Between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity – oscillating strategic communication

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Abstract
Purpose – Ambiguity has become a central concept in strategic communication research in recent years. This paper addresses three central deficits in the research to date. First, clarity-focused approaches and ambiguity-focused approaches are in opposition to each other, resulting in an exaggeration of the advantages and opportunities of the respective favored perspective and affording the opposing position little justification at best. Second, research on strategic ambiguity is by and large limited to the organizational perspective and has little interest in societal change. Third, there has been barely any research into concrete practices of strategic ambiguity and these practices have never been systematized.

Design/methodology/approach – The research questions will be answered on the basis of the “Theory of Social Systems” (TSS) by Niklas Luhmann, which can be attributed to the “Communication Constitutes Organization” (CCO) perspective. This perspective seems appropriate because the important concepts of communication and decision making play a central role in the TSS.

Findings – Strategic communication oscillates between clarity and ambiguity in order to defuse the dilemma and paradox. The re-entry of the distinction is a second-order observation and, thus, reveals the blind spots of clarity- and ambiguity-focused approaches. On this basis, a systematic approach is developed that encompasses various different dimensions of strategic clarity and ambiguity.

Practical implications – The paper focuses on the oscillation between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity, making clear that the aim is not simply to substitute a new dominance of ambiguity for the clarity that has dominated textbooks thus far. Instead, it is a matter of reflective management of the distinction between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity. The systematization of the practices of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity can ultimately be used as a toolbox for the concrete application of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity.

Originality/value – Overcoming the dualism of clarity-focused and ambiguity-focused approaches makes it possible, first, to explore the situational use of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity. Second, the societal theoretical perspective shows the way in which organizations respond with strategic ambiguity to the increase in social contradictions without, however, being able to abandon strategic clarity. Third, using the systematic approach to the dimensions presented here, these practices can be described and examined in context.

Keywords Social theory, Organizational theory, Communication management, Public relations, Corporate communications, Integrated marketing communications

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Companies often deliberately talk vaguely about their sustainability goals to avoid critical scrutiny (e.g. Christensen et al., 2015). In times of crisis, organizations often respond with mixed messages to avoid further escalation without admitting culpability (e.g. Sohn and Edwards, 2018). Furthermore, organizations operate with ambiguous mission statements (Carmon, 2013) to enable future change. In recent years, strategic communication research has explored the use and effects of strategic ambiguity for many fields. However, a closer look reveals that the research topic of strategic ambiguity is often somewhat of a desert island, largely cut off from other discourses. The goal of this paper is to establish and expand...
connections between strategic ambiguity and other fields of strategic communication research.

The insularity of strategic ambiguity results firstly from the exaggeration of the advantages of strategic ambiguity in ambiguity-focused approaches. Is strategic communication “better” the more ambiguous it is? This is the impression one gets when reading the literature on the ambiguity-focused approach. However, companies that always avoid unambiguous answers will probably quickly find themselves exposed to public criticism, so there needs to be a situational use of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity. Such a dual perspective has rarely been pursued (Gulbrandsen, 2019) and leads to the first research question: How can existing clarity and ambiguity-focused approaches be merged in such a way that strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity are two alternative ways of solving a problem? Thus, strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity are interpreted as two sides of a distinction. This is conceptualized in terms of organizational theory based on Luhmann’s (1995, 2018) “Theory of Social Systems” (TSS), which belongs to the “Communication Constitutes Organization” (CCO) perspective (Schoeneborn, 2011). This perspective seems appropriate because the important concepts of communication and decision play a central role in TSS. This theoretical perspective thus embeds aspects of ambiguity and clarity in the discourse on strategic communication in organizational and decision-based approaches (e.g. Osswald, 2019).

Second, research on strategic ambiguity is for the most part limited to the organizational perspective. References to society are predominantly limited to the argument that a central advantage of strategic ambiguity is to avoid conflicts with stakeholders with opposing interests (e.g. Christensen et al., 2015; Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995). A societal theoretical perspective can show how organizations respond with strategic ambiguity to the increase of social contradictions without being able to renounce strategic clarity. In doing so, it elaborates how organizations are on a double escape: they flee from both ambiguity and clarity. The particular advantage of Niklas Luhmann’s “Theory of Social Systems” (TSS) is that organizational theory is part of a superordinate societal theory (Luhmann, 2013). The organizational theoretical considerations can be directly linked to societal theoretical considerations. Accordingly, the second research question is: Which societal changes have contributed to the importance of both strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity for organizations?

Third, to date research has focused on content-related aspects in the context of strategic ambiguity: vaguely formulated goals (e.g. Eisenberg and Witten, 1987), mixed messages (e.g. Sohn and Edwards, 2018) or the use of metaphors (e.g. Eisenberg, 2006; Leitch and Davenport, 2002; Scandelius and Cohen, 2016). The truncated nature of such a perspective is demonstrated by practices that have been widely observed in recent years: Hybrid advertising such as brand journalism (Bull, 2013) can be perceived as advertising on the one hand and non-commercial content on the other (Balasubramanian, 1994). Bullshitting is an attempt to evade a binding discourse by deliberately leaving open whether one’s statements claim truth or post-truth (Frankfurt, 2005; Christensen et al., 2019). These examples show that the strategic use of ambiguity in strategic communication is not limited to content dimensions. Strategic ambiguity can be used almost extensively in strategic communication. This leads to the third research question of the paper: How can existing ambiguity concepts be extended and concretized in such a way that they provide a framework for further practices? This paper proposes a systematization that expands upon the diversity of practices of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity. Practices of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity are thus located here in the context of general dimensions of strategic communication.

