Organizational Communication

Organizational Discourses - A Literature Review

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Abstract: Reaching effective communication by organizations represents a challenging mission. The objective of this article is to discuss the communication strategies and organizational discourse practices studied by various researchers and published in nine major academic journals between 1981 and 2015. After reviewing the literature, the findings illustrate that annual reports are examined by revealing different structures, catalogues of sub-texts, types of discourses, graphs, themes, indicators, words classifications. Study of organizational discourses using communication theories offer valued information to the researchers and organizations. Literature review was performed in academic articles referring to human resources that allowed us to observe what information about employees is relevant for the organizational discourses.

Keywords: strategic communication; organizational discourses; annual reports

1. Introduction

The study of communication performed by organizations is important because this focuses on building internal and external relationships, sending and receiving messages for achieving common goals, exchanging information through speaking and writing.

Organizational communication is described by Torp (2015, p. 34) as comprising everything an organization speaks and does as well as everyone who is affected by the existence and activities of the organization. Correspondingly, Mumby (2012, p 38) defines organizational communication as being "the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented toward the achievement of organizational goals".

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Strategic communication as theory, research and practice of discourse has been characterized by comprehensive statements such as:

- organizational communication is seen as a strategic and goal-oriented activity that manages discourse to achieve the defined goals and outcomes by the companies;

- organizational communication is seen to be dialogic, dedicated to build relationships, understanding, and authentic debate through discourse or dialog in the public sphere. (Self, 2015, p. 75)

The emergence of strategic communication as a unifying paradigm for studying purposeful communication of organizations offers a great opportunity to focus the study of organizational communication on how organizations present and promote themselves as well as on how organizations interact with their audiences (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 16).

Communication can be performed by companies for multiple audiences, such as customers, employees, investitors and through different ways, like annual reports, websites, organizational newsletters, press releases, brochures, general presentations, advertisements. The annual reports and companies' websites include dedicated sections to human resources where organizations present different aspects related to their team members, training programs offered to employees, recruitment specifics. Fox, Fox (2004, p. 33) said that public discourses of an organization may be highly frequent (organization news), periodical (annual reports), or comparatively infrequent (organization mission statements). Organizations naturally generate a diversity of communicative events to meet specific communicative purposes, which raise the appearance of new genres. Certain genres like organization mission statements, annual reports, business guidelines are default genres of public discourse of organizations. Referring to employees, Stanton (2017, p. 71) stated that employees are an important component in reputation management, image and brand recognition. Companies have turned from advertising their products and services to images showing people and specifically employees as being their most important tactical advantage. Companies choose to use employees on the front cover of the annual reports showing that they are important stakeholders for their organizations.

Since this research is an important contribution to achieving an improved communication by organizations related to employees in the annual reports, we

structured the literature review on the following main concepts: strategic communication and organizational discourse.

2. Definitions, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Strategic communication is defined by Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, Sriramesh (2007, p. 3) as the use of communication by an organization to achieve its mission. Moreover, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015, p. 4) said that "the strategic communication process typically is a communication process that follows from an organization's strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in enabling the organization's strategic goals and objectives". Johnston and Everett (2015, p. 157) define strategic communication as being the central device organizations use to respond to environmental uncertainty, when management have to monitor and interpret the environmental conditions and then to formulate an appropriate response to that interpretation. Ihlen and Verhoeven (2015, p. 134) mentioned that strategic communication can be seen as "different forms of communication, ranging from symbolic, interpersonal and social communication to the non-personal communication function in system theory", while Murphy (2015, p. 124) considers that strategic communicators should play a continuing role in shaping messages and participating in issue arenas that determine public opinion.

Strategic communication represents the communication realized by companies to achieve their missions, values, long-term goals, objectives and managing communication should be a strategic priority for the organizations. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, Sriramesh (2007, p. 7) revealed that strategic communication focus is on how a company communicates across organizational activities. The importance is on the strategic application of communication and how an organization as a social actor advance its mission. Academic research on organizational communication examines the processes involved in how people interact in organizations, while strategic communication focuses on how the organization presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners. Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, Lair (2004) reached to a similar conclusion that organizational messages and discourses have a strategic function and organizations should make strategic decisions regarding the types and audiences of their messages.

