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Combining Strategic Foresight and Strategic Communication: An Interdisciplinary Framework of Future-Oriented Communication in Times of Multiple Future Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Communicating future developments such as societal or economic trends and their effects on organizations has gained importance for organizations in recent years. However, it is not easy to communicate future developments as the future is uncertain and ambiguous. This paper takes a closer look at strategic communication and strategic foresight and analyzes how future strategy paths of organizations can be systematically communicated. Specifically, it looks at communicative elements known in strategic communication such as vision or mission. In combination with communicative elements from foresight such as scenarios, future narratives or images a framework for systematic future-oriented communication of organizations is developed. The paper differentiates between meta communication – that is communicating why an organization is future-oriented at all – and topical communication – that is communicating specific strategic paths on future opportunities and challenges. A first empirical analysis is undertaken that illustrates the usefulness of the framework looking at three project examples from a European Union foresight data base. The framework provides a powerful toolset for a competitive future-oriented communication in complex and dynamic environments. It shows how strategic foresight and strategic communication benefit from each other.

Introduction

Nowadays organizations and societies are increasingly confronted with complex, dynamic and often unpredictable future developments. Trends like climate change, aging societies, artificial intelligence advancements, human machine interactions, quantum technologies or autonomous mobility are examples of an ever-transforming world (Singh, 2012; Zukunftsinstitut, 2024). Organizations find themselves in more complex realities due to phenomena like globalization, new technologies, and fast-changing economic conditions (Heide et al., 2018). At the same time, we see a rise in public discourse when it comes to big future issues. How do we want to live in the future? What opportunities and challenges will our children face? How can we proactively shape pathways towards the future? These questions are being discussed more actively by a variety of stakeholders (Abrudan et al., 2021). Perhaps, the most prominent current example of future-oriented stakeholder movements is *Fridays for Future* articulating future challenges and necessary actions (Wallis & Loy, 2021).

Organizations start to understand that actively promoting their strategic reactions to future events may influence their competitive positioning. Anticipating the future and being proactive about how future opportunities and challenges can be tackled promotes proactive sensemaking both inside and

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outside an organization (Rindova & Martins, 2022). Recent examples of companies like *Henkel* (e.g. podcast “Fritz for Future”¹) or *DM Drogerie Markt* (e.g. “DM Future Week”²) and examples of political organizations like the *European Commission* (Annual Strategic Foresight Report³), the *World Economic Forum* (Global Foresight Network⁴) or the *United Nations* (“UN 2.0 Network”⁵) showcase that organizations increasingly choose to bring the debate about the future to organizational stakeholders and the public. Therefore, a future-oriented communication of organizational strategic pathways towards future opportunities and challenges gets more important while the openness towards futures thinking expands (Baldwin & Inayatullah, 2021). Future-oriented communication is needed because the uncertainty and complexity of future events is increasing while the perceived impact at the stakeholder-level rises (Vecchiato, 2012). When proactively addressing the future with regard to its strategic pathway an organization presents itself as forward-looking. It triggers imagination, dialogue and discussion, thus aligns stakeholders towards its potential future position and supports differentiation from competitors and rivals. It provides orientation for stakeholders in times of multiple future opportunities and challenges.

While the public debate of future opportunities and challenges tends to become more important, it seems that the discussion on how to effectively, efficiently and strategically communicate future developments and organizational strategic responses is only beginning to take shape. Although there is an ongoing theoretical discussion on time horizons and temporality in the organizational, communication and management context (Das, 1993; Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Rindova & Martins, 2022; Rohrbeck, 2010), a review of how the future and future states of organizations can be communicated systematically and strategically is missing so far. This is surprising, since there already exists a variety of communicative elements linked to messages about the future. For instance, vision, mission, narratives, or aspirational talk have been conceptualized and empirically tested. However, most of these communicative elements have been discussed in isolation and there remains criticism for being vague, not dynamic enough or with loose context to the overall strategic path of an organization (Allison, 2017, 2019; Christensen et al., 2021; Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Kopaneva & Sias, 2015; McAdams, 2006). Such individual and unsystematic treatment within the organizational context limits the impact of each future-oriented communicative element with regard to the overall strategy presentation of an organization.

One reason why it may be difficult to systematize future-oriented communication in organizations is that the future is uncertain and can develop manifold. This makes it difficult for human beings to understand and anticipate the future. Ersner-Hershfield et al. (2009) show that it is much easier for people to consider themselves in the present than imagining future situations. This unknowability of the future relies on cognitive processes like prospective sensemaking and creative imagination that are complex and difficult (Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Rindova & Martins, 2022). This has substantial consequences for the communication of future events. Reflecting on how to communicate future situations or pathways toward the future, Ramos (2006) found that the future is messy and future communication should be well designed and planned. But the question then is: how can we plan, design, and execute communication on something that is still so uncertain and ambiguous?

One major field of communication research that is linked to a future perspective is *strategic communication* that (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 11)

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.

¹<https://www.henkel.de/spotlight/fritz-for-future> (last checked 20.12.2024)

²<https://www.dm.de/neu/lust-auf-zukunft-zukunftsinitiative> (last checked 20.12.2024)

³https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-foresight_en (last checked 20.12.2024)

⁴<https://initiatives.weforum.org/global-foresight-network/home> (last checked 20.12.2024)

⁵<https://un-two-zero.network/> (last checked 20.12.2024)

It is closely linked to future-oriented strategy making and communication. It is aligned to an organizations' strategy or agenda and needs objectives, careful planning, and the measurement of objectives (Argenti et al., 2005). It defines and concertos communication measures that support long-term competitiveness and the long-term ability to compete for attention accordingly (Hallahan et al., 2007; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). Therefore, strategic communication takes a future perspective as most strategies do.

Yet, strategic communication does not reflect on how to communicate future events and strategic responses in a strategic and systematic manner. Although scholars have argued that strategic communication "prepares organizations for uncertain futures" (Zerfass & Huck, 2007, p. 108) and that communicators should take a long-term orientation (Argenti et al., 2005) such systematic future-oriented, long-term perspective of communication has not been discussed in the literature. Lately, the discussion on emergent strategy communication in agile organizational settings goes in this direction, arguing that strategy is a process of adaptation to a desirable but uncertain future, making internal and external stakeholders aware of changes in the environment. Strategy communication as an important management function should be, therefore, linked to narratives and realizing a vision and objectives (Düring & Zerfass, 2021; van Ruler, 2021). But how systematic and strategic future-oriented communication could be conceptualized under the roof of strategic communication remains unclear.

One possible link to overcome this gap, is to take an interdisciplinary perspective to foresight. *Strategic foresight* helps organizations like enterprises, governments, or non-governmental organizations to deal with future uncertainties, opportunities, and challenges in a systematic way. Foresight analyzes and develops desirable futures, increases strategic choices, makes future possibilities obvious, and stimulates a discussion about the future (Cuhls, 2003). One of the main characteristics of strategic foresight is to develop alternative scenarios, narratives, visions, or roadmaps invigorating the internal and external perception of future strategies and developments (Bode & Dietrich, 2013; Cuhls, 2003; Fergnani, 2019; Gordon et al., 2020; Jarva, 2014; Rhisiart et al., 2015; Schoemaker et al., 2013). Building illustrative pictures of the future helps to better understand, prepare for and adapt to necessary changes such as technological breakthroughs or new societal trends.

