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Discourse Theory and Strategic Communication

A long-expected party

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This contribution explores the nexus between Discourse Theory and Strategic Communication. Traditional positivist and rationalist approaches to business, economics, politics, and management often marginalize strategic communication as merely instrumental; whereas discursive approaches, and Discourse Theory in particular, recognize its constitutive role in shaping social realities. This contribution therefore argues for the development of a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication, highlighting its potential to offer new insights and understandings. It first examines existing uses of the notion of discourse in Strategic Communication, before discussing Discourse Theory's potential added value to its study. Next, it emphasizes the importance of Discourse Theory scholars engaging with Strategic Communication topics. Finally, two examples contrasting non-discursive and discourse-theoretical approaches are presented, focusing respectively on populism and authenticity in corporate marketing campaigns. Overall, this paper advocates for a deeper integration of Discourse Theory within the study of Strategic Communication.

Keywords: discourse, Laclau, Mouffe, strategy, Strategic Communication, Discourse Theory, poststructuralism, political strategy

1. Introduction

This contribution situates itself at the intersection of Discourse Theory (PDT) and Strategic Communication (SC), arguing that a cross-pollination between both fields would be highly mutually beneficial.¹ Strategic Communication is a

1. For clarity's sake, this text uses the capitalized 'Strategic Communication' to refer to the field, and the non-capitalized 'strategic communication' to refer to the research object.

very heterogeneous, fragmented, and diverse field, which, by its own admission, is in need of overarching theories and frameworks (Goldberg & Gustafson 2023). Its disciplinary boundaries remain blurry, and efforts to establish common theoretical foundations and shared research agendas remain ongoing (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2014). Yet the existence of an ‘International Journal of Strategic Communication’ and a ‘Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication’ points towards the institutionalization of a research tradition interested in the strategic effects of organizational communication (Thomas & Stephens 2015). In the inaugural edition of the aforementioned journal, Hallahan et al. (2007, 4–5) claimed that as early as 2007, scholars were “coherently exploring (...) a unified body of knowledge” on strategic communication, said to constitute “an emerging paradigm.” While admitting that the concept of ‘strategic communication’ remains elusive and hard to pin down, Nothhaft et al. (2020, 24) conclude that [S]trategic [C]ommunication has successfully established itself as an academic discipline.”

As is the case for similar fields such as Marketing and Public Relations, the study and the teaching of Strategic Communication remain largely subservient to the professional practices that constitute their object (Cheney & Christensen 2001; Macnamara 2018; Goldberg & Gustafson 2023; Mahoney 2023). Put differently, most work on Strategic Communication is strongly informed by practitioners’ experiences and intuitions. The focus is on the concrete “outputs” and “activities” of spin doctors, spokespeople, PR consultants, publicists, propagandists, diplomats, and marketeers; rather than on theorization and conceptualization (Macnamara 2018). Depending on what type of strategic communication is being looked at, Strategic Communication is variously classified under Business, Politics, Management, or Economics. The rationalist, functionalist, realist, empiricist, and positivist theories that dominate those overarching domains are usually taken for granted without too much question (Bouzon 2013; Buhmann & Likely 2018).

Given this inclination towards pragmatic empiricism, implicit positivism, and general theory-weariness, it is striking that some Strategic Communication scholars have been expressing a reluctant and begrudging admiration for discursive and poststructuralist approaches. Balogun et al. (2014, 176) note, for instance, that discursive and poststructuralist approaches “provide a valuable set of theoretical and methodological resources that are adding significantly to our understanding of how language use shapes the work of strategy.” Sustained engagements with the notion of discourse can also be found in Critical Management studies (Alvesson & Wilmott 2012) and in the strategy-as-practice approach (Whittington 1996), which will be discussed later in this text. And in the introductory chapters of the ‘Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication,’ we find one of the most telling examples of Strategic Communication scholars’ interest in discourse

and poststructuralism, which reserves some very high praise for Discourse Theory. Discourse Theory is the brainchild of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985/2014; De Cleen et al. 2021), and proposes one of the most radically constructionist approaches in Discourse Studies.² In his introductory chapter, Torp (2014, 43) effectively presents the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe as the apogee of a historical process that spans Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St Augustine, and the Renaissance; and that culminates in Discourse Theory recognizing and grasping in an almost Hegelian fashion the constitutive nature of communication, and therefore the importance of Strategic Communication as a field of study.

One potential explanation for this remarkable interest in discourse and discursive approaches among scholars of Strategic Communication could be the tendency of the dominant theories in Business, Politics, Management, and Economics to cast strategic communication as almost epiphenomenal. The positivist and functionalist theoretical frameworks that dominate those domains attribute an *a priori* existence to economic, managerial, and political processes (Bouzon 2013, 34–36; Buhmann & Likely 2018, 637–638), which are hence governed by self-sufficient laws and stand-alone mechanisms. Since their internal logic is not communicative in nature, strategic communication can at best hope to marginally influence such processes from the sideline. Within this perspective, strategic communication is best understood as one of the many tools that can help us navigate the worlds of management, business, and politics. However, it can never fundamentally alter or transform these worlds, for the logics that animate them are not communicative in nature. As such, the most prevalent theoretical viewpoints in the study of politics, economics, management, and business have an innate tendency to undervalue and underappreciate the importance of strategic communication.

