Integrated internal communications: a multidisciplinary perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This article's purpose is to explore the multidisciplinary nature of internal communications, and argue that an integrated approach to internal communications is beneficial when assessing knowledge sharing in organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – This article presents a review of relevant current literature, and explores the issue through qualitative interview data from a world-leading multinational companies (MNC).

Findings – The empirical data provide support for the integrated view, and also enhance our understanding of knowledge sharing as an important and strategic function of integrated internal communications.

Originality/value – The integrated perspective here contributes to the understanding of internal communications in two ways. First, it draws from the domains of business, management, corporate, and organisational communication, which together incorporate both practical and theoretical knowledge. Second, it includes all formal and informal communication that take place inside an organisation.

Keywords Communication systems, Knowledge sharing, Multinational companies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Internal communications has an important role in organisations given the evidence that companies with effective communications strategies are usually successful, while others tend to fall short of optimal performance (Argenti and Forman, 2002; Tourish and Hargie, 2004a). However, simultaneously, an imbalance exists between the perceived importance of communications and the actual attention and resources given toward it (Argenti and Forman, 2002; Tourish and Hargie, 2004b). Furthermore, Oliver (1997) points out that communications are rarely recognised as a required principal competency. Therefore, a paradox exists because, although increasing awareness concerning the importance of communications to organisations exists, that knowledge appears to have rarely translated into practice.

It is proposed in this article that an integrated view to internal communications is advantageous if the benefits of internal knowledge sharing want to be fully enjoyed. Here, integrated internal communications are seen as being composed of all the academic disciplines or domains that Miller (1996) identifies as meeting at the cross-section between communication and organisational life, i.e. business, organisational, management, and corporate communication. Furthermore, integrated internal communications are not limited to the formal tasks performed by the corporate communication function; instead all formal and informal communication taking place inside an organisation is included.

The goal of this article, then, is twofold. The first goal is to understand the complex and multidisciplinary nature of integrated internal communications, which is challenging due to the multiplicity of inconsistently-used terms and sometimes too tightly defined boundaries (e.g. Shelby, 1993; Reinsch, 1996). The second goal is to comprehend the strategic impact of internal communications by assessing how integrated internal communications manifests itself within the multinational company (MNC) context and how that in turn enhances knowledge sharing. Evaluating the knowledge sharing function of internal communications is important as many notable scholars stress that the ability to effectively share knowledge internally is fundamental for maintaining a competitive advantage (Doz *et al.*, 2001; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1993; Spender, 1996).

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. First, the complex nature of communication(s) is explored by looking at different definitions and discussing certain key features. Second, the multidisciplinary approach to integrated internal communications is discussed, drawing from the domains of business, organisational, management, and corporate communication. Third, the methodology is described. Fourth, empirical findings from 12 qualitative interviews, conducted at a world-leading multinational high-tech company, are presented. Fifth and last, the central findings and most important contributions of this article are highlighted.

Complex nature of communication(s)

The nature and role of communications are rarely the focus of research or discussion because they are taken to be self-explanatory (e.g. Tourish and Hargie, 2004b). However, the role of communication within organisations is far from clear, and the large array of academic terms in usage has made it difficult to establish "common cognitive ground" (a term introduced by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 14)). After all, who are "us, communications professionals" – a term one often hears being used in academia and business?

Defining communication(s)

There are various interpretations of the term communication(s), while everyone recognises it, few can define it satisfactorily (Fiske, 1990). At its simplest, the definition for communication is social interaction through messages (Fiske, 1990; see also Bovée and Thill, 2000; Tourish and Hargie, 2004b). On the other hand, Oliver (1997, p. 64) provides a more comprehensive definition of communication as "an interchange of ideas, facts and emotions, by two or more persons, with the use of words, letters and symbols based on the technical problem of how accurately the symbols can be transmitted, the semantic problem of how, precisely, the symbols convey the desired meaning, and the effectiveness of how the received meaning affects conduct in the desired way". In order to understand better the nature of communication(s) and the definition chosen for internal communications within this article, certain key issues will now be explored.