However, research on strategic foresight argues that communication is important for the success of foresight projects *without* actually analyzing ways, methods or best practices of foresight communication in a systematic manner (Hofvenschioeld & Khodadadi, 2020; Ramos, 2006, 2012). Foresight projects and papers often do not address the importance of systematic and strategic communication. Foresight results (e.g. scenarios, narratives, stories, roadmaps, etc.) have a great communicative potential that is lost due to a missing link to the overall strategic communication of an organization. As a consequence, the strategic and organizational impact of foresight activities is often marginalized after projects terminate.

In research and practice, there seem to be open questions on how to systematically and strategically promote and communicate future strategy paths of organizations as responses to external future developments. This paper addresses these issues and combines strategic communication and strategic foresight in a framework of systematic future-oriented communication of organizations. I define *systematic future-oriented communication* as such communication that informs and aligns an organization's internal and external stakeholders about future strategy paths and the corresponding actions an organization will take in order to answer external future opportunities and challenges. Key to this framework is a systematic integration of various future-oriented communicative elements that are treated individually so far. The framework attempts to close this gap by focusing on two particular modes of communication: *meta* and *topical future-oriented communication*. It explains how future-orientation of communication can be organized and how strategic communication and strategic foresight – in combination – can be helpful for systematic future-oriented communication in organizations. It brings foresight and strategic communication closer together.

This paper is structured as follows: First, I review strategic foresight and how communication is addressed in foresight, including communicative elements. Second, I discuss the strategic communication literature and its future-oriented communicative elements. I then present a bridging solution

how strategic foresight and strategic communication can be combined for a more systematic future-oriented communication in organizations. Finally, I present three exemplary foresight projects to illustrate how organizations use and manage communicative elements. In fact, there are many intersections between strategic foresight and strategic communication that – combined – provide a powerful toolkit for the future-oriented competitive position of an organization or its agenda.

Communication of the future in strategic foresight

The rising importance of strategic foresight

Strategic Foresight has seen much increase in research during the last 20 years. Rohrbeck et al. (2015) present a literature review and identify four phases of foresight: (1) *the birth of the field* (1950s) with the French “*la prospective*” school around Gaston Berger and the US “*strategic foresight*” school around Herman Kahn. (2) During the *age of scenarios* (1960s and 1970s) various corporations such as *Shell*, *Motorola* or *General Electrics* applied corporate scenario planning systems that went beyond quantitative linear forecasting of markets and laid ground for other analytical techniques such as trend analysis, cross-impact analysis, or roadmapping. During the 1980s and 1990s (3) *professionalization of methods and processes* took place, where quantitative long-range planning of enterprises was further challenged by increasing economic instabilities due to globalization and a faster innovation pace. Finally (4) *organizational integration* took place where enterprises install foresight departments, use sophisticated big data analysis for scanning trends and technologies and increasingly integrate foresight results into managerial processes. The growth in research and practical usage of foresight methods and tools corresponds with an increasing amount of research articles, conferences, and digital toolsets for foresight (Ehls et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2020; Marinković et al., 2022; Rohrbeck et al., 2015).

The growth of strategic foresight also manifests in an increasing amount of practical foresight projects and activities at corporate, political and NGO level. For instance, Schwarz and Wach (2023) found in a survey with C-level executives from 400 companies with 10.000 or more employees in Europe and the US that 39% of the surveyed companies have applied continuous foresight activities in the past 12 months. Similarly, strategic foresight has seen a push at the political level. For example, the European Commission amplified its foresight capacities with the assignment of a Commission member responsible for strategic foresight. It also established the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System promoting foresight and anticipatory governance and it founded an EU-wide foresight network (European Commission, 2023). I will use a data base from the European Commission later to illustrate my conceptual thoughts.

In the course of the academic debate several definitions of strategic foresight appear. For instance, Becker (2002, p. 7) highlights that foresight is a participatory task for identifying and deploying future opportunities and challenges:

Foresight should be understood as a participatory, future intelligence gathering and medium-to-long-term vision-building process that systematically attempts to look into the future of science, the economy and society in order to support present-day decision-making and to mobilize joint forces to realize them.

The widely used definition of Rohrbeck et al. (2015, p. 2) puts a stronger focus on the corporate context:

[...] Corporate foresight is identifying, observing, and interpreting factors that induce change, determining possible organization-specific implications, and triggering appropriate organizational responses. Corporate foresight involves multiple stakeholders and creates value through providing access to critical resources ahead of competition, preparing the organization for change, and permitting the organization to steer proactively towards a desired future.

Another definition of the European Political Strategy Centre (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 3) points to creative elements of foresight in order to prepare for future events:

Strategic foresight offers a way of making use of our inherent storytelling abilities in order to engage tacit knowledge, make assumptions explicit, forge new shared understanding (i.e. meaning making), and anticipate and prepare for what has yet to happen.

In fact, most definitions understand that foresight is not only about analyzing the future but also about promoting future strategic pathways. This includes multiple stakeholders, either external (e.g. customers, suppliers, external experts) or internal (e.g. high-level managers, specialized analysts, employees). Due to the growing complexity of trends and technologies, crowd knowledge and collective sense-making has become an important part of foresight (Ehls et al., 2022; Fergnani et al., 2020; Heger & Rohrbeck, 2012; Rohrbeck, 2006; Schatzmann et al., 2013; Surowiecki, 2006; Tetlock & Gartner, 2016; Wiener et al., 2020). So, in order to engage in foresight with multiple stakeholders, foresight practitioners need a clear understanding of how to interact with stakeholders. This is where communication comes in place.

Challenges of communication in strategic foresight

The communication of foresight activities can be seen as a key pursuit to align and transform an organization or agenda towards future opportunities and challenges. It addresses the imagination of people and promotes future strategy paths of an organization and the discussion around these (Rohrbeck, 2010). Foresight activities like horizon scanning, scenario workshops, or future narrative framing are all activities that help to build and promote probable, preferable, and desirable future developments with regard to the strategic environment of an organization. They support cognitive imagination of strategic future paths and integrate internal and external stakeholders into futures thinking, facilitating an ongoing dialogue on future strategy paths (Fergnani et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2020; Iden et al., 2017; Marinković et al., 2022). The results of foresight activities have often been developed from a broad stakeholder perspective.

Most importantly, the results of foresight activities – namely *scenarios*, *future narratives*, *future images*, *visions*, *roadmaps*, and *future literacy* – are already designed in a strong communicative manner. Foresight activities have a strong communicative function of facilitating the discussion on future strategic paths under uncertainty, complexity, and dynamic environments: They can be seen as figurative and inspiring projections of the future that boost the cognitive perception of future events. *Scenarios* are scripts about possible, alternative and desirable future developments, covering the boundaries of future developments in the context of an organization (Bezold, 2010; Buehring & Liedtka, 2018; Denning, 2006; Rhisiart et al., 2017; Schoemaker, 1995; Schwarz, 2008). *Future narratives* are related to storytelling and can fill the gap between scenarios and action as they build a bridge between past, present, and future developments – being either a story, guiding myth, or metaphor about future developments. In order to reach the audience, narratives need to be inspiring and create mental models of the future (Iden et al., 2017; Jarva, 2014; Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015; Rindova & Martins, 2022; Sarpong et al., 2019). *Future images* are visual representations of future developments and support the communication of tacit knowledge and complex future developments where written words are difficult to grasp (Au-Yong-Oliveira & Pinto Ferreira, 2014; Carton & Lucas, 2018; Müller & Shwarz, 2016). *Visions* represent a message from an organization's leadership about its long-lasting strategic positioning with regard to future opportunities, challenges, and competitive position (Carton & Lucas, 2018; Graham et al., 2013; Mirvis et al., 2010). *Roadmaps* visualize strategic action paths in a systematic manner (Marinković et al., 2022). Finally, *future literacy* is all communication with a mid to long-term time horizon, promoting long-term thinking in and outside an organization (Baldwin & Inayatullah, 2021). Promoting future literacy is advantageous for the perception of an organization as somebody who actively engages in future opportunities and challenges. If the audience understands why a long-term orientation is crucial, it is easier to communicate the actual reaction of an organization towards future opportunities and challenges. Obviously, all elements have a strong connection to communicative actions.

