

A communication perspective on organisational stakeholder relationships: discursivity, relationality, and materiality

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to rethink the notion of stakeholder communication and articulate a distinct 'communication perspective' on stakeholder relationships, one that takes seriously the constitutive effects of language and human interaction in the ongoing social construction of various connections between and among organisations. This communication perspective involves rethinking three important aspects of stakeholder thinking: (1) stakeholder identification and salience, (2) the false separation of material and symbolic resources, and (3) the political production of meaning involved in stakeholder relationships. The article begins with a critical review of previous literature on stakeholder communication, situated within broader developments of stakeholder research. Key themes and trends in this literature are identified, revealing the need for an alternative notion of communication to ground future thinking about communication and stakeholder relationships. Next, the perspective of communication-as-constitutive is introduced, a meta-theoretical framework that can better capture the complex dynamics of organisational stakeholder relationships. From here, the article describes what a communication perspective of stakeholder relationships entails and how this conceptual shift provides a stronger foundation to understand key aspects of stakeholder thinking. The implications of a communication perspective on stakeholder relationships are explained and theoretical propositions to inform future empirical research are offered.

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Over the last 30 years, stakeholder theory has emerged as an important perspective to inform business, management, and organisational studies (Parmar et al., 2010). Beginning as a pragmatic alternative for business strategy and management, stakeholder theory has evolved into a more comprehensive line of research that addresses business-society relations from multiple perspectives (Steurer, 2006), while both complementing and challenging previous theories of the firm (e.g. resource dependency, transaction cost economics, institutional theory, etc.). The central claim of stakeholder thinking is that firms exist within a broad system of interdependent relationships among other organisations and constituents, and therefore should be managed in the interest of all

legitimate stakeholders who can affect or be affected by the firm (Laplume, Sonpar, & Litz, 2008). The main ideas of stakeholder thinking have now become established and prevalent assumptions throughout several fields, both in theory and in practice (Agle et al., 2008).

From its foundation as a theory of business strategy (Freeman, 1984), a fundamental premise of stakeholder thinking is some notion of stakeholder management: ways in which focal firms relate with a variety of stakeholders in order to maintain control over their organisational environments. This generally involves various processes to identify and classify the salience of stakeholders and the legitimacy of their claims (e.g. Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997).¹ Furthermore, *stakeholder communication* has emerged as a major area of interest (Andriof, Waddock, Husted, & Rahman, 2003) and represents a potentially key aspect of stakeholder thinking (Kim, 2012; Smith & Arnold, 2005). Despite its practical appeal, the notion of stakeholder communication has had limited impact on the development of stakeholder theory and remains as the periphery of stakeholder thinking. At the root of the problem is a limited view of communication that is not tenable for the complexity of stakeholder relationships that exist in today's organisational landscape, which currently underwrites most thinking about stakeholder communication. This involves static and instrumental notions of communication focused primarily on information exchange, message transmission, and personal expression, but largely ignoring practices of meaning production, identity construction, and the social processes of organisational relationships. The result is a narrow framing that regards communication as a discrete phenomenon that is best explained through other perspectives, particularly financial and economic theories. Yet, stakeholder relationships are inherently communicative, and thus warrant a distinctly communicative conception, especially in terms of understanding how stakes, stakeholders, and stakeholder relationships are constituted by and through processes of social interaction at the intersection of materiality, discursivity, and relationality.

The growing interest in stakeholder communication (Andriof et al., 2003; Smith & Arnold, 2005) cannot be sustained by limited and sterile conceptions of communication grounded in linear models of information exchange. Although this does help us understand how firms and stakeholders send and receive message through various communication channels, it cannot advance knowledge of the social processes that constitute organisational stakeholder relationships, challenge the false dichotomy between material and symbolic resources in stakeholder relationships, uncover the inherent politics within the production of meaning between firms and stakeholders, or explain the dynamism and contingency of stakeholder identification – all of which are important aspects of stakeholder relationships but beyond the logics of conventional stakeholder thinking. However, I argue that an alternative approach to communication provides a path forward. A small, but growing body of research in the business and management literatures does focus on stakeholder communication, in terms of either studying instances of communication among stakeholders or studying management communication from a stakeholder perspective (e.g. Brønn & Brønn, 2003; Crane & Livesey, 2003). Similarly, some communication scholars consider stakeholder relationships as key sites to advance communicative theories of organisational phenomena (e.g. Arnaud & Mills, 2012; Deetz, 1995; Kuhn, 2008). This work offers valuable points of departure

