

**A BALANCING ACT: STAKEHOLDER ENABLEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT TOWARDS MULTIPLE
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The increasing pluralistic business environment, where stakeholders continually challenge the treatise of organisational primacy, places more pressure on organisations to address and prioritise diverse stakeholder expectations. Stakeholders are central to the success of organisations, which necessitates engagement, transparency and responses to stakeholder concerns. Despite consensus in existing literature on the significance of stakeholder engagement, no common understanding on what it entails exists. Another gap is to approach stakeholder engagement from multiple stakeholder vantage points and to explore the role of the strategic communication professional in facilitating stakeholder engagement.

The digital network revolution, among others, has brought about a “collaborative turn” that allows innovative and engaging opportunities to obtain valuable information from stakeholders through interactive conversations. These forces resulted in a paradigmatic shift in strategic communication where emergent processes and the rejection of linearity become prevalent. The role of the strategic communication professional is to facilitate a stakeholder engagement strategy that elicits dialogue, consultation and reciprocal relationships that are evolutionary and mutually defined.

Based on this contextualisation, this paper proposes a theoretical, conceptual framework for multiple stakeholder engagement by drawing from the principles of polyphonic strategic communication. Depending on the controllability of voices, a polyphonic communication perspective for multiple stakeholder engagement allows interplay between a centralised strategic communication approach through stakeholder enablement and a more decentralised communication approach to elicit stakeholder empowerment. This paper serves as foundation for further empirical validation of the proposed multiple stakeholder engagement framework and emergent, multi-voiced approaches in strategic communication.

Keywords: *Stakeholder engagement; polyphony; polyphonic communication; strategic communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

The current business environment is increasingly sensitive to power relations and necessitates organisations to acknowledge the meaning and value that could be derived from diverse stakeholder perspectives (Johnston, 2014). This, as cited by Johnston (2014), requires an awareness of “privileging certain groups and the marginalization of others, but highlights the relational, and therefore moral, nature of our social and organizational experiences” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 409). This places renewed emphasis on the importance of stakeholder engagement as a means to co-create meaning and solutions. It also provides the opportunity to realise the role of the strategic communication professional as facilitator of a stakeholder engagement process that elicits dialogue, consultation and reciprocal relationships that are evolutionary and mutually defined (Cornelissen, 2014).

To embrace the interactive network society, contemporary research in strategic communication has sparked interest in emergent strategy as opposed to deliberate, planned strategy formulation. From this perspective, organisational management “abandons the prerogative of intentions over strategy formulation and flattens the way for a collective learning process” (Zerfass & Schneider, 2018, p. 21). Emergent strategies arise from decentralised interactions and develops incidentally in a ritualistic rather than linear fashion. Research in this milieu include, among others, Zerfass and Schneider’s (2018) proposition of polyphony in strategic communication as a multi-voiced communication strategy that requires a mindset of openness and an appreciation of diverse voices. Essentially, it is argued that strategic communication professionals should step down from managing the organisation’s communication by allowing other actors to speak on behalf of the organisation.

Stakeholder engagement is regarded as an “under-theorised area” (Greenwood, 2007, p. 318; Sloan, 2009), specifically within the field of public relations and communication (Dhanesh, 2017; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017). Rhodes, Bergstrom, Lok and Cheng (2014) concede that the best approach to engage with diverse stakeholders “is still inconclusive” (p. 84). In congruence, Dhanesh (2017) explicitly states that “the field [public relations] lacks a practice-relevant, theoretically informed model and definition of engagement that can inform practice and chart future directions of research” (p. 925). To address the need to expand the body of knowledge on stakeholder engagement, the purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement with a specific emphasis on the role that the strategic communication professional could play in this process. This will be done by drawing from the principles of polyphonic strategic communication (Zerfass & Schneider, 2018). Such an approach, which departs significantly from normative theory (the excellence theory) and functionalist approaches in strategic communication, is essential to expedite the uptake of emergent and critical approaches in the field. The proposition of such a framework thus aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on stakeholder engagement and provides a starting point for further empirical validation for multi-voiced, emergent approaches in strategic communication.

The paper will be structured as follows: An elaboration on strategic versus secondary stakeholders will be provided followed by a discussion of engagement within an organisational context, as outlined in public relations, communication management and business management literature. This discussion will specifically focus on the various perspectives on engagement, an overview of existing stakeholder engagement frameworks and engagement complexities to culminate in various engagement considerations for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement. An elaboration of the role of the strategic communication professional in stakeholder engagement will be provided followed by a discussion on polyphonic communication as a framework for multiple stakeholder engagement. This paper will be concluded with an acknowledgement of the contributions and limitations of this paper as well as directions for future research.

2. STRATEGIC VS SECONDARY STAKEHOLDERS

Since this paper aims to propose an approach for multiple stakeholder engagement, it is essential to define the concept “stakeholder” and to differentiate between strategic and secondary stakeholders. This elaboration will be of a generic nature, as the proposed approach will not be customised to a specific organisation or industry.