All communicative elements of foresight are interlinked and used as synonyms or related elements. They are linked to modeling and imagining the future and support people in better understanding images of the future (Bode & Dietrich, 2013; Cuhls, 2003). They all encompass something that is yet undecided, open, and address unrealized potentials (Bode & Dietrich, 2013; Ehls et al., 2022). They support visual thinking, storytelling, collective sense-making and participatory future processes (Daheim & Uerz, 2008; Hofvenschioeld & Khodadadi, 2020; Paliokaitè et al., 2014; Rhisiart et al., 2017; Roubelat, 2000; Sarpong et al., 2019). They facilitate decision-making, learning, and strategic choices (Buehring & Liedtka, 2018; Ehls et al., 2022; Marinković et al., 2022; Rhisiart et al., 2017). They incorporate both tacit and explicit knowledge (Au-Yong-Oliveira & Pinto Ferreira, 2014), and articulate risks and opportunities that were identified in the foresight process (Denning, 2006). Finally, they help communicating far-distant future events and longer time-horizons that are more difficult to comprehend than present events (Müller & Shwarz, 2016; Ramos, 2006).

While a large body of research exists with regard to the aforementioned elements of foresight, there is not much research about a systematic integration of these elements into a strategic communication process. A clear determination and systematization how the communicative elements work together is missing. This has already been criticized by Ramos (2006) who found that much potential of futures research is lost due to the inability to communicate effectively. He calls for more interaction between foresight practitioners and media/communication professionals in order to raise awareness and consciousness of future developments. He points to problems that arise when communicating foresight: the future is messy and full of uncertainties. As a consequence, the audience suppresses rather than embraces transformative changes and innovations. Therefore, it is important that communication of foresight activities establishes instrumentalization, raises awareness and consciousness. While he argues for a multi-channel approach, it remains unclear, how a systematic communication process of foresight activities may look like. In a special edition of the *Journal of Futures Studies*, Ramos (2012) sees much innovation in the field of foresight communication. However, the special issue gathers scientific contributions on the aforementioned elements but there are no insights on a systematic and strategic communication plan. In a literature review on communication in foresight studies, Hofvenschioeld and Khodadadi (2020) sort the literature into four blocks: (1) communication through narratives, (2) communication as a capability, (3) communication through technology, and (4) communication as a participatory process. The article states that communication of foresight has indeed attracted more research. The authors conclude that more research is needed, especially on how communication can be integrated into the foresight process in a systematic manner.

In addition, there is only little empirical testimony on the impact of communication activities on the success of foresight activities. For example, Sinkkilä (2021) conducted interviews with Finnish organizations about success factors of foresight. The results indicate that communication of foresight results – primarily inside the organization – is seen as one of the major success factors of foresight. Foresight messages need to be simple, clear, condensed, and supported by images. Communication is seen as „an arduous process that takes time to penetrate all organizational levels” (Sinkkilä, 2021, p. 60). In the context of public policy foresight in Brazil, Chauke Nehme et al. (2012) see the communication skills of foresight project managers as a critical success factor. Thus, dissemination of results should be part of the planning phase of foresight projects. Similarly, in a review of critical success factors of government-led foresight, Calof and Smith (2010, p. 38) infer that a communication strategy is needed “that serves to keep key stakeholders aware of ongoing projects and activities”. As they analyze several foresight programs, they see media reach as a success factor, for example, newsletters, websites, media partnerships, or elevator pitches. However, they conclude that while there is a need for communication strategies in foresight projects, there are still open questions about how communication strategies should be designed, or what components and actors should be involved. In a related vein, Rhisiart et al. (2017) concluded in their study on the *Future of Work: Jobs and Skills in 2030* project that communication is critical and that foresight results need to be attractive for communication using visuals, brochures, slide decks, or social media. Yet again, how a systematic and strategic communication process in foresight should look like remains unclear. Foresight communication is

often reflected on as something to enhance the foresight process by communication among internal stakeholders. The aspect of communicating to an external audience seems to be underrepresented in the discussion. All in all, communication is treated as a success factor in foresight without being clear how to communicate foresight and the future in a useful way.

Communication of the future in strategic communication

Foresight results have a great communicative potential that is often lost due to a missing link to the overall strategic communication of an organization (Buehring & Liedtka, 2018; Chauke Nehme et al., 2012; Denning, 2006; Hofvenschioeld & Khodadadi, 2020; Ramos, 2006). It is not clear how communicative elements such as scenarios, future narratives, future images, visions, roadmaps, and future literacy are most effectively combined or used for communication purposes, how they can be integrated within a communication strategy, and how a communication strategy of foresight and the future should look like. There remain open questions regarding the value of communication in foresight. The communication of the future is, therefore, not fully potentialized in strategic foresight. This is a research gap where strategic communication can be very useful. So, what do we find in the field of strategic communication? How does strategic communication contribute to foresight communication and the communication of the future?

First, strategic communication is about making internal and external stakeholders aware of changes in the environment and how an organization reacts towards these changes. Therefore, strategic communication must correspond with a minimal requirement of complexity or uncertainty – otherwise it would be only “pretentious” (Zerfass et al., 2018). To effectively deal with this complexity, it should make use of all possible stakeholders and channels in order to listen to the audience and give messages at the same time. This should be a systematic act in order to make choices about how to align the strategy with communication activities, define stakeholders and communications targets, and allocate resources (Argenti et al., 2005; Volk & Zerfass, 2018). Conversations are linked to strategic objectives and can take place in a variety of areas such as mass media, social media, or directly between stakeholders of an organization. Strategic communication has, therefore, an important communication management function and can be seen as a systematic management process of defining, planning, executing, and monitoring communication with strategic relevance to an organization (Argenti et al., 2005; Christensen et al., 2008; Heide et al., 2018; van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018).

Second, strategic communication recently focuses on emergent strategies under uncertainty and complexity (Winkler & Etter, 2018). Since strategies are nowadays rather emergent than fully planned, strategy making and communication is linked to desirable but uncertain future positions. Strategy – as a series of linked hypothesis – is not a product but a process of adaption (van Ruler, 2021). Strategic communication should be, therefore, conceptualized as an agile management process with a focus on all internal and external arenas, where strategies are presented, negotiated and (re)constructed (van Ruler, 2018). While the discussion on emergent strategies and communication is evolving, open questions remain what methods are useful for analyzing emergent strategies in the context of communication. Here, the link to foresight is strong, as foresight provides a powerful toolbox for analyzing and illustrating external future opportunities and challenges as well as organizational responses.

Third, with regard to the communication of future strategy paths there are various future-oriented communicative elements that have been discussed in strategic communication: *vision*, *mission*, *narratives*, *strategic goal communication* and *aspirational talk* (Argenti et al., 2005; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Hallahan et al., 2007; Volk & Zerfass, 2018; Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). The *vision* articulates a desired future (Mirvis et al., 2010). The *mission* statement goes deeper with regard to strategic direction, purpose, and objectives of an enterprise and is more specific than the vision (Hallahan et al., 2007; Mirvis et al., 2010). *Narratives* are stories about desirable developments of an organization, constituting a sense of direction and purpose (Rindova & Martins, 2022; Winkler & Etter, 2018). *Strategic goal*

communication is strongly linked to the analysis phase of strategic communication and promotes measurable shared goals with regard to the mission of an organization (Hallahan, 2014). Finally, *aspirational talk* is linked to CSR of organizations where the leadership promotes future prospects of an organization with regard to social responsibilities (Christensen et al., 2013, 2021; Iden et al., 2017).