From the strategic communication point of view, organizations are preoccupied to distinguish from their competitors, to proactivity find right opportunities to

communicate and influence their publics, and to accomplish their business objectives considering the industry trends. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, Sriramesh (2007, p. 10) enumerate four reasons for studying strategic communication:

- organizations must differentiate themselves as audiences view organizations from multiple perspectives: product offerings, expertise and competence, service commitment;

- public communication is driven by digital technology (World Wide Web, instant messaging) which converge communications channels;

- audiences' experiences and impressions about organization - companies use a variety of methods to influence the behaviours of their publics;

- organizations have to achieve strategically important goals.

Organizational discourse is described by Grant, Hardy, Oswick, Putnam (2004, pp. 4-8) as comprising four predominant areas: conversation and dialogue - referring to language, speech, interaction analysis; narratives and stories - involving context, socio linguistics and semiotics, institutional dialogue; rhetoric of symbols within the organization; and tropes of metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony.

Organizational discourse has a vital role in the organizations' building, existence and maintenance as distinctive and good-looking units as well as for the success of communication within and outside of the organizations, because through discourses companies disseminate their ideas internally and externally. Gunnarsson, Johansson, Jämtelid, Skulstad, Norlyk, Bülow-Møller (1999, pp. 10 - 11) define four characteristics of the organizational discourse:

- in an organization, discourse is of crucial significance for the success of the various communicative activities which occur there and for the actual survival of the organization;

- discourse plays an essential role in the construction of an organization as a unique and attractive entity; discourse builds up and maintains the organizational self;

- the relationship between discourse and organization is a complex one; discourse creates the organization as a unique entity;

- companies are steered by ideas and discourse is part of the dissemination of those ideas, internally and externally.

Mumby (2012, pp. 40 - 52) classifies communication performed by companies as integrating five types of discourses: discourse of representation (functionalism); discourse of understanding (interpretivism); discourse of suspicion (critical theory); discourse of vulnerability (postmodernism); discourse of empowerment (feminism). Therefore, these are five perspectives of the organizational communication.

In organizational communication, the research over the past decades was dominated by the discourse representation or functionalism that includes a conduit model and a model of communication about information transmission. Organization is viewed as a goal oriented structure independent from the actions of their members, and the research goals include prediction and control, generalizable knowledge claims, establish causal relationships. (Mumby, 2012, pp. 41-42). In discourse of understanding, the communication is seen as a model of dialogic creation of meaning systems, and the research goals include developing descriptions of cultures as well as insight and understanding (Mumby, 2012, pp. 42-45). In critical discourse or discourse of suspicion, the communication model is seen as creation of ideological meaning systems mediated by power relations, and the research interests include critique of unfair systems of power and emancipation from unfair organizational structures (Mumby, 2012, pp. 45-46). In discourse of vulnerability/postmodernism, communication model is seen as an unstable and shifting system of meanings, and the research objectives are deconstruction and destabilization of common views of the world, rejection of grand narratives and promotion of little narratives (Mumby, 2012, pp. 47-49).

In discourse of empowerment/feminism, communication is focused on the creation of gender meanings and identities, and the research goals are gender equality, increasing "women's ways of knowing", transcending binary thinking (Mumby, 2012, pp. 50-51). On the same matter, Ashcraft (2004) speaks about four ways of framing the relationship between discourse - gender - organizations:

1. discourse as outcome: gender differences in organizational communication style - some women in management; 2. discourse as performance: doing gender at work - routine performance of masculinities and femininities in organizational life; 3. discourse as text: organization as gendered - alternative (especially feminist) forms of organizing; 4. discourse as social text: organization theory as gendered - cultural studies of gendered organization.

Annual reports represent public appearances of the organizations, published on a yearly basis, and are of high interest for the academic researchers and communication professionals. Stanton (2017, p. 51) mentioned that annual reports sit at the apex, top of the strategic communication of the organization. The annual report is the prime artefact, item in a communication strategy of an organization and its tactical representation and content drives the organization narrative. If an organization lives in a legislative environment with mandatory reporting structures, then the annual report is the instrument of delivery. When organizations understand the significance of annual reports as narrative drivers, then their existence is extraordinary.