The research questions aim to establish and expand connections between strategic communication research and the research island of strategic ambiguity, thus strengthening
the topic as a relevant issue in strategic communication research. In this paper, strategic communication is defined with Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 493) as follows: “Strategic communication encompasses 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 entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals”.

Literature review

In the past, the demands for clarity and ambiguity have been largely irreconcilable in the research. What both sides have in common is that they emphasize their own perspective while largely neglecting the respective other side. Only in recent years there has been a discussion of a possible coexistence of both sides (e.g. Gulbrandsen, 2019).

Generally, the two terms are often used surprisingly vaguely. The demarcations between them and terms such as vagueness, unclarity and indirectness on the one hand (Eisenberg, 1984) and consistency, openness and lack of discrepancies on the other hand are usually afforded little attention (Eisenberg and Witten, 1987). There is, however, a broad consensus on one point: Clarity and ambiguity are seen not as attributes, but as ascriptions. “Clarity exists to the extent that the following conditions are met: (1) an individual has an idea; (2) he or she encodes the idea into language; and (3) the receiver understands the message as it was intended by the source.” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 229) It follows that ambiguity strategically used by the source may be understood differently by its recipients.

Ambiguity points to a coexistence of different viewpoints and divergent ways of making sense of the world. Ambiguity does not refer to a misunderstanding of the way the world really is (Guthey and Morsing, 2014). Such clarity is the ascription that something is perceived as being unambiguous. Clarity will therefore be present only if and when “a source has narrowed the possible interpretations of a message and succeeded in achieving a correspondence between his or her intentions and the interpretation of the receiver” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 232). Clarity will exist only under certain circumstances; in most instances there will be ambiguity (Gulbrandsen, 2019).

Clarity and ambiguity can thus be understood in a first approximation as (1) ascription of an observer in a situation. In addition, they can (2) be used strategically when trying to communicate more clearly or ambiguously in a given situation. Even if strategic ambiguity is a relational construct, an organization can nevertheless attempt to communicate ambiguously or clearly in a given situation. Whether such attempt has been successful is, again, an ascription. Unintended clarity and ambiguity thus need to be distinguished from intended clarity and ambiguity (Guthey and Morsing, 2014, p. 561).

Clarity-focused approaches

The postulate of clarity is still widely disseminated in instrumental approaches to strategic communication today (e.g. Argenti, 2016; Broom and Sha, 2013; Smith, 2017; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). The latent assumption is usually that clear messages increase the likelihood of achieving the intended effects (e.g. Broom and Sha, 2013). Clarity is often mentioned alongside consistency or openness as one of the goals or postulates of strategic communication (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; FitzPatrick, 2016). The roots of clarity and avoidance of ambiguity can be traced back to classical rhetoric in antiquity. Quintilian as a rule recommended avoiding ambiguity (Quintilian, 1892; McNamara, 2018). Cicero derived the demand for comprehensibility from the maxim of clarity. Understanding is achieved through “adopting words in common use, and such as aptly express what we wish to communicate or explain, without any ambiguous word or phrase” (Cicero, 1986, p. 205; Winter-Froemel and Zirker, 2015).
While clarity was afforded comparable importance in management and strategy research (e.g. Chatterjee, 2005), concepts such as consistency and clarity play a central role in strategic communication. Christensen et al. (2015, p. 13) state that the field of strategic communication “has built its identity around the promise of avoiding inconsistencies”. The ideal of strategic communication was seen in presenting an organization as a unique, coherent and credible entity (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). van Riel (1995) describes strategic communication as an all-embracing framework designed to manage the overall business message. The principle of clarity can be found (e.g. Argenti, 2016; Broom and Sha, 2013; Smith, 2017; Theaker, 2016) in many strategic communication textbooks and handbooks and several prescriptive concepts have been developed with the aim of realizing the goals of clarity and consistency. Meanwhile, the more general concept of orchestration (van Riel, 1995, 2003) aims to avoid gaps and inconsistencies despite different messages and behaviors (Christensen et al., 2008a). The various concepts of integrated communication as “the notion and the practice of aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviors in order for an organization to communicate with clarity, consistency and continuity within and across formal organisational boundaries” (Christensen et al., 2008a, p. 423) are more concrete. As heterogeneous as the schools of thought concerning integrated communication are, they are united by the fact that clarity is a central goal (e.g. Kliatchko, 2005; Torp, 2009). The ideal of clarity and consistency became the “holy grail of integrated communication efforts” (Guthey and Morsing, 2014, p. 559). Regardless of the specific approach, the goal of clear communication results in the need for clearly defined goals in internal planning and the establishment of clear links between the various strategy levels (e.g. Gulbrandson, 2019; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Butterick, 2011).

The goals pursued with clarity and consistency in strategic communication barely differ from those of classical rhetoric. The aim is to reduce ambiguity in order to narrow the field of possible interpretations and, thus, reduce the risk of being misunderstood (Christensen et al., 2015). “Words must mean the same to the receivers as to the sender” (Broom and Sha, 2013, p. 333). Accordingly, clarity and consistency are understood as prerequisites for trust and credibility (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Gulbrandsen, 2019; Seiffert et al., 2011).

