Regimenting Circulation: A Case Study of Mediatization in Corporate Communication

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ABSTRACT

Communication is necessary work and imagined want in corporations. Using firsthand data from a midsize corporation, this essay discusses the professional practices of corporate communication as a metadiscursive project of proleptically shaping the circulation of representations of the corporation. In corporate work, activities spoken of as "communication" are segmented and ritualized with respect to who the corporation seeks to engage in discursive and semiotic frameworks of participation and which communicative media it employs. The ways in which various communicative scenarios are imagined and framed in the design and use of corporate media are examined, as is the manner in which the boundary of the corporation's communicative activity is drawn and (re)defined through metapragmatic regimentations of future participatory encounters. The expertise of corporate communication practitioners involves the ability to formulate the corporation as the mediatized center of the groups with which it communicates and to devise messages that target diverse groups as addressees.

Communication is work and want in corporations. The word *communication*, according to Urciuoli, may be enregistered "with *index*, *function*, and *social*" in linguistic pragmatics but in corporate discourses, it is

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I am deeply grateful to Asif Agha for his tremendous generosity in helping to phrase my ideas here in not only a receivable but also a precise manner. I had the good fortune to attend a graduate seminar where he presented his conceptualization of mediatization. I then felt it curiously relevant to my own fieldwork observations; but it has taken me more than a decade to figure out how to fully apply it to the practice discussed here. This essay also benefits from comments received during the 2021 Semiotic Anthropology Conference held at the University of Pennsylvania. Last, but not least, I owe thanks to my informants—in particular, TG, KK, VP, DY, and DC. This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2021S1A6A3A01097826) and the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2020.

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enregistered within "a model of business as an idealized, predictable set of processes" (2008, 215). Inside companies, communication is rhetoric and practice, subject to rationalization and technologization; and "corporate communication (CC)" can mean a job, a skill, a profession, a department, an objective, or a slogan, and so on. When carried out, such activities can entail business-important and potentially multiple intersecting processes of commodification (Heller 2010), organization (Cooren and Taylor 1997), and socialization.

But while "communication" has separated out as a professional practice starting in the post-Fordist capitalist phase and increasingly in the twenty-first century with businesses emphasizing market differentiation, flexible specialization, and information control for reputation or "promotion of cultural values" (Harvey 1991, 161; cf. "communicative capitalism" in Kuhn et al. [2019, 101]), it is not that most companies have departments or specialists specializing in such work; and even where there are, it is noted that practitioners struggle for recognition vis-à-vis those whose work are traditionally linked to production or profit (Zerfass and Sherzada 2015; Cornelissen 2020).[1] In recent years, studies of language use and neoliberalism have documented how language is subjected to commodification in contexts (e.g., call centers, multilingual operations) where it is readily seen as capital, with languages differently valuated of their instrumentality and language is treated as labor.[2] But how commodifying or corporatizing processes might also be observed of communication in general (vis-à-vis specific language use) has less been highlighted, with few exceptions including a growing number of researches in organizational studies,[3] hence the reason and manner in which "communication" becomes categorically separated as a type of work, skill, or labor in business contexts, as well as the relational processes involved in the everyday constructions of communication as corporate, organizational (Taylor and Cooren 1997), or strategic (Graan 2022) communication is less understood.

In this essay, I work with ethnographic observations gathered inside a corporate setting where a newly found department devoted to organizing corporate-level communication engages in programming and coordinating series of multiple cooccurring present and future events of communicative encounters between corporate groups and counterparts, for the purpose of message transferences and exchanges across its larger "stakeholders."[4] Activities of "corporate communication"

1. In fact, it remains largely the case that corporate communication is taken to be synonymous with public relations (Wright 1997).

2. Heller (2003); Urciuoli (2008); Heller and Duchêne (2012); Park and Wee (2013); Kang (2017).

3. Cooren (1999); Cameron (2005); Cooren et al. (2014); Cohen (2015); Prentice (2015); Gal (2016).

4. The word *stakeholders* has become a naturally occurring term in corporate sector discourses, particularly with the naturalization of the "social responsibility" concept (cf. Shamir 2008; Trnka and Trundle 2014).