Discursive approaches, on the flip side, do attribute a (partially or fully) constitutive role to strategic communication activities. Discourse-theoretical approaches in particular theorize the articulation of discourse and meaning as the very acts that create and construct the fabric of the social world. Discourse Theory proposes an ontology of radical negativity and in which contingency and articulation are the driving sole forces of signification processes. From this perspective, it is (strategic) communication that brings the world of business, politics, and management into being. The laws and mechanisms that govern these worlds are therefore best understood as artefacts of communication and as communicative in nature. This assumption is the driver of Torp's appreciation for Discourse Theory: it conceptualizes far better than positivist approaches just how crucial, decisive,

2. Discourse Studies is understood as the field overarching various forms of discourse analysis and discursive approaches.

and fundamental (strategic) communication can be. Once noticed, the traces of the theoretical affinity between Strategic Communication and Discourse Theory can be recognized everywhere. For example, the modern conception of marketing as a process of value creation that starts even before the idea for a product arises (Kotler 2020) closely resembles a constructionist discourse-theoretical account of value (Tunderman 2023), while not having much in common at all with an essentialist neoclassical theory of value (Skålén, Fougère & Felleesson 2007).

Unfortunately, however, no concerted or dedicated effort to develop a discourse-theoretical approach to the study of strategic communication exists hitherto. That is of course where this contribution comes in: it makes the argument that a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication is highly promising and it sketches the contours of what such an approach could look like and what it could achieve.

Practically, this contribution starts out with an overview of how the notion of 'discourse' has thus far been used in the study of strategic communication. The second section of this paper considers what a potential discourse-theoretical approach to the study of strategic communication could look like. It discusses how Discourse Theory could contribute to the study of strategic communication by discussing Discourse Theory's methodological and theoretical added value and by exploring the avenues for future research it opens. Changing perspective by 180°, the third section observes the nexus where Strategic Communication and Discourse Theory intersect from the point of view of the latter; analyzing why it is both important and necessary for scholars of Discourse Theory to take attention to subjects like strategic communication. To finish, this paper proposes two examples that illustrate the richness of a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication.

2. State of the art

Discursive and poststructuralist approaches to Strategic Communication had been booming slowly but steadily in the background of the field for quite some time, before experiencing an explosion of attention about two decades ago (Balogun et al. 2014). Yet despite this surging interest in absolute numbers, discursive and poststructuralist approaches remain relatively speaking quite rare in the field of Strategic Communication, given the sheer quantity of research being conducted on political, business, and managerial strategies (Skålén, Fougère & Felleesson 2007, 8). Particularly in the study of political communication by scholars of marketing, public relations, and strategic communication, the absence of a sustained discourse-theoretical approach is glaring, for Discourse Theory can in the

end be understood as a theory of political communication and political strategy (Jacobs 2022). But even though the study of Strategic Communication continues to be overwhelmingly dominated by rationalist and realist approaches, in the margins, several discursive approaches have been tested and deployed to analyze strategic communication, with fascinating results.

First and foremost, there are constructionist experiments such as the Montreal School (Schoeneborn et al. 2014) and the idea of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (Putnam & Nicotera 2010). While these approaches put front and center the idea that communication can have a constitutive role, they remain quite far away from Discourse Theory and from Discourse Studies in general – thinkers such as Searle, Weber, Dewey, Habermas, Luhmann, Latour, and Grice provide recognizable points of reference, but typical discourse scholars such as Foucault, Laclau, Mouffe, Fairclough, and Wodak are conspicuously absent. Its key concepts include coorientation, hybridity, imbrication, and ventriloquism; while notions such as articulation, ideology, hegemony, intertextuality, and (re)contextualization are not used. This absence is partially explained by the contrast between the “continental” reputation of thinkers like Foucault and the rather Anglo-American undertone of the projects mentioned above. But it effectively entails that the potential of a poststructuralist and discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication remains fully unexploited by these approaches.

In the bigger and broader traditions of Critical Marketing and Critical Management studies, some of these “continental” thinkers do make an appearance, including Laclau and Mouffe. However, there is no exclusive (or even particularly strong) focus on the notion of discourse in these approaches. The Frankfurt school, Critical Theory, and the work of Foucault function as its main sources of inspiration (Saren 2007; Alvesson & Wilmott 2012). Their interest in ideology, power, and critique resonates with a discourse-theoretical approach, but ultimately, the research conducted in this school does not really intervene in the field of Discourse Studies either, although various forms of discourse analysis are regularly deployed on an exclusively methodological level (e.g. Jaynes 2015).

The main catalyst for the ‘discursive turn’ in the field of Strategic Communication was the strategy-as-practice approach (Whittington 1996). This approach originated in the literature on Management and Organizations and has the self-proclaimed ambition to “open up the ‘black box’ of strategy” by looking at “what actually takes place in strategic planning, strategy implementation and other activities that deal with strategy” (Gholsorkhi et al. 2010, 1). While the strategy-as-practice approach was not inherently interested in discourses, this interest very quickly arose as a logical product of its focus: once one opens the black box of strategy to look at the internal mechanisms and the functioning of strategy, discourse

quickly becomes a key concept. Strategies are constructed and decided upon through conversation and dialogue; they deploy words, narratives, and metaphors as some of their most potent resources; they are filled with symbolism and meaning; and they are present in nearly all professional interactions (Balogun et al. 2014, 175–176). All these situations can be very effectively conceptualized and analyzed from a discursive point of view.