Although criticism of clarity-focused approaches has increased in recent years, clarity remains a widely shared postulate. The extent to which clarity has the status of a taken-for-granted assumption is shown by the fact that strategic clarity is almost never mentioned in the literature – in contrast to strategic ambiguity. Clarity thus seems to be the norm, while ambiguity seems to be the exception. Three reasons can be found for this. First, generally speaking, there has been much talk of a growing societal intolerance for any discrepancy and ambiguity in communication from and about organizations (Christensen et al., 2015). Secondly, adherence to postulates such as clarity and consistency can be interpreted as theoretical conservatism (Gulbrandsen, 2019). Although functional and instrumental research has been the subject of growing criticism and has been questioned by interpretative and critical research in recent years, the postulates of clarity and consistency are still widely disseminated in practice and in the relevant textbooks and handbooks (e.g. Argenti, 2016; Broom and Sha, 2013; Smith, 2017; Theaker, 2016). Thirdly, advocates of ambiguity-focused approaches admit that clarity also has a certain relevance. Eisenberg (1984) has already pointed out the relevance of clarity at various points. On the one hand, clarity is a suitable measure if the individual’s goal is to be clear. On the other hand, Eisenberg states with regard to credibility that for those with low credibility, clear communication is one of the only ways they can use communication to improve others’ impressions of them.
Ambiguity-focused approaches

With the rise of the interpretative paradigm in strategic communication research, ambiguity-focused approaches have gained ground in recent years. Such approaches often derive their plausibility from criticism of the postulates of clarity and consistency.

On the micro-level, the clarity postulate is confronted with the characteristics of the communication process, which is arbitrary, conventional and polysemic (Cheney et al., 2011; Eisenberg, 1986; Gulbrandsen, 2019): “human communication is inherently symbolic and thus potentially vague, ambiguous and polyphonic” (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 9). This understanding of communication is well known in communication theory (e.g. Blumer, 1986) and media effects research (e.g. Oliver et al., 2020) as well as in relevant studies on ambiguity. For example, in their study on strategic ambiguity and crisis apologia, Sohn and Edwards (2018, p. 564) concluded that “people interpret the same messages divergently”.

On the meso-level, the organizational contradictions are the focus of criticism of clarity postulates. In the past few years, this has been described primarily using the polyphony approach (e.g. Christensen et al., 2008b, 2015; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2016). Like an orchestra, organizations are polyphonic, i.e. they “are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic, with many conversations occurring simultaneously and sequentially” (Ford, 1999, p. 485; Fairclough, 1992; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Hazen, 1993; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Multiple contrasting voices inevitably make consistent and clear communication difficult. Polyphony can lead to inconsistency and contradiction, and ultimately to perceived ambiguity. This is the descriptive perspective of the polyphony approach, which focuses on the polyphony of organizations. Furthermore, the polyphony approach offers a prescriptive alternative to clarity-focused approaches. While clarity-focused approaches try to reduce or even eliminate the polyphonic potential of symbolic communication (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 9), the prescriptive understanding as a “multivoiced communication strategy” (Schneider and Zerfass, 2018, p. 29) allows or encourages polyphony, e.g. in order to stimulate change (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 12).

Usually, ambiguity-focused approaches are only marginally interested in the macro-level. At the societal level, the contradictions in organizations are inextricably linked to the inconsistent norms in the environments of organizations (e.g. Brunsson, 2003), which become even more diverse and contradictory as individualization progresses (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In such a world, consistent and clear communication could lead to permanent conflicts, especially when expectations are constantly changing (Guthey and Morsing, 2014).

For these reasons, ambiguity-focused approaches have received a great deal of support in both descriptive and prescriptive approaches in the past few years. Eisenberg’s, 1984 essay on strategic ambiguity made him a pioneer of prescriptive approaches. Eisenberg’s essay emphasized the advantages of the strategic use of ambiguity. Weick’s work at least paved the way for this idea (1979, 1995). For Weick, ambiguity is primarily a problem solved by sensemaking, though he also repeatedly emphasized the relevance of necessary ambiguity or ambiguity to be created (e.g. Weick, 2015) because too little ambiguity increases the risk that an organization tends to oversimplify interpretations.

Eisenberg explicitly positioned his approach “as a critical response to the ‘optimal’ model of communication which equates effectiveness with clarity and openness” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 228). Ambiguity is understood not as an attribute, but as a relational variable and as a combination of source, message and receiver factors. Furthermore, strategic ambiguity should be understood as a continuum ranging from most clear to most ambiguous (Eisenberg, 1984).

His considerations focus on the functions of strategic ambiguity. Eisenberg identified four functions that continue to be relevant today. Firstly, strategic ambiguity promotes unified
diversity. The starting point for these considerations is the diversity or contradictoriness of organizations: If different constituent groups may apply different interpretations to the symbol, ambiguity can be used strategically to foster agreement on abstractions without limiting specific interpretations (Eisenberg, 1984). The more diverse stakeholders are, the more useful strategic ambiguity can be. Second, strategic ambiguity facilitates organizational change. This is made possible by ambiguous goals, which is also the term used in the polyphony approach and the neo-institutionalist approach to decoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Third, strategic ambiguity reinforces existing ascriptions and privileged positions. Together with Manis (1961, p. 76) Eisenberg argues that recipients tend to be influenced more by their own views when interpreting an ambiguous statement than they would be when interpreting a clear statement. Finally, strategic ambiguous communication is deniable and thus ensures freedom of action. The functions put forward by Eisenberg have since been further differentiated and supplemented (e.g. Leitch and Davenport, 2002; Wexler, 2009).