The word “stakeholder” was first utilised in 1963, in management literature at the Stanford Research Institute to generalise the concept of “stockholder” as the only group to which the organisation should react (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010). This gave rise to the definition of stakeholders as groups that are essential for organisational survival. Based on this notion, Edward Freeman (1984) developed the stakeholder concept as a mutually influential approach to strategic management, in which he broadly defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives” (p. 46). The stakeholder concept concentrates on the maximisation of value for all parties who are aligned with the organisation’s strategy, to ensure the fulfilment of mutually beneficial objectives (Freeman et al., 2010).

Organisations have a reciprocal relationship of influence and impact with specific stakeholders (AA1000AP, 2018). To accept accountability for stakeholders on whom an organisation has an impact, does not imply that an organisation has to adhere to all stakeholder requests or that it is relieved from making its own decisions (AA1000APS, 2018). A starting point for a multiple stakeholder engagement approach is therefore to align stakeholder engagement with the broader stakeholder identification strategy of the organisation (Slabbert, 2018), which should in essence provide a differentiation between strategic and secondary stakeholders. Secondary stakeholders are not deemed essential to the survival of the organisation (O’Higgins & Morgan, 2006), while strategic stakeholders are “those groups that may limit the autonomy of the organisation in pursuing and realising its strategic goals” (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 31). Slabbert (2012) asserts that strategic stakeholders ensure the achievement of organisational objectives as well as the future existence and survival of the organisation, and will always be present and relevant over time. Gao and Zang (2006) aver that sustainable development in the organisation can only be achieved through a multi-stakeholder approach. From this perspective, for the purpose of this paper, multiple-stakeholder engagement encapsulates short-term engagement with secondary and continuous engagement with strategic stakeholders, depending on the identified issue that holds mutual saliency and the controllability of voices. It is posited that an organisation should continually engage with strategic stakeholders towards sustainable relationship building and engage reactively with secondary stakeholders based on a healthy working relationship (Slabbert, 2018).

3. ENGAGEMENT WITHIN AN ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

The following discussion will provide an overview of engagement in an organisational context evident in public relations, communication management and business management literature. Although this paper aims to propose an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement in line with contemporary developments in strategic communication, it is noteworthy to consider that an organisation must select a mode of engagement that corresponds with their stakeholders’ needs (Dhanesh, 2017).

3.1 Engagement perspectives

Despite the increasing importance of engagement brought about by digital media, the concept of engagement remains vague and is often used synonymously (and inaccurately) with interaction, commitment, involvement, dialogue and participation (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017). In this vein, Verčič and Vokić (2017) assert that engagement in public relations literature is used as an umbrella term to encapsulate the organisation’s wide array of endeavours to involve stakeholders in its activities. Engagement in public relations, communication management and business management has predominantly been studied under the following themes: digital engagement (Smith & Taylor, 2017; 2016; Bowen, 2013); employee engagement (Ewing, Men & O’Neil, 2019; Sievert & Scholtz, 2017; Verčič & Vokić, 2017); corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Devin & Lane, 2014); corporate governance, sustainability and integrated reporting (Martinez, Peattie & Vazquez-Brust, 2019; Romero, Ruiz & Fernandez-Feijoo, 2018; Fasan & Mio, 2016; Manetti & Bellucci, 2016; Rhodes, et al., 2014; Mathur, Price & Austin, 2008); corporate reputation (Rensburg & De Beer, 2011) and public/stakeholder engagement (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Dhanesh, 2017; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Johnston, 2014; Greenwood, 2007). Across these thematic engagement studies, specific engagement perspectives emerged which will be outlined in the sections to follow.

3.1.1 Engagement associated with and/or situated within dialogue

Dialogue is an ethical process of communication that allows creation of meaning, understanding, co-creation of reality and considerate and compassionate interactions (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Dhanesh (2017) notes that most engagement studies associated with dialogue attempts to conceptualise the notion of stakeholder engagement with actions such as “consultation, listening, involvement, openness, and most, importantly, dialogue” (p. 926). From this perspective, stakeholder engagement is considered a “network-based, relational and process-orientated approach” and is a “trust-based collaboration between individuals and/or social institutions with different objectives that can be achieved together” (Kaur & Lodhia, 2014, p. 55). More specifically, stakeholder engagement represents the organisation’s endeavours to involve organisational stakeholders in decision-making, to encourage participation in organisational activities and to recognise the potential influence the actions of one might have on the other (Magee, 2012; Noland & Phillips, 2010). Situating stakeholder engagement within dialogue enables organisations and stakeholders to make decisions and create social capital (Taylor & Kent, 2014). They further argue that engagement is an orientation that both influences and guides interaction among stakeholders.

Motion, Haar and Leitch (2012) argue that engagement actually extends beyond dialogue as it entails stakeholder involvement in agenda setting, decision-making and policy formation. Further critique in associating stakeholder engagement with dialogue resides within the use of two-way symmetrical communication, which in itself has been highly criticised. It is argued that power asymmetries between an organisation and its stakeholders cannot be avoided; organisations might be unable to create the conditions of equality that dialogue necessitates. It might even be unrealistic for organisations to try and reach these conditions as they might have to relinquish organisational objectives imperative for survival (Dhanesh, 2017).