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are, first and foremost, undertaken by companies with some shared assumption and belief that talk about the company is necessary for carrying out business—as any transactional relations involves at the very least two and usually numerous parties—and with realizations (typically on the part of persons in management positions) that talk about talk of the company is also important for image and reputation. Hence, with the idea and expectation that metadiscursive activities do and should serve a mediating function for business and reputation, the institutionalization and furthermore strategization of communication at the organization level becomes a project whereby communicative activities can bridge, link, and bring about actual and possible interactivity relevant to business and the corporate entity. The organization of corporate-level communication activities, therefore, in effect[5] involves "mediatization," which Agha (2011, 163) explicates as the reflexive coupling of processes of communication and processes of commoditization and which accompanies assignment of "communicative roles to positions within a socioeconomic division of labor."[6]

The work of planning and organizing communication for practitioners in local corporate contexts however, as will be shown, is not straightforward and is fraught with anxieties; this is so for various reasons (e.g., estimating needs, developing channels, adequate staffing and support, etc.), but especially because the nature of the task requires speculations and generalizations about interpretations of messages, and imagined metapragmatic and metasemiotic judgments about the corporation, and from a wide variety of groups distributed across the scheme of socioeconomic labor relative to the corporation. It is about thinking ahead and attempting to account for—that is, "manage"—not simply a one-time message transference or release but further metadiscursive circulations in/and "communicative imaginaries" (Slotta 2019, 399); and therefore, such managing—or, to use a more contemporary term, *strategizing*—entails a series of tasks, including reflecting upon the characteristic interpretive tendencies of various groups, determining to what degree messages are released, finding appropriate uses of language, weighing the utility of media kinds, setting frequency and intervals of contact, and so forth, all of which is done with respect to actual or imagined future addressees and audiences—so-called stakeholders—who are

5. Mediatization occurs regardless of corporate motivations or intentionality—but in some forms of "corporate communication" (e.g., in "strategic" communication, PR, marketing, etc.), corporate actors can likely be more attuned to managing how it unfolds than others.

6. In a verbal conversation about corporate communication during my participation in the 2021 Semiotic Anthropology Conference, Agha offered a view of corporations as engaged in and operative through continuous projects of "mediatized semiosis."

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mostly by default abstract socioeconomic categories (e.g., "employees," "customers," "public").

On the other hand, such guesswork and decisions must be anchored in the central corporate capitalist, pan-organizational, cultural concern that such metadiscursive activity is heard and taken up in a manner that ideally reproduces positive relational and interpretive feedbacks or, at a minimum, relays information necessary for release to some relevant audience. Graan (2022, 13) rightly points out that contemporary capitalist organized forms of strategic communication, like projects of marketing and branding, are ultimately about publicity, that is, they have publicity as a goal . And since such an "organization" or "strategization" has to do with shaping metadiscursive and metasemiotic interpretations and uptakes for some corporate benefit (minimally, preserving the status quo), this job of managing does not, of course, rest entirely on practitioners' shoulders, even if it does remain their job to rationalize procedures and processes that sustain it.

Agha (2011, 163) observes that "institutions in any large-scale society (e.g., schooling, the law, electoral politics, the mass media) all presuppose a variety of mediatized practices as conditions [of] their possibility." This essay provides a case supporting this observation. In the following sections, based on two years of ethnographic research at a Hawaiian corporation, including on year of close involvement with the department of "corporate communication" focused on strategizing communicative interactions, I examine the company's overall plans and programs and analyze the conceptualization and instrumentalization of communication in ways that contribute to forms of mediatized semiosis. In doing so, one of my goals here is to understand what the concerted effort at communicating does for corporations. I point out that the quality of the corporation—which, in the categories of law, belongs to the class of "legal fictions" (Riles 2017, 128)—is that of joint attention and that this quality is indexically reproduced in a coordinated fashion through the proleptic orchestration of "corporate" communication, which, in turn, aspires to engage various categories of socioeconomic actors who are imagined as attending to—or in the language of corporate sector discourses, as "having a stake in"—its sustenance.