to develop a more coherent and impactful contribution to stakeholder thinking. But much more needs to be done to advance the scholarly conversation.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to rethink the notion of stakeholder communication and articulate a distinct ‘communication perspective’ on stakeholder relationships, one that takes seriously the constitutive effects of language and human interaction in the ongoing social construction of various connections between and among organisations. The goal here is not just to provide an explanation for a particular communication phenomenon (as important as that is), but rather a more ambitious attempt to provide a communicative understanding of stakeholder relationships that combines discursive, relational, and material aspects of organising into a coherent explanatory framework. I develop a communication perspective to explain three important aspects of stakeholder thinking not adequately addressed in the current stakeholder literature: (1) stakeholder identification and salience, (2) the entanglement of material and symbolic resources, and (3) the political production of meaning involved in stakeholder relationships. This work is needed both to advance the stakeholder literature and to further demonstrate the value of a communication perspective for organisational studies.

The article is structured as follows: the first section presents a critical review of previous literature on stakeholder communication, situated within broader developments of stakeholder research. Key themes and trends in this literature are identified, revealing the need for an alternative approach to communication to ground future thinking about organisational stakeholder relationships. The second section turns to the notion of *communication-as-constitutive*, a meta-theoretical framework to develop a communication perspective on organisational stakeholder relationships. From here, the article describes what a communication perspective on stakeholder relationships entails and how this conceptual shift provides a stronger foundation to understand and explain key aspects of stakeholder thinking. The third section explains the implications of a communication perspective on stakeholder relationships and offers theoretical propositions to inform future empirical research. The central claim of this approach is that stakeholder relationships are best understood as dynamic sites of organisational constitution where negotiation and meaning construction shape how organisational realities are known and experienced.

Literature review: stakeholder communication

Before developing an alternative communication perspective on organisational stakeholder relationships, it is important to understand how communication is conceptualised in the extant stakeholder literature. In their recent review of the stakeholder literature published since Freeman’s influential 1984 text *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Laplume et al. (2008) identify five themes marking the development of stakeholder thinking to date: stakeholder definition and salience, stakeholder actions and responses, firm action and responses, firm performance, and various theory debates. Key unanswered questions from their review include issues related to the mechanisms of stakeholder management, the emergence of stakeholder relationships, the symbolic implications of stakeholder management, and conceptions of other-regarding logics in terms of stakeholder relationships. All these unanswered questions

can be understood as representing a boarder theme of *stakeholder communication* because they entail various aspects of interaction between stakeholders and maintaining constructive stakeholder relationships.

A small, but growing body of research has begun investigating issues of stakeholder communication, though most of this literature was not included within the scope of Laplume et al.'s (2008) otherwise extensive review of stakeholder scholarship. This work on stakeholder communication includes both studies that investigate specific instances of communication within stakeholder relationships (e.g. Patterson & Allen's, 1997 examination of communication between organisational and environmental activist stakeholders) and studies that incorporate a stakeholder perspective to understand broader aspects of business and organisational communication (e.g. Lewis' 2007 stakeholder model of change implementation communication).

For the present study, a review of research involving stakeholder communication was conducted in order to summarise the key themes and trends, as well as to inform subsequent theorising and empirical investigation. This review began with a broad search of the main business, management, organisational, and communication search indices (e.g. Business Source Complete, Business Source Premier, Communication and Mass Media Complete, etc.) using several different search terms to identify any articles having to do with communication and stakeholder relationships (e.g. 'stakeholder theory,' 'stakeholder communication,' 'stakeholder relationships,' 'stakeholder interaction,' etc.). From this initial gathering, stricter criteria were imposed to eliminate certain articles that had limited relevance to the investigation. For example, articles were also excluded that made cursory or generic references to stakeholders and communication but did not seek to advance any particular aspect of stakeholder theory per se, or did not draw from the stakeholder theory literature to inform their investigation. Four scholarly books widely cited in this literature were also included: Phillips' (2003) *Stakeholder Theory and Organizational Ethics*, Parmar et al.'s (2010) *Stakeholder Theory: The State of the Art*, plus the two-volume set *Unfolding Stakeholder Thinking* edited by Andriof, Waddock, Husted, and Rahman (2002, 2003). This resulted in a total of 68 sources to investigate how communication is understood and portrayed in the stakeholder literature, as well as how communication scholars have utilised stakeholder thinking in their research.