Courtis (1997, p. 269) similar to Ditlevsen (2010, p. 163) said that each year, public corporations are legally required to communicate their financial results to their shareholders and others. The annual report is the primary corporate document by which this is achieved and could be analysed for example from an accounting or financial perspective or from a communicative and linguistic perspective Ditlevsen (2010, p. 163).

Bhatia (2010, p. 39) reached to a similar conclusion stating that corporate annual reports have long been considered the pulse of corporate realities, their main purpose being to inform their shareholders about the performance and health of the company, specifically its successes and failures, current problems, and prospects for its future development. Annual reports seem to change their function from "informing and reporting" to increasingly "promoting" the companies by a strategic underplaying of corporate weaknesses.

Companies use strategically the annual reports to inform their audiences about the results, to deliver organizational messages at a global level and to the general public. The terminology, the language used in the annual reports by the organizations should be familiar and customized to the audience. The annual reports are massive and complex texts read by the owners, managers, employees, investors, financial institutions, government, media and other publics for a variety of reasons, such as for making business decisions, assessments, negotiations, offers. (Zanola, 2010, p. 11).

Annual reports are write and prepared by multiple parties of an organization. For example, Zanola (2010) revealed that the accountants write and formulate the technical documents of the annual reports, while managers, chief financial officer, and chief executive officer write and arrange the non-technical documents of

annual reports. In addition, Zanola (2010, pp. 14 - 15) said that the annual reports differ from country to country and are a reflection of the local culture, language, economy and legal systems. Globalization of annual reports in terms of texts, figures and images represent opportunities for the companies to increase their earnings and investments.

One of the most important sections in the annual reports is the President's or Chairman's letter to shareholders. Stanton (2017, p. 51) mentioned that the annual report should begin with chairmain's or chief executive's report which could be used to present a strong leadership image or to attract government legislation. Bhatia (2008) pointed out that the letter often has a fairly standardized seven-move structure with some variation within this general discourse structure: 1. looking back - overview of the review period; 2. identifying important themes - claims made; 3. elaboration on themes - evidence for claims; 4. expectations and promises - projections for future; 5. expressions of gratitude - thanks to staff and shareholders; 6. looking forward (revisiting point 1); 7. positive and polite closing. (Bhatia, 2008, p. 170)

Most organizations choose to go digital and publish online these reports of activity issued on a yearly basis. Reynolds (2000, p 66) refers to the rapid trend towards the replacement of printed annual reports by online electronic reports and notes that these developments in electronic reporting over the previous years changed the relationship between companies and their shareholders. The author points out that Citigate-MARCHCom put its first annual report online in 1996, through the development of CAROL (Company Annual Report on Line) and EDGAR (Electronic Data Gathering And Reporting). In 1997 CAROLWorld offered free connection to over 3000 online annual reports of top European, US and Asian companies.

3. Literature Review

For this study, we have selected the following major academic journals where we have searched scientific articles using the key words "annual report":

1) Journal of business communication;

2) Journal of specialized communication;

3) Journal technical writing and communication;

4) Discourse and communication;

5) Journal of international business studies;

6) Accounting, organizations and society;

7) Corporate communications: an international journal;

8) Journal of intellectual capital;

9) Social responsibility journal.

We further limited our review to the ones that were most relevant, which included information about human resources, discourse types, texts categorizations, words and statements classifications, graphics types. Considering the criteria presented above, we retained from the selected journals a total of 20 articles published between 1981 and 2015.

With reference to the annual reports, we are interested about their structure and in this sense, we are exemplifying the studies performed by Beattie, Dhanani, Jones (2008) and Bhatia (2010). Beattie, Dhanani, Jones (2008) outline the structure and form of the annual report, narratives in annual reports, financial graphs in annual reports, pictures in annual reports. The authors also reveal comparisons of annual reports in structure and form, content, graph usage as well as changes in the structure and form considering total page count, regulatory page count, voluntary page count, narrative page count, pictorial page count. Moreover, Bhatia (2010) reveal that annual reports are structured on four types of discourses:

1. accounting discourse - that forms a major part of the annual reports, being certified by public accountants; 2. discourse of economics - found in the financial review section of the annual report; 3. public relations discourse - found in the chairman's letter to shareholders; 4. legal discourse (disclaimers) - necessary to comprehend the full implications of the information disclosed in the annual report.