Mapping the Participatory Scope

Literatures in management note that as a field, "corporate communication" evolved in relation to "business communication," "organizational communication," and "management communication" (van Riel 1997, 288; Hooghiemstra 2000). It is a relatively new emerging field of disciplinary study and professional practice. In Hawaiian Lands Company, Inc. (a pseudonym, hereafter referred to as

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"Hawaiian Lands"), a century-old midsize corporation that has roughly 1,500 employees, the function of communication was first departmentalized in 2006 when a new chairman and CEO embarked on multiple large-scale changes. At this time, it was brought to the attention of upper management that rumors abounded in the general island public as to the motivations for the direction that the corporation was taking business-wise. Landmark hospitality operations, including a hotel, were shut down for sustainable renovation and large chunks of land that the company had long owned were sold or repurposed for new construction projects. Many employees were highly anxious about such major changes and expressed discontent at the lack of appropriate information sharing. Since the company had been in business for over a century, countless island residents were also former employees or had family and friends who were or had been employed at some point, and, thus, negative coverage of Hawaiian Lands in the local news was becoming an everyday affair.

It was in such a situation that the corporation created the corporate communication department, hired a new director, and assembled a team. The department's work began with a pan-organizational audit that sought to evaluate how activities of communication are carried out.[7] Strathern (1996, 13) wrote that audits in bureaucratic institutions are often a process of "self-examination" for "self-improvement," which involves conflating measures with goals. This was the case at Hawaiian Lands, where the audit exposed the ad hoc state of communicative practices and made them susceptible to evaluation for improvement. After the audit, efficiency and effectiveness, key corporate capitalist words, were iconically reproduced as target goal of the department's various objectives and the word "strategy" was applied to communication in hopes to move beyond the non-, dis-, or unorganized state. The corporation's "strategic communication plan" and "communications manual" were developed, and tweaks and changes were made to existing methods and activities. It is this moment, when the company reflects upon its own evaluation of the present and plans for change, that I examine below.

In the strategic communication plan document prepared by the department and approved by the "corporate communications committee" consisting of upper management officers and employees (i.e., CEO, presidents, vice presidents, relevant department directors), a comprehensive list of all possible communicative counterparts is given (fig. 1). Other contents of this document include a

7. Some of the data I obtained during this data collection for the audit has been used in an earlier research that discusses semiotic remediational work voluntarily undertaken by some employees (Koh 2020). My engagement in the audit was upon the request of the CEO.

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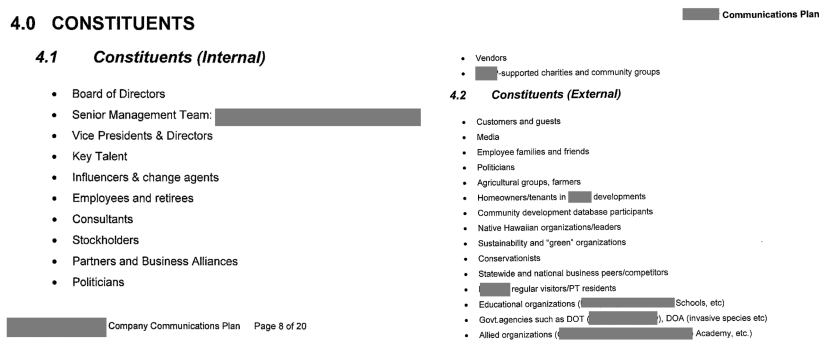


Figure 1. Identifying communicative "constituency" (reproduced from "Hawaiian Lands Company, Inc." 2006 "Strategic Communication Plan" document. Identity-revealing information has been intentionally masked).

summary of the audit, benchmark and situational analysis of the findings, a list of existing communication tools, and recommendations for changes in communicative tools and message compositions. What I wish to point out is that a key step in the company's process of conceptualizing the organization of communicative actions concerned a mapping of the scope of actors and groups imagined as social categories of persons capable of occupying interlocutory roles in participation frameworks of corporate communication.

It is interesting to note that in figure 1, various socioeconomic groups are listed as "constituents" and further classified as "internal" or "external." In the beginning of this strategic communication plan document, it was stated that among the several goals of communication, the first is "to facilitate a flow of information between key constituencies to allow [Hawaiian Lands]'s work to occur efficiently as possible." An important aspect of "strategizing" communication in other words has to do with ensuring that some necessary information gets exchanged between the corporation and relevant groups. But what precisely the listed constituents here "constitute"—whether that object might be the corporation or some communicative framework—is not made explicit in the entire document nor was it verbally referenced during its development and circulation (at least, during my observation; see "Organizing Attention toward the Corporation" below). What can be said however is that the object is contextually understandable to the addressed readers of this text as referring to persons and groups with respect to whom the corporation should strategize its means and messages of communication.