As well as highlighting the advantages, Eisenberg also identified the limits and risks of strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity requires trust and goodwill on the part of the recipients (Leitch and Davenport, 2002). In situations where clarity is expected, strategic ambiguity can lead to cynicism, alienation and apathy (e.g. Christensen et al., 2021; Morsing and Spence, 2019). Many publications have described the ethical problems of strategic ambiguity. The advantage of strategic ambiguity from an ethical perspective is that the statements are not false, but open to interpretation. The benefit is obvious: “the deniability of ambiguous communications allows senders to avoid responsibility for their communications” (Paul and Srbiak, 1997, p. 150). Strategic ambiguity thus remains a powerful instrument in the hands of management, but also represents a rhetorical resource that may be exploited by different actors to advance their particular interests and is a kind of spin or manipulation (Christensen et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010, 2012; Sillince et al., 2012; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000).

The concept of strategic ambiguity has been widely followed to this day (Johansen, 2018). Applications range from studies on strategic ambiguity in mission statements (e.g. Carmon, 2013), change situations in public sector organizations (e.g. Leitch and Davenport, 2002) to crisis communication (e.g. Eisenberg, 1984; Frandsen and Johansen, 2018; Kline et al., 2009; Ulmer et al., 2007; Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995) and corporate social responsibility (e.g. Cheney et al., 2011; Christensen et al., 2015; Langer and Morsing, 2006; Scandelius and Cohen, 2016).

Eisenberg himself always located strategic ambiguity on a communicative and linguistic level: “members use symbols strategically to accomplish goals” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 227). Similarly, Davenport and Leitch anchor ambiguity when they understand strategic ambiguity as “the deliberate use of ambiguity in strategic communication in order to create a ‘space’ within which multiple interpretations by stakeholders are enabled and to which multiple stakeholder responses are possible” (Davenport and Leitch, 2005, p. 1,604). This continues to be the case today. Practices of strategic ambiguity range from the use of ambiguous wordings and equivocal language (e.g. Contractor and Ehrlich, 1993; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987; Miller et al., 2000) to mixed messages such as simultaneously apologizing and denying (Sohn and Edwards, 2018, p. 554) and, more specifically, the use of metaphors (e.g. Eisenberg, 2006; Leitch and Davenport, 2002; Scandelius and Cohen, 2016). Examples of ambiguous wording include keywords like growth, co-existence, community and sustainability, to which multiple meanings are assigned (Leitch and Davenport, 2007). However, to the present day there has been no systematization of the various different dimensions for the field of strategic communication.

This is not surprising given that the messaging discourse in strategic communication research itself is still poorly developed overall. Significantly more attention was afforded to other aspects of the communication process, such as source and receiver variables (Werder, 2015). Although the number of articles on corporate messaging and strategic communication
messaging has been increasing for several years (Werder, 2015; van Halderen et al., 2011), these focus primarily on functions or strategies (e.g. Hazleton, 1992; Zaltman and Duncan, 1977; Page, 2000; Page and Hazleton, 1999, Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009; Werder, 2005) as well as on framing (Hallahan, 1999; Hiebert, 2003; Fröhlich and Ridiger, 2006). A theoretically-grounded methodology for assessing and analyzing messages sent to publics was not offered (Springston and Keyton, 2001; Hallahan, 2000; Werder, 2015). Hazleton’s (1993) matrix for the analysis of public relations symbols distinguishes between physical, psychological and sociological levels on the content dimension. On the psychological level, it also mentions ambiguous style, among other aspects. Nevertheless, overall this system is not a suitable means of describing different practices of strategic ambiguity in context. In linguistics and literary studies, the explanations are more concrete. In the context of ambiguity, linguistics is interested, among other things, in unspecified terms that either do not specify certain meaning features at all or are used simultaneously for several meaning features (e.g. Chomsky, 1965). In literary studies, ambiguity at the textual level is recognized as a specific literary stylistic element of, e.g. novels (Jakobson, 1960).

Interim conclusion
Similar to scientific paradigms, clarity and ambiguity-focused approaches have each absolutized their own position and largely ignored the advantages of the respective other side. The other side was considered to be relevant marginally at best. An integrative perspective that considers clarity and ambiguity equally would seem to be more plausible. Gulbrandsen (2019) with his concept of co-presence was one of the first to propose such a perspective for the development of communication strategies. This is the starting point of the present paper and develops a theoretical framework for the strategic use of clarity vs ambiguity in strategic communication. From an organizational theoretical and decision-based perspective, it is shown how strategic communication oscillates between strategic clarity and ambiguity.

But how plausible are the advantages and opportunities mentioned in the clarity and ambiguity-focused approaches respectively, if strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity are both relevant for organizations? This reveals another deficit in the theoretical foundations. So far, it has not been possible to plausibly explain why organizations depend on both clarity and ambiguity. Consequently, ambiguity, clarity and the role of organizations are described from a societal theoretical perspective.

Detailed descriptions of practices of strategic ambiguity are not yet available. Often, the explanations are limited to individual practices. Therefore, a systematic approach is presented here, which can on the one hand concretize clarity and ambiguity in strategic communication while remaining open to further dimensions.