Drawing inspiration from Critical Discourse Analysis and the work of Foucault and Fairclough, the strategy-as-practice approach has produced a rich literature on strategic language use. However, it has also consistently emphasized the need to reconnect discourses to and ground them in what it calls the “social”, the “physical”, and the “psychological” worlds (Balogun et al. 2014, 176–177). These worlds apparently envelop and surround the realm of discourse and are as such extra-discursive in nature. While emphasizing that communication is an autonomous practice with its own internal (discursive) logic, the strategy-as-practice approach also posits that communication is only one among the many practices prevalent in the physical, social, and psychological worlds. A discursive logic can therefore not fully exhaust or explain these worlds, which feature many logics that escape and therefore remain inexplicable from a discursive perspective. In other words, discourse is limited to a micro-level; it is essentially reduced to language use in context. This theoretical ploy is designed to keep the strategy-as-practice approach comfortably close to mainstream research on strategic communication. It effectively allows the results of a strategy-as-practice analysis to be readily plugged into non-discursive research on strategy without additional epistemological or ontological concertation.

The picture sketched in the paragraphs above shows that this contribution’s proposal for a discourse-theoretical approach to the study of strategic communication is by no means revolutionary. Scholars of Strategic Communication have long recognized the potential of a discursive perspective. However, the exploration of this nexus has remained superficial and incomplete. A more sustained and profound dialogue between Strategic Communication and Discourse Studies is in order, and while there may be great potential in a Critical Discourse Analysis or a Foucauldian approach to Strategic Communication, this contribution argues that Discourse Theory is especially well-positioned within Discourse Studies to set up a conversation with Strategic Communication.

3. Why a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication?

The ensuing section presents three arguments concerning the added value of a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication: it provides a com-

prehensive and inclusive definition of strategy and strategic communication, it allows for a holistic approach to strategic communication that goes “all the way down”, and it has the potential to be methodologically compatible with much existing discursive research on strategic communication. None of the approaches discussed in the previous section exploit these advantages to their full extent. Crucially, the case made here has by no means the ambition to be exhaustive or definitive – there are undoubtedly other advantages still to studying strategic communication through a discourse-theoretical prism, and reversely, there may be important obstacles to a discursive approach to Strategic Communication that do not receive their due attention here. This section merely attempts to map and identify some of the unexploited potential that a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication holds, so as to spark debate on and research within this nexus.

3.1 Defining Strategic Communication comprehensively

A first argument in favor of a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication relates to the problems involved in the conception and definition of strategic communication as a research object. As is clear from the introduction, a very wide range of actors communicate strategically. Businesspeople, marketers, politicians, civil servants, social movements, non-governmental organizations, and governments all engage in different forms of strategical communication in different contexts and at different points in time. This diversity and heterogeneity make it hard to define strategic communication. There has notably been a tendency in the literature towards an overly narrow and exclusionary definition, with a whole myriad of conceptual problems as a result.

The term ‘strategic’ has for instance been infused with modernist, managerial, and top-down connotations, which fail to do justice to the variety of communicative practices that can be understood as strategic communication (Sriramesh *et al.* 2007). Social movements communicate strategically all the time, but their communication is hardly ever conceived in a centralized or top-down manner, and the question of who decides or designs the strategic communication of social movements is often unanswerable or even non-sensical (Seiffert-Brockmann, Wiggins & Nothhaft 2023). The intentional and voluntarist nature that is systematically attributed to strategic communication poses a similar issue (Winkler & Etter 2018). Strategies can shift slowly over time, without any conscious decision to alter them; and accidental mishaps can similarly have a profound strategic effect (Jacobs 2022). The varied and heterogeneous nature of Strategic Communication has additionally promoted a focus on complete and fully-fledged strategies, which are the easiest to observe and to understand. This has led to a neglect of emergent,

incomplete, and context-bound strategies (Winkler & Etter 2018). Perhaps the most fundamental definitional problem in the study of strategic communication is that the highly multi-disciplinary nature of the field continues to complicate the integration of and the dialogue between various strands of research on strategic communication (Werder et al. 2020). It remains very difficult to use insights about strategic business communication in research on strategic political communication and vice versa, even when accounting for the different contexts where they originate and operate.

Adopting a discourse-theoretical approach does not magically conjure away these problems. But it does expedite lines of thinking and reasoning that can help to tackle these definitional and conceptual issues. First and foremost, Discourse Theory provides a broad and inclusive definition of strategic communication, that can be used to conceptualize the campaign of a local politician, the sales strategy of a multinational, and anything in between in a manner that does justice to the variety and heterogeneity of these communicative practices (Jacobs 2022, 28). It repudiates a modernist definition of strategic communication as something that operates in an exclusively centralized or top-down fashion: Discourse Theory looks at any “discursive strategy”, not only at “the strategies of [privileged] discourse participants” (Nonhoff 2019, 79). Neither does PDT’s interpretation of strategic communication necessarily imply the presence of a goal-oriented, “self-conscious subject” acting. This makes it possible “to see any manipulation of power as strategic, rather than only conscious and intentional manipulations of power” (Herschinger 2012, 75–76). Furthermore, Discourse Theory understands ‘strategies’ as second-order interpretations: strategies are something recognized in the discourse of actors by the analyst. Actors themselves can of course also invest and signify their discourses strategically in their first-order interpretation, and they very often do. But this is not a pre-condition for studying a discourse as a strategy (Jacobs 2022, 82). This perspective enables us to identify a strategic dimension in emergent, incomplete, or aborted practices, whose strategic character did not come to full fruition (yet) and may not even be present (yet) in the minds of their actors. Finally, being an inherently transdisciplinary approach, Discourse Theory has no problems tackling topics that are situated in completely different contexts in a coherent and comparable manner (De Cleen et al. 2021, 5–6).