While the division of the listed groups into internal and external classification is meaningful only in the context of this document, it is also worth noting that it is not based on corporate organizational membership status—since

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"partners and business alliances," "politicians," "vendors," and "charities and community groups" are listed as internal constituents. What the division here does expose is that from the perspective of corporate communications practitioners attempting to manage discursive flows of information about the corporation, certain circulatory boundaries—or, to employ Slotta's (2019, 397) words, circulatory "bubbles"—are imaginatively drawn and taken into account. Considering the groups just mentioned, groups already in some stable socioeconomic and communicative relations with the company, in some business or work capacity, are seen as internal to circulating corporate sources. Unlike these groups that have access to the various forms of discursive interaction—whether involving speech or text artifacts (including contracts)—that are designed to accomplish business functions, those that largely come into participatory relations at metadiscursive, metasemiotic, or metacultural levels (e.g., "media," "employee families and friends," "customers and guests," etc.) are differentiated as external—not because these latter groups are entirely off limits to internal sources but because they are external to the imagined corporate-internal circulatory boundaries.[8] For the goal of ensuring necessary information flows between groups, the next task in organizing communication naturally considers how diverse groups engage in communicative encounters and form participatory relations.

Strategization as Mediatization

Figure 2 is a PowerPoint slide found in a different document the department prepared as the "communications manual" and features diagrammatic representation of the overall "Communication Channels by Audience." Much can be said about such pictorial representation, but it basically lists (in square shapes) various situations and structured media whereby the company is or can be in communicative interactions with five large categories of persons and groups (in circular shapes—"all employees," "supervisors," "government," "public," "media"). Different from the above discussed sample text, the internal/external divide in figure 2 corresponds to employee status. As shown, the corporation has nine ways in which corporate (i.e., upper) management can theoretically engage all employees in communicative interactions (e.g., corporate newsletters, face-to-face meetings, bulletin boards, anonymous Q&A box, etc.). There are five

8. The internal-external division here is of course not static (e.g., a move by an "'external' allied organization" to "'internal' business alliances") and as stated in-text, it is only relevant in the context of this piece of document.

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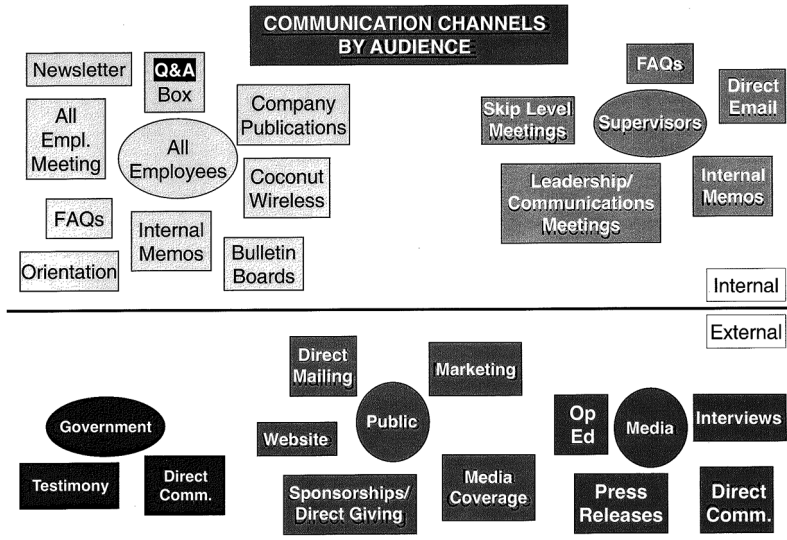


Figure 2. Diagrammatic representation of the corporate circulation of communication (reproduced from "Hawaiian Lands Company, Inc." 2006 "Communications Manual" document. Identity-revealing information has been intentionally masked).

for employees that are in supervisory/managerial positions, including opportunities that are closed for rest of the employees such as "direct e-mail," "leadership/communications meetings," and "skip level meetings." With "external audiences" in governmental and media institutions, communication through public genres ("testimony," "op ed," "interviews") and PR releases, as well as interpersonal "direct communication," are possible; with respect to the general "public," mass mediating venues such as "website," "media coverage," and interestingly corporate gift giving opportunities are also identified.