Effective communication. Some authors distinguish between communication and effective communication (e.g. Bovée and Thill, 2000); whereas others take communication to always refer to effective communication (e.g. Oliver, 1997; Spence, 1994). For example, Bovée and Thill (2000, p. 4) believe that effective communication only takes place when participants "achieve a shared understanding, stimulate others

to take actions, and encourage people to think in new ways". On the other hand, Spence (1994) argues that communication is always a persuasive two-way process, where the sender usually has an intention of influencing the receiver; while others (e.g. Eisenberg and Goodall, 2004) are less adamant and view communication as a goal-oriented process only in certain situations. Furthermore, Spence also contends that for communication to be effective, a message must be received and understood, and only then can it produce resultant action. Therefore, communication is not a neutral process of information transfer (Mumby and Stohl, 1996), and elements of a persuasive process exist (e.g. Spence, 1994; Oliver, 1997). However, here, effective communication will be defined as an interactive two-way communication process resulting in an action or decision (even if it is not the intended action or decision); effective communication can be distinguished from communication (two-way exchange of messages without action), and informing (one-way sending of messages).

Internal communication(s). Internal communication(s) can be defined in many different ways. For example, Bovée and Thill (2000, p. 7) define internal communication as "the exchange of information and ideas within an organization". Argenti (2003, p. 128), however, contends that "[i]nternal communication is, in essence, about creating an atmosphere of respect for all employees within the organisation. Communication from management should come directly from one manager to the next, and from supervisor to employee, but as companies grow larger and more complex, this often becomes more difficult – hence the need for the internal communication function".

In this article, however, internal communications is defined as integrated internal communications, i.e. all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organisation. This definition is new, and it may be necessary to explain the choice of the plural over the singular form. Although there does not appear to be any established and consistent usage of the terms across the field, Spence (1994, p. 86) argues that "[w]hile interpretations of the terms can vary slightly the most widespread practice is to consider *communication* (in the singular) as being the social process which ordinarily operates when personal interaction takes place. *Communications* (plural) is used more specifically to indicate the channels and the technological means by which this process may be facilitated". Argenti and Forman (2002), on the other hand, distinguish corporate communication from corporate communications by the former being the process and the latter the products of communication, e.g. memos, web sites, and e-mails. In this article, the term internal communications is used in the plural because the goal is to capture all the communication processes that simultaneously take place inside an organisation.

The multidisciplinary approach

One of the goals of this article is to produce a multidisciplinary[1] look at internal communications in the light of business, management, corporate, and organisational communication. These particular domains of communication[2] were chosen because they are at the crossroads between communication and organisational life (Miller, 1996). Each of the four communication domains have certain unique features, and hence bring different perspectives to the study of internal communications. At the same time, each may be argued to display features of both practical and theoretical knowledge, have some areas that focus on dyads and others focusing on larger groups, and also include functions of both internal and external communications (e.g. Argenti, 1996; Mumby and Stohl, 1996; Reinsch, 1996; Shelby, 1993, 1996; Smeltzer, 1996).

Review of the four communication domains
The four domains of communication will be discussed separately in the following sections, but no clear-cut boundaries exist between them (Eisenberg, 1996; Reardon, 1996; Rogers, 2001). The focus here is to understand how each domain has been defined and how it contributes to the study of internal communications; not to carry out an exhaustive study of all features, nor to participate in the debate on where the exact boundaries between these domains lie (for that, see, e.g. Shelby, 1993). However, it would perhaps be fair to say that in the context of integrated internal communications, business communication addresses the communication skills of all employees, management communication focuses on the development of the managers' communication skills and capabilities, corporate communication focuses on the formal corporate communication function, and organisational communication addresses more philosophically and theoretically oriented issues.

Business communication. Reinsch (1996, p. 28) defines business communication as "the scholarly study of the use, adaptation, and creation of languages, symbols, and signs to conduct activities that satisfy human needs and wants by providing goods and services for private profit". Reinsch continues by calling business communication a practical-science because he believes that neither an ivory-tower approach (knowing-why without knowing-how) or a trade-school approach (knowing-how without knowing-why) is sufficient, and hence both knowing-why and knowing-how elements should be and are present in business communication. However, many books with the term business communication in the title tend to mostly address specific skills like letter writing over more theoretically focused issues (see, e.g. Ober, 2003; Quible *et al.*, 1996; Bovée and Thill, 2000).