However, as for a systematic and strategic communication these future-oriented communicative elements are conceptualized in isolation and there is not much work on how the different elements interact under the roof of strategic communication. For instance, research on narratives and aspirational talk come closest in conceptualizing how organizations can communicate desired future states as responses to future opportunities and challenges (Christensen et al., 2013, 2021; Rindova & Martins, 2022). Yet, how such stories or talks relate to the overall strategic position of an organization, how they can be planned, monitored, and steered within the organizational context under uncertainty and complexity and how they interact with other future-oriented communicative elements remains unclear. It seems like the communication about future states is taking place but somehow unorganized, unplanned and with no strong link to the strategy of an organization.

Still, with regard to the communication of foresight and future states of organizations, strategic communication holds many promises. Its endeavor of being a transdisciplinary, holistic, and inclusive field of knowledge on communication is of great advantage here (Heide et al., 2018). It is a systematic supportive process and toolset for attaining strategic objectives. It contributes to the overall success of organizations. It tries to break down silos of parallel research streams under the roof of strategy, goal orientation, and societal impact (Heide et al., 2018). It has a link between strategy, mission alignment, and communicative actions in order to support strategic activities under uncertainty and complexity (Argenti et al., 2005; Zerfass et al., 2018). It deals with internal and external communication endeavors that acquaint a well-defined target audience with the strategic necessities of an organization. It stimulates a systematic, planned, and continuous approach for more powerful strategizing, and agenda setting within organizations. It is, therefore, very important that decisionmakers understand the necessity of communication whenever they engage the organization in strategic updates, along with the values and beliefs of an organization (Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). Therefore, communicators and decision makers alike should have managerial skills and long-term orientation for clarity and consistency of strategic messages. It is important that stakeholders are integrated within the strategic communication process for getting the message across and receiving feedback on strategic messages.

Bringing both research streams together: Meta and topical communication for systematic future-oriented communication

Following this review, it becomes clear that the field of strategic communication has many intersections with strategic foresight, and both hold promises for the communication of future states. Both, strategic foresight and strategic communication are future-oriented and refer to changes, uncertainties, complexity, and dynamism. Both have intersections with regard to strategy analysis and communication and provide useful insight on how to strategize and communicate under (future) uncertainty. Integrating foresight and strategic communication research for systematic future-oriented communication in organizations seems to be highly promising. This answers calls from researchers from both streams for more interdisciplinary research in strategic foresight (Gordon et al., 2020; Rohrbeck & Schwarz, 2013; Sinkkilä, 2021) and strategic communication (Heide et al., 2018; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). Interestingly, there is so far no link between the two research streams. Afterall, the main unifying objective of both streams is to find out and support how organizations successfully vie for a good competitive position in the future and how an audience can be sensitized towards new or refined strategies to boost this position. It is, thus, the attempt of this paper to present such a unifying approach putting the strengths of both research streams together.

Future-oriented communicative elements in focus

There is a variety of future-oriented communicative elements already discussed in different research fields. **Figure 1** gives an overview of these elements that derive either from strategic foresight (roadmaps, scenarios, future images, future literacy), strategic communication (mission, strategic goal communication, aspirational talk) or that were mentioned in both fields (vision and narratives). While the elements identified in the foresight literature try to communicate specific future paths of an organization (i.e. how do we assess the future, how do we want to compete in the future, what future agenda do we set), the elements from strategic communication focus more on tailored strategic organizational messages (i.e. how do we define, plan, execute, and monitor strategic messages and communication activities in order to secure attention and agenda competitiveness?).

Although one could argue that these elements are already a valid foundation for communicating future developments and strategic responses of organizations, there are several points of critique: First, they are discussed in isolation. Although the elements have been more or less well-studied, it is not easy to understand which one should be used under what circumstances. This is because the ability of the audience to perceive future-oriented communication without organizational and strategic context is limited (Baldwin & Inayatullah, 2021; Chauke Nehme et al., 2012). The diversity of elements prevents an easy utilization of these elements for a communication of organizational future states. The question remains how to systemize these elements.

Second, some of these elements have been criticized for being vague, not dynamic enough and not fully tied towards strategy. Vision and mission statements are often too abstract and decoupled from an organization's emergent, dynamic reality (Denton, 2001; Kopaneva & Sias, 2015). The role of vision is often overlooked in communication planning models (van Ruler, 2021). McAdams (2006) and Jarva (2014) point out that narratives come in many formats as speeches, written texts, audio, or video messages that are often decoupled from strategic or organizational context. The same accounts for other communicative elements in foresight that are often not tied to the overall strategic discussion of an organization. A more systematic coupling of the elements may increase their impact towards a holistic promotion of organizational future strategy paths.

Third, the communicative elements come as a mix of written and oral communication, being sometimes explicit and codified and sometimes implicit (Allison, 2017; Christensen et al., 2021; Jarva, 2014; Märtsin, 2019; Müller & Shwarz, 2016; Sarpong & Maclean, 2014). This is problematic because there remains confusion about the intentions for using these elements. Sometimes an executive gives a spontaneous future-related statement reacting on external future challenges that is contrary to a vision or mission. Sometimes oral and visual elements of a communication campaign contain elements that are not in line with other codified messages. The interpretation process with regard to the overall organizational strategy path is ambiguous and depends on the individual perception and

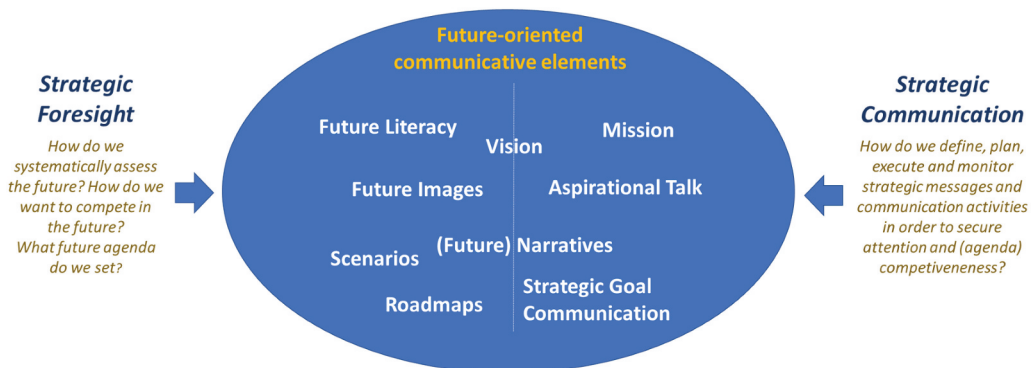


Figure 1. Overview of future-oriented communicative elements identified in the literature.

organizational experiences of audience and stakeholders to connect the dots (Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Kopaneva & Sias, 2015; McAdams, 2006). Therefore, a better systematic streamlining and communication management of future-oriented elements with regard to strategy may be helpful.

Finally, the future-oriented communicative elements tend to be over-optimistic. This has been described as hypocrisy where a promoted future path cannot be met realistically which negatively influences the credibility of an organization (Christensen et al., 2021). Therefore, a more systematic way of future-oriented communication may support a more realistic position of an organization in the future, balancing negative and positive future influences for the best possible use of future opportunities or challenges.