It is essential to note that dialogic communicators also have individual and/or organisational objectives to reach but the aim to achieve an understanding and to explore new possibilities obtain precedence over these objectives (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Taylor and Kent (2014) further state that the dialogic communicator will enter an interaction with their own framework of beliefs, values and attitudes to act in the best interest of their organisation and stakeholders, but should be willing to be changed by the encounter. This perspective corresponds with the concept of ‘inclusivity’ as a core accountability principle of the AA1000 Accountability Principle Standards (AA1000APS) and one of the four philosophical underpinnings of the King IV report on Corporate Governance. Inclusivity is regarded as an enabler of stakeholder engagement and encapsulates a “commitment to be accountable to those stakeholders on whom the organisation has an influence and to facilitate their participation in identifying issues and collaboratively working towards solutions” (Slabbert, 2018).

3.1.2 Engagement as control

According to Mathur et al. (2008), stakeholder engagement as a control or management endeavour represents a practical approach aimed at identifying stakeholders who could assist the organisation in achieving its objectives. This is in line with Greenwood’s (2007) managerial control and social construction perspective and Sloan’s (2009) controlling approach, where stakeholder engagement is conducted in line with the organisation’s one-sided objectives (i.e., stakeholders need to be managed, evaluated and monitored). Engagement as control is associated with asymmetrical or two-way asymmetrical communication practices where the message creator controls the channel and content of information (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Where the focus of dialogical communication lies within generating an understanding through conversation, engagement as control is only applied as a means to more effectively execute the organisation’s objectives.

3.1.3 Engagement associated with ethics

This approach to stakeholder engagement, rooted in participatory governance, equity, transparency and ethics, regards stakeholders as citizens with the right to value the process of participation for democratic reasons (Mathur et al., 2008). Dialogic engagement also falls within this perspective, as dialogue is considered one of

the most ethical forms of communication because it contributes towards alleviating power relationships, it values individual dignity and aims to involve participants in conversation and decision-making (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Noland and Phillips (2010) state that ethical stakeholder engagement encapsulates a notion of “seeing stakeholders as individuals with names and faces” (p. 41). Due to the interconnected relationship between stakeholders and the organisation, they argue that stakeholders should be engaged before the strategy of the organisation is even compiled. Similar to dialogical engagement, ethical engagement also accepts that the organisation’s objectives are subordinate to their stakeholders’ objectives and the environment in which it operates (Noland & Phillips, 2010).

3.1.4 Engagement associated with organisational behaviour and elements of psychology

Devin and Lane (2014) define engagement as a “dynamic motivated affective state that brings voluntary extra-role behaviors, and is characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity and empowerment that an individual public experiences in interactions with the organization over time” (p. 438). In the context of employee engagement, engagement is regarded as an agile and vigorous psychological state that serves as a connection between the organisation and employees (Welch, 2011). Verčič and Vokić (2017) argue that most definitions of engagement resonates with Kahn’s (1990) work in defining employee engagement as a process where employees express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally in enacting their roles in the organisation. In this vein, engagement implies a psychological and physical presence.

3.2 Overview of stakeholder engagement frameworks

Despite the equivocal nature of stakeholder engagement, various frameworks exist that provide specific stakeholder engagement criteria and/or standards. In business management literature, this include, among others, Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation; The Environment Council’s (TEC’s) stakeholder evaluation and benchmark criterion; the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2015) and the AA1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standard (AA1000SES, 2015). In public relations and communication management literature, Devin and Lane’s (2014) framework for CSR engagement and Dhanesh’s (2017) model of engagement in public relations are seemingly the most prominent. For the purpose of this paper, the AA1000SES and the model of engagement in public relations (Dhanesh, 2017) will be used as benchmark to build towards a multiple stakeholder engagement framework.

3.2.1 AA1000SES

The AA1000SES, developed by AccountAbility (a leading global research, consulting and standards organisation) is an in-depth approach providing guidelines on the purpose, scope and process of stakeholder engagement. This framework consists of three sections that serve as foundation, preparation and implementation of stakeholder engagement (Slabbert, 2018; AA1000APS, 2018; AA1000SES, 2015)

- *Commitment and integration:* To ensure that stakeholder engagement is aligned with the culture and organisational functions, adherence to the principles of the AA1000APS (2018), namely inclusivity, materiality, responsiveness and impact should be in place: An inclusive organisation accepts accountability to those on which it has an impact and those who have an impact on the organisation. It allows the organisation to enable stakeholders’ participation in identifying relevant material issues and solutions. Material issues are identified by means of a materiality determination process which also involves the prioritisation of material issues that occur simultaneously. Responsiveness encapsulates the process of relevant reaction to material issues and measuring its impact on the economy, environment, society, stakeholders and the organisation.
- *Purpose scope and stakeholders:* This section of the framework focuses on identifying the purpose (why), the stakeholders involved in the engagement (who) and scope (what and how) of the specific stakeholder engagement endeavour (Slabbert, 2018). It should be noted that the engagement process will be driven by the availability of engagement resources. These engagement resources will also determine the methods of engagement.