In sum, adopting a discourse-theoretical approach can help the study of strategic communication move on from a top-down, intentionalist, and absolute definition of strategic communication; and towards a more inclusive, interpretative, and emergent one. This would in turn facilitate a more comprehensive and exhaustive perspective on strategic communication. It can also provide a common viewpoint, a common jargon, and a common philosophy for the study of strate-

gic communication, that can be deployed in and adapted to the various empirical contexts where scholars of Strategic Communication do research, but at the same time offers a basis for dialogue and mutual understanding.

3.2 A monistic ontology that ‘goes all the way down’

While important, the contribution outlined in the previous paragraphs cannot be deemed ground-breaking. Substantial efforts exist, notably in the popular strategy-as-practice approach overviewed in the state-of-the-art, to conceive of strategy in a discursive and emergent fashion (Gholsorkhi et al. 2010; Balogun et al. 2014). However, this strategy-as-practice approach systematically insists on the separation between discourse and practice, thereby limiting the reach and the utility of the discursive perspective it proposes. Discourse is reduced to pragmatic language use in context, which is then understood as one among the many elements out of which strategies emerge:

However, while strategy work involves talk in all its form, it is not *just* talk (emphasis in original). Yet the focus in studies of discourse and strategy to date has mostly been on the language of strategy and its communication per se. To move forward it is important to place strategy discourse in context and acknowledge the social practices of strategizing in which such language is embedded

(Balogun et al. 2014, 176)

To put it differently, the strategy-as-practice approach proposes that once language use has been studied from a discursive perspective, the resulting insights are then to be situated amidst a series of other contextual factors. These include “sociomaterial practices”, “the cognitive aspects of strategic sensemaking”, and the subjectivities of and “power relations between actors engaged in strategizing”. Together with language use, these are the factors out of which strategies emerge. Crucially, only language and language use are studied from a discursive perspective — the other factors are not. As a result, the benefits of adopting a discursive perspective outlined above remain confined to the study of language and language use. It is (erroneously) believed that a discursive perspective cannot tell us anything about sociomaterial practices, cognition, subjectivity, or power; and that complimentary perspectives are needed to examine these dimensions. This way, the other contextual variables leave room for the top-down, intentionalist, and absolute definition of strategy to sneak right back into the equation.

Attempts to integrate discursive research with research on socio-materiality in the strategy-as-practice approach illustrate this pitfall. Balogun et al. (2014, 186) argue that “strategy making episodes are characterized by particular forms of language (the language of competition), particular types of spatial arrangements

(tables and boardrooms), particular participants (executives, often male, with particular roles and skills sets), and particular material aids (flipcharts, PowerPoint, spreadsheets)". While adopting a discursive approach avoids an essentialist conception of strategy as something voluntaristically articulated in a top-down manner, the integration of this discursive perspective into a non-discursive one brings this essentialism back in, since apparently, these various discourses are only relevant during "strategy making episodes". Strategy work is said to be embedded "in institutionalized conventions or genres, such as strategic planning, strategy workshops, strategy meetings, and their associated tools and artefacts" (Balogun et al. 2014, 185). But a discourse-theoretical perspective shows us that strategy is not limited to such institutionalized settings, to explicit planning and conscious steering, to the active deployment of strategic tools. Strategies are shaped by slow diachronic evolutions and by sudden accidental hiccups (Hardy & Thomas 2014; Jacobs 2022), none of which necessarily play out in the board room or the planning meeting. Studying language use in a discursive manner brings into focus the relevance of both established conventions regarding jargon and genre as well as innocuous water cooler conversations (Balogun et al. 2014, 175–176; Hardy & Thomas 2014). But limiting their strategic effect to the impact they may or may not have on explicit strategizing during planning sessions unduly constrains a discursive perspective and leaves the mechanisms and logics of a wide range of strategic discourses unexplored.

Furthermore, the distinction between discourses (in the linguistic sense of the word) and practices (in the material and social sense of the word) creates what Taylor and Van Every (2010, cited in Hardy & Thomas 2014, 323) call the 'uplink problem': why do certain ways of talking manage to affect and alter existing behaviors, while others fail? How do discourses and practices interact with one-another? The choice for an ontological dualism introduces a whole range of conceptual problems that cannot easily be resolved (Jacobs 2019). It is not an exaggeration to say that the 'uplink problem' puts the entire project of a discursive approach to Strategic Communication in jeopardy: if we cannot properly understand how discourses affect practices, why even look at discourses in the first place? The difficulties in identifying the causal effect of words on the social and material worlds which we inhabit put into question whether they can actually affect these worlds. If we cannot be sure that language has any effect on our lives at all, it may not even be worth studying.