Oscillating strategic communication between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity
This chapter and the following chapter present the theoretical framework relating to oscillating organizational communication between clarity and ambiguity and relating to the dimensions. First, ambiguity is described at the macro-level. Here, it is shown which societal structures and changes have led to organizations encountering contradictions more and more frequently, thus increasing the risk of conflict. At the meso-level, a decision-based approach is used to show how organizations oscillate between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity. This general theoretical framework is followed in the next chapter by a more in-depth explanation of the concrete dimensions of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity. These
dimensions can be understood as a toolbox of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity in strategic communication.

A theoretical framework for strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity depends essentially on two concepts: communication and decision. Therefore, this paper focuses on the “Communication Constitutes Organization” perspective, which assumes that organizations are constituted through communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Such an approach to communication theory seems to make sense because ambiguity can hardly be explained without reference to communication (e.g. Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Eisenberg, 1984). The concept of decision is also required in order to be able to understand strategic ambiguity. Communicated decisions are the elements of organizations in Niklas Luhmann’s “Theory of Social Systems” (TSS), which is the third school of the CCO perspective (Schoeneborn, 2011; Cooren et al., 2011). Since the publication of the English-language edition of his major work on organization theory, “Organization and Decision” (2018), Luhmann has received even more attention in international organization theory discourses (e.g. Holmström, 2005; Osswald, 2019; Seidl, 2018). Niklas Luhmann’s starting point is the complexity that is reduced in autopoietic social systems. Social systems are built on communication. Examples of social systems at the micro-level are interactions; at the meso-level, organizations; and at the macro-level functional systems such as the economy and politics (Luhmann, 1995). This societal theoretical perspective of Luhmann is another central advantage of the TSS for the following considerations. Luhmann’s oeuvre has a breadth that is known only from a few sociologists. His organizational theory is part of an overarching social theory (Luhmann, 2013). Thus, it is easy to make a connection between organizational theoretical aspects and superordinate societal developments. On this basis, the research question can be answered, which social developments have contributed to the fact that both strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity are important for organizations. Modern society is primarily functionally differentiated (Luhmann, 2013). Societal functional systems such as economy, science, law or politics each exclusively deal with a societal problem. While in earlier stratified differentiated societies the hierarchical distinction decided what was true and what was false, this has fundamentally changed in modern society. Whereas science used to look to the powerholders to determine which findings suited them, in modern societies the two have become separate with academics and scientists increasingly switching from external reference to self-reference. Since then, politics has no longer been the leading system, but only one of several functional systems alongside the economy, science, law, religion and others. The consequences for social complexity are obvious: There has been an explosive increase in societal complexity, which has since continued to grow with further differentiations. What happens when (almost) anything is possible and there is no central societal steering authority? This coexistence leads to contradictions and conflicts.

The problems that have led to the (increasing) relevance of strategic ambiguity are thus found at the societal level. These conflicts are dealt with in organizations. In societies, conflicts are predominantly fought out between and within organizations (Lieckweg, 2001; Luhmann, 2013). They are fought out between organizations when a company faces, for example, trade unions, NGOs, a government or other companies with conflicting interests. Within a company, they are played out when departments such as Marketing, Public Affairs, R&D or HR try to assert their conflicting interests. Although conflicts are neither positive nor negative for a society per se (Coser, 2011), too many conflicts would bring organizations and companies to a standstill.

The risk of disappointment and, thus, of conflict, is all the greater the more clearly expectations are formulated. Here Luhmann locates the function of ambiguation, which in essence does not differ from Eisenberg’s strategic ambiguity: “Therefore making expectations ambiguous is a strategy for creating relative security and for protecting them from environmentally conditioned disturbances. The logical, conceptual, and linguistic
possibilities of detailing an expectation are therefore never exhausted. One is precise about an expectation only insofar as is necessary to secure connective behavior.” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 308). The function of ambiguation, or strategic ambiguity, is thus to ensure follow-up behavior. In such a situation, strategic ambiguity can defuse conflicts both internally and externally because it provokes less contradiction. Goals are formulated so ambiguously that internal conflicts between departments and external conflicts such as NGOs are less likely. In a contradictory, individualizing and polarizing society, ambiguation seems to be all the more important to avoid an excess of conflict or to increase the probability of acceptance. Eisenberg’s functions can be subsumed to this general function.

Eisenberg (1984) already pointed out the limits of strategic ambiguity with reference to attribution theory: For someone with low credibility, clear communication provides almost the only opportunity to improve their image. Examples of this can be found in almost every election campaign: While a popular incumbent can rely on strategic ambiguity and, thus, not scare anyone away, challengers have to be specific in order to be able to attack the incumbent and convey to voters what they themselves stand for. More generally: strategic ambiguity tends to be just as unsuitable for completely new and thus unknown organizations as it is for organizations that want to generate new supporters within a short time. In addition, however, the incumbent can also quickly encounter criticism if he never wants to commit himself and remains all too obviously ambiguous.

This reveals the dilemma faced by organizations: They take flight, twofold. On the one hand, they flee from clarity in order to avoid conflicts in a contradictory society. On the other hand, they flee ambiguity in order to gain supporters. Organizations thus oscillate between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity.