- *Stakeholder engagement process*: The actual engagement has to be planned, prepared, implemented and reviewed (Slabbert, 2018).

3.2.2 Dhanesh's model of engagement in public relations

By drawing from issues management, the situational theory of publics and the concepts of dialogue and ethical communication, Dhanesh's (2017) model for engagement in public relations entails the following:

This model is built on salience as an antecedent of engagement, with the perspective that topics of mutual interest connect publics and organisations. Salient stakeholders, as outlined by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) in their theory of stakeholder identification and salience (TISIS), refer to stakeholders with power, legitimacy and urgency. Similarly, an issue of mutual saliency sparks engagement. This is congruent with the concept of "materiality" as stipulated in the AA1000APS (2018) which refers to "a topic that will substantively influence and impact the assessments, decisions, actions and performance of an organisation and its stakeholders in the short, medium and/or long-term" (AA1000APS, 2018, p. 20). It could therefore be argued that the organisation and its stakeholders will engage on material/salient issues. Salient or material issues are normally evident in "issue arenas" which is regarded as "communication networks in which active stakeholders discuss topics and involve passive stakeholders" (Hellsten, Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019, p. 35). They argue that these places of communicative interaction allow active stakeholders (authors) to put topics on the agenda, initiate social change and mobilise other stakeholders. Organisations that participate in the conversation could actively engage in interpreting and reformulating the issue of discussion as it could affect the organisation's legitimacy (Hellsten et al., 2019).

Dhanesh's model further indicates that an affective and cognitive engagement with a salient issue triggers a search for more information that could range from passive information seeking endeavours to more active information seeking activities. Organisations could vary their communication models depending on the affected publics' communicative behaviour. One-way dissemination and public information models could be useful for passive information seekers, while dialogic, participatory and collaborative models of communication could be more conducive to active information seekers. These communication models are applied across a continuum of engagement as control and engagement as collaboration depending on the communicative behaviour of the target publics. From the public's perspective, being engaged encapsulates cognitive (problem and constraint recognition), affective (emotional connection to the issue) and behavioural (online and offline material/communicative expression of thought and emotion) dimensions.

From this perspective, Dhanesh (2017) asserts that "engagement is an affective, cognitive and behavioural state wherein publics and organisations who share mutual interests in salient topics interact along continua that range from passive to active and from control to collaboration, and is aimed at goal attainment, adjustment and adaption for both publics and organizations" (p. 931).

Existing engagement literature also emphasises various engagement complexities that should be deliberated for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement.

3.3 Engagement complexities

Dhanesh (2017) contends that a stakeholder will only seek information on an issue if the issue is highly salient to the respective stakeholder. Despite the high degree of saliency and the stakeholder being affectively, cognitively and behaviourally engaged, it still does not guarantee that this stakeholder will interact with the organisation on the issue. The stakeholder might still choose to seek information from mediated sources or active, connected influencers and/or opinion leaders. This might be ascribed to the fact that specific stakeholder groups often quantitatively and qualitatively dominate discourse in engagement (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016). The contrary of this engagement complexity could also be true: Instead of engaging directly with a specific stakeholder group, organisations might find it easier to engage with social media influencers and/or active connected stakeholders to reach a wider group of stakeholders.

The organisation might be reluctant to engage in dialogic communication with stakeholders in order to maintain control over communication, especially when social media is used as an engagement medium and/or during crisis situations (Dhanesh, 2017). Furthermore, stakeholders might be unwilling to share information if there is no personal benefit or gain for sharing information. There could also be an overall lack of listening to others and a commitment to collaborate (Manetti & Belucci, 2016).

Taylor and Kent (2014) specifically warns that *dialogue* should not be confused with *dialogic*. Dialogic precedes dialogue and encapsulates the procedural steps in creating dialogue. Furthermore, mutual trust between communicative parties enables dialogical engagement. It could thus be argued that there are various foundational enablers to dialogic engagement.

The AA1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standard (2015) specifically underlines engagement complexities for both the organisation and stakeholders. Stakeholder complexities could also include participation fatigue; disruptive stakeholders; uninformed and disempowered stakeholders; and conflict between participating stakeholders. Organisational complexities could further include, among others, a waste of time and financial resources; strong criticism; an inability to meet the organisation's expectations and a conflict of interest.

3.4 Engagement considerations

The above literature review on engagement perspectives, frameworks and complexities culminated in various engagement considerations, which could be used as foundation for a polyphonic strategic communication perspective to multiple stakeholder engagement: Firstly, engagement between the organisation and stakeholders are based on a topic of mutual salience. The organisation has to ensure that these issues are actively identified. Secondly, although not always the case, engagement is intended to be a dialogic process where communicative parties collaborate towards the co-creation of meaning and solutions to a salient issue. Thirdly, there are important antecedents that enable stakeholder engagement. The organisation has to ensure that these prerequisites are in place. Fourthly, despite the existence of engagement antecedents and the necessary platforms to engage, it does not guarantee that the respective stakeholder will engage with the organisation. The organisation might also find that it could be more beneficial to engage with active, connected stakeholders to reach a wider a group of stakeholders. It is thus essential that the organisation build and foster relations with related opinion leaders. Lastly, engagement is seemingly a deliberate process towards the resolution of a salient issue and a means to build sustainable stakeholder relationships with strategic stakeholders. Engagement with secondary stakeholders could be regarded as more reactive in nature based on working relationships. From this perspective, the stakeholder engagement process is directly linked with the overall stakeholder identification strategy of the organisation.