The reason why the strategy-as-practice approach seeks to insert discursive analyses into an overarching perspective that takes on board material and institutional factors, despite all the problems that such a move entails, is the belief that discourse analysis is predominantly concerned with language use and does not sufficiently theorize the physical or institutional context in which language

is used. But this is precisely where Discourse Theory can bring genuine added value to the study of strategic communication: it can think discourse ‘all the way down’, making sense of the material (Beetz 2016) and the institutional infrastructures (Jacobs 2019) as well as the practices (De Cleen et al. 2025) of strategy in a discursive manner. This way, there is no need for an ontological dualism, where linguistic, material, and institutional artefacts are captured and described by two (or more) different theoretical frameworks that need to be layered on top of each other. Instead, we can think of material and institutional factors as wholly discursive in nature; rife with meaning, symbolism, and representation. Practices can similarly be read and studied as discourses, thereby eliminating the need to actively integrate the study of contextual language use with the study of the practices of which this language use is part, for they no longer constitute separate contexts. Language and practice can, from a discourse-theoretical perspective, both be theorized and understood as ‘discourse’, resulting in a more streamlined and parsimonious ontology.

In sum, a discourse-theoretical approach offers two advantages on an ontological level. First, the theoretical pitfalls which a discursive perspective evades cannot sneak back into the equation once this discursive perspective is abandoned in favor of a non-discursive one. The holistic and emergent approach to Strategic Communication that a discursive ontology facilitates cannot be substituted anymore for the top-down, voluntarist, and absolutist perspective associated with a non-discursive ontology, because the discursive ontology goes all the way down and does not need to be abandoned at any point, not even to look at the material, social, or institutional aspects of strategy. Secondly, the uplink problem is cut off at the knees: there is no longer any need to worry about how words, objects, institutions, and behaviors interact with and affect each other, for they are all theorized as one and the same thing, belonging to the same ontological category: discourse. Their mutual effects and interactions are therefore no longer difficult to theorize or analyze, as they can readily be studied using a discourse-theoretical approach (Jacobs 2022, 116). It is important to note that this is a theoretical solution: the reification and essentialization of particular truths as inevitable, universal, and without alternative obviously remains a powerful discursive strategy in the hand of political and business actors.

3.3 Methodological compatibility

One of the major achievements of existing discursive approaches to Strategic Communication is how they have managed to diversify research into strategy on a methodological level. Various forms of narrative analysis and discourse analysis (including poststructuralist discourse analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

have become relatively common in the study of strategic communication (Balogun et al. 2014); conversational analysis and similar linguistic approaches have been applied to transcripts of negotiations and meetings (Aggerholm & Asmuß 2016); ethnographic field research and participant observation have been used to gather wholly new forms of data (Vesa & Vaara 2014);... This methodological diversity has allowed the extant literature to look at strategic communication from a variety of different angles, shedding lights on different stages of the strategic process and on different elements of what constitutes strategic communication as a discourse.

Crucially, most of these methods can be combined with a discourse-theoretical approach. While there are a few ready-made methodologies associated with Discourse Theory that can be applied directly to a dataset, these are by no means the only way to operationalize Discourse Theory. At its purest, Discourse Theory merely provides a framework for processing and making sense of the results achieved through a variety of methods. This entails that it can, and in fact must, be articulated in tandem with a wide range of other methods. All Discourse Theory requires is that the way these methods operate in a way that is compatible with the epistemological premises of a discourse-theoretical approach. Discourse Theory can be operationalized using various other forms of narrative, discourse, or linguistic analysis, ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and even more quantitative or statistical methods; provided the articulation of the research design happens in a manner that renders Discourse Theory and the method at hand commensurate. In other words, these methods are to be articulated as an extension of Discourse Theory, which then offers a framework within which the results generated by these methods can be interpreted and analyzed (De Cleen et al. 2021).

As such, the lack of a single, definitive discourse-theoretical method implies that Discourse Theory respects and leaves intact the methodological diversity in the field of strategic communication. Rather than imposing its own methods, it would rather integrate and overarch the existing methodological landscape. This way, it can provide a shared epistemological horizon within which methodological triangulation and integration becomes possible (Werder et al. 2020). While strictly speaking compatible with statistical approaches, Discourse Theory mainly expedites research that uses qualitative methods. This way, it also indirectly contributes to the ongoing challenge to the dominance of statistical and quantitative approaches in the study of strategy.

4. Why Strategic Communication as a research object in Discourse Theory?

The discussion above outlines the contributions that Discourse Theory can make to research into strategic communication. However, if this paper proposes a discourse-theoretical approach to the study of strategic communication, then this is not only because our understanding of strategic communication stands to benefit, but also because Discourse Theory must prove value and its viability in research on these types of topics if it wants to (continue to) establish itself as major current in Discourse Studies. The ensuing section outlines three reasons why Discourse Theory can benefit from taking an interest in the field of Strategic Communication.

4.1 Tackling the ‘harder’ topics

In theorizing discourse ‘all the way down’, Discourse Theory makes the explicit claim that it can capture the social construction of any societal phenomenon (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014, 98–99). Yet despite its far-reaching ambitions, Discourse Theory has mainly found purchase in the study of issues whose socially constructed nature is readily apparent, such as identity, ideology, and culture. The research domain where Discourse Theory has found most mainstream success and appraisal is the study of populism. Filled with ideas, emotions, conflict, and rhetoric, populism is a research object whose socially constructed nature could hardly be more obvious. But if we turn to questions about decision-making, policy, administration, the economy, then we suddenly encounter a dearth of discourse-theoretical research, despite PDT’s explicit claim that these issues are just as much a discursive and social construct (Jacobs 2022, 9–11). Even though these matters are at the heart of the social sciences, Discourse Theory has had little to say about them relative to the size of the discourse-theoretical literature; and absolutely nothing relative to the literature on and the importance of these questions.