A decision-based approach is used below to describe this twofold escape. Such a decision-based approach enables a better understanding of strategic communication (Osswald, 2019). Strategic communication in general can be understood in a communication-based approach as options are communicatively linked to certain organizational goal. “A connection is made between a decision and an intention to change something in line with particular goals” (Osswald, 2019, p. 272). More generally: Communication has a special character in organizations (Luhmann, 2018). Decisions are a special form of communication because they always reveal their own contingency (Schoeneborn, 2011). Decisions are paradoxical because they are undecidable: “Only questions that are in principle undecidable, we can decide” (von Foerster, 1992, p. 14). When decisions are made in organizations, open contingency is transformed into closed contingency (Andersen, 2003; Luhmann, 2018). In a decision situation, there are several alternatives to choose from, which are presented as alternatives – only such addressing of alternatives constitutes a decision situation. In the decision situation, one alternative is selected and then presented as the supposedly better option. For organizations, the paradoxical character of decisions, which also results from the described contradictoriness of society, gives rise to the need to de-paradoxify decisions (Andersen, 2003). One possibility for deparadoxification is oscillation (Andersen and Born, 2000; Spencer-Brown, 1969; Schoeneborn, 2011). Furthermore, autopoiesis and operative constructivism in TSS result in a strict observer dependence. Thus, from the perspective of the TSS, as in Eisenberg (1984), clarity and ambiguity are ascriptions.

In the literature review, the dissemination of the latent assumption of clarity in the clarity-focused approaches was identified. Ambiguous messages or identities are seen as a problem to be solved. Using the “Laws of Form” by Spencer-Brown (1969), Baecker (2006), Luhmann (2018) this can be modeled as follows: In the clarity-focused approaches, clarity is the marked side, while ambiguity is the unmarked side. Pursuant to this perspective, clarity is the preferred side of the distinction. In the ambiguity-focused approaches, the situation is reversed–these approaches emphasize the advantages and opportunities of ambiguity in strategic communication. Accordingly, ambiguity is the marked side in this perspective and,
thus, the preferred side. This also reveals the preference of each of the two approaches: While clarity-focused approaches flee ambiguity, ambiguity-focused approaches flee clarity.

While clarity- and ambiguity-focused approaches favor one side without questioning the other, an understanding in which strategic communication strategically uses clarity and ambiguity requires second-order observation. With this second-order observation, the distinction clear vs ambiguous is observed with the distinction clear vs ambiguous (Seidl, 2018). This re-entry is the third relevant operation besides condensation and cancellation in Spencer-Brown’s calculus of form. What this means for the present question, in concrete terms, is: The observer observes with the distinction clear vs ambiguous, as he or she or another observer has previously used the distinction clear vs ambiguous.

This second-order observation reveals the blind spots of the clarity- and ambiguity-focused approaches, the first-order observations. What concrete advantages result from such a re-entry? First, the second-order observation generally reveals the contingency of previously made ascriptions of clarity or ambiguity. Thus, one could conclude with the second-order observation that statements that were previously labeled as particularly clear are still relatively ambiguous – and vice versa. Secondly, the visibility of the contingency highlights the ascriptive character of clarity and ambiguity. It becomes obvious that different points of observation can lead to different ascriptions. This is an important prerequisite, especially in the field of strategic communication, where the aim is to anticipate possible effects. Thus, only the re-entry of the distinction between ambiguous vs clear enables an assessment of the chances of success of clarity and ambiguity. While the extent of clarity or ambiguity is not apparent in the one-sided approaches with their first-order observation and the unspecific aim is to achieve the highest possible degree of clarity or ambiguity, this can be better adjusted with the re-entry.

The use of strategic clarity or strategic ambiguity in strategic communication means that clarity and ambiguity are used in such a way that they can lead to intended effects. For this purpose, the intended effects are discussed and weighed up against the background of clarity and ambiguity in strategic communication. If clarity and ambiguity are conceived of as ascription that senders and receivers perform independently and if one assumes the limitations or interpretative character of all communication (see e.g. Blumer, 1986), this means that strategic communication attempts to communicate more clearly or ambiguously in any given situation. A distinction must be made between this and how it is perceived by the recipients. Studies have shown that clarity has often been interpreted very differently (e.g. Sohn and Edwards, 2018).

In this way, an organization decides in which situation it will primarily flee ambiguity and when it prefers instead to flee from clarity. This ultimately leads to the paradox of decisions. Therefore, it seems plausible that, over time, an oscillation between predominantly clear and ambiguous decisions can be observed in order to defuse the dilemma and the paradox (Spencer-Brown, 1969; Gebert and Boerner, 1999; Mintzberg and Westley, 1992; Seidl, 2018). Thus, when using strategic clarity and ambiguity, organizations oscillate between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity.

While any organizational communication can be viewed by an observer as either rather clear or ambiguous, the focus of this article is a reflective use of clarity and ambiguity. The oscillation of strategic communication between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity means that this decision is discussed in an organization and thus consciously (reflectively) decided in each case. It can be assumed that this has not yet happened in most organizations. Exceptions are only to be expected in the fields mentioned, such as CSR communication and crisis communication. Moreover, in the political context, strategic ambiguity is used in election campaigns to scare off as few voters as possible (e.g. Aragonès and Postlewaite, 2002). The increase in societal contradictions and conflicts described above leads us to expect
that organizations will be increasingly reflective in dealing with strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity in strategic communication.

This is the general theoretical framework for the use of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity in strategic communication. From this follows the question: How can more or less ambiguity be achieved in strategic communication in concrete terms? These dimensions, with their various different practices are explored in greater detail in the next section. In the process, it becomes clear that strategic ambiguity is more than deliberately speaking ambiguously about goals and strategies.

