

Strategic communication is a growing field of theory and practice focused on communication to advance an organization's mission or agenda through aimed, intentional, planned, and specific messaging. This is based perhaps one of the simplest explanations of strategic communication, provided by Frandsen and Johansen (2017), which states that "strategic communication can be defined as a study of how organizations use communication purposely to fulfill their overall missions." Similarly, Argenti, Howell and Beck (2005), define it as aligning communication with an organization's overall strategy to enhance its strategic position.

With these explanations in place and the recognition of the necessity of intentional, planned, and specific communication to further a mission or agenda, it is easy to see that strategic communication can be relevant in many settings, not only limited to the private sector and the corporate world, but also in political communication, foreign relations, advocacy work, and much more. Building on these descriptions and revelations of strategic communication, I would describe strategic communication as a processual attempt to influence or persuade stakeholders to come in alignment with one's agenda, mission, or opinion.

This understanding of strategic communication has been invaluable when reflecting on my future in advocacy work. As a person with a physical disability, I intend on using my voice and learned skills as a reflexive communicator to advocate for greater disability awareness and rights. Being able to appeal to government officials, organizations, and the public around issues on disabilities is imperative to achieve the goal of further acceptance, accessibility, and safety nets for people with disabilities. This means providing more than just swaths of information supporting claims, but also appealing to society in a larger manner through appropriately crafted messages which resonate with diverse audiences. Falkheimer and Heide (2022) share Robert Heath's emphasis on the importance of addressing the meaning behind communication:

“Those of us interested in issues, rhetoric dialogue, and discourse continue to emphasize that information does not serve for much without interpretation and advocacy, however loud and subtle. We lose sight of the richness of dialogue if we only feature information and don’t address how meaning is crafted, shared, and enacted in ways that relate to collective and competitive sense making of the information/fact and evaluations at play.”

This acknowledgment by Falkheimer et al. of the need to engage with audiences to substantiate fruitful dialogue and create opportunities for change is key for communication practitioners, particularly in advocacy work.

James Grunig’s situational theory of publics creates a framework for understanding how audiences may respond to communication around a given topic, allowing communication practitioners to prepare communication plans which are effective and efficient (Thompson & Browning, 2022). According to Thompson and Browning, Grunig split communication behaviors into two categories – information seekers and information processors. Information seekers, which Grunig defines as those who are keen to engage in messaging on a given topic, should be a primary target for advocates, as their interest in the subject can lead to them taking positive action. On the other hand, information processors are more passive and are unlikely to engage on a specific message, making it difficult to encourage action (Thompson & Browning, 2022). With this framework in mind, disability advocates are better positioned to recognize the audiences of information seekers in which their messaging is likely to have more effect.

Falkheimer and Heide (2018) suggest that to be effective as a communicator, practitioners must adopt the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity helps bridge the gap between

strategic thinking and technical application by evaluating the broad impact of their communication efforts. For advocates to reach their goals and missions, becoming a reflexive practitioner is essential to ensure engagement with appropriate audiences, as well as refining strategies based on feedback and ever-changing conditions. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) point out that communication practitioners can emphasize either doing things right—acting merely as a mouthpiece for their organizational superiors or doing things the right way through strategic means. As Falkheimer and Heide note, this dichotomy does not exist in practice but is still a valuable reminder for communicators to balance both technical execution and strategic thinking. For advocates, focusing on doing the right things—engaging strategically and refining based on feedback—ensures that their communication efforts are both efficient and impactful.

As a person with a disability, I can speak directly to the effectiveness and importance of storytelling in advocacy and other communication efforts. Storytelling often creates greater empathy than facts or statistics, which can lead to a higher level of motivation to act, all while reducing potential resistance to new ideas (Austin & Connell, 2019). From my personal experience, storytelling has a greater chance of impact than providing data alone, especially if the audience is not directly affected by physical disabilities. I have spoken and written of the negative experiences of flying with a power wheelchair due to airlines currently not providing a spot on planes for wheelchairs to be tied down, as is common in other forms of public transportation. This lack of accessibility and disregard of people with disabilities often goes unknown unless one is directly affected through their own disability, or from a loved one who is disabled. In my experience, instead of overwhelming people with data on damaged wheelchairs or even injuries because of the lack of accessible flying, it has been more effective to lean on personal experiences and the tragedies that I and others have gone through. One advocacy

organization focused on lobbying for research efforts as well as legislation changes to ensure safe air travel for those with wheelchairs is All Wheels Up 501©(3). Through their efforts using strategic communication practices, awareness around the issue is growing, and policymakers along with the airline industry are facing pressure to ensure accessible air travel (Gavine, 2024).

According to a toolkit released by The Arc, a 501©(3) focused on advocacy for people with disabilities, personal stories can help make policy “real” (The Arc, 2019). Personal narratives give insight into how people’s lives are affected and can be useful when trying to appeal to policymakers by emphasizing how certain legislation can have a dramatic impact. As The Arc mentions in their toolkit, personal stories were vital for the fight to protect Medicaid from cuts in 2017. Community leaders, the media, and policymakers were exposed to firsthand accounts of people dependent on Medicaid and how detrimental it would be if the program were to be defunded in any capacity. This use of narrative and storytelling allowed for further exposure to policymakers who may be unfamiliar with the struggles people with disabilities face and the importance of keeping social programs such as Medicaid funded or even expanded.

Regarding people with disabilities and my interest in advocacy work in this field, I have found that most resistance against change which favors the equal and equitable treatment of those with disabilities generally comes from ignorance or lack of exposure more so than a lack of desire to see change take place. While many Americans suffer from some form of disability, many are invisible or do not receive any mainstream coverage. It is important that all people with disabilities, whether their disabilities are visible or not, are understood and respected, and have a voice which is listened to. My mission as an emerging disability advocate is to increase awareness around the struggles people with disabilities face so that governments and society can

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be better informed to make changes which ensure an equal and equitable environment which promotes access and opportunity.

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