Management communication. According to Smeltzer (1996, pp. 22-3), the unifying goal of management communication is "to develop and disseminate knowledge that increases effectiveness and efficiency of managers functioning in contemporary business environments". Therefore, the focus may be argued to be the development of the knowledge sharing skills of managers. Communication as a key managerial competence is important because a large part of a manager's time is spent on communicating, and his/her communication effectiveness can also impact subordinates job satisfaction (Oliver, 1997). There is a strong focus on skill development. Skills include business letter writing, oral presentations, use of graphic aids, and listening, with a tendency to find prescriptive solutions for managers (Bell and Smith, 1999; Hattersley and McJannet, 1997; Smeltzer, 1996).

Corporate communication. Argenti and Forman (2002, p. 4) define corporate communication as "the corporation's voice and the images it projects of itself on a world stage populated by its various audiences, or what we refer to as constituencies". Oliver (1997) believes that corporate communication can be seen as an umbrella term consisting of all the various internal and external organisational communication functions[3]. Given that the same methods and tactics can be used in both internal and external communications, it makes sense to call internal communications (in plural) employee relations, which makes it comparable to public relations in terms of the terminology (Oliver, 1997). However, the interest in corporate communication from the perspective of this article is on the official internal communications function, which emphasises formal communication performed by communication professionals.

Organisational communication. Miller (2003, p. 1) states that organisational communication "involves understanding how the context of the organization influences communication processes and how the symbolic nature of communication differentiates it from other forms of organizational behaviour". Tourish and Hargie (2004b, p. 10) take a slightly different view of "how people ascribe meanings to messages, verbal and nonverbal communication, communication skills, the effectiveness of communication in organizations, and how meanings are distorted or changed while people exchange messages, in both formal and informal networks". This latter view comes closest to the definition for integrated internal communications adopted in this article, but is not consistent with the previous definition due to its inclusion of less theory-driven elements like communication skills. This domain contributes to integrated internal communications by giving it a context (Miller, 2003; Mumby and Stohl, 1996), which may in part be explained by organisational communication being equally strongly positioned in the fields of organisational studies and communication studies (Jablin *et al.*, 1987; Tourish and Hargie, 2004b).

Integrated internal communications
Figure 1 attempts to visualise the multidisciplinary nature of integrated internal communications, highlighting that internal communications draws from the theoretical and practical knowledge of all four communication domains discussed in this article. This is meant as a conceptual framework for describing how integrated internal communications is understood in this article, and not as a guide to what the relative importance of each domain is (hence the size of all the domains is the same), or what the exact relationships are between the domains (hence the order and placement of the domains is not highly significant). The fact that all four domains of communication have both an internal and external communications side also has to be underlined, while emphasising that the focus here is on the internal functions (hence certain areas of each domain fall outside the sphere of integrated internal communications).

The main argument here has been that if an integrated view to internal communications is adopted, then it has to be recognised that both theoretical and
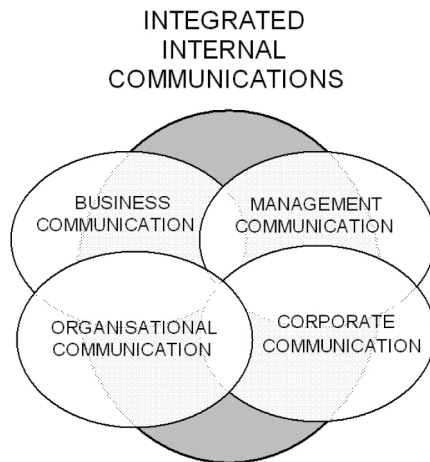
Figure 1.
Conceptual framework of integrated internal communications

practical components guide the actions of corporate communication experts, managers, and all employees in their formal and informal communication tasks. This view is important because it helps us understand that employees receive information from various sources, and the balance has to be right for them, i.e. a balance has not been achieved if one aspect works well (e.g. corporate communication) while another (e.g. management communication) is failing the employees' expectations. This integrated view also implies that it may be possible to create common cognitive ground among academics and practitioners interested in the multidisciplinary topic of internal communications. Finally, this holistic view also has important implications for understanding knowledge sharing in the organisational context, which will be explored after the methodological approach has been described.