Dimensions of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity

The literature review has shown that the existing descriptions of the practices of strategic ambiguity remain surprisingly vague. Ambiguity is usually related to messages. While, on the one hand, even the descriptions of ambiguous practices at the level of messages remain remarkably nebulous, it seems plausible, on the other hand, to interpret the strategic use of clarity and ambiguity in strategic communication more broadly.

If ambiguity is generally understood as an ascription to the coexistence of different viewpoints and divergent ways of making sense of the world (Guthey and Morsing, 2014), then this coexistence of different viewpoints can refer to different distinctions and thus to different dimensions. The coexistence of different viewpoints has been the main focus in the literature to date and has been promoted on a content-related level, e.g. through the use of metaphors (e.g. Eisenberg, 2006; Leitch and Davenport, 2002; Scandelius and Cohen, 2016), keywords (Leitch and Davenport, 2007) or mixed messages (Sohn and Edwards, 2018, p. 554). There can also be different viewpoints on the character of a media product: Is it an advertorial or a journalistic text? There may also be different views regarding the truth claim: Is it a lie? Is it the truth? Or is it bullshit? There are several possible interpretations in all of these cases. The strategic use of ambiguity then aims precisely at creating a space in which multiple interpretations by stakeholders are enabled and multiple stakeholder responses are possible (Davenport and Leitch, 2005).

The literature review has shown that the contributions on strategic communication messages and symbols do not provide a framework for this paper. How can the various dimensions be concretized and systematized? The dimensions of the distinction between strategic clarity vs strategic ambiguity can be systematized based on the elements of the communication process and the question of whether the dimension refers primarily to the sender, to the message or to the addressee. This is a purely analytical systematization and does not imply linear thinking or even stimulus–response assumptions. In addition, reflexive relationships are self-evident here: the contents of the messages depend on the addressee; the goals depend on the relationship between the communicator and the addressee, etc. Meta-dimensions that refer to the strategic character and its visibility have to be identified. Here, too, organizations can act with particular clarity or ambiguity (see Figure 1).

In the case of the sender, strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity initially refer to (1) the positioning and the degree of consistency of strategic communication. In this dimension, strategic clarity is concretized in a clear positioning, which is to be conveyed by integrated communication and which is a widespread ideal in the literature on integrated communication (e.g. Kliatchko, 2005). The ambiguous counterposition is similar to the prescriptive polyphony concept (e.g. Christensen et al., 2008a, b, 2015; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), in which polyphony tends to make contradictions visible. The disadvantages and the probable unfeasibility of the respective extreme positions have already been described. While it follows that every organization must be located in the area of conflict between the two poles it can also be assumed that an intensive oscillation can be observed in this complex dimension in particular.
If the meta-level refers to the strategic character of the situation, this is concretized for the sender by (2) the visibility of the strategic communication character. The question behind this is whether the strategic character of the communicator should be fundamentally visible. Precisely because it is generally assumed that strategic communication is perceived as less credible, there have always been attempts to conceal its strategic character. Balasubramanian generally refers to this as hybrid advertising: “all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character; under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages” (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 30). A clear practice in this dimension would be if the communicator clearly reveals the strategic character or, conversely, denies it. In recent years, however, ambiguous practices with a hybrid character have been observed increasingly often. In the field of brand journalism (Bull, 2013), organizations do not usually hide their identity entirely as the sender of a customer magazine, for example, but they do simulate journalistic or entertainment practices.

On the level of the statement, strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity can be differentiated as regards topics, facts, truth claims and assessments, following Kohring and Matthes (2007). Concerning (3) the topic, the fundamental question is whether a topic should be clearly recognizable or whether mutual transfer effects should be created by combining it with other topics. An example of this is so-called outside-in topics (Hoffjann, 2020), where relevant topics or persons from outside the organizations are picked up in order to indirectly say something about the organization. The facts (4) are explained in many ways in existing studies on strategic ambiguity (e.g. Contractor and Ehrlich, 1993; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987). Ambiguous facts can, for example, be ranges or the extensive omission of facts, as is often observed in value communication (Christensen et al., 2015).

In (5) truth claims, the focus is on the classical truth norm. Clarity strategies here are truthfulness and lies, because in both cases the organization commits itself and the statement can be verified, e.g. on the basis of agreed procedures (Hoffjann, 2013). Bullshit is an ambiguous strategy. A bullshitter is concerned with the effect on the public, the loud provocative assertion – regardless of the truth. When a bullshitter makes a claim and is indifferent to the truth of his assertion (Frankfurt, 2005), the distinction between truth and lie is pushed into the background. It could all be untrue – but it could also be true. “A lie is a constrained form of speech act, whereas the bullshitter is afforded considerably more freedom to make claims in relation to the real world. In its purest form, it is not possible to submit bullshit to adjudication in a court of truth where the claim is simply tested against the facts. Ideal-typical bullshit is immune to any attempt to scrutinize a claim against the

![Figure 1. Dimensions of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity](image-url)
empirical record. Confronting the bullshitter with ‘the facts’ is unlikely to be a successful argumentative strategy. This, in a nutshell, is what makes bullshit so much more dangerous and socially corrosive than lying.” (Hopkin and Rosamond, 2018, p. 643). Finally, on the message level (6) assessments such as adjectives can be found. Clear strategies are clear assessments, e.g. of future prospects, while ambiguous assessments should deliberately leave this open.