5. THE ROLE OF THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL IN STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

It is widely accepted that the communication function in an organisation plays a fundamental role in the engagement process. Jelen-Sanchez (2017) contends that the cultivation of engagement is perceived as one of the core tasks of the communication professional while Devin and Lane (2014) regard communication as an essential "building block" of engagement. To elaborate on the essence of engagement, Verwey, Benecke and Muir (2017) state that communication professionals "are responsible for facilitating the sense and meaning making activities between diverse groups" and ensuring that these groups "are given a share of voice to state their views and collaborate in creating new knowledge" (p. 76). Furthermore, the task of communicators is increasingly to create connection within a disengaged world (Verčič & Vokić, 2018; Sievert & Scholtz, 2017).

Slabbert (2018) draws on the aligning dimension of strategic communication (consisting of boundary spanning, environmental scanning and bridging) proposed by Invernezzi and Romenti (2015) to emphasise the role of the strategic communication professional in stakeholder engagement. This dimension emphasises that in line with the objectives of the organisation towards achieving its mission, the strategic communication professional plays a critical role in identifying material issues and topics for engagement through boundary spanning and environmental scanning activities. Verwey et al. (2017) assert that when the contemporary strategic

communication professional embraces and expands boundary-spanning activities, it will “enable collaboration between variously situated participants from a variety of disciplinary and social, and institutional contexts, and to embrace mechanisms of stakeholder participation” (p. 74). Through bridging, the strategic communication professional acts as facilitator in creating a network of mutual responsibility by eliciting conversation and debate, and stimulating dissent with strategic stakeholders. To establish accountability, it is essential that the strategic communication professional facilitate transparent and consistent organisational statements and actions. Thus, the emphasis should be on bridging stakeholder claims and actions by ensuring that the organisation adapts its activities to conform to the expectations of strategic stakeholders.

Based on the this foundational literature review, the following section will focus on polyphony in strategic communication to specifically underline the role of the strategic communication professional in the stakeholder engagement process.

6. POLYPHONY IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Elements such as globalisation and interactive communication technologies have changed the traditional, modernistic organisational management context of efficacy, rigidity, hierarchy to control and divisions to facilitate authority to a postmodern context of effectiveness, flexibility, delaying to empower and sharing of knowledge through teamwork (Kemp, 2013). This, coupled with the increasingly pluralistic organisational environment, contributed to displacing the functional understanding of strategic communication as one-to-many communication with many-to-many communication (Zerfass & Schneider, 2018). In essence, this has led to the redefinition of the strategic communication function in the organisation (Verwey et al., 2017).

6.1 Strategic communication through a critical, postmodern lens

Strategic communication paradigms have evolved from a stringent managerial view to an emergent, reflective and multi-paradigmatic approach (Verwey et al., 2017). More specifically, mainstream strategic communication, situated within a modernistic paradigm that is driven by normative theories such as Grunig’s (1984) excellence theory, regarded the field as a “management orientated practice that can be strategically planned, tactically executed and empirically evaluated” (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017, p. 937). Strategic communication in this context is regarded as a means to influence, coordinate and control through functionalist, linear models of communication interaction (Deetz & McClellan, 2011). Definitions of strategic communication framed within a modernistic paradigm neglect emergent and pragmatic strategies; are too organisational centric and not inclusive of stakeholder interests; it discounts the constitutive role of communication in generating strategy and is too focused on strategic communication professionals as opposed to the communication activities of other organisational members (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Werder, 2018). In contrast, contemporary strategic communication draws from both a *postmodern* paradigm, thereby viewing communication as a fluid notion created through discourse and a *critical* perspective, thus discouraging the concept of managerialism (where managers assign workers to authoritarian workplace activities predominantly to benefit themselves) and power structures (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017). In this context, Zerfass et al. (2018) define strategic communication as “all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other to engage in conversations of strategic significance and goals” (p. 493). This definition has several implications that should be taken into consideration (Zerfass et al., 2018): Although purposeful communication allows for the sharing of meaning and ideas, deepens mutual understanding and creates meaningful action (Hodges & Gill, 2015), not all purposive communication will be strategic. Since conversations of strategic significance will occur in various arenas, ranging from global spheres to individual conversations, communicators should have an acute awareness of the changing communication landscape, the technological drivers and various influencers thereof. Communication includes both messaging and listening which could be disseminated through various kinds of earned, paid, owned and shared media channels. The term “entity” should be interpreted as both a broad and scalable term: Broadly speaking, it refers to corporations, governments, non-profits, social movements and known individuals in the public sphere. A topic will be in the public sphere, which is regarded as a “network of points of interest”, as communicators, as points in the network, communicate about it (Bentele & Nothhaft,

2010, p. 114). As a scalable term, it comprises an actor or group of actors with a specific sphere of responsibility, a specified purpose in the sphere and a limited amount of resources to fulfil the respective purpose.

