



Communication and Attention Dynamics: An Attention-Based View of Strategic Change

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ABSTRACT

The attention-based view (ABV) has highlighted that role of organizational attention in strategic decision-making and adaptation. While the original formulation recognized the importance of communication channels, subsequent research has tended to focus on communications as “pipes and prisms” for information processing, which limits the scope of ABV in addressing strategic change. Here we propose a broader role for communication in generating attention to new strategic issues and initiatives, and forming and implementing a new firm strategy. We offer specific suggestions for future research on the role of communication practices, vocabularies, rhetorical tactics, and talk and text in shaping organizational attention in strategic change. We believe that such enhanced view of ABV can contribute to advancing research on dynamic capabilities, strategy processes, strategy-as-practice, and behavioral strategy.

Twenty years ago, the attention-based view of the firm (ABV) (Ocasio, 1997) was proposed to explain firm strategic decision-making and adaptation—key topics in strategy research. Building on and reinterpreting Andrews' (1971) classic definition, ABV defines a firm's strategy as the *pattern of organizational attention*, the distinct focus of time and effort by the firm on a set of issues—problems, opportunities, and threats, and on a particular set of action alternatives—skills, routines, programs, projects, and procedures (Ocasio, 1997: 188). According to ABV, the organizational attention generates a firm's strategic agenda, the issues and action alternatives that guide the allocation and deployment of resources in organizations (Ocasio and Joseph, 2005).

The original ABV formulation (Ocasio, 1997) has influenced a broad range of strategy areas, including research on strategy planning (Ketokivi and Castaner, 2004), top management teams (Cho and Hambrick, 2006), corporate governance (Tuggle *et al.*, 2010a; Tuggle *et al.*, 2010b), multinational management (Bouquet and Birkinshaw, 2008), and technology strategy (Eggers and Kaplan, 2009). ABV research has focused on the structural determinants of attention, situated decision-making and strategic moves.

Subsequent theoretical development and empirical studies (Joseph and Ocasio, 2012; Ketokivi and Castaner, 2004; Ocasio and Joseph, 2005) have extended the original theory and further explained the structure and role of communication channels as a means to distribute organization attention and formulate and implement the firm's strategy. Most research on ABV remains, however, primarily structural, with the attention structures—the firm's rules, players, positions, and resources—and the structures of communication channels responding to the environmental stimuli, to generate strategic change and adaptation (Barnett, 2008; Joseph and Ocasio, 2012; Vuori and Huy, 2015). This more structural approach to attention allocation and strategic change is particularly useful to explain how responses to changes in institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999), government regulations (Cho and Hambrick, 2006), and technological innovations (Li *et al.*, 2013) external to the firm are mediated and moderated by

existing structures and patterns of organizational attention. It is less useful to explain less-incremental forms of change and adaptation (cf. Cyert and March, 1963; Greve, 2003) that are critical in dynamic environments. In dynamic environments, key aspects of strategic change, such as strategy renewal and transformation, radical and architectural innovations, and environmental disruptions require a reconsideration of strategic agendas and a reconstitution of the firm’s attention structures, which are less readily explained by existing approaches to ABV.

To better account for forming and implementing less-incremental forms of strategic change and renewal, a more dynamic approach to attention allocation is needed. In this paper, we seek to do so by highlighting the need to expand the role and centrality of communication in generating changes to the firm’s strategic agenda and attention structures. Prior research has shown how communication through the exercise of voice (Bouquet and Birkinshaw, 2008) and issue selling (Dutton *et al.*, 2001; Dutton *et al.*, 1997) generates changes to existing patterns of organizational attention. Yet the more general role of communication in developing new strategic agendas that result in strategic change and renewal remains underdeveloped.