From these academic articles, we can conclude that besides Beattie, Dhanani, Jones (2008) there are also authors like Courtis (1997) and Penrose (2008) who focus in their studies on annual reports on graphics analyses, such as type of graphs (column, bar, line, others) and length of time series graphed (under 5 years, 5 years, over 5 years).

Speaking about texts structure from the annual reports, Ditlevsen (2010), similar to Meek, Roberts, Gray (1995), revealed a catalogue of subtexts that are usually

presented in the annual reports by organizations. Meek, Roberts, Gray (1995, pp 569 - 570) classify the texts from annual reports as including:

1. strategic information: general corporate information; corporate strategy; acquisitions and disposals; research and development; future prospects; 2. non-financial information: information about directors; employee information; social policy and value added information; 3. financial information: segmental information; financial review; foreign currency information; stock price information; 4. overall disclosures.

Furthermore, Ditlevsen (2010, p. 169) specify the following catalogue of subtexts available in the annual reports: 1. financial position of company - balance sheet; 2. general performance of the company - operational review; 3. selected topics of specific company matters - employees; 4. statements - auditor's report; 5. at a glance - financial highlights; 6. views of the management - CEO letter; 7. topics of special interest to shareholders - shareholder information; 8. presentation of company management; 9. communication data; 10. meta-communicative subtexts.

The texts from annual reports related to employees are analysed by Hutt (2010), Hutt (2012), Branswijc and Everaert (2012), Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012), Dominguez (2012), Goebel (2015) and these authors highlight in their studies the human capital and how the information related to employees is disclosed and structured in the annual reports. Hutt (2010, 2012) identifies if employees are referred by CEOs in their annual letters, while Branswijc and Everaert (2012, p. 55) mention that the human resources section include information related to: staff breakdown by age, department, function; education and training; rate of staff turnover and comments on turnover; health and safety; recruitment and career opportunities; remuneration; employees attitude and communication activities. A different classification related to human resources information available in the annual reports is offered by Goebel (2015, p. 708) who emphasizes the following categories: qualified staff, personnel expenses, employee turnover, employees' length of service, remuneration system, vocational training, professional development and employee training, internal incentive measures, as well as employees working in research and development.

Moving into more details, Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012) and Dominguez (2012) provide a profounder structure and classification related to employees' measurement, trainings, relations, welfare, and safety displayed in the annual reports.

Employees measurement is defined by Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012, p. 200) as comprising indicators like: employee numbers, value-added per employee, years of services, median age of employee, vocational qualification, know-how, employee morale and attitude, duties and responsibilities, revenue per employee, employee competency index, productivity per employee, pre-tax profit per employee, turnover rate, assets per employee, profile of top management. Correspondingly, Dominguez (2012, pp. 9-10) speaks about staff performance which include profits per employee, income per employee, cost per employee.

Regarding employees trainings referred in the annual reports, Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012, p. 200) mention indicators like: continuing education offer to employees, career development, vocational development, training, recruitment/retention, international exposure, exchange program, knowledge sharing program. Despite this fact, Dominguez (2012, pp. 9-10) presents employees trainings as including: days, hours and cost of staff training; professional qualifications, responsibilities, talent, innovation, experience; staff selection (recruiting excellence, internal promotion); training output; human capital management; human capital management information model.

Human relations revealed in the annual reports are presented by Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012, p. 200) as including the indicators: union/club activity, employee thanked, employee opportunity to be involved with community, engagement with business community, recognition from employer, engagement with employer, external recognition. Whereas Dominguez (2012, pp. 9-10) describes the interaction with staff as comprising: internal communication; staff feedback; staff as customer communication, customer satisfaction; rising communication, suggestions, and ideas.

Employees welfare from annual reports includes, as per Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012, p. 200), indicators like: long term benefit, short term benefit, employee share and option ownership plan, working environment, loan for employee, family welfare, termination benefit. In the same way, Dominguez (2012, pp. 9-10) refers to staff compensation, incentives, motivation as containing: salaries, activities, total costs, salary according to sex and qualifications; incentives, nursery, indirect remuneration; stock options; salary incentives.