For PDT, tackling administrative and economic questions and studying decision-making and policy in politics and business is a way to put its money where its mouth is. Social construction does not stop where things look a bit more real or where the stakes get a bit higher — if anything, the hegemonies we encounter in these types of questions are more normalized, deeper entrenched, and exercise more pervasive and more significant power effects. It is therefore paramount that Discourse Theory take a more sustained interest in them. The study of strategic communication can be a way for Discourse Theory to address this challenge: the communicative aspects of this topic ease the deployment a

discursive approach, but at the same time, its strategic nature means that questions regarding decision-making, policy, and administration are right around the corner, allowing Discourse Theory to analyze these matters.

4.2 Expediting hands-on empirical research

As Marttila (2015, 5) notes, one of the challenges Discourse Theory faces in its growth to scientific maturity is showing that it can expedite concrete, hands-on research. Because of its conceptual and theoretical strengths, there is a tendency in Discourse Theory to limit its arguments to this level. This is not just a Discourse Theory issue, however: much of the critical research on strategic communication that is driven by poststructuralism takes aim at the idea of strategic communication, rather than at concrete and tangible communicative practices (e.g. Raaz 2021).

While this is a way to capitalize on what it does best, its focus on theory-building has seen Discourse Theory sidelined in situations where it should not be. Depending on their research design and how they make sense of their research object, scholars looking at their data through a discursive prism should be in a position where they can consider a discourse-theoretical approach. Only this way will Discourse Theory be able to garner the gravity and the momentum that will allow it to establish itself as a fully-fledged and autonomous project in Discourse Studies (Marttila 2015, 5; Glynos et al. 2021). Indeed, the turn to practice which this special issue argues for, is driven by a need to move “beyond ideology” and to “allot greater weight to analytical aims” (De Cleen et al. 2025).

4.3 Power and critique

Finally, the field of Strategic Communication offers Discourse Theory the opportunity to tackle one of the main challenges it faces: the ambiguous status of the notion of critique within the theory. While Discourse Theory has a lot to say about power, power relations, and power effects, it is not always clear how it can ensuingly evaluate or criticize them. Theorizing morals, norms, and ethics as unstable and dislocated discursive constructs; it appears that there are no ultimate foundations left upon which Discourse Theorists can base criticisms of the power dynamics that they have observed and analysed. Thinking discourse ‘all the way down’ seemingly removes the normative or ethical grounds upon which a critique of power relations can be built (Critchley 2012).

By contrast, some of the existing discursive approaches to Strategic Communication discussed above have managed to chart several interesting avenues for critique, both on a micro- and a macro-level. The Critical Marketing school has

for example formulated a powerful analysis of marketing as a function in capitalist and neoliberal hegemony (e.g. Saren 2007; Alvesson & Wilmott 2012, 129–156). The strategy-as-practice approach meanwhile has combined the mapping and evaluation of the effect of concrete empirical strategies with a critique of the power effects they exercise (e.g. Sánchez, Valenzuela & Sanfuentes 2024). PDT, on the other hand, has yet to prove that it can expedite research that systematically criticizes and problematizes the power relations under analysis.

As has been argued elsewhere, one of PDT's strengths is analyzing the effects and the effectiveness of strategies of resistance (Jacobs 2022). Focusing on this strength could be a way for Discourse Theory to demonstrate its relevance to a critique of power. Even if the malleability and flexibility implied by its ontology of radical negativity make Discourse Theory somewhat less adept than other critical approaches at judging the intrinsic value of various political projects, it is well-suited to evaluate which counterhegemonic project is best positioned to successfully challenge the extant hegemony. Interestingly, this creates something resembling a division of labor within Discourse Studies, where critical approaches that leave a normative and ethical foundation intact can evaluate a (counter)hegemonic project on a moral level, while Discourse Theory can do so on a strategic level (Nonhoff 2017). Crucially, the analysis of such (counter)hegemonic projects does not need to be limited to explicit ideological projects or coherent social movements, as these projects do not need to be the product of deliberate strategies.

It is important to note that Strategic Communication would relish such a division of labour: as Hardy and Thomas (2014) have argued, strategies of resistance and the effect that resistance has on the articulation of a strategy are somewhat of a blind spot in the current state-of-the-art in the field of SC. Discourse Theory could make valuable contributions in both areas.

5. Studying Strategic Communication in a discourse-theoretical manner: Populism and marketing

Having explained what our understanding of strategic communication stands to gain from a discourse-theoretical approach and having argued why Discourse Theory needs to study topics such as strategic communication; the remaining question is of course what such a Discourse Theory approach to Strategic Communication would concretely look like. To explore this question, the final section of this paper develops two examples. The former takes on a theoretical intervention in the literature on political communication that uses a non-discursive perspective and re-imagines what this intervention would hypothetically look like if

it were to be conducted from a Discourse Theory perspective. The second example explores the idea of (in)authenticity of corporate marketing campaigns, highlighting the added value of a discourse-theoretical approach to our understanding of this phenomenon.