Heide, von Pletzen, Simonsson and Falkheimer (2018) further indicate that some core assumptions of the Communicative Constitution of the organisation (CCO) approach (which is a collection of perspectives on the “role of communication in the ontology of the organizations” (p. 456)) are significant towards a contemporary understanding of strategic communication:

Bottom-up: Organisations emerge from bottom-up, not top-down, which implies that the organisation is the result of continuous sense-making and communication. Similarly, Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013) state that contemporary strategic communication should favour bottom-up communication where meaning is created by the communication process itself.

Emergency: Emergency sprout from Mintzberg’s idea that strategies are not only planned but are also emergent (Winkler & Etter, 2018). In line with the notion of ‘the organisation as becoming’ (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), emergency is concerned with how organisational members construct their social reality (Graetz, Rimmer, Lawrence & Smith, 2006). It is thus concerned with how organisational members constitute strategy through communication. Since emergency is established in both practice-based strategy research and constitutive approaches to communication, emergency is regarded as one of the greatest future challenges for strategic communication as it confronts the instrumental approach to strategy and the corresponding understanding of communication (Winkler & Etter, 2018).

Communicative practice: At the heart of the notion that strategy is something that is created and realised by organisational members, strategy is perceived as a communicative practice that is enacted at different organisational levels while the organisation continuously reinvents itself.

Polyphonic or multi-voiced: Polyphony within organisations refers to the notion of “multiple contrasting voices that express themselves simultaneously and autonomously” (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2015). This implies that an organisation is “constituted in a multiplicity of voices” (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2018). In proposing a dual narrative lens on strategic communication, Winkler and Etter (2018) contend that strategic communication hardly ever follows a linear process, but is usually disputed, circular and polyphonic in nature.

From the above discussion it could be deduced that contemporary strategic communication moves away from being a centralised, linear, planned and management-induced process towards a more decentralised, ritualistic process appreciative of diverse voices, emergency and continuous stakeholder input. Polyphony, as an emergent mode of strategic communication, will be used as a platform for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement.

6.2 Polyphonic strategic communication as multi-voiced strategy

The musical concept “polyphony” has been used in a myriad of disciplines, for example, literature, politics, theatre and film, psychology and philosophy. For the purpose of this paper, Zerfass and Schneider’s (2018) application of polyphony to organisational and corporate communication will be used as a contemporary development in strategic communication to ground multiple stakeholder engagement. In this context, they define polyphony as “the integration of a multiplicity of internal and external voices into communication processes that are performed on behalf of the organization” (p. 19). It is argued that the main challenge for strategic communication professionals lies in the integration of these diverse voices (plurality) into definite values of communication (unity) while simultaneously ensuring alignment with strategic communication objectives (Zerfass & Schneider, 2018).

A multi-voiced strategy will necessitate an open mindset and an appreciation of diverse voices where communication becomes the task of the entire organisation, not just the strategic communication professional (Zerfass & Schneider, 2018). In conceptualising an organisation-wide polyphonic communication policy, Zerfass and Schneider (2018) propose two conceptual perspectives, namely, deliberate emergency and radical

emergency, depending on the controllability of voices. It should be noted that tendencies towards deliberate emergency or radical emergency are proposed as it is argued that no strategy could fully be deliberate emergent or radical emergent. These two conceptual perspectives to polyphony are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Deliberate vs radical emergent polyphony in strategic communication

	Deliberate emergency	Radical emergency
Key proponents	All stakeholders take on a communicative role in the organisation. There is an acknowledgement to manage an organisation's communication by means of a communication department / strategic communication professional overseeing the communication function.	All stakeholders create communication. Strategic communication professionals or the communication department accepts, at the most, a coaching role to other stakeholders. All voices cooperate in the dissemination of organisational messages, the inclusion of valuable organisation-related information from internal and external constituencies and internal sharing of the acquired information.
Creation of unity	Unity arises from planning approaches and managing plurality through a set of strategic guidelines.	Unity develops out of plurality itself by securing common rules (that serve as the self-steering of voices by defining rules of their situational interplay).
Management of communication by the strategic communication professional / communication department	Centralised. The strategic communication professional selects appropriate speakers in the organisation and outlines communication barriers and the amount of freedom in which polyphony could unfold.	Decentralised. Semi-autonomous groups developing organic forms of communication management.
Multi-voiced approach	With a high controllability of voices and low autonomy of voices, voices are <i>enabled</i> to communicate.	With a high autonomy of voices and low controllability of voices, voices are <i>enabled</i> and <i>empowered</i> to implement communication independently.

From the above table it could be inferred that the higher the controllability of the voices, the more centralised the approach to emergency and the strategic communication function could be. Since strategic communication professionals are seemingly slow in the uptake of emergent developments in practice (Verwey & Overton-de Klerk, 2013), it could be argued that large organisations that are by default more rigid and hierarchical in structure will be more conducive towards a deliberate emergency approach, while a smaller, organically structured organisation could have a stronger tendency towards radical emergency.