This literature review resulted in three primary themes (summarised in Table 1) that illustrate current thinking about stakeholder communication: (1) communication as strategy, (2) communication as interaction, and (3) communication as normative obligation. These themes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather describe

Table 1. Themes of stakeholder communication literature.

Theme	Description	Representative citations
Communication as strategic	Communication as a calculated endeavour that firms engage in to accomplish organisational goals and strengthen firm performance	Lewis (2007); Ulmer (2001)
Communication as interaction	The forms and practices of stakeholder relationships, usually conceived as negotiation or dialogue	Beaulieu and Pasquero (2002); Buchell and Cook (2006, 2008)
Communication as normative obligation	Firms have a responsibility to interact with and involve legitimate stakeholders, usually in relation to some notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Morsing and Schultz (2006); Rasche and Esser (2006)

alternative ways in which stakeholder communication is understood and conceptualised in the literature. Additionally, the literature also reveals an emerging theme related to the social constructionist aspect of stakeholder relationships and language use, but did not fit neatly into either of the above themes or reveal enough coherence to compose a distinct theme. This includes a growing body of work premised on the idea that communication constitutes stakeholder relations that have developed largely outside the mainstream management literature, which suggests an important next step of articulating a robust notion of stakeholder relationships from a communication perspective to advance the literature and guide future theorising and empirical research. These ideas from this emerging theme provide a transition between the summary of the current literature and the argument for a communication perspective of organisational stakeholder relationships, based on a constitutive model of communication.

Theme 1: communication as strategy

The dominant theme in the stakeholder literature is communication as a strategic endeavour that firms engage in to accomplish organisational goals and strengthen firm performance. This theme concentrates mostly on the first half of Freeman's (1984) influential definition of stakeholders: 'those who can affect ... the achievement of the firm's objectives' (p. 25). From this perspective, communication involves a linear (Clark, 2000) flow or exchange of information (Bendell, 2003; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008) as a means of accomplishing strategic ends and achieving various outcomes and benefits, such as organisational learning (Burchell & Cook, 2006) and resource acquisition (Welcomer, Cochran, Rands, & Haggerty, 2003). Much of this work is rooted (implicitly or explicitly) in a linear model of communication as information transmission concerned with message exchanges between senders and receivers (Pfeil, Setterberg, & O'Rourke, 2004) and the need to establish clear channels of communication between firms and their stakeholders (Ulmer, 2001). Communication as strategy is concerned primarily with effectiveness and the proper expression of ideas with stakeholders, especially in terms of promotion and advocacy (e.g. Longest & Rohrer, 2005), as well as minimising threats and concerns from external stakeholders (Miles, Munilla, & Darroch, 2006). Communication is thus conceptualised as a skill (Hornik, Chen, Klein, & Jiang, 2003) to be utilised and perfected in order to increase the likelihood that organisational activities will be successful.

Communication as strategy is also the main theme in the business communication literature, which focuses on the message strategies of numerous parties involved in various organisational relationships and initiatives. For example, Lewis offers an established line of empirical research investigating the strategic implications of stakeholder communication. She demonstrates the importance of stakeholder communication processes during planned organisational change (Lewis, 2007), as well as the significance of communicative attention in relation to strategic resources and the prevalence of information dissemination as a communication strategy in times of organisational change (Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003), and the potentially negative aspect of change announcements related to perceptions of honesty and trustworthiness of implementers (Lewis, Laster, & Kulkarni, 2013). Other examples include Stephens, Malone, and Bailey's (2005) investigation of message strategies during crisis, Vernuccio's (2014)

exploration of corporate branding through social media, Vielhaber and Waltman's (2008) study of crisis communication and changing technology during a strike, and Weber, Thomas, and Stephen's (2015) analysis of communication breakdowns during a failed initiative to change transportation and security regulations of the U.S. Coast Guard. This work exemplifies the main idea that communication with and among stakeholders has important strategic consequences for the achievement of organisational goals and the success (or failure) of various organisational initiatives.