Thus, we propose that in order to further develop the attention-based view of strategic change, it is paramount to go beyond existing information processing perspective on attention allocation and elaborate the role of communication in attention dynamics. Communication already plays a role in ABV, but primarily in terms of communication channels as the “pipes and prisms” through which information flows. In this paper we propose instead that future developments in ABV more explicitly consider the content and practices of communication, defined in terms that of “*social interaction that builds on speech, gestures, texts, discourses, and other means*” (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2015). Communication through social interactions, both within and between communication channels, allows for organizational participants to jointly attend to and co-orient themselves to the changes in strategic issues, initiatives, and activities throughout the organization, which constitute strategic change—whether planned or emergent.

For this purpose, we outline four suggestions for future research on how: (1) communication practices, (2) vocabularies, (3) rhetorical tactics, and (4) talk and text shape organizational attention and generate strategic change. We argue that by focusing on such under-explored areas ABV can also complement other previous research on strategic change, including dynamic capabilities (Helfat and Peteraf, 2015), strategy process dynamics (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst, 2006), strategy-as-practice (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) and behavioral strategy (Powell *et al.*, 2011).

FROM INFORMATION PROCESSING TO COMMUNICATION IN THE ABV

Given its origins in the Carnegie School tradition (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Simon, 1958; Simon, 1947), ABV is often regarded as an information processing perspective, with attention as the critical limit on the information processing capacity of the organization. When ABV was first proposed the objective was to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of the structuring of attention in line with Simon's (1947) pioneering work on structure and cognition and to "link individual information processing and behavior to organizational structure" (Ocasio, 1997: 188). This information processing view is reflected in applications of ABV in strategy research including the work on performance feedback effects (Chen and Miller, 2007; Iyer and Miller, 2008; Washburn and Bromiley, 2012), firm forecasting ability (Durand, 2003), and how the proximity of a deadline changes attention focus (Lehman *et al.*, 2011).

While the ABV highlights well the central importance of information processing capacity and the structural distribution of attention, the role of communication in shaping the dynamics of organizational attention has received less research attention, as discussed above. Theory and research on the ABV has tended to regard the communication channels as pipes and prisms for information processing instead of arenas for sensemaking and competition over ideas and viewpoints (cf. Nigam and Ocasio, 2010). Yet attention in ABV is defined as the noticing, encoding, interpreting, and focusing on time and effort on the repertoire of issues and action

alternatives facing the organization (Ocasio, 1997; 189).

Moreover, although organizational attention is often measured in terms of communication through official texts, primarily letters to shareholders (Cho and Hambrick, 2006; Eggers and Kaplan, 2009; Nadkarni and Barr, 2008), minutes of boards of directors (Tuggle *et al.*, 2010a; Tuggle *et al.*, 2010b), and, less commonly, through observations of informal communications and meetings (Yu *et al.*, 2005), the acts of communication have most often been seen as measures of relative attention allocation instead of acts that themselves also influence the dynamics of organizational attention.

In the original formulation of the ABV, Ocasio (1997) provided a platform the studying the role of communication in the ABV by outlining the spatial, temporal, and procedural dimensions of communication channels that guide attention. In his more recent work, he has expanded on this idea by discussing the central role of communication channels in “attentional engagement,” defined as the process of intentional, sustained allocation of cognitive resources to guide problem solving, planning, sensemaking, and decision making (Ocasio, 2011).

Ocasio (2011) notes that attentional engagement is central to the ABV perspective on attention, relative to views on attention drawn from research on managerial cognition, which define attention more narrowly in terms of selective attention and noticing, rather than his more expansive definition. While attentional engagement is shaped by communication, the research on attention has tended to overlook the social interactions underlying communication in shaping the situated attention and attentional engagement that occurs within and between communication channels. We propose that attention in the ABV should be studied not only as an individual level cognitive phenomenon, but also as a social one, where the attention and co-orientation of organizational actors is shaped by communication.