5.1 Populism and political strategy

The first example addresses Weyland's (2017) critique of ideational and ideological approaches to populism and his proposition to substitute them for a political-strategic approach. Discourse-theoretical approaches to populism have had widespread mainstream success (Laclau 2005; De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis 2017). However, as is clear from this framing of his argument, Weyland (2017, 52–55) does not use a discursive conception of political strategy — he explicitly contrasts both, and even goes as far as to conceptualize a political-strategic approach as the opposite of a discursive approach. Weyland (2001, 12) defines strategies as “the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power”, and populist strategies specifically as a subset of methods and instruments that are wielded by personalistic and authoritarian leaders. Here, we encounter the overly narrow, voluntarist, and absolutist conception of strategy that was criticized above. A discourse-theoretical approach to strategy would never argue that a populist strategy is an essential characteristic of an actor (even if certain actors are more prone to using them or deploy them more frequently), but instead understands it as an articulatory pattern that can be recognized in certain discourses.

Such a discursive definition of strategy is far less restrictive. We can for instance recognize populist strategies in the discourse of leaderless movements such as the Occupy movement (Matthews 2019) and technocratic centrists like Emmanuel Macron (Fougère & Barthold 2020). This way, a discursive approach is better placed to account for the heterogeneity and variety of strategies that different actors may deploy. A discursive definition also does away with the voluntarist idea that populist strategies are tools that are exclusively deployed by personalistic leaders in a top-down manner towards a singular end (notably the erosion of the rule of law). There was no leader in the Occupied squares who autonomously decided that today, a populist strategy was going to be articulated, and tomorrow, a Marxist strategy. The strategies of the Occupy movement emerged out of a vast debate, and many interventions that contributed to this emergence were not at all intended strategically.

The case at hand is also a great illustration of the previously discussed ‘uptake problem’, as well as of how a discourse-theoretical approach tackles it. Weyland (2017, 59) argues that populists seek to incarnate the “‘will of the people’” by promoting “a widespread belief in a leader’s amazing, extraordinary, ‘supernatural’

capacities". But how is this belief spread? How is a sociologically and politically heterogeneous people persuaded of a leader's charisma? Without answering this question, populism very quickly becomes akin to a magic wand giving the wielder unlimited power. The interaction between the leader's words and the people's minds is very hard to decipher when strategy is understood this way. A discursive definition does away with this problematic schema: populism is not understood as something a leader does to a people, but is instead a discursive pattern of demands allied and fused together within a chain of equivalence. This way, populism is not a permanent state or a fixed object, but a strategy that must constantly be rearticulated. Put simply, populism, as a strategy, emerges out of how politicians and citizens interact. The question how populism convinces its subjects becomes far easier to answer in this picture: its persuasive power depends on its interaction with the other discourses present in the debate, but even then, persuasion is not a permanent and stable state that can straightforwardly be achieved through the deployment a populist strategy.

A final downside of reifying populism as a non-discursive rather than a discursive strategy, is that the prime question it raises is one of classification. Since populism is an object, rather than a discourse or a social construct, the question of where it can and cannot be found becomes primordial. Who is a populist? Is a particular political arrangement populist? The line of questioning that follows from a non-discursive approach to populist strategies remains mainly descriptive. A discourse-theoretical approach to populist strategies, meanwhile, encourages us to open black box of strategy, and look at what goes on underneath the bonnet: where did it come from? How did it emerge? Which effects does it exercise on other discourses that are part of the same order of discourse, and vice versa, how is it affected by them? The issue of delineating populism is not particularly relevant to an approach that considers the social world the product of articulation — the malleability and flexibility of Discourse Theory entails that pretty much any ideology can be promoted through a populist strategy. The question of how this ideology is articulated and constructed in a populist manner is what is crucial. This question can, as argued above, be examined at from various angles, and through a broad range of methods.

The example above focused on populism, because it is a topic where PDT's acumen is well-established, and the benefits of a discourse-theoretical approach are well known, making it low-hanging-fruit for a theoretical article like this one. The challenge, however, will be to use a discourse-theoretical approach to tackle subjects that are common in Strategic Communication but that are further away from PDT's home turf. How are demands and interests articulated in corporate lobbying, for instance? Is it possible to develop a discourse-theoretical approach to marketing and external communication strategies? What light does

a discourse-theoretical perspective shed on the strategies that play out in internal corporate communication? These kinds of questions are where the largest reservoir of added value for a discourse-theoretical approach to Strategic Communication is located. As such, the final section of this paper looks at authenticity in strategic corporate marketing campaigns from a discourse-theoretical point of view.

5.2 Authenticity, marketing, and corporate strategy

Turning away from political communication and towards corporate communication, ‘authenticity’ is an example of a strategic aspect of communication that can be explained in an interesting and revelatory manner using a discourse-theoretical approach. Public relations professionals associate authenticity with transparency and openness, with taking responsibility and ownership of one’s communication, with originality, with the projection of organizational values, with sustainability, and with exceptional levels of quality (Molleda 2010). Authentic communication is original, first-hand, prototypical, genuine, real, actual, and truthful (Pérez 2019). But what makes communication original, genuine, and real?