Theme 2: communication as interaction

A different but related theme in the literature on stakeholder communication focuses attention on the forms and practices of stakeholder relationships, and the ways in which organisations and stakeholders engage in relationships via communication. If communication as strategy is concerned primarily with the *why* of stakeholder communication, communication as interaction is more concerned with the *how*. Scholars differ on how they conceptualise stakeholder interactions, whether they assume a traditional hub-and-spoke model with a focal firm and surrounding stakeholders that is assumed in most stakeholder thinking (Frooman, 1999), or a more networked perspective that decentres the notion of a focal firm and highlights patterns of interactions among various stakeholders (Payne & Calton, 2002; Rowley, 1997).

The two most common forms of interaction described in the literature are negotiation and dialogue, though a wide variety of meanings are attributed to both these concepts. Interaction as *negotiation* generally involves a back-and-forth exchange of ideas between organisational representatives in order to reach some level of agreement about some aspect of their relationship. For example, Gregory (2007) describes how firms can involve various stakeholders to negotiate the development of a corporate brand. At a deeper level, negotiation is conceived as the way in which stakeholders order the social reality that forms the basis for their relationships, influences their interpretations of current circumstances, and guides future decisions (Beaulieu & Pasquero, 2002). In this way, communication is seen as patterns of interaction that enable stakeholders to negotiate the stakes of their relationships, as well as the legitimacy of those stakes and the salience of stakeholder claims.

Stakeholder communication in terms of *dialogue* usually involves certain types of interactions where firms and stakeholders engage in a form of reciprocal conversation that enables the parties involved to have their voices heard and where multiple ideas can be shared. Dialogue is usually conceived as a form of interaction that is distinct from 'normal' communication between firms and stakeholders, especially to improve levels of trust (Buchell & Cook, 2006; van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2008), enhance organisational learning (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Calton & Payne, 2003; Payne & Calton, 2002) and expertise (van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2008), sustain positive relationships with stakeholders (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003), involve stakeholders in decision-making processes (Pedersen, 2006), or develop increased accountability standards (Rasche & Esser, 2006). For other scholars dialogue is a much simpler process, merely equivalent with flows of information (Bendell, 2003); informing and reporting (van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2008); or a vehicle for sending and exchanging messages (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008). From this perspective, dialogue is merely synonymous

with communication, but places more emphasis on listening and involves two-way interaction between stakeholders.

A common assumption across this theme of communication as interaction (negotiation and dialogue) is to see interaction as a type of event, a 'highly structured conversational episode' (Barge & Little, 2002, p. 375) that organisations engage in with their stakeholders and is largely distinct from other organisational practices (and also not a segment of an ongoing stream of practice but something that can be isolated and disconnected from other episodes). Negotiation and dialogue are seen as alternative forms of communication to be utilised in times of crisis or change, but not as ordinary patterns of interaction for everyday organisational occurrences. This perspective separates stakeholder communication from the 'normal' business of the organisation, implying that what generally goes on in organisations is *not* stakeholder communication – stakeholder communication is a special kind of interaction applied in unique circumstances. Yet as I explain later, this is at odds with a constitutive approach to communication, which emphasises the overlapping and intertwined aspect of all organisational communication in the constitution of organisational stakeholder relationships.

Theme 3: communication as normative obligation

A final theme in the literature involves another perspective on the *why* of stakeholder communication. The theme of communication as strategy says the reason why organisations (usually commercial firms in this literature) engage in stakeholder communication is to achieve strategic goals and objectives. Conversely, the theme of communication as normative obligation says the reason why organisations engage in stakeholder communication is because they have a responsibility to involve and interact with legitimate constituencies that have relationships with the organisation and are influenced by its actions. This theme concentrates mostly on the second half of Freeman's (1984) definition of stakeholders: those who are 'affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives' (p. 25). One of the main ideas driving the theme of communication as normative obligation is corporate social responsibility (CSR), the notion that firms are accountable for the broader societal implications of their actions, not just their financial performance. CSR is a larger trend in stakeholder thinking beyond communication, as many scholars see stakeholder thinking as a valuable perspective to underwrite ethical arguments that advance ideas of CSR (e.g. Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Accordingly, much of the recent stakeholder literature is published in journals such as *Business Ethics Quarterly* and *Journal of Business Ethics*.