The labor-intensive goal of the corporate communication department is to ensure that these communicative events and media devices function in desired ways or, at the very least, in some relatively controlled and manageable fashion. The same listed venues in figure 2 existed in Hawaiian Lands prior to the establishment of the department; but they were not seen as satisfactory by most employees throughout my two years of research there, and this was also confirmed in the audit. According to a managerial PR and communications staff ("S" in transcript 1, taken from Koh [2010]), this is because in order to be "successful" in corporate communication (line 598 in transcript 1), whatever is said has to be "package[d] and program[med]" (line 582) in specific forms, which had not been

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the case previously when the company was not attending to how it talked of its decisions and actions.[9]

Transcript 1

573	S	You have to know like, who, who's your audience,
574	S	who are you trying to communicate,
575	S	what are you trying to tell them, what's the number one thing.
576	S	Ok. I'm gonna close the [Hotel for redevelopment].
577	S	You know what kinda effect that has on all the employees.
578	I	Yes.
579	S	There has been a culture, that has grown up with that hotel
580	S	among the local community, that relies on the jobs.
581	S	And tha, that's an extreme situation.
582	S	But to package and program, and and communicate that message is, uh,
584	S	should be considered a major process.
585	S	Cause it's affecting different types of audiences. So many [of them].
586	S	You have your business associates who can say
587	S	"oh they're closing the hotel, what's going on."
588	S	And then you have the general public that has been going there?
589	S	So the past guests, and then you have the consumer,
590	S	and then you have the audience who you're trying to lure in the future.
591	S	Every message is a different message.
592	S	For the employees it's a lot more sentimental.
593	S	You could be a heartless corporate citizen and say
594	S	"well you know we have the prerogative."
595	S	Yeah.
596	S	But does that help you in a small community like this island.
597	I	No, in a small state like Hawai'i.
598	S	You can't do it like that. You can't be successful.

The packaging and programming this practitioner discusses involve stipulating how communications about corporate decisions and activities are produced, interpreted, and circulated by aligning the content of central messages with target groups of receivers or audiences who are presumed to have interest in such content. In the transcript, using a case of the corporation closing one of its hotels for sustainable redevelopment, the practitioner explains that the said action has to be told in versions that differ for incumbents of addressee role that happen to belong to distinct social categories of (past, present, and future) employees or clients —including the "local community that relies on the jobs" (line 580), "business associates" (line 586), "the general public" (line 588), "past guests" and "the consumer" (line 589), "the audience who you're trying to lure in the future" (line 590), and "the [current] employees" (line 592)—without all of which "You can't be successful" (line 598). Such versions differ in what gets

9. In the transcript, underline indicates speaker emphasis.

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captioned as "the number one thing" (line 575) in messages to these groups, and strategies for ranking content (namely, "number one") are linked to goals like maintaining the reputation and long-term business success of Hawaiian Lands despite their hotel's temporary closure. Insofar as these links connect communication design to commoditized services, or addressees of messages to personnel within a commercial division of labor, they have a transparently mediatized design. Figure 3 is a depiction of how this process of packaging messages of interest into corporate media intricately links to, and is bound up with, processes of mediatization.

In other words, in order to practice corporate communication "strategically," upper management and the communication department of the corporation (left column) attempts to indexically embed "central" messages (middle column, text portion)—that is, ones likely to be found most relevant to the social categories of personnel/clients who are addressees of these messages (right column)—into those corporate media channels (bottom right, red dotted line) that are held to be the most efficient and effective means of reaching such target markets. This type of "strategizing" involves the proleptic shaping and relevance-making of business interests through strategies of message composition and media construction that serve the mediatized goal of making current corporate transmission and future two-way communication with employees/clients as likely and effective as possible. In the case at hand, namely the corporate act of shutting down a hotel, the strategic goals differ in the following kinds of ways: with respect to Hawaiian Lands' employees—who worry about possibilities of layoffs, are "sentimental" (line 592) about the loss of a historic hotel, and prefer oral to written communication—the central message that is captioned here as "employment"