Based on the preceding literature review and the proposed approach to emergency outlined in Table 1, the following section will provide an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement.

7. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT: A POLYPHONIC STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

From the above insights, stakeholder engagement could be defined, in the context of this paper and in line with a dialogical approach to engagement, as follows:

It is a collaborative effort that allows reciprocal decision-making between the organisation and strategic stakeholder/s brought about by a topic of mutual salience (material issue) that, depending on the controllability of voices, could emerge from plurality through stakeholder empowerment or by managing plurality through stakeholder enablement, towards the co-creation of meaning and resolutions to material issues.

In the context of this definition and proposed framework, it is argued that stakeholder engagement is facilitated by the strategic communication function/professional in the organisation either as a centralised function with clear guidelines to stakeholder engagement or in a more decentralised capacity by fulfilling a coaching role.

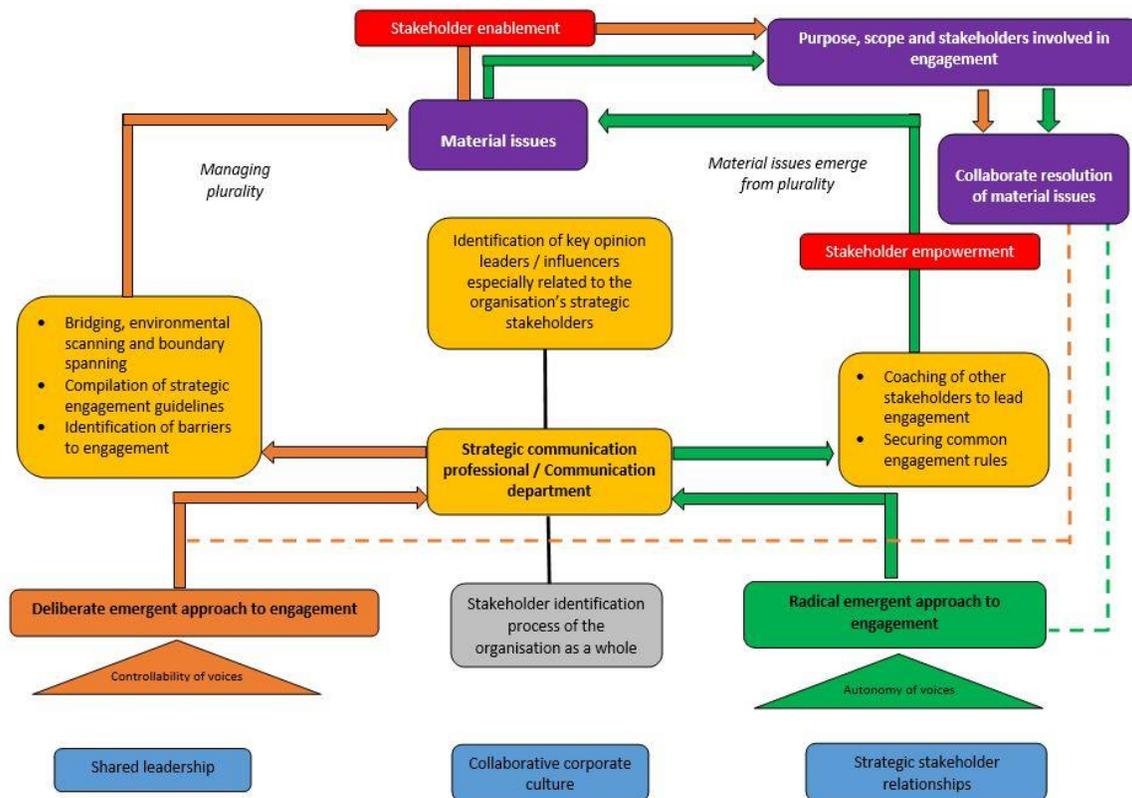


Figure 1: Multiple stakeholder engagement framework from a polyphonic strategic communication perspective

In congruence with a postmodern, critical strategic communication perspective proposed in this paper, it is argued that stakeholder engagement as a predetermined and categorised activity based on the degree of influence that a stakeholder has on the organisation, should be replaced by emerging forms of negotiation that necessitates a reconfiguration of social relations (Verwey, et al., 2017). Although the uptake of emergent approaches should become a key priority for the contemporary organisation, it should be noted that “the dominant coalition is still largely orientated towards instrumental strategy” (Winkler & Etter, 2018). The reality is therefore that it will take time for strategic communication professionals to become accustomed to these contemporary developments but will also require a reconfiguration of the structure, leadership and mindset of the organisation itself. Furthermore, as stated earlier, stakeholder engagement is, to some extent, a deliberate process as it is driven by salient issues, requires resources and is implemented as a means to build sustainable relationships with strategic stakeholders. It is for these actualities in practice that polyphonic strategic communication is applied to stakeholder engagement as it acknowledges contemporary emergent approaches and the reality of the current organisational context (which is seemingly still orientated towards functional strategy and communication). Based on this argument, the proposed framework is aligned with an integrative approach to the implementation of emergency as “there is place for both a functionalist and an emerging strategic process in organizations, which depends on transformational and visionary leadership and broad stakeholder participation” (Winkler & Etter, 2018). It is for these actualities in practice that polyphonic strategic communication is applied to stakeholder engagement as it acknowledges contemporary emergent approaches and the reality of the current organisational context. In doing so, this approach proposes that larger, hierarchal organisations could have stronger tendencies towards a deliberate emergent approach with

a centralised strategic communication function to stakeholder engagement. On the contrary, smaller, organic organisations could be more favourable to a radical emergent approach with a decentralised strategic communication function to stakeholder engagement.