Human resources safety from annual reports is described by Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012, p. 200) with indicators like: safety policy/procedures, quality, activities, awards, while Dominguez (2012, pp. 9-10) speaks about health and safety at work

as comprising besides health and safety, also the prevention, health campaigns, day lost, absenteeism.

In addition, Dominguez (2012, pp. 9-10) points out staff recruiting defined through flexi-hours, reduction of working day, job stability, youth opportunities as well as ethical information as comprising: workers' rights and industrial relations - relation between management and unions; workers' rights; job satisfaction. Husin, Hooper, Olesen (2012, p. 200) make known directors related measurement (profile of directors, duties and responsabilities, awards) and equity issues as counting indicators like: employees by race, gender, religion, disabled, meritocracy, diversity.

Concluding, there are various coding schemes and categories used by the authors in their academic studies to classify the human resources information available in the annual reports and most of them include employees' descriptions, training and development, health and safety, remuneration and recruitment systems, communication and interaction practices.

Moving forward regarding the content included in the annual reports, Branswijc and Everaert (2012), Goebel (2015), Husin, Hooper and Olesen (2012) highlight in their studies the employee turnover - information communicated by the companies usually in the human resources section from their annual reports. Employee turnover is a key indicator that reflects the percentage of employees who leave the organizations during a fiscal year. If the employee turnover registers high percentages, this could determine companies to analyse the reasons of leaving and to find new ways to increase job satisfaction.

Moreover, Adams and Harte (1998), Penrose (2008) as well as Cahaya, Porter, Tower and Brown (2012) study as well the content of annual reports emphasizing the women disclosure. Adams and Harte (1998) display the results of their study related to women disclosure using the following sections found in the annual reports: general disclosure, recruitment, training, promotion, career development, monitoring, and harassment policy. Cahaya, Porter, Tower and Brown (2012) revealed that very few companies from Indonesia disclosed information about salary of men to women, the highest level of communication being for issues about skills management and lifelong learning programs for employees. Moreover, Penrose (2008) mention that women are underrepresented in the annual report photos.

Speaking about the content of CEO letters found at the beginning of the annual reports, Kohut and Segars (1992), Thomas (1997), Hildebrand and Snyder (1981), Crombie and Samujh (1999) examine the characteristics of the Chairman's letters. Kohut and Segars (1992) focus on the time and thematic perspectives, highlighting the recurrent subjects presented by companies in their annual reports, Hildebrand and Snyder (1981) study the positive and negative words utilization, while Crombie and Samujh (1999) highlight strategic communication through being negative in certain contexts. Moreover, Thomas (1997, p. 53) emphasize six verb types available in the CEO letters (considering the Halliday functionalist theory): 1. material - verbs of doing or happening (movement, doing, occurring, action); 2. mental - verbs of perception, affection, cognition (sensing, feeling, seeing, thinking); 3. relational - verbs of attribution or identification (being, identifying, attributing); 4. behavioural - verbs of behaving (smiling, daydreaming, hesitating); 5. verbal - verbs of saying (said, asked, told); 6. existential (there is, there are).

Besides the CEO letters analyses, Rutherford (2005) examine the words frequencies in the annual reports and group them into: general words (Europe, management, market, services), financial performance (loss, margin, revenue, sales, turnover), financial position (asset, borrowings, debt), general financial terms (currency, exchange, expenditure, interest), comparison (rate, reduction, up), self-reference (company, division), temporal (continued, completed). Annual reports are a genre of organizational discourses that can be studied using different types of content analyses. Slattery (2015, p. 78) highlights that researches on annual reports are realized using: narrative analysis, quantitative and qualitative analysis of content, writing style and tone analysis, thematic analysis, effectiveness analysis, performance and readability analysis, positive and negative news analysis, market sentiment analysis, summary generation.

4. Conclusions

In this research, communication is appreciated as an important organizational process. The findings of this study contribute to the benefit of organizations taking into account that nowadays strategic organizational communication plays a significant role in the larger field of communication studies. The challenges faced by organizations in communication, justify the need for more effective and ingenious organizational communication approaches and strategies. The derived outcomes of this study promote proficient strategical organizational

communication and commitment. This research represents a strategic organizational communication model in order to be used as reference and implemented by the organizations in their communication policies and strategies.

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