Thus, to develop a more dynamic attention-based view on strategic change, we suggest researchers to go beyond the traditional information processing view and highlight the role of communication in attentional engagement. The traditional view can be described following the

“conduit metaphor” (Reddy, 1979) view where communication is a process of sending and receiving information, and language and communicative practices have limited effect on the message, its meaning, and reception. We suggest drawing instead on more contemporary approaches that highlight the role of communication in shaping how organizational actors think, and act (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2015; Loewenstein *et al.*, 2012; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). Accordingly, communication is a process by which speakers interact with other speakers and recipients to jointly attend to and engage with understanding of organizational and environmental phenomena (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Weick, 1995). This process is situated within channels and between channels and distributed throughout the organization (Joseph and Ocasio, 2012).

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE ATTENTION-BASED VIEW: AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To elaborate on the role of communication content and practices on strategic change, we identify four future research areas that hold potential to enhance our understanding of how attentional dynamics shape a firm’s strategic agenda. These include (1) an analysis of the nature of communicative practices used in communication channels, which can enable or constrain changes in attentional engagement; (2) an analysis of strategic vocabularies to develop insights into how the language used shapes attention; (3) an analysis of rhetorical tactics to better comprehend the role of political dynamics in the shaping of the strategic agenda of a firm; and (4) an analysis of different forms of talk and text to understand how changes in strategic agendas are articulated and shared throughout the organization.

These four areas not intended to provide an exhaustive account or theory of how communication shapes attentional dynamics and strategic change, but to identify potential building blocks for future research. In what follows, we draw from insights from key areas of communication and discourse studies, and apply these insights to explain how ABV can help

strategy researchers explain strategic change.

Proposal #1: Communicative practices in communication channels

In order to understand better the role of communication in shaping a firm’s strategic agenda, there is a need to examine the nature and characteristics of communication channels, a research area that remains under-developed in ABV. One way to approach this issue is to focus on the communicative or discursive practices that enable or constrain communication in specific channels (e.g., Balogun *et al.*, 2014; Paroutis and Heracleous, 2013; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Communicative practices are not the content of communication, but the means through which communication happens. Thus, they are the ways in which communication technologies and tools are used, rules about participation rights, conventions about language use, and norms about appropriate forms of interaction that steer organizational communication and attentional engagement within and between channels.

Past research has shown how communicative practices enable or constrain communication and thus the emerging strategic agenda. This is especially the case for strategy meetings and workshops (e.g., Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Seidl and Guérard, 2015) that are formalized communication channels having a major impact on attention (Ocasio and Joseph, 2008; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). For example, Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) have studied strategy meetings and elaborated on how various meeting practices – e.g., turn-taking, scheduling, issue bracketing and voting – can influence strategic discussions. Similarly, Johnson *et al.* (2010) have elaborated on the ritualistic aspects of strategy workshops and how managers performed ‘quasi-priestly’ roles and others follow suit. Kwon *et al.* (2014) have highlighted the discursive practices that teams use to develop shared views around strategic issues in meetings: re/defining, equalizing, simplifying, legitimating, and reconciling. Kaplan (2011) has in turn focused on the characteristic features of PowerPoint as a means of communication. Other studies have examined the effects of discursive practices on people’s ability to participate in strategy

processes and shape the strategic agenda. For example, Mantere and Vaara (2008) identified six practices impeding or enabling participation.

These studies notwithstanding, we have still a rather limited understanding of the communicative practices in various communication channels and, in particular, the extent to which they reinforce existing patterns of organizational attention or facilitate the formulation and implementation of strategic change. Future studies should consider both communicative practices within the firm's channels, but also outside its boundaries. Thus, it would be important to examine the practices of orchestrated strategy-making as in "open strategy" (Whittington *et al.*, 2017) as well as how discussions in the media may shape the attention of managers. Furthermore, there is a need to go further in the analysis of the communication tools and technologies in increasingly distributed organizations and for example global teams in them. In addition, we have a limited understanding of how social media and communication technologies are used to shape strategic agendas. Yet it would be important to examine, for example, how diverse communicative practices help to spread new strategic issues and initiatives through social media relative to those used in more traditional communication. Overall, while existing research has already established the importance of communicative practices in developing strategic agendas, more research is required to explain how diverse communicative practices both generate and transform attentional engagement in new and different forms of communication channels and how these enable or constrain strategic change.

