, as much as the managerial calculation and entrepreneurial pursuit of profit.

Finally, keeping in mind all of the definitions and co-relations presented for the concept of communicational capital, it is possible to defend it as a promising subject and field of research to communication and managerial sciences, particularly if the advanced stage of research on business communication is considered.

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