In contrast to seeing communication with stakeholders as a means to accomplishing some broader strategic ends, literature within this theme of normative obligation sees communication with stakeholders as a moral end in and of itself. This is because ethical standards of communication suggest that information should be shared with those who are impacted by the firm's activities, and that they have a right to be involved in certain decision-making processes (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). A Habermasian theory of discourse ethics is common in much of this literature (e.g. Reed, 1999). Broadly stated, Habermas' (1981) discourse ethics emphasises the notion of 'communicative action' where firms and stakeholders engage in mutual deliberation and argumentation in

order to reach an intersubjective consensus about the status of their relationships. These ideas are foundational for Phillips (2003) theory of stakeholder fairness and his identification of normative and derivative stakeholders. Similarly, Rasche and Esser (2006) argue from a Habermasian perspective to claim that stakeholder communication is a necessary precondition (not just an outcome) for stakeholder accountability standards. Furthermore, Zakhem (2008) demonstrates that a mere transactional account of stakeholder relationships cannot provide direction for normative stakeholder claims, arguing instead that relationships between firms and stakeholders should involve a discursive process with an illocutionary goal of working towards mutual understanding (versus strategic action).

When stakeholder communication is viewed as a normative obligation, it then becomes an indicator to evaluate the relationships between firms and stakeholders, not just an instrument to achieve other strategic ends (van huijstee & glasbergen, 2008). The notion of responsibility becomes a key consideration from this perspective, such that firms and stakeholders share responsibility for the social reality they construct (Beaulieu & Pasquero, 2002) and that firms understand the relational responsibility (Payne & Calton, 2002) that exists when they embark on activities that affect other stakeholders. Overall, the theme of stakeholder communication as normative obligation arises from a particular understanding of what it means for firms to exist within an interdependent network of stakeholder relationships, and that communicating with these stakeholders is an ethical responsibility, especially in terms of sharing information and involvement in decision-making.

To summarise, the literature reviewed in this section suggests three primary ways in which scholars understand stakeholder communication: as a strategic means, as a form of interaction, or as a normative obligation. These themes are distinct but not mutually exclusive. For example, Burchell and Cook (2006) combine ideas from all these themes to discuss stakeholder dialogue as a CSR strategy, Morsing (2006) talks about strategic CSR communication with external stakeholders, and O’Riordan and Fairbrass (2008) explain CSR in relation to models of stakeholder dialogue in order to enhance firm strategy implementation. Though drawing from each of the three themes identified here, these studies still maintain a conceptual difference between strategy, interaction, and normative obligations.

Emerging theme: social construction and constitutive communication

A small number of articles and book chapters question the instrumental and informational view of communication that is assumed in the vast majority of the stakeholder literature and thus do not fit within one of the primary themes mentioned above. Rather than seeing communication as a linear process of message transmission between firms and stakeholders, some scholars argue that stakeholder thinking needs a much more dynamic conception of communication in order to understand and explain the complexity of stakeholder relationships that exist in today’s organisational landscape. Simply put, the stakeholder literature has not adequately considered the constitutive effects of language (Crane & Livesey, 2003) and the co-construction of social reality (Beaulieu & Pasquero, 2002). To be sure, these ideas are not completely absent from the broader stakeholder literature, but they are on the periphery and have yet to make a

substantive contribution to mainstream stakeholder thinking. That is the goal of this study – build upon the ideas from this emerging theme of literature to develop a distinct communication perspective on organisational stakeholder relationships to advance stakeholder scholarship in the key areas noted earlier (i.e. stakeholder identification and salience, symbolic and material resource, and political production of meaning).