All in all, the future-oriented communicative elements provide a useful foundation for communicating future states of organizations as responses to future developments. But to unfold their full potential, they need to be better systemized, interlinked, and strategically aligned. This is why a new framework is needed that uses the strengths of foresight and strategic communication to equip organizations with a systematic toolkit for the communication of their potential future states.

Meta and topical communication for systematic future-oriented communication

Organizations must understand that future orientation – detecting and proactively reacting upon future opportunities and challenges – is very important in times of multiple transformational future issues. Trends, complexity, shorter innovation cycles, and high competition challenge organizations. It gets harder to make a strategic position clear under these circumstances. Future orientation is indispensable as the perceived stakeholder impact of future events increases as well. Organizations should not only react on future opportunities and challenges, but also continuously promote their proactive behavior regarding the future in a systematic and strategic manner. In communicating how they tackle transformative future challenges to internal and external stakeholders, they can make a competitive difference. Systematic future-oriented communication can help an organization to be more attentive, strategically enduring, and attractive to its audience. This does not mean that the organization is overoptimistic about the future. More tailored, future-oriented communication puts a stronger link between strategy and the proactive promotion of future states and future strategy paths – including opportunities and challenges to be tackled. Such systematic future-oriented communication framework has not been conceptualized and it is the main aim of this paper to fill this gap.

I define systematic future-oriented communication as such communication that informs and aligns an organization's internal and external stakeholders about future strategy paths and the corresponding actions an organization will take in order to answer external future opportunities and challenges. Such communication is highly inclusive and includes stakeholder knowledge to build future responses of an organization. It promotes future literacy and integrates communicative elements of foresight and strategic communication into a more systematic approach of communicating future states of organizations.

This conceptualization starts with the macro perspective of both research streams and what they can contribute to systematic future-oriented communication and an organization's competitive position. It is the key objective of strategic foresight and strategic communication to promote strategic and competitive imperatives of an organization resulting from opportunities and challenges now and in the future. Such strategic issues derive from analytical and managerial processes that are linked to the *sensing*, *seizing*, and *reconfiguring* of the dynamic capabilities framework in the strategic management school (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 1997). Most importantly, strategic foresight and strategic communication contribute to all three aspects when combined properly: *Sensing* future challenges and opportunities is mostly done in foresight activities but it needs good communicative elements and strategies to sensitize stakeholders towards detected strategic necessities. Similarly, *seizing and reconfiguring* an organization's resources, assets, or strategic objectives can only be successful if internal and external stakeholders are properly informed and aligned about realistic future options. Consequently, both aspects in combination – materializing as systematic future-oriented communication of

organizations – can be a powerful dynamic capability when properly integrated and installed in an organization.

In the following, I develop an integrated framework of systematic future-oriented communication building on future-oriented communicative elements as well as management processes to anchor such communication within the organization. To overcome fragmentation of the communicative elements, systematic future-oriented communication needs two levels of communication: *meta-communication* and *topical communication*. *Meta-communication* refers to the fact that an organization can make a competitive difference in addressing the future. It signals that it is a future-oriented and progressive organization that has future challenges and opportunities, trends, and technologies in sight and wants to use them for the sake of its stakeholders and the society. In contrast, *topical communication* goes more into detail and describes more specific future strategy paths to reach a certain future position.

A differentiation between meta and topical communication is useful because the communication of future strategy paths is a complex, not entirely certain and often resource-intensive issue. Therefore, streamlining communication activities along both levels of communication can be key to a more profound and realistic positioning of an organization toward the future. In this regard, it goes along with the differentiation between strategic (or decisional) and tactical (or supportive) communication that has been identified as a meaning of strategic communication (Zerfass et al., 2018). By using meta and topical communication in combination, an organization can establish the link between long-term strategizing of real-world problems and daily communication. It can advance communication among internal and external stakeholders about future strategy paths. It can keep a balance between long-term thinking and emergent strategy making.

Figure 2 summarizes the framework. The interdisciplinary framework for systematic future-oriented communication combines future-oriented communicative elements of foresight (left side) and strategic communication (right side) in an integrative concept so that the elements support each other and unfold more impact. It also provides guidance on how to plan, execute, and manage systematic future-oriented communication.

With regard to strategic communication, *meta communication* is codified in the *vision* and the *mission* of an organization. With regard to the strategic foresight perspective, *vision* and *future literacy* promote long-term thinking – that is the ability to be open to the future, to imagine variations of

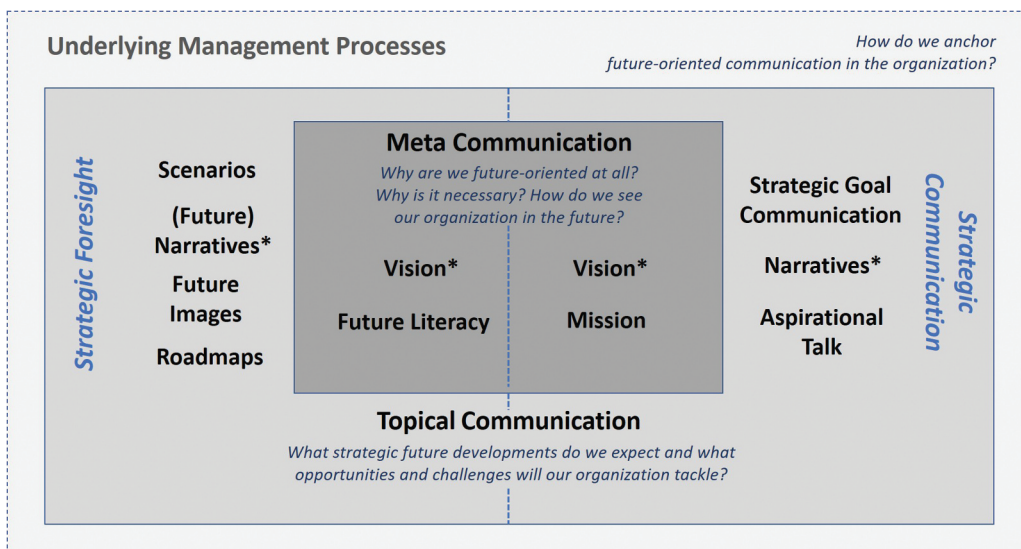


Figure 2. An interdisciplinary framework for systematic future-oriented communication. Vision and narratives have been identified in both foresight and strategic communication literature and derive from both streams (marked *).

future developments and to choose appropriate actions to react. Therefore, meta communication answers the question why an organization is future-oriented and what role an organization wants to play in the future.

In contrast, *topical communication* goes more into detail and uses communicative elements that describe and promote specific future paths. When it comes to strategic communication, specific *strategic goals* are communicated with regard to the topic in focus. *Aspirational talk* and *narratives* refer to senior executive talks and stories on specific future ambitions of an organization. Strategic foresight offers communicative elements such as *scenarios*, *narrative*, *images*, or *roadmaps* in order to illustrate future developments. These elements complement the meta communication as more imaginary and creative communicative elements. Please note that vision and narratives derive from both, foresight and strategic communication, that is why they are displayed twice in [Figure 2](#) (marked *).

Both, strategic foresight and strategic communication profit from *underlying management processes* that support systematic future-oriented communication of an organization (in [Figure 2](#) this is the part in dotted box). As has been noticed, foresight increasingly relies on the input of multiple stakeholders. At the same time, strategic communication is not understood as a one-way road of shooting the message to the audience, but listening to the audience is an important part to grasp feedbacks and signals. So, an important management function at the crossroads of foresight and strategic communication is *the definition, alignment, and participation of stakeholders* for the communication of organizational future states. The same is true for the *definition of project objectives* (i.e. how is a foresight exercise designed and integrated within communication), a proper *resource allocation* for foresight and communication (i.e. what resources are available and how can they be used effectively) as well as *monitoring and necessary updating* of foresight and communication activities (Argenti et al., 2005; Dadkhah et al., 2018; Schoemaker et al., 2013; Zeffass & Sherzada, 2015). Consequently, strategic foresight and strategic communication both benefit from a systematic management process. These management processes anchor systematic future-oriented communication in organizations. They can proactively signal the commitment on foresight-related strategic activities when an organization communicates information about targeted stakeholders, stakeholder inclusion, objectives, resources, or strategic updates to its stakeholders (i.e. we take it seriously).