Figure 1 firstly indicates that there are various antecedents to stakeholder engagement as a process. These include, but are not limited to, shared leadership, a collaborative corporate culture and strategic stakeholder relationships (Slabbert, 2018). The volatile business environment necessitates organisations to deviate from a leader-follower logic towards collaborative and shared leadership. Holbech (2015) argues that people within a team and organisation should lead each other. Such a leadership stance is essential to enable a collaborative organisational culture to elicit an innovative spirit within the organisation to allow cooperation and the creation of shared meaning. Furthermore, engagement is regarded as an outcome of an existing organisation-stakeholder relationship (Smith & Taylor, 2017). Similarly, the AA1000APS (2018) highlights that stakeholder engagement is directed by the maturity of an existing relationship. It is therefore argued that based on an existing organisation-stakeholder relationship, stakeholder engagement serves as a means to build forth towards *sustainable* relationships with strategic stakeholders and, depending on the material issue, engage with secondary stakeholders based on working relationships.

Whether a deliberate emergent or radical emergent approach is applied to stakeholder engagement, the strategic communication professional or communication department should cultivate relationships with key influencers and opinion leaders that are specifically relevant to the organisation and its strategic stakeholders. This in itself requires, as a starting point, an acknowledgement of the organisation's stakeholder identification process as a whole. The cultivation of relationships with these opinion leaders and influencers are critical as it was indicated that stakeholders might, despite a topic of mutual salience and the establishment of engagement platforms, decide to rather engage with a key influencer as opposed to engaging with the organisation.

As depicted in Figure 1, the difference between a deliberate and radical emergent approach to stakeholder engagement lies within the identification of material issues / topics of mutual salience. When a deliberate emergent approach to stakeholder engagement is applied, the strategic communication professional or communication department fulfills a centralised role and the controllability of the voices are high. In the context of engagement, this implies that the strategic communication professional will conduct boundary spanning, bridging and environmental scanning to elicit conversation to identify barriers to engagement and material issues. Furthermore, the strategic communication professional is also responsible for compiling specific engagement guidelines. On this basis, organisational members are enabled to engage with strategic stakeholders. In contrast, a radical emergent approach to stakeholder engagement allows the strategic communication professional to fulfill a coaching role to empower organisational members to have conversations with strategic stakeholders to identify material issues. The autonomy of voices in this capacity therefore allows for the identification of material issues as opposed to a conversation around a pre-determined material issue.

Once the material issues have been identified, both approaches necessitate that the purpose, scope and stakeholders of the engagement endeavour should be identified, as "the way in which an organisation engages and communicates with stakeholders will depend on the capacities of both..." (AA1000APS, 2018). This particular step might still be perceived as a modernistic and planned activity to engagement, but it is critical to determine what resources are available to most effectively work towards a collaborative resolution of the identified material issue/s. It should also be noted that the stakeholder engagement process is depicted as a continuous process.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper addresses the need for theory building in stakeholder engagement through the proposition of a multiple stakeholder engagement framework from a polyphonic strategic communication perspective. This framework serves as a heuristic for future research and provides a starting point for the uptake of multi-voiced

approaches in strategic communication. This paper also emphasises the role of the strategic communication professional in the stakeholder engagement process.

This paper is limited as it only provides a theoretical framework and the pragmatic relevance of this framework has to be established. Since qualitative research is of specific relevance in the current milieu of postmodernism and critical theory (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017), an exploration of this framework by means of focus groups and interviews could have value. Such a methodological strategy will focus on exploring strategic communication professionals' inputs on their involvement in stakeholder engagement and obtain the perspectives from leaders of both large and small South African organisations to determine the pragmatic value of this approach. Extensive quantitative testing is also required to build forth towards a multiple stakeholder engagement model. Such a model should also provide more detail on the actual steps in planning and implementing an engagement endeavour and how multiple stakeholder needs are balanced and addressed in such a multi-voiced engagement strategy. Although this paper aims to provide a generic approach that is not specific to an organisational type or industry, future research could provide a more customised approach where specific strategic stakeholder groups are identified.

"Organisations operate in complex, dynamic environments in which several issues are present simultaneously, initiated and discussed by different stakeholders and other actors..." which "...challenges organisation-centered approaches to stakeholder engagement" (Hellsten et al., 2019, p. 35). It will however take time for organisations to depart from instrumental strategy and the conventional way of doing. Strategic communication professionals could play an indispensable role in guiding organisations towards the uptake of emergent strategy and specifically towards a multi-voiced approach to stakeholder engagement.

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