A limited number of articles and book chapters in the stakeholder literature have moved beyond inadequate notions of information transmission and are more in line with a constitutive approach to communication, though not necessarily using this terminology. Rowley (1997) was one of the first to move ‘beyond dyadic ties’ of stakeholder relationships in order to understand the interactions of multiple influences within the domain of stakeholder environments, and how these interactions shaped an organisation’s relationship to a network of stakeholders. Beaulieu and Pasquero (2002) explain how organisations and stakeholders create a social reality of negotiated order, which is a co-construction between various stakeholders and the interdependent issues that define them. Brønn and Brønn (2003) introduce a model of co-orientation as a framework for understanding the communication processes that influence perceptions of stakeholder relationships. Crane and Livesey (2003) advocate a form of stakeholder communication that involves genuine symmetric practice between organisations and stakeholders in a joint negotiation of meaning, which entails communicating *with* stakeholders in contrast to merely communicating *to* stakeholders. Sedereviciute and Valentini (2011) develop a more holistic model of identification for online stakeholders, recognising that stakeholder attributes change across time and situations. Finally, Friedman and Miles (2004) argue that stakeholder communication must go beyond organisations’ internal views of their stakeholder relationships, and that communication practice should be ‘decentred’ from the notion of a focal organisation.

Communication scholars writing from a more explicitly constitutive perspective discuss implications for stakeholder relationships, though not necessarily with the intention of contributing to the development of stakeholder theory per se. This includes Kuhn’s (2008) communicative theory of the firm, which has important implications regarding the process of organisational change in relation to governance and competence theories of stakeholder relations; Arnaud and Mills’ (2012) analysis of interfirm collaboration, which demonstrates how coordinated actions among stakeholder through micro-level conversations enable the formation of a stable collection competence that constitutes and interorganisational relationship among manufacturing companies; Deetz’s (1992, 1995, 2005) critical model of stakeholder engagement, communication, and corporate governance; and Kuhn and Ashcraft (2003) communicative theorising about corporate scandals and stakeholder claims. Accordingly, the perspective developed in this study has its roots in organisational communication scholarship, proposing further alignment and eventual integration of stakeholder scholarship with an organisational communication perspective.

Despite important insights provided by these studies, the above-mentioned work remains relatively fragmented and has yet to make a definitive, coherent contribution to shape thinking about stakeholder communication (especially in the mainstream stakeholder literature). But taken together, these studies –from both the stakeholder literature that turn towards an alternative understanding of communication and studies from the

communication literature that have implications for stakeholder thinking – move us closer to the nexus of discourse, relationality, and materiality and the articulation of a distinct communication perspective on stakeholder relationships. More than just an attempt to investigate particular instances of stakeholder communication, the goal is to conceptualise stakeholder relationships from a communicative perspective. To accomplish this, the article now turns to the literature on communication-as-constitutive, which provides a meta-theoretical framework to explain how discursive, relational, and material aspects of organising combine to constitute stakeholder relationships, with several important implications for subsequent research on stakeholder communication.

Specifically, three key areas are not adequately addressed (and perhaps cannot be) within current stakeholder thinking: (1) the process of stakeholder identification and the constitution of stakeholder salience, (2) the connection between material and symbolic resources between stakeholders, and (3) the political production of meaning in stakeholder relationships. These are key areas for rethinking stakeholder communication, but they are not well understood if stakeholder relationships are assumed to only involve the linear exchange of information and pre-existing meaning.

Developing a communication perspective towards stakeholder relationships

Having reviewed how communication has been studied in the stakeholder literature and how communication scholars have utilised stakeholder thinking, we are now in position to articulate a distinct contribution that communication can make to enhance stakeholder research. To begin, the main tenets of a constitutive approach to communication are summarised. From there three key implications of communicative constitution are explained, all of which involve a rethinking of communication and stakeholder relationships – especially at the intersections of discursivity, relationality, and materiality. Together, these ideas form an overall ‘communication perspective’ that can advance our understanding of stakeholder theory.