Both, strategic foresight and strategic communication can massively profit from each other. Foresight results gain more weight inside and outside the company as a thorough communication strategy can boost the distribution of strategic messages and future literacy. Strategic communication, on the other hand, receives more future orientation as its role is more bound to specific future paths and communicative elements from foresight. With regard to its competitors and the large public an organization can position itself as a forward-looking organization that has multiple future opportunities and challenges in sight and provides valuable answers and orientation. Because of the parallel use of meta and topical communication, such a position can be well proven and illustrated. It also substantiates the link between strategic future analysis, strategic objectives and strategic communication. Instead of focusing solely on a vision or mission statement, this integrated approach facilitates a much deeper understanding of an organization's future orientation. The combination of meta and topical communication promotes the dialogue between various functional levels of an organization. A shared future-orientation supports the commitment among strategists, foresighters, communicator, and all members of an organization, including resources and communication objectives. It also supports the cooperation between the organization and external stakeholders by proactively triggering people to think about future issues and an organization's position towards them, enhancing the dialogue between organization and stakeholders. Conclusively, foresight and strategic communication combined provide a very useful toolbox for analyzing, securing, and updating the competitive position of an organization and its strategic agenda with regard to a deliberate future orientation.

Systematic future-oriented communication in practice: A look at three foresight projects

To illustrate how the framework helps in building systematic future-oriented communication, I would like to examine three examples of the “*futures4europe*” project database (4strat GmbH, 2023a). This platform invites the professional foresight community, European citizens, and policy makers to promote foresight projects, stories, and other insights on foresight-related issues.

The database provides an overview of recent foresight projects with an international and interdisciplinary scope. For illustrative purposes, I choose three projects with at least two international partners and a project webpage as a minimum requirement. These projects are the “*Earth4All*” campaign (The Club of Rome, 2023), “*Futures Forward*” (University of Bologna, 2023) and “*Stories from 2050*” (4strat GmbH, 2023b). The “*Earth4All*” Campaign analyzes and promotes a worldwide economic transformation for the equitable future for people and the planet. “*Futures Forward*” tries to align science education with the fast-changing society by giving advice on future literacy and futures thinking in the context of education. “*Stories from 2050*” has the overall objective to support the implementation and further development of the “*European Green Deal*” with new narratives and out-of-the-box thinking.

The aim of the empirical analysis is to make a first illustration how a framework for systematic future-oriented communication can be helpful in organizations to communicate a strategic position towards future opportunities and challenges. Following my argumentation that a systematic and defined use of communicative elements in meta (i.e. why are we future-oriented at all) and topical communication (i.e. what future opportunities do we want to tackle) paired with the organizational anchoring of such communication (i.e. management processes) is promoting a future position more thoroughly, the analysis wants to show how the elements are used in practice. Is the organization able to communicate its future-oriented position or not? Which future-oriented communicative elements does it use and which not? How are the elements combined to create a picture of future orientation and more specific strategy paths? How often are these elements used to communicate meta and topical communication parts of future-oriented communication? How are management processes used and communicated that support this kind of communication in organizations? These are the questions of interest when it comes to testing the framework.

The cases present foresight projects of organizations that try to tackle different future challenges. Future-oriented communication has become an issue for organizations of all kind, not only corporate organizations. In fact, today organizations more often define and develop strategic paths in (emergent) strategy projects with regular strategy updates (van Ruler, 2021; Winkler & Etter, 2018). So, communication becomes even more important in times of multiple future opportunities and challenges.

The methodological approach for this first empirical review is a qualitative content analysis, scanning all publicly available communication materials for meta and topical communication as well as the underlying management processes as set out in the framework. This includes websites, social media feeds as of January 1st until September 30th, 2023 like *Facebook*, *Twitter (X)*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *LinkedIn*, and *TikTok*. In this regard, the analyst takes the position of an external stakeholder with an interest in the organization, reviewing all publicly available communication materials like statements, interviews with project participants and central stakeholders, project reports, hand-outs, brochures, newsletters, podcasts, slide decks, animated videos, infographs, and so on. I use content analysis as a methodological foundation because it has been identified as a valid research method for strategic communication (Werder et al., 2018). Specifically, I use a qualitative deductive approach (Forman & Damschroder, 2007; Kuckartz, 2019), scanning communication materials for the categories identified in meta communication (i.e. vision, mission, future literacy), topical communication (i.e. scenarios, narratives, future images, roadmaps, strategic goal communication, aspirational talk) and the underlying management processes (i.e. stakeholder definition, alignment and participation, project objectives, resource allocation, monitoring and updating). Qualitative deductive content analysis explores patterns in textual or visual data, based on predetermined

categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The data are gathered along different predefined categories. The categories in this case are the future-oriented communicative elements as well as management processes as set out in the framework. The researcher then scans the content if categories are included (i.e. are they existent at all), how (what content reproduces them) and when (i.e. how often can they be met) they are included in the sample material. In doing so, a systematic overview is gathered how intense the elements and information on underlying management processes are used.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the results. It shows whether and how elements of meta and topical communication or the underlying management process are continuously visible within the available communication material, whether they are mentioned rarely or whether they cannot be found at all. Given the qualitative nature of the exercise, the following categorization is used for the analysis of the elements: 1) displayed regularly, at least on a monthly basis (marked “X”). 2) rarely, not more than three times between January 1st and September 30, 2023 (marked “(X)”). 3) element is missing (marked “--”). The analysis looks at format (i.e. specific roadmap visualization) and the use in communication materials (i.e. “our vision is”). This allows for a detailed comparison of communicative elements in the three projects and how they have been used and displayed.

First, the “Earth4All” campaign uses many elements from meta and topical communication continuously. It communicates a strong *future orientation (future literacy)* by highlighting a clear time span until 2050, using videos and interactive infographs for displaying alternative development paths. While a *vision* or *mission* statement is missing, central *strategic objectives* are formulated as “five turnarounds” (e.g. reducing inequality, transforming food systems). They are continuously featured on several channels like YouTube, LinkedIn, Bluesky and the webpage. The preferred baseline *scenario* (“Giant Leap”) is continuously communicated. A *roadmap* is not used. Communication is supported by a broad use of *future images* and infographs. For example, by telling the life story of four women from birth until 2050, *narratives* are used in an animated infograph on the webpage. These stories are also featured on social media. *Aspirational talk* is used, e.g. in providing coverage of conference talks of prominent project stakeholders like Per Espen Stoknes (science chair of the project) communicating central project opportunities and challenges (e.g. the “five turnarounds” for achieving the preferred scenario “Giant Leap”) on the webpage and social media. Concerning the underlying management processes, the overall project objective (“transforming economic system”) is repeatedly communicated on several channels using e.g. videos, infographs and social media posts. Yet, there is no systematic *stakeholder definition* (i.e. who is the specific target group). Also, *resource allocation* or how actions are *monitored and updated* are not obvious. All in all, the “Earth4All Campaign” shows an extensive communication coverage, but does not use all elements presented in the framework (see Table 1 for details).