Methodology
The methodology appropriate for this study was deemed to be thematic qualitative interviews, which are part of a more extensive, multi-phase case study being conducted at a world-leading, high-tech, MNC. This particular case company was selected because it provided an appropriate real-life context where the contemporary phenomenon of integrated internal communications could be studied (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, due to the researcher's previous work experience at the case company, access to people and sensitive information not in the public domain was made easier. Gummesson (1991) and Johns (2001) argue that different roles played by the researcher within the research process can produce sound contextualisation of the research phenomenon. Hence, the observational material, together with the interviews, forms an important part of the data.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted in 2002, with a focus on communication practices and organisational social capital. Knowledge sharing was not one of the themes to be discussed explicitly but the theme emerged throughout the discussions, hence it has been raised in this article. There was a bias towards Finnish interviewees, but the sample was representative of senior managers within the studied functions. Interviews were conducted in English and Finnish, and verbatim quotations in Finnish have been translated into English by the author. Due to confidentiality concerns, the company and individual identities have been made anonymous. Since the sample size is small, interviewees are only identified by a number (in parentheses after each quotation); this approach avoids recognition but makes the data more transparent to the reader. Table I summarises the interviewee information.

Focus area	Communication practices and social capital
Industry	High-tech
Type of organisation	MNC
Number of interviews	12
Functional background of interviewees	Corporate communication, human resources
Management level	Senior managers
Geographic location of interviewees (number)	Finland (9), UK (3)
Nationality of interviewees (number)	British (2), Finnish (9), Swedish (1)
Gender of interviewees (number)	Male (7), Female (5)

Table I.
Interviewee information

Each interview was recorded and lasted about an hour, following which it was transcribed. The interviews were analysed according to Dey's (1993) "Circular Process" for qualitative analysis, which consists of three different stages: describing, classifying, and connecting. Dey (1993, p. 30) himself explains that, "[d]escription lays the basis for analysis, but analysis also lays the basis for further description". This is a process that happens over and over again in a spiral-like shape. The emphasis is on description, and then on splicing and splitting the data in order to form new and more comprehensive categories gathered under a common theme. The results are presented in the following section.

Findings

The findings section has been divided into two sections. The first addresses the nature of integrated internal communications within the MNC context, and the second views knowledge sharing as a function of integrated internal communications.

Nature of integrated internal communications within MNCs

Given that integrated internal communications has been presented as a multidisciplinary phenomenon occurring at many levels of an organisation, the interview data will be discussed under the subheadings of multidisciplinary and multilevel.

Multidisciplinary. Internal communications is traditionally seen purely as a function of corporate communication. As such, it typically emphasises such business communication skills as writing, creation of internal announcements and newsletters, and the publication of the web content (Ober, 2003; Quible *et al.*, 1996; Bovée and Thill, 2000). Traditionally, those are the skills that have been stressed within the corporate communication function, although they do not necessarily fulfil the requirements for effective communication, as illustrated in the following two quotations:

> Informing about company matters is probably what we do best . . . CEO's quartile letters to the whole staff and communication packages about quartile results to managers are important steps and fill largely the informing function (9).

> [. . .] getting our messages to result in changes in behaviour and other things is something we can probably improve on because the current communication probably comes mostly to the intellectual side (10).

However, in the increasingly complex business world communication skills alone are no longer sufficient when an overall understanding of organisational life as a whole is required (Argenti and Forman, 2002). Hence, professionals working in that area have needed to develop a much more diverse set of skills and a broader knowledge base. It may be that as a result there has been a greater need to understand the underlying strategic issues, and perhaps those topics emphasised in the organisational communication literature. The following quotations sum up well the current situation:

> I came from the position that we really have to redefine what role Communications [function] plays in the company. Not a passive infrastructure management role but a much more influential role in culture and environment of the company (1).

> [. . .] our operational environment and the business is becoming more complicated all the time and hence it is becoming more and more challenging for people to know where the whole business is going and what [this company] does. . . . Internal Communications [function] could be a catalyst in saying that our people want a clearer direction and vision . . . (9).

Multilevel. The second part of integrated internal communications is its all-encompassing nature, manifesting itself at multiple levels of the organisation. However, although the multilevel nature is discussed separately from the multidisciplinary nature, the two are closely linked. Management communication is a good example of this overlap. On the one hand, management communication is an important domain of internal communications, hence contributing to the multidisciplinary discussion. On the other hand, management communication addresses the need for multilevel communication, whereby managers act as bridges linking the different levels. The current situation is such that people are the most frequent source of information for managers (Cross *et al.*, 2001), and employees find face-to-face communication invaluable in the technology-driven world (Hargie and Tourish, 2002; Nohria and Eccles, 1992; O'Kane *et al.*, 2002). Hence, due to the sheer size of the globally dispersed operations, it is not possible for the corporate communication function alone to provide effective communication for the whole organisation, especially in the face-to-face format. Therefore, managers become critical in bridging the different layers, as suggested in the following quotations:

> [...] management communication is a stumbling stone. I am certain that people want more face-to-face than more e-mails or intranet sites, people want an opportunity to ask and get information at a level that is relevant for them specifically (9).

> Now we have this much more flat and virtual set-up, and I understand from a lot of people that they don't understand the same sense of identity and clarity (4).

At the same time, communication is the responsibility and right of everyone within an organisation. Dess and Picken (2000, p. 18) argue that "to compete in the information age, firms must increasingly rely on the knowledge, skills, experience, and judgement of *all* their people". Remarks by interviewees provide support for the integrated view by stating that the boundaries between communications and other functions are no longer so clear, while also emphasising that much of internal communications takes place outside the corporate communication function:

> [...] there is increasingly interaction, where I don't see any sort of barriers. It does not matter who gets involved, there is very little worry about who is in a Communication, HR or Line Management function ... (12).

> Ninety-nine percent of internal communications is something other than what the Internal Communications department does, i.e. superior-subordinate communication, communication in meetings, or informal knowledge sharing, e-mail. The majority of it takes place outside formal channels, e.g. e-mail, phone, PowerPoint, meetings, etc. (2).

While communication is an inevitable part of organisations at all levels (Tourish and Hargie, 2004b), employees too often see it as belonging to corporate communication; and may not necessarily associate it as also being an integral part of their own everyday working lives. As highlighted in the following quotation, it is important for employees to be receptive to information and even look for it actively by themselves:

> It is not enough that we are open and share information, because people have to also be interested ... I come across situations all the time where people don't know that the information is on the web, and even if they do, they won't still go and look at it actively and out of their own initiative (5).

In summary, if we view internal communications through the integrated lens, it can be seen to manifest itself both as a multidisciplinary and a multilevel phenomenon. This then implies that in order for organisations to communicate effectively, they need to view internal communications as strategic rather than as skill-oriented, and also include managers and employees at all levels to ensure the delivery of important messages. This change, however, cannot occur unless employees understand that communication is as a core competence for everyone – not a competence required by corporate communication alone.

Knowledge sharing as a function of integrated internal communications

Knowledge sharing and related concepts are a relatively new phenomenon to be discussed in the field of communication (most specifically, Monge and Contractor, 2003; Kalla, 2003; *Management Communication Quarterly*, 2002; Zorn and Taylor, 2004). Here, knowledge sharing is understood as the formal and informal exchanges through ongoing social interaction, which mobilise knowledge that is dispersed around the organisation (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2004). Two themes relevant for knowledge sharing emerged from the data; one addressing efficiency, and the other, motivation and security.

Efficiency. One of the reasons knowledge sharing provides such an important focus for internal communications is that the ability to effectively share knowledge internally is fundamental for maintaining a competitive advantage (Doz *et al.*, 2001; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1993; Spender, 1996). The following quotations highlight the importance of communication and knowledge sharing as strategic aspects of company operations:

> Internal interaction and sharing of knowledge have a direct impact on how efficiently a firm can act and direct its activities, and change its functioning. And here results speak for themselves. A firm that in difficult conditions can react to changing markets, a firm that can change the geographical and technological focus of its business, can produce the kind of results that we can, then internal communications can't be on a completely shaky ground. I think it is directly comparable to the efficiency of our activities (2).

> The role of internal communications is to share results and other information, but the transfer of knowledge and information, as well as the openness of internal communications, may play a more important role in people's day-to-day work than in the goals or functions of our official internal communications (8).