Communication as constitutive

The common view of communication in much of the stakeholder literature is that of *transmission*, rooted in informational models of messages exchanged between senders and receivers (Axley, 1984; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). From this perspective, communication involves the expression of already formed realities, and the primary concern is with the effectiveness of these expressions. Not that a transmission model of communication is necessarily wrong, but rather incomplete. Alternatively, over the last 25 years, communication scholars have developed a *constitutive* view of communication that focuses on the power of language in the production of meaning and how social realities are known via symbolic interaction (see Carey, 1989; Craig, 1999; Deetz, 1994a, 1994b; Pearce, 1989; Shepherd, 1993). This way of thinking is rooted in the linguistic turn in social theory (Rorty, 1967), where language is actively involved in the production and creation – not just the reflection or expression – of social realities. Communication acts on the world, it does not merely describe it. From this perspective, communication is a dynamic, interactive process that involves constant negotiation

over interpretation and meaning, not just the transmission of information. Social realities are not fixed such that they can be reflected or expressed unproblematically, and things often taken for granted in the social world – organisations, institutions, and relationships – only maintain their existence through sustained patterns of interaction. Communication can thus be defined as a dynamic, interactive process of meaning negotiation and interpretation through symbol use involving contextualised actors who coordinate and control their own and others' activity and knowledge (combining definitions from Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Kuhn, 2008).

In a seminal essay published in *Communication Theory*, Craig (1999) articulated the notion of *communicative constitution* (or communication as constitutive) as a meta-theoretical framework to encompass all communication scholarship. As Craig explains, 'Communication, from [a constitutive] perspective is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural, or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors' (p. 126). In fact, Ashcraft et al. (2009) call communicative constitution the 'overarching principle that guides the discipline [of communication] today.' This constitutive view of communication has gained particular traction among scholars in the subfield of organisational communication, who have long incorporated constitutive ideas in their research, but more recently have coined the term communicative constitution of organisation (CCO) to connote a more explicitly constitutive approach to communication and organisational ontology (see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1999). This work moves away from conceiving organisations as containers *within* which communication happens, to a more profound claim that organisation exists *as* communication, and thus seeking to explain all aspects of organisational existence and operation in distinctly communicative terms – what Kuhn (2008) simply refers to as 'taking communication seriously.'

Over the last few years, three schools of CCO scholarship have emerged as the main articulation of communicative constitution in the field of organisational communication. These include the Montreal School, which foregrounds the distanciation and imbrication of text-conversation dialectics that scale up to organisational forms; McPhee's Four Flows model, a structurationist approach that foregrounds distinct communication processes necessary for social structures to exist as organisations; and Luhmann's general theory of social systems, which foregrounds self-organisation (autopoiesis) and paradoxical decision events that enable organisations to distinguish themselves from their environments. Extensive reviews of these lines of scholarship exist elsewhere (see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Bisel, 2009; Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Kuhn, 2012; Schoeneborn, 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2014), and my purpose here is not to align with a particular school of CCO thinking. Instead, I want to step back from any specific articulation of CCO in favour of a broader perspective that emphasises the general principle of communicative constitution they all share, thus developing a foundation for a distinct communication perspective of organisational stakeholder relationships (that subsequently could be advanced by proponents of any particular school of CCO thinking in more targeted investigations, e.g. Kuhn, 2012). As Cooren et al. (2011, p.) state in their summary of CCO scholarship:

The general claim is that if communication is indeed constitutive of organization, it cannot be considered to be simply one of the many factors involved in organizing, and it cannot be merely the vehicle for the expression of pre-existing 'realities'; rather, it is the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained. Consequently, organizations can no longer be seen as objects, entities, or 'social facts' inside of which communication occurs.

From this broad orientation towards a constitutive model of communication, we are able to construct what Craig (1999) calls a 'communicational perspective on social reality,' specifically organisational stakeholder relationships. Therefore, we can move beyond seeing organisations as pre-existing, independent entities that 'have' stakeholders, and instead focus on how organisations are embedded within a dynamic, relational landscape consisting of various stakeholder relationships. These relations make organisations what we consider them to be – they have no reality outside of these networks of relations. To develop these ideas further, I next explain how a communication perspective contributes to three key areas of organisational stakeholder relationships: (1) stakeholder identification and salience, (2) the entanglement of material and symbolic resources, and (3) the political production of meaning involved in stakeholder relationships – all of which are essential to the development of stakeholder thinking but beyond the logics of conventional stakeholder literature.

Stakeholder identification and salience

One of the most fundamental topics in the stakeholder literature is 'stakeholder identification and salience' (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & De Colle, 2010; Mitchell et al., 1997). This involves labelling different stakeholder groups and classifying various stakeholder relationships, and then deciding which stakeholders managers should pay attention to (Andriof & Waddock, 2002). The most established and widