

Strategic Communications: Beware the Jabberwock

*...Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!...*

Lewis Carroll, in his 1872 novel *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, wrote one of the most famous nonsense poems ever written. Called [Jabberwocky](#), the entire poem uses jumbled, yet interesting sounding terms that hint at what they might mean, but are actually gibberish. The poem describes a vicious mythical creature (the Jabberwock) that comes “whiffing through the tulgey wood” and meets its demise at the hands of a “vorpal blade.”

Strategic Communications is today’s Jabberwock. The term might have once meant something, but has taken on a life of its own, becoming more muddled as it becomes more popular. Google the term and you will get over a half-million hits. Companies ranging from website designers to political consultants bill themselves as “strategic communicators.” Most major government agencies have an office of strategic communications, and private companies such as Booz Allen Hamilton are adding strategic communications practices. Even universities are getting into the act. Columbia University, for example, offers a Masters of Science in Strategic Communications.

As executives scramble to add a strategic communications capability, they are grappling with what it means. Private sector companies try to put it into a marketing, advertising and corporate communications “box,” while many government agencies are trying to figure out if it fits with Information Operations or Public Affairs. As Alice wonders through the looking glass, she unwittingly sums up the problem with strategic communications by saying:

"Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas--only I don't exactly know what they are!" (ibid.)



“The Jabberwock” Illustration by Sir John Tenniel (1820-1914).

The only way to understand Carroll’s *Jabberwocky* is to look at each term in the context of what’s happening in the poem. The same idea applies to strategic communications. There’s not a lot of point in trying to create “the perfect” definition. However, by looking at it in the context of how and why people use it, you can come to some very useful conclusions:

- Radical changes in how people approach knowledge, information and interrelations have made communications an increasingly powerful tool for organizations to create the effects they want.
- Strategic communications is often so muddled a concept because many organizations aren’t built to handle it.
- There are some common concepts that trace through how various organizations use strategic communications which offer some clarity on how to most effectively apply it.

Anatomy of a (communications) monster—why strategic communications is so popular

The growth of strategic communications is being fed in large part by the ever-increasing innovations in information technology. Although the “Information Age” has been around for a while, it is by no means static. In fact, one of its main characteristics is that it keeps reinventing itself at a faster and faster rate. Newer innovations build on the success of slightly earlier communication breakthroughs. This, in turn, alters dynamics throughout society, impacting everything from how we earn money (e.g., online shopping), to how we interact

(e.g., MySpace), to how we fight wars (e.g., cyber warfare). It might be more apropos to think of the "Information Age" as having versions and upgrades; we are in Information Age 2.0 now, and that's soon to be replaced.

All this drives our need for information, knowledge, and communications. Internet World estimates the number of Internet users to be over a billion people and growing at a furious pace. Some of the more recent trends impacting how we approach communications include:

- **User-controlled content:** Blogging was virtually unheard of ten years ago. Now, according to Pew Internet & American Life, there are an estimated fifteen thousand new blogs every day. This instantly provides millions of perspectives about any topic and is reshaping what we consider to be "credible information."
- **Mobility:** Cell phones have been around for a while, but they have recently experienced unparalleled proliferation. Their capabilities have exploded to include phones, entertainment centers, GPS tracking devices and databases all in one portable device. The CTIA estimates that there were two billion cell phones worldwide in 2006 and five billion text messages sent per month in the United States. Matched with innovations such as wireless broadband for computers, people no longer have to seek information; information finds them.
- **Virtual alter-egos:** The next big change? It might very well come from virtual simulated environments that are being developed in such gaming sites as The Sims, World of Warcraft, and Second Life. These allow people to enter into a fully virtual world, complete with their own rules, social mores and even money. Virtual millionaires are literally created online. These are characters on a website, created by real people, who live in a virtual world. The catch is that the virtual money they earn online can be converted to US dollars. The line between real and virtual is blurring.

These advances are constantly reshaping how we use, value and need knowledge and information. We now assimilate much more information at a much faster rate; multitasking while watching multimedia. We can't watch a sports game or a newscast without five different pieces of information being simultaneously displayed. We collect, distill and apply information much more in our daily lives than ever before. This not only increases the overall demand for communication, but as we become more sophisticated in how we use information, we want our communications much more immediate and customized to our needs.

Organizations are starting to understand that communications is much more than simply "creating awareness." It is a major, and sometimes only, way to create the effects and results they want. It is a key tool driving the success of the organization. We now have "knowledge workers" developing "knowledge management" strategies, generating money in the "knowledge economy."

The U.S. government is also starting to look at communications as a powerful weapon and a key part of creating and maintaining credibility across the globe. They recognize the sobering success of the many terrorists who have used communications to generate tangible results: gain recruits, increase funding, shape global political process, and generate fear. Partly as a result of this, strategic communications has become an integral part of the planning process across the government. For example, the Department of Defense's most recent *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* includes an entire section devoted to strategic communications. It notes:

"Victory in the long war ultimately depends on strategic communication by the United States and its international partners." (Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, 2006.)

Terrorism and Communications

"It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles"

-- Osama bin Laden

"More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of Muslims."

-- The late Abu Musab al Zarqawi

Tin cups in a wireless world—why communications fail

As the Information Age continues to reinvent newer versions of itself, most communications are built on industrial models that would make Adam Smith and Henry Ford proud. Organizations wall off aspects of communications in specialized departments, each responsible for “producing” its particular aspect of the process.

The reaction to the changing communications environment is to either ignore it or to increase production of communications. This increased output from the traditional communications channels, however, still can't keep up with the demand, leaving other departments to develop their own communications.

Executives are then surprised that their target audiences are confused by mixed messages, or so inundated with information overload that they stop listening all together. Leaders complain about “silos” and “stove pipes,” understanding the need to be more flexible, effective and proactive, but struggle to figure out why they can't change. Many of them have not come to grips with the reality that their industrial model of communications does not apply in a networked world.

Slaying the Jabberwock—the heart of strategic communications

As executives grapple with how to adapt their communications and organizations to an ever-changing digital environment, there is some hope of clarity around the concept of strategic communications. There are consistent principles that cut across the various definitions and applications of strategic communications.

Principles of strategic communications:

- **Recognized:** acknowledge growing importance of communications to help organizations reach their strategic objectives
- **Part of the central strategy:** integrate with all aspects of the strategic vision
- **Effects-based:** drive audiences to specific actions and outcomes
- **Proactive:** reach out to the audiences, rather than waiting for them to come to you
- **Targeted:** approach well-defined audiences with individualized messages
- **Comprehensive:** map all the audience contact points and ways targets receive messages
- **Integrated and harmonized:** spread common themes and messages, individualized to each audience
- **Receiver-focused:** design messages from each audience's perspective—what they need to hear in the way they need to hear it
- **Supported by executive-level backing:** align across segments of the organization to drive one vision

These principles will help executives navigate a communications environment that is as strange and dynamic as a Lewis Carroll wonderland. Technology has taken us through the looking glass, and as ironically confusing as Strategic Communications is, it represents a new way of operating and achieving the results organizations need to be successful today and in the future.

Mosaic Strategies: Management Consulting, Effects-Based Communication, and Execution Management

Mosaic Strategies bridges the gap between executive vision and effective implementation. Through our unique blend of management consulting, effects-based communication and execution management, we provide the solutions and support that executives need to answer strategic questions, as well as the expertise and consistency that implementers need to deliver results.