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Strategic Improvisation and Narratives: New Ideas for Crisis Communication in the Borderland between Theory and Practice

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This paper is based on a recently published book (Falkheimer et al 2025) focusing the role of narratives and strategic improvisation in contemporary management, and a chapter on improvisation and crisis communication in an international handbook (Falkheimer & Heide 2022). The aim of this conceptual paper is to develop the ideas of strategic improvisation and narratives, partly based in the fine arts, for crisis communication theory and practice. With anchoring in previous research and a selection of established theories (e.g. Weick 1969), the innovative argument is that that jazz music, narrative theory and improvisational theatre have more to bring to the development of crisis communication than traditional managerial models. A premise in the paper is that the dependencies between all institutions, actors and stakeholders create increased complexity, paradoxes, ambiguity, and constant demands of adaption and innovations.

The concept narrative is as old as mankind and is founded in a fundamental thinking about human meaning-making. Narratives are aligned with storytelling as a practice. But often, the concept of narrative is used without and deep reflection on what it means. Most definition's view narrative from a structuralist approach, as a story of events and experiences, true or false, with an internal structure, called a plot. Later research has challenged these ideas and highlighted that we live in a world where long, complete, and fixed structure narratives are challenged by communication that happens in everyday conversation and social media interactions which may not be linked to the established narratives and plots. Digital narratives tend to be incomplete, fragmented and not following any linear logic at all. Strategic narratives are still of core importance for contemporary crisis communication, especially connected to public diplomacy, statecraft, international conflicts, and war. In a world of increasing spread and impact of propaganda and disinformation, the role of strategic narratives is getting more important. Ekman and Nilsson (2023) describe, as an example, how

Ukraine and its' president Volodymyr Zelenskyj have used strategic narratives in a very efficient way to create resistance towards the aggressor Russia. But, as mentioned, crisis communicators need to embrace a more nuanced understanding of narratives.
In the paper the idea of narratives is aligned with the idea of strategic improvisation. The aim of strategic improvisation is to enable communicators to navigate both order and chaos, perform the balancing act between complexity and the ever-changing nature of everything, and establish a clear direction. Ultimately, strategic improvisation fulfils the basic needs for stability, security, and shared values. The model for strategic improvisation consists of three supporting parts: *strategy, narrative,* and *improvisation*. It should not be interpreted as a linear process but where the different parts continuously fertilize each other. Strategic improvisation means a narrative adapted to the situation within a given framework. Strategic improvisation occurs when three essential components are combined: a clear strategy (the framework or composition), a professional interpretation and making of purpose (the narrative), and situational adaptation based on given opportunities and conditions (improvisation). Strategic improvisation is the intersection of two seemingly contradictory logics. However, in practice, these concepts are not at odds; instead, they are prerequisites for one another. The idea of strategic improvisation has its origin in both the creative and fine arts, crisis management (e.g. Falkheimer & Heide 2022) and in management and strategy (e.g. Tyrstrup 2006). Still, the main contributor to the field of improvisation and management is Frank J. Barrett (e.g. 2012) who highlights the importance of embracing jazz improvisation in organizations.

In the paper, these ideas will be developed and exemplified, aming to inspire innovative thinking and practice in crisis communication.

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