In the statements, the meta-level refers to (7) the media schemata. Media schemata are collectively shared expectations relating to media products, e.g. the relation to reality, to topics, aesthetics and style (Schmidt, 1987). Advertisements differ from journalistic texts, for example, in their binding nature and aesthetics. The recognizability of media schemes thus structures the expectations and the reception of a media product. A commercial in a classic advertising aesthetic is thus strategically clear. Strategic ambiguity is present in this dimension when elements of several schemes are used. So-called advertorials in magazines, for example, are labeled as advertisements, but use the same layout as the editorial part. This applies is a similar way to press releases that are immediately recognizable as such to journalists but are written with a strong emphasis on the facts. The strategic character of the communication offer is recognizable in both cases, but is likely to be weakened by the adaptation of journalistic elements.

When it comes to the addressee, the first question is that of (8) addressee transparency. A clear practice in this dimension specifically addresses the addressees. It should be immediately apparent to the addressees whether or not they belong to the defined target group. This is deliberately kept vague in an ambiguous addressing of addressees. Lastly, on the meta-level related to the addressees, statements can be found on (9) transparency regarding the intended follow-up action. This is part of the meta-level because the intended effect is either revealed or concealed. Strategic clarity designates the effect that is to be triggered: Buy this product! Vote for this party! Drive carefully! In the case of ambiguous practices, the intended follow-up action increasingly fades into the background. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, well-known consumer brands such as supermarkets and beer brands utilized their advertising to encourage people to stick to the social distancing rules and stay at home – in order to ultimately benefit from an image transfer.

Strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity can be very different in a particular situation in the dimensions presented. For science, the presented systematics can serve as the basis for empirical studies, while for practitioners it can be interpreted as an ambiguity mix. An organization may opt for strategic clarity in terms of topics, facts and assessments, or it may opt for ambiguous bullshit in order to gain freedom. For example, populist politicians like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump can ostensibly promise clear policies by employing an unambiguous friend-foe scheme. At the same time, through ambiguous truth claims such as bullshit, they leave open how important the truth reference is to them (Wodak, 2020; Kristiansen and Kaussler, 2018). The example illustrates how organizations use simultaneously clear and ambiguous practices. Organizations will probably only very rarely act exclusively clearly or ambiguously in all dimensions. Ambiguity that encompasses all dimensions is likely to lead to criticism and protest just as quickly as comprehensive clarity. Ambiguous clarity, where different addressees with different points of view each interpret something unambiguously – but divergently, is more promising. This is the illusion of clarity.

Conclusion
This paper presents a theoretical framework for the strategic use of clarity and ambiguity in strategic communication. Strategic communication oscillates between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity in order to defuse the dilemma and paradox. The re-entry of distinction is a second-order observation and thus reveals the blind spots of clarity- and ambiguity-focused approaches, the first-order observations. From a societal theoretical perspective, it has been
shown that organizations are on a double escape: Ambiguity and clarity are both a risk and an opportunity for organizations. Increasing societal differentiation and thus the diversity of perspectives thus increases the risk of conflict and as a result tends to make strategic ambiguity more and more appealing. Subsequently, based on a general understanding of ambiguity, a systematic approach encompassing different dimensions of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity was presented. If ambiguity is generally understood as an ascription to the coexistence of different viewpoints and divergent ways of making sense of the world (Guthey and Morsing, 2014), then this coexistence of different viewpoints can also refer to media schemata or truth claims.

Taking this broader perspective makes it even clearer how important strategic ambiguity is becoming in strategic communication. In addition to the practices mentioned in the literature, other practices such as the ambiguous handling of messages regarding the strategic communication character, but especially ambiguous bullshitting and ambiguous media schemata come into focus. Using the presented systematic approach to the dimensions of strategic use of clarity and ambiguity allows these practices to be described in context and researched empirically.

This paper establishes and extends multiple links to the research island of strategic ambiguity. First, strategic ambiguity has been anchored in organizational theory as a counterpart to strategic clarity and in the context of decision-based approaches. Second, the advantages of strategic ambiguity have been justified in societal theory. With Luhmann’s TSS, a more general function of strategic ambiguity could thus be found. Third, the practices of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity have been described in a larger context. This theoretical framework can be used as a basis for empirical studies. If clarity and ambiguity have been conceived as ascription, studies need to take this observer-bound character into account. The communicator perspective focuses on questions concerning the use of different practices and the motivation behind their use. As outlined previously for politicians, which organizations are particularly prone to strategic ambiguity and whether organizations act similarly in an organizational field are of particular interest. From the recipient’s perspective, the question of effects is central. How does the ascription of clarity and ambiguity differ from the use of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity? This makes it clear that such a broad understanding of strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity provides an ideal framework and can furthermore incorporate several different fields of research. Finally, the establishment of new links and the expansion of existing links to strategic communication research highlights the great need for further research in this field. For example, the effects of oscillating between strategic clarity and strategic ambiguity need to be examined in the context of other strategic communication decisions.

How can the practice of strategic communication benefit from these considerations? First of all, the state of research shows that clarity-focused approaches are still dominant in the most important textbooks. In practice, therefore, it is still primarily a matter of questioning this latent assumption in planning methods and concepts. However, with the oscillation between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity, the article has also made clear that it is not a matter of simply replacing the previously dominant clarity with a new dominance of ambiguity. Rather, the goal is a reflective management of the distinction between strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity. The systematization of practices of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity can ultimately be used as a toolbox for the concrete application of strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity.

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Further reading

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