Proposal #2: Strategic vocabularies as microfoundations of attention formation

While understanding of the practices of specific communication channels is crucial, it is also important to examine the role of language as a basis of communication to develop the ABV approach to change. This is not a trivial matter as specific forms of language or discourse tend to steer attention towards particular issues and initiatives. One way to approach this issue is to focus on the strategic vocabularies that managers use or do not use in a firm. Following Loewenstein et

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al (2012), we define vocabularies as systems of words, and the meaning of these words, used by groups, organizations, and institutional fields in communication, thought, and action.

Vocabularies are central to determining which issues and initiatives are likely to be attended to within and between communication channels. For example, the vocabularies of NASA have been examined by Vaughan (1996) and Ocasio (2005) to explain how managers and engineers’ attention and inattention to safety and risks shaped the fatal Challenger and Columbia accidents, respectively. Importantly, research has begun to study how vocabularies shape the strategic agenda of the firm. For example Jones and Livne-Tarandach (2008) explored the vocabularies of architects and how these affected their marketing strategies.

Attention shifts may be triggered and legitimated through new and changing vocabularies (Nigam and Ocasio, 2010). Innovations in vocabularies are like crystallizations of ideas that serve as focal points of attention. Through new conceptualizations, managers may be able to coin a strategic idea that fundamentally shifts distributed patterns of organizational attention. For example, Ocasio and Joseph (2008) examined how changes in vocabularies used for strategic planning at General Electric shifted the strategic agenda throughout the corporation. More generally, we argue that new words and categories play a crucial role in attention dynamics.

In order to develop new ideas and challenge conventional ways of strategic thinking and acting, there is a need to tolerate, nurture and even promote new words, concepts and categories as an essential part of strategic change. The key argument is that vocabularies have a fundamental impact on how managers make sense of their environment, organization, and strategy. Language both enables focusing attention on important issues and initiatives as managers may miss opportunities and threats that they cannot make sense of with the existing vocabularies. Thus, not only does cognition impact the vocabularies we use (we think before we talk), but vocabularies also affect attention and cognition (we use language to guide how we think).

While research on vocabularies and strategic agenda change is still in its infancy, some studies provide guideposts for future research. For example, the study of Gawer and Phillips

(2013) on the evolution of Intel's strategic agenda to aim at becoming a platform leader provides evidence of how changes in vocabularies created changes in the firm's strategic agenda. Faced with a changing institutional setting, Intel created a new language emphasizing the company as "industry enabler" and "catalyst for innovation," facilitating a strategic agenda that favored platform strategies. New words and categories used both within the firm and with Intel's suppliers were critical in shifting organizational identity and relationships and transforming organizational strategies. Future research should also examine not only how vocabularies may facilitate strategic agenda change, but also how they may hinder attention to new strategic agendas, either within specific communication channels or throughout the organization.

Proposal #3: Rhetorical tactics as determinants of attentional engagement

Another key issue is how managers then use communication to influence others. This is an important topic because although the attention-based view sees the power of organizational players as an important part of the firm's attention structures, it implicitly treats power as fixed and has not specified how the political dynamics are related to attentional engagement or to changes in the firm's attention structures. Extending the work of Paroutis and Heracleous (2013), an analysis of the different types of rhetorical strategies or tactics used by different actors in the organization to guide the attention focus of the organization can be useful for understanding this link. In general, the question is how to exercise not only power but also influence through rhetorical tactics and how they affect the patterns of organizational attention that enable or constrain strategic change.

While there is a broad range of different types of rhetorical strategies that can be used to influence attentional engagement, research on strategic issue selling has been particularly enlightening in this respect (e.g., Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton *et al.*, 1997). Essential in this work is to note the key role of middle managers in regulating communication and 'buying' and 'selling' issues and ideas (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). The political dynamics

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between middle and senior management is likewise important (c.f., Vuori and Huy, 2015). Another perspective is the framing of issues or initiatives (Kaplan, 2008; Werner and Cornelissen, 2014). For instance, Kaplan (2008) has studied ‘framing contests,’ that is the ways in which actors provide alternative ways of understanding and focusing attention on strategic issues.