Secondly, “Futures Forward” includes some elements of meta and topical communication, most of them being only mentioned once on the webpage. The project continuously promotes long-term thinking to create *future literacy* in the context of future-oriented science education like in the animated video “Teach the future – all the challenges” that addresses young peoples’ skills for futures thinking. Even though it is mentioned that there is a *vision*, it cannot be found in the available communication material. A *mission* statement is missing. There are some *strategic goals* communicated along the project in the form of recommendations. They are displayed on the webpage, in the summary book of the project “Pathways for a future-oriented science education” and an animated video “Fedora project summary”. These recommendations present specific action paths, so *roadmapping* is displayed (mainly using text and infographs). *Aspirational talk* is not used. Additional material like *future images*, infographs or Youtube videos are used for promoting various “future-scaffolding skills” among teachers and students, but not on a regular basis. *Narratives* are not used, even though the project has the major objective to endorse this kind of thinking. Regarding the underlying management processes, the project is *planned* in detail and this plan is communicated

Table 1. Overview of future-oriented communicative elements and underlying management processes for systematic future-oriented communication in three illustrative projects. “X”=mentioned regularly “(X)”= mentioned rarely “—”=is not mentioned at all | SF=communicative element derives from strategic foresight, SC=communicative element derives from strategic communication.

	Earth4All	FEDORA – Futures Forward	Stories from 2050
Description			
Overall Objective of the Foresight Activity	Analyze and promote a worldwide economic transformation for the equitable future for both people and the planet	Develop a future-oriented model to enable creative thinking, foresight and active hope as skills needed in formal and informal science education (<i>project ended in 2023</i>)	Support the further development of the vision of a Clean Planet 2050 and the implementation of the European Green Deal by creating and harvesting stories (<i>project ended in 2023</i>)
Organizations Involved	Club of Rome, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Stockholm Resilience Centre, BI Norwegian Business School https://earth4all.life/	Bologna University, University of Helsinki, University of Oxford, Kaunas University of Technology, formicablu https://www.fedora-project.eu/future/	4strat, Austrian Institute for Technology, Institutul de Prospectiva, ISINNOVA, https://www.storiesfrom2050.com/
Website (central landing page) Available	Website, published book on the project, Facebook, Bluesky, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, newsletter	Website, Twitter (X), YouTube, podcast (Soundcloud), publication for teachers	Website, collaborative platform with stories, newsletter, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), publication with all stories
Meta Communication			
(SF) Future Literacy Communication	There is a specific time frame until 2050 that is communicated continuously (long-term future). The overall project wants to address economic transformational issues in the future; creating future literacy (i.e. imagining this kind of transformation) to the audience is communicated, using different formats, such as videos like “the Story of Earth4All” or interactive scenarios “exploring two futures” with four different female characters until 2050.	X The project promotes long-term thinking (although no specific time frame is given) and foresight-related techniques, e.g. imagination, narrating etc. It is the overall objective of the project to create future literacy in the context of future-oriented science education; and this is clearly and continuously communicated. Long-term thinking is communicated on the webpage, on Twitter (X) and YouTube using animated videos, e.g. “Teach the future – all the challenges” that addresses young peoples’ skills and challenges for futures thinking.	X The project collects and creates inspiring and thought-provoking imagery and narratives. Long-term orientation is provided by specific calls for stories about a sustainable Europe with a time frame until 2050 on several future-related topics. Although “future literacy” is not mentioned or promoted, the overall aim of the project is to imagine stories of the future.
(SC, SF) Vision	–	(It is mentioned on the webpage that there is a vision but it is not described).	–
(SC) Mission	–	–	–
Topical Communication			
(SF) Scenarios	The project communicates scenarios for plausible futures (“too little too late”, “Giant Leap”) as well as five turnarounds to achieve the preferred “Giant Leap” scenario. These scenarios are explained in animated videos and interviews with lead stakeholders of the project on several channels, like YouTube, Bluesky, LinkedIn and the webpage.	X	– The project develops scenarios based on predefined topics: e.g. “Space Mission” explores narratives about the discovery of planets in the future after the planet Earth has become uninhabitable. However, the scenarios themselves are only rarely displayed, e.g. in project summaries (X)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Earth4All		FEDORA – Futures Forward		Stories from 2050	
(SC, SF) Narratives	The project features a story book “Two futures, four girls” to communicate different scenarios as a narrative. These stories are told regularly on the webpage and social media. One team member has the function as a “narrative chair” which underlines the role of stories for the project.	X	The project tries to enhance the use of future narratives in education, which is mentioned; however, there are no examples of future narratives given in any of the available communication material.	–	The project is about creating narratives with the use of storytelling that are continuously communicated, mainly on the webpage, using stories, images and videos.	X
(SF) Future Images	There is an extensive and continuous use of images and infographs on several channels like YouTube, BlueSky, LinkedIn and the webpage, explaining the turnarounds in detail, giving figures on implications of both scenarios etc.	X	The project uses pictures and infographs about core project objectives, project updates and results, but not regularly. The project summary with core findings about future literacy in education is displayed in an infograph on the webpage.	(X)	Pictures are intensively used for illustrating narratives (but not always in line with the corresponding story). The project promotes radical forward-looking imagery of sustainability opportunities and challenges ahead, e.g. also with fictive imagery of far-distant future states on fictive planets.	X
(SF) Roadmaps	(Although there is a lot of communication on the two scenarios and the “turnarounds” how to reach these scenarios, there is no roadmap on specific and timed actions paths how to reach the targets.)	–	The project presents specific action paths in the form of recommendations at the webpage, mainly using text and infographs. These have been communicated at the end of the project.	(X)	(Some of the stories are being told in different time slices like 2025, 2030, 2035 but they do not display a roadmap with specific activities how to reach the future state in 2050)	–
(SC) Strategic Goal Communication	The overall project wants to address economic transformational issues in the future – this is continuously communicated on several channels like LinkedIn, Bluesky or Facebook, using infographs, animated videos and interviews with lead stakeholders of the project. Key strategic messages “turnarounds” are communicated continuously. These “turnarounds” are: eliminating poverty, reducing inequality, empowering women, transforming food systems and energy turnaround	X	There are some strategic goals of the project in an unordered structure at the webpage. The strategic goals derive from three dissonances with regard to interdisciplinary innovation, new languages and narratives and construction of visions of the future in education. The recommendations for stakeholders can be interpreted as strategic messages that are linked to strategic objectives. The recommendations are displayed on the webpage as an infograph, in the summary book of the project and in an animated video “Fedora project summary”.	(X)	“Stories from 2050” aims to bring new narratives, out of the box thinking and controversial/contrasting visions into the policy debate on sustainability and the interconnection with science, technology and innovation. This main strategic goal is communicated at the beginning of the project on the webpage, in a “kick off” video and social media posts on Youtube, Twitter (X) and Instagram but not regularly after.	(X)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Earth4All		FEDORA – Futures Forward		Stories from 2050	
(SC) Aspirational Talk	The communication features aspirational talk of prominent project partners on conferences and other events regularly, e.g. videos of the Per Espen Stoknes (science chair of the project), David Korten (member of the Earth4All Transformational Economics Committee), or Jayati Ghosh (co-author of Earth4All book) about opportunities and challenges of the project, objectives, scenarios and turnarounds being featured on YouTube, LinkedIn, Bluesky and the webpage	X	–	–	–	
Underlying Management Processes						
Stakeholder Definition, Alignment and Participation	There are ways of joining and supporting the initiative as a citizen or professional (“kickstarting conversations” as an individual; signing open letters addressing policy makers, producing own Instagram story; organizing workshops) mentioned primarily on the website; However, whom the initiators specifically seek for, is not clear.	(X)	The target group of schooling networks, institutional designers, teachers and policy makers is communicated on the webpage, but it is not specified how stakeholders can participate.	(X)	There is an own section for collaboration. Individuals and communities are invited to contribute with their own stories as well as to comment other stories. However, it is not entirely clear who exactly should participate (it says “individuals and communities willing to share insights, inspiration and impactful conversation”). This information is presented primarily on the website.	(X)
Project Objectives	The overall objective of the project “transforming economic system” is communicated continuously.	X	All Projected Work Packages and Deliverables are described in detail; there is also a communication plan for the project on the webpage.	(X)	The overall objective of the project is mentioned on the webpage as well as continuously on social media channels.	X
Resource Allocation		–		–	–	
Monitoring and Updating		–		–	–	