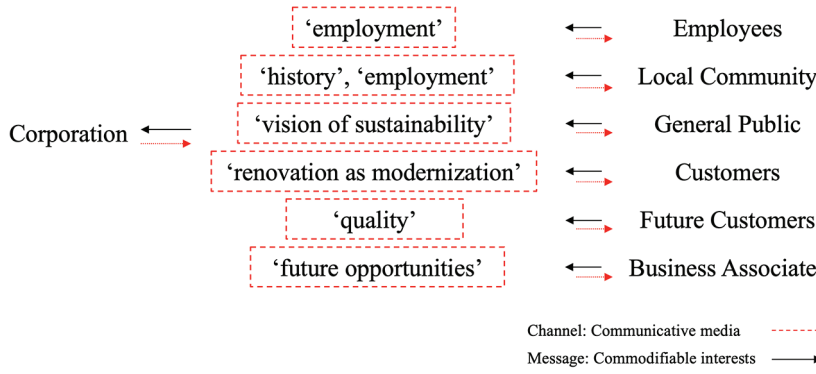


Figure 3. Combining communication and commoditization in corporate communication

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(and elsewhere, as "memories") was foregrounded in the content of written corporate newsletters circulated to all employees and verbalized in complementary situations of face-to-face interaction (e.g., in the president's ceremonial visit to honor the hotel's employees). With respect to another category of corporate counterparts, the communication department suggested in its strategic plan that upper management create an "externally-focused version" of an already existing corporate brochure titled "Cultivating Our Next 100 Years," where the source-version fantastically narrates a new corporate vision of applying sustainability to development projects, but whose content is addressed to employees and is thus less relevant to recruiting new engagement or involvement from the general public. In this manner, as the above practitioner very explicitly mentions, "Every message is a different message" (line 591), and talk of "strategizing" corporate communication belongs to an ethnometapragmatic idiom for describing processes of mediatization.

Organizing Attention toward the Corporation

The practice of strategizing communication at the corporate organizational level works to sustain already formed socioeconomic ties with target populations, and seeks to enroll and engage future socioeconomic actors/groups in criterial participation frameworks of mediatized communication via metapragmatic and metasemiotic invocations of their commercially relevant interests. Since bits of corporate news or information can operationally be distinguished and tailored, there are established protocols at Hawaiian Lands for some routine communicative activities, protocols which employees regularly follow to respond to emerging communicative needs (see "standard operating procedures" for corporate-internally circulated memos and media inquiries in fig. 4). Even in these ritualized processes, which may very well be applied to the production of texts not necessarily involving mediatized goals with respect to external clients and publics, there are moments or steps—for example, "review and iteration" (fig. 4, left) and determination of the "nature of inquiry" (fig. 4, right)—in which the construction of message is reflected upon and cross-checked by personnel having occupational roles within the corporation's internal mediatized division of labor.

Figure 4 offers a glimpse of some of the task-allocations of employees within this internal division of mediatized labor. Tasks allocated to individual personnel categories are coordinated through genres of internal communication such as review meetings and e-mail (left box), and the varied task allocations through which their labor is organized (shown in both boxes) receives compensation (in the form of salaries), which is paid by income derived from services (provided

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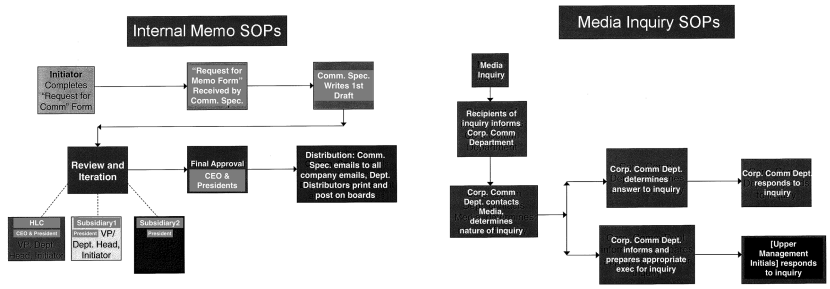


Figure 4. Ritualization of corporate text production (reproduced from "Hawaiian Lands Company, Inc." 2006 "Communications Manual" document. Identity-revealing information has been intentionally masked).

to external clients), which, in turn, requires maintaining a brand reputation when responding to media inquiries (right box). The circuits of mediatized communication are therefore as complex as the number of coordinated roles and tasks on which a large organization depends, and they appear bewildering from the outside. However, no individual incumbent of any of these occupational roles needs to know the entire picture. They simply need proficiencies that are localized to task allocations within the organization and that can periodically be reinforced (or enlarged, or altered) by instructions from other members of a coordinated division of labor. Moreover, such a sequence of reciprocally coordinated discursive interactions unfolds in routinized and recurrent ways within cycles of work time (the week, the month, the fiscal quarter) and, thereby, acquires the characteristics of ritual.