First, it should be noted that an intentionalist and voluntarist definition of strategy can never fully grasp the notion of authenticity (Perez 2019). The ‘Real Beauty’ advertisement campaign launched by Dove in 2017 could be seen as a genuine and truthful expression of Dove’s longstanding and well-established concern with body-positivity and self-esteem through natural beauty. Yet the campaign caused outcry as images of a woman taking off her t-shirt to reveal a lighter-skinned woman underneath seemingly suggested that a lighter skin tone is preferable. While this insensitive colorism was accidental, it overshadowed the campaign’s message of inclusivity — As a result, Dove’s genuine attempt at original and value-driven communication was perceived as an inauthentic attempt to exploit social inclusion for commercial gain (Brooks, Chanland & Cox 2024). Clearly, then, authenticity cannot be understood as a product of good intentions.

Neither does it make sense to adopt a constructivist definition of authenticity that does not go ‘all the way down’: authenticity is not the product of language use embedded in a series of socio-material practices which are themselves extra-discursive in nature, as the discourse-as-practice approach would have it. The viral Adidas ad ‘Break Free’ was received in 2017 as a moving and beautiful tribute to the emotional and transformative power of sport, its role in personal development, and its ability to inspire and unite diverse communities (The Drum 2017). However, the ad was made by a German art student at his own initiative, and Adidas was not at all involved in its production and distribution. On a socio-material level, the ad was strictly inauthentic: it tricked its viewers into believing they were

watching advertisement for Adidas, whereas they were watching a spoof made as homework. Yet this socio-material falsehood did not spoil the sense of authenticity that the ad projected — millions of people enjoyed its heartfelt and genuine message, even in the knowledge that the ad was not what it purported to be.

These examples show that authenticity is a discursive effect beyond the direct control of the discourse's authors and relatively independent from the socio-material context in which the discourse was produced or received. Rather, a discourse produces a sense of authenticity through its interaction with its discursive context. To put it in discourse-theoretical terms: meaning is produced by the interaction of an articulation with the order of discourse within which it is articulated. The involvement of Beyoncé and Colin Kaepernick in advertisement campaigns demonstrates in a very rudimentary fashion how this process functions. Both Beyoncé and Kaepernick are heroes of black African-American community in the United States: the former a pop star turned cultural icon with outspoken opinions on feminism, racism and LGBT rights; the latter an American football player turned social activist who took the knee during the national anthem. But when Pepsi enlisted Beyoncé as a brand ambassador in 2013, associating themselves with her as a symbol of a self-empowerment, reactions were largely negative. Beyoncé was criticized for selling out and for associating herself with a company whose products harm the public health. The advertisement campaign contrasted negatively with Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign, which encouraged Americans to exercise, and to which Beyoncé had lend her support (Allan 2019). However, when Kaepernick starred in a Nike ad in 2019, the campaign gave Nike a huge surge in sales and stock value. Nike and Kaepernick received praised for their radical and daring collaboration. Even though there was potential for an agonistic repudiation of Nike and Kaepernick for commercially exploiting a nation-wide social struggle (Hoffman et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2020), the campaign was given a lot of authenticity by the angry reactions from conservative politicians such as Donald Trump, who spoke out negatively about the campaign several times. These reactions ensured that the campaign actively participated in the debate over racial inequality, giving a great deal of credibility.

6. Conclusion

This contribution explored the nexus between Discourse Theory and Strategic Communication, arguing that its exploration holds significant theoretical, empirical, and methodological promise for both traditions.

It first identified the challenges inherent to Strategic Communication as a fragmented and heterogeneous field, beset by definitional and conceptual issues,

and dominated by rationalist and instrumentalist perspectives. These perspectives tend to marginalize the constitutive role of communication in shaping social realities. In contrast, Discourse Theory provides a radically constructionist framework that positions strategic communication as central to the articulation and signification of social, political, and economic processes.

Ensuingly, this contribution looked at how Discourse Theory can offset some of the aforementioned definitional and conceptual issues. A discourse-theoretical approach notably allows for a more inclusive and emergent understanding of strategy, moving beyond the top-down, intentionalist, and modernist connotations often associated with the concept. A discourse-theoretical perspective also addresses some theoretical gaps in existing discursive approaches to strategic communication. By theorizing communication, materiality, and institutional structures as fully discursive, it dissolves dualisms that limit the explanatory reach of current frameworks. This monistic ontology thus eliminates the ‘uplink problem’ and supports a more parsimonious and comprehensive analysis of strategic communication. Furthermore, the compatibility of Discourse Theory with a wide variety of methods enables its integration into diverse research designs while respecting the methodological pluralism of Strategic Communication studies.

Reversely, engaging with Strategic Communication provides Discourse Theory with opportunities to expand its methodological, empirical, and critical horizons. Discourse Theory has so far mainly focused on topics such as identity and culture, where its constructionist framework is readily applicable. However, the analysis of strategic communication would introduce Discourse Theory to domains like decision-making, policy, administration, and corporate strategy, where social constructs often appear more entrenched and resistant to discursive analysis. Strategic Communication thus offers a practical and rich field where Discourse Theory can prove its merit in the hands-on exploration of concrete and practical topics, ranging from corporate marketing campaigns to political strategies. This can help Discourse Theory establish itself as a robust empirical tool and not merely a theoretical lens. Dialogue with existing critical approaches to the study of strategic communication would also allow Discourse Theory to clarify its role, its place, and its unique contribution within the pantheon of critical and discursive approaches.

Finally, the paper illustrates the practical potential of a discourse-theoretical approach to strategic communication through two case studies: populist political strategies and the authenticity of corporate marketing campaigns.

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