thoroughly on the webpage. Central *project goals* and deliverables are orally portrayed in a podcast series “Lenses for Tomorrow” as well in the “Fedora project summary” video. It is clearly stated on the webpage that project results are tailored to *stakeholders* such as schooling networks, institutional designers, and policy makers. However, no information on *resource allocation* or how activities are *monitored and updated* are available. In summary, “Futures Forward” uses several communicative elements of the framework but to a lesser extent than “Earth4all” (see Table 1 for details).

Finally, “Stories from 2050” uses some elements of meta and topical communication more prominently than others. There is a clear connection to *future literacy* as the imagination of an uninhabitable planet Earth is provoked, being communicated on the website, in a special “project summary” video and on social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

(X). A community platform serves as an interactive tool to develop and comment *narratives* from the community. However, no *vision* or *mission* can be found. As for topical communication, *narratives*, and storytelling are frequently used as this is the core activity of the foresight project. These narratives are integrated in *scenarios* about life on other planets, far-distant future thinking, and radical forward-looking imagery of future sustainability. The project often uses *future images*, animated fictive pictures and videos to illustrate these future scenarios. Other elements such as *roadmaps* or *aspirational talk* are missing. Regarding the underlying management processes, the overall project objective (“bring new narratives, out of the box thinking and controversial/contrasting visions into the policy debate”) is communicated regularly on social media. Stakeholder participation is desired (since this is a collaborative project) and mentioned on the webpage, but a clear *stakeholder definition* (i.e. who exactly should join the community and why) is missing. The same applies for *resource allocation* and *monitoring activities*. To sum up, “Stories from 2050” also uses a limited number of communicative elements (see [Table 1](#) for details).

All in all, the results show that the framework is a useful tool to better understand, analyze, systemize and deploy systematic future-oriented communication in organizations. The examples show that there are differences when it comes to the use of future-oriented communicative elements. Among the three projects, *future literacy*, *narratives*, and *future images* are most often used in a continuous way. Other elements are not or only rarely used. For example, *vision* or *mission* statements are missing in all three projects. This is quite surprising because vision or missions are a straight-forward way of communicating future strategic endeavors, especially when paired with other future-oriented communicative elements. *Scenarios*, *roadmaps*, or the communication of *strategic goals* are used more extensively in one project but are left out in others.

The empirical analysis shows that there is potential for a more systematic integration of the communicative elements from both meta communication (i.e. why are we doing this foresight exercise at all) and topical communication (i.e. what specific future opportunities and challenges does the organization want to tackle). A stronger and more systematic use of communicative elements can facilitate the link between long-term strategizing and the promotion of central future-oriented messages of the organization. From the position of an external stakeholder, the consistent use of different communicative elements leads to a much better understanding of what the project intends to achieve in the future.

Similar observations can be made for the underlying management processes. The timeline of the projects remains unclear, *monitoring and updating* activities are not specified. It remains unclear what happens with the projects’ knowledge and further communication after the projects finish. In addition, *stakeholder definition* is not clearly communicated. Even though these elements can be sometimes hidden for a good reason (i.e. internal strategic knowledge or not feasible for communication), it can be advisable to be clear on the desired stakeholder participation (i.e. target group, people I want engagement with). It could also be useful to know when the next update is to be expected because a dynamic and complex strategic and communicative environment may demand quick adjustments. It could even be supportive to understand what kind of *resources* are used for foresight projects and the hitherto related communication to increase transparency and commitment (i.e. we are really serious about this). Such publicly available information can underline the engagement and professionalism of an organization towards its systematic future orientation.

Conclusion and directions for future research

This paper addresses the link between strategic foresight and strategic communication. It presents an interdisciplinary framework for systematic future-oriented communication. Such communication rests on three pillars: meta communication, topical communication, and the underlying management processes to anchor such communication with the organization. By combining these three aspects, the framework represents an important intersection between strategy, communication, management, and

foresight/future-orientation. This communication framework clearly benefits from the overlaps between both research streams. Foresight and strategic communication research and practice facilitate each other regarding this communication set-up. Most importantly, this combined approach enhances the future-oriented strategic communication using meta and topical communication, promoting a future-oriented strategy, underlying foresight activities and, conclusively, the competitiveness of an organization.

The framework contributes to several research streams: First, it provides an overview of future-oriented communicative elements that are discussed individually in research, yet share many overlaps. Although there exists a large body of research on the individual elements, this work presents a first systematization how these elements can be better coupled to unfold more impact. Second, the framework supports research on emergent strategies in strategic communication, putting emphasis on (future) dynamics and uncertainty. This systematic future-oriented communication framework can be used to promote future strategy positions and provides guidance on how to systematically and strategically inform stakeholders. Systematic future-oriented communication in organizations itself can be considered to be a powerful dynamic capability of organizations as defined in strategic management research because it facilitates the sensing, seizing and reconfiguring of future strategy paths in a sound way (Semke & Tiberius, 2020; Teece, 2007). Third, the framework can be used as an analytical lens for research and as a guideline for practitioners how to systematically apply future-oriented communication within their organization. Foresight practitioners, strategists, and communicators benefit from more cooperation. This framework also has practical implications for organizations who want to take and promote a clearer strategic future position.

Future research may take a closer look on how different organizations such as enterprises, NGOs, or political organizations use meta and topical communication as well as management processes in order to promote their future orientation as a competitive asset. Since most organizations are confronted with fundamental future challenges such as climate change or digital transformation, it is important to understand how different organizations use meta and topical communication.

This conceptualization is followed by a first empirical analysis using three project examples. The concept and the presented communicative elements need further empirical research, for instance how they interact with each other and what combination is the most promising in different contexts. Empirical research may look deeper into the overlaps between communicative elements from foresight and strategic communication. Which elements are more often used in combination under which particular organizational setting? What future opportunities and challenges are most often addressed in organizational communication contexts? In order to operationalize the framework further, case and content studies with a larger sample would be interesting. Cross-industry findings may also be interesting with regard to intersections on future challenges and communication strategies across industries. Future research could also address the relationship between the use of future-oriented elements and the outcome in terms of stakeholder feedback and competitive position of an organization (i.e. how well it is perceived as a long-term oriented organization on the long run). This would also allow to take a closer look at stakeholder reactions towards future-oriented communication of organization, e.g. by using interviews or questionnaires. This may be achieved by following an organization throughout the process of foresight, strategy making, and communication strategy over time. In addition, case studies including cooperation among foresight, strategy, and communication departments of an organization would be of interest, how the organizational stakeholders interact in order to promote a future strategy position.

This paper aims at bringing both research streams, strategic foresight and strategic communication, closer together. Focusing research on the intersection of both has great potential for foresight activities and future-oriented strategic communication of organizations alike. As the growing interest on communicating future endeavors in research and practice shows, the potentials for further research on that issues are high.

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