If messages are indexically formed as mediatized or mediatizing texts relative to abstract socioeconomic categories of persons and groups as addressees or audiences in this way, how do we make sense of the utility of this major work or the possible effect of the overall orchestration of communicative actions for the corporate entity (or organizational entities more broadly)? In other words, what is the function of corporate strategic communication for business? For this, I now return to the use of the word *constituents* in Hawaiian Lands' strategic communication plan document (mentioned above for fig. 1) and to the views of communication scholars upon which the practices of corporate personnel in local-level corporations are reflexively modeled.

According to Hallahan et al. (2007, 7), the main characteristic that stands out in strategic communication (versus other forms of organizational communication that are distinguished within the discipline of communication) is its "purposeful nature," the goal of "intentionally" applying communication to the promotion of

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the organization as a social actor that creates meaning, builds networks, and so on. While Hawaiian Lands' strategic communication plan does not explicitly clarify exactly *what* is constituted as the denotatum of the word *constituents*, as noted, the contextual use of the word suggests that it refers to persons and groups with respect to which the corporation should and can strategize its communicative efforts. These are the social categories (e.g., clients, employees, publics, media, etc.) with which the corporation communicates in the variety of ways needed to sustain its business ventures, as shown above. These interlocutors also respond to the corporation's messages in the back and forth of communicative interaction. The "constituents" of corporate communication are, in essence, those persons/groups that attend to the corporation based on their own socioeconomic interests (e.g., labor, finance, consumption, etc.) and with whom the corporation interacts through various genres of mediatized communication in the course of pursuing its continuing business functions and goals, as we have seen. If the corporation's goal of producing representations of itself includes intentionally establishing and maintaining business relations, the instrumentalization of communication relies on protocols designed *inter alia* to create and sustain the continued recognition of the corporation by various socioeconomic categories of interlocutors, in order to maintain itself as a center of their coordinated attention.

Conclusion

Using ethnographic observations, this essay has discussed how a corporation previously inattentive to managing representations of its activities began applying the idea of organizational "strategization" to communication. The essay has examined the processes involved in shaping messages so that they have a higher likelihood of being received, exchanged, and circulated among socioeconomically diverse groups of interlocutors. The denotational content of corporate communication is usually produced through ritualized work procedures and tends to have multiple employees and officers as coauthors who interactively design text artifacts. Meanwhile, as shown, the embedded core messages of strategic communication are carefully selected and composed through varying degrees of reflection upon what the primary interests of targeted audience groups might be. Groups of audiences who surround the corporation—or are identifiable as corporate constituents—can include those already in some stable form of socioeconomic relationships (e.g., employees) or bystanders recruited to temporary interlocutor roles (e.g., business peers, media institutions). In the case of the Hawaiian Lands Company examined here, the stated aim of strategizing communication had to do with facilitating the flows of informational discourses and metadiscourses

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across both these categories, in order to engage several types of groups as interlocutors within its imagined circulatory boundaries. The technique suggested in corporate strategic communication and adopted at Hawaiian Lands has been that of mediatization, which, when felicitously done, can increase this possibility.

As a type of corporate practice, corporate communication is seen by both practitioners and scholars alike as qualitative work—with its quality more often described with the adjective *soft* rather than *hard*; but what is less known or observed is that it is work that is always in stages of making, aiming, and anticipating sequellae. What this essay has shown is that such characteristics depend upon a range of practices, such as requiring specific forms of professional expertise, designing this range to suit the scope or landscape of the corporation's communicative reach, speculating on and determining the various ways in which messages can be interpreted and tailored, investigating contextual appropriateness of sign use, and attempting metadiscursively to regiment representations of the corporation.

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