Several authors argue that an important part of knowledge sharing is the existence of formal and informal networks because they facilitate the knowledge sharing process (e.g. Abrams *et al.*, 2003; Borgatti and Cross, 2003; Cross *et al.*, 2001). The first of the following two quotations emphasises the need to use such networks, so that people can connect directly with experts, and hence enhance the effectiveness of knowledge sharing. Meanwhile, the second quotation highlights the importance of balancing technology-mediated communications with face-to-face communications in order to facilitate social interaction and knowledge sharing:

> What is part of our culture is that people talk to those who have the best expertise, and things don't need to go through the command route (10).

> So the trick then is, how you stay effective by having enough face-to-face meetings while utilising this technology fully, so that you get some social interaction through these people.

> We form a social group, someone starts suddenly sending me all this information I wouldn't otherwise have and we build trust at the same time (12).

Simultaneously, although internal communications can enhance knowledge sharing, more is not necessarily better. According to Zorn and Taylor (2004) one of the reasons knowledge management has become an important topic of discussion in recent years is the explosion in the available information, and the subsequent information overload. If there is so much information available that it leads to an inability to act, then that is clearly undesirable, as the following quotation highlights:

> We cannot share everything with everyone, and that is not our goal either. Information flood leads to information overload, i.e. you may get so many e-mails that you cannot take care of things or even prioritise them (2).

Security and motivation. The second aspect of knowledge sharing is that it appears to increase employees' feeling of security. The current business environment is such that the workforce is under increasing pressure, which has resulted in increasing fatigue and stress being observable (e.g. Eisenberg and Goodall, 2004). Creating a feeling of security and motivating employees is especially important in times when job insecurity and downsizing have resulted in increased uncertainty and decreased levels of trust (Tourish and Hargie, 2004c). The following quotations show that motivation and security are relevant issues for communications, and involve the sharing of a different type of knowledge:

> [...] communication is so important because people who stay [after layoffs] should not get scared but should be ready to enthusiastically implement new strategy. The challenge is how to communicate negative news to some, while simultaneously creating a positive and secure atmosphere for others (3).

> I think where we are also going through a learning process, and what is not engraved in the culture, is for line management to take part in the other side of internal communications, and that is the motivational part and driving part (12).

In summary, effective knowledge sharing appears to increase the efficiency of employees, and also enhance their motivation and the feeling of security. However, efficiency and motivation are not completely independent of one another. Open knowledge sharing often results in more effective work practices, which in turn can also increase one's motivational levels. Therefore, given the importance of effective knowledge sharing at all levels of an organisation, it is suggested here that true effectiveness can only be obtained through incorporating all organisational members, and hence viewing knowledge sharing as a function of integrated internal communications.

Conclusions

This article has examined the multidisciplinary nature of internal communications, and showed that an integrated perspective can be observed within the MNC context. That is a perspective, which is also beneficial for enhancing our understanding of knowledge sharing within organisations. Therefore, if we adopt the view that the employee is the most valuable asset of the corporation (Argenti and Forman, 2002) or possibly even the only sustainable source of competitive advantage (Englehardt and Simmons, 2002), then the integrated view helps us comprehend that we need to

incorporate all employees to our analysis of internal communications and knowledge sharing.

It is suggested here that in order to adopt a more strategic perspective to internal communications, there are two main issues to be considered. First, this article has presented a novel way of looking at internal communications through an integrated lens, enabling us to see it as all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organisation. Second, viewing knowledge sharing as a function of such integrated internal communications may help us to understand how communication contributes to the organisation's competitive advantage. This warrants further research to be conducted.

One of the limitations of this study is that the results are from the first phase of a multi-phase study conducted within one multinational corporation. Therefore, the results presented in this article may be taken as indicative but will need further testing and a wider sample before final conclusions can be drawn.

Notes

1. The term "multidisciplinary" is used here because of its widely accepted and recognised usage. However, perhaps a more appropriate term would have been "multi-domain", in line with discussing domains rather than disciplines of communication.

2. Instead of referring to disciplines, domains of communication are discussed because there are many different ways to define an academic discipline, and the focus of this article is not to participate in the debate over which of these four domains constitute as disciplines (for that discussion, see, e.g. Argenti, 1996; Mumby and Stohl, 1996; Reinsch, 1996; Shelby, 1996; Smeltzer, 1996).

3. Argenti (1996, 2003) includes the following functions under corporate communication: corporate advertising and advocacy, media relations, marketing communication, internal communication, investor relations, community relations and corporate philanthropy, government relations, and crisis management.

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