Beyond issue selling and framing, further research on rhetorical strategies would be useful in order for us to understand the political underpinnings of attention dynamics. It is not only that strategic agendas shape the attention of individual managers in the ongoing process of organizational communication (Joseph and Ocasio, 2012), but that managers often have their own interests in shaping agendas and focusing attention on specific issues and initiatives.

Proposal #4: Forms of talk and text to study how strategic agendas are articulated and shared

From the perspective of the ABV, talk and text play an important role in the structural distribution of attention and form the strategic agenda of the organization (Cooren *et al.*, 2014; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). To better understand these forms of communication, it is important to examine both specific instances of talk (as in strategy meetings) and texts (as strategic documents). For instance, recent work on the communicative construction of organizations (CCO) is useful for elaborating on the specific role of talk and texts in these processes (Cooren *et al.*, 2014; Robichaud *et al.*, 2004; Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). In this view, attention focuses on a common object such as a strategy text or conversation. Thus, even if managers may have different interest and goals, alignment may be created precisely by texts or ideas that that are jointly attended to. Robichaud et al. (2004) propose that strategies tend to develop through ‘metaconversations.’ In this view, multiple and disparate conversations distributed in various meeting or communication channels are linked together by common communicative elements such as understandings of what strategies should be all about (see also,

Fenton and Langley, 2011). Strategic texts, especially strategic plans, may then become significant parts of communication in their own right.

Rather than only focusing on individual texts, our perspective emphasizes that talk and text constitute a continuous, yet differentiated, stream of communication that evolves dynamically over time and across the organization. Prior patterns of talk and text both enable or constrain management to direct organizational attention to key issues and initiatives. Importantly, specific communicative practices, changing vocabularies and/or rhetorical tactics allow for new forms of talk and text to emerge, which is critical for non-incremental strategic change and renewal. Changing patterns of talk and text generate changes in the firm's organizational attention to the extent these patterns are reproduced, translated, and transformed throughout the various firm's communication channels and new attention rules are generated. This temporal and spatial fluctuation and co-evolution of talk and text is thus a key part of the attention structures of an organization (Joseph and Ocasio, 2012; Nasrallah *et al.*, 2003; Ocasio and Joseph, 2008; Ocasio and Joseph, 2006), resulting in changes in strategic agendas throughout the organization. (Jacobides, 2007; Macintosh and Maclean, 1999; Ocasio and Joseph, 2005).

Future research examining the co-evolution of talk and text from a dynamic ABV perspective, may also examine not only the commonalities across talk and text but also their differences. As attention is distributed throughout the organization multiple meta-conversations typically co-exist, which may inhibit strategic change and adaption (Joseph and Ocasio, 2012). Future research would be needed to examine whether, when, and how attention to contradictions within and across meta-conversations may generate or impede strategic change.

A NOVEL PERSPECTIVE ON STRATEGIC CHANGE

We propose that foregrounding the centrality of communication in ABV can significantly advance our understanding of strategic change and renewal. This is because attention to new strategic issues and initiatives is generated, reconstructed, and implemented in organizations in

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and through communication. As outlined above, this opens up new questions and areas of inquiry that strategy scholars could – and in our view should – pursue to enhance our knowledge of attention dynamics and strategic change. Focusing on how communication affects attention dynamics can in and of itself provide an important missing piece of puzzle to conversations about strategic change. However, it can also complement other existing approaches such as research on dynamic capabilities, strategy process research, strategy practice research, and behavioral strategy research.

First, an enhanced focus on communication in ABV can help deepen our understanding of how communicative practices, vocabularies, rhetorical tactics, and forms of talk and text shape a firm’s dynamic capabilities (e.f. Teece, 2007). Prior research on dynamic capabilities has incorporated attention into the sensing and seizing capabilities (Barreto, 2010; Eggers and Kaplan, 2009; Helfat and Peteraf, 2015; Salvato, 2009), but its role is not yet fully developed. An enhanced focus on communication can help deepen our understanding of the different patterns of strategic change and renewal that heterogeneity in the distribution of perception and attention across individuals in organizations (Helfat and Peteraf, 2015) can lead into. By incorporating social interactions, communication, and attentional engagement more explicitly may provide a more expansive understanding of the role of attention not only in sensing and seizing, but also in reconfiguring opportunities for strategic change, which is particularly critical when strategic change is less incremental. Future research could examine further how different types of patterns of communication and attention translate into dynamic capabilities that generate effective strategic change, renewal, and adaptation (Laamanen and Wallin, 2009).

Second, the strategy process research (Floyd *et al.*, 2011; Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst, 2006) can build on an attention-based view of strategic change and renewal by analyzing the communications practices through which organizational attention can constrain or enable attention to new strategic issues and initiatives. Key questions here include, for example, how different strategic themes emerge and compete for the attention of the decision-makers, how they

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3 evolve over time from one management team meeting to another in different parts of the
4 organization, and how they eventually become articulated in the strategic agenda that is then
5 formally communicated to the organization. The emphasis on the dynamic view of attention
6 would also enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how the attention to firm's goals
7 cascade in the organization, direct the attention of middle and front-line managers to the strategic
8 agenda of the firm and influence strategic change and renewal.
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12 Third, strategy-as-practice research (SAP) has caused a recent surge of interest in the social
13 and organizational practices that enable and constrain strategy-making (Vaara and Whittington,
14 2012). Communication dynamics within the ABV can help elucidate how strategy practices shape
15 attentional engagement and focus, and it can also be connected with recent work on strategy tools
16 (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). For example, vocabularies used for labeling the key strategic
17 themes and concepts and the way strategy presentations are crafted with PowerPoint can be
18 highly influential in changing patterns of organizational attention.
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21 Fourth, research on behavioral strategy has recently become increasingly interested in the
22 different behavioral dynamics and biases associated with strategic decision-making (Gavetti,
23 2012; Powell *et al.*, 2011). A communicative perspective on ABV allows for examining how
24 attentional biases can play out in group settings and communication channels (e.g., Board of
25 directors, top management teams (TMT), task forces). Such analysis would help us to better
26 understand how different kinds of communication practices can affect the different aspiration
27 levels and reference points that management attend to (Blettner *et al.*, 2015) and the temporal foci
28 of the TMT (Nadkarni and Chen, 2014) and through that either bias or de-bias organizational
29 attention and strategic agenda (Monteiro, 2015).
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32 When pursuing these questions, the future strategy research using the ABV may also need
33 to use and develop new methods of analysis. So far, the cognitive foundations of the ABV have
34 been studied with a relatively limited range of methods, although there have also been quite
35 promising recent developments (e.g., Laureiro-Martinez, 2014; Laureiro-Martinez *et al.*, 2015).
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Future research could strive even further to come up with new methods to elucidate the communicative dynamics in strategic change. As to quantitative methods, advances in textual network analysis and topic modelling have a great deal of potential in terms of being able to elucidate the key role of vocabularies in strategic change. Such methods may also be useful to study the role of rhetoric in attentional engagement. Qualitative methods such as discourse or conversation analysis can serve to dig deeper into communication practices in meetings and communication in other arenas. Video-ethnography (Gylfe et al., 2016) and other forms of ethnographic analysis (Paroutis et al., 2015) can in turn broaden our understanding of various communicative processes and practices and their dynamics in a novel manner.

In conclusion, we propose that by going beyond the existing ABV focus on information processing and adopting a more expanded role for communication, future theory and research will better explain how strategic agendas change throughout the firm as different set of issues, initiatives, and action alternatives are attended to. Strategic change is a collective process, and the dynamics of attention allocation, at the organizational level, are achieved through communication and social interactions. Increased research on the content and practices of communication will therefore provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of attention behind the forming and implementing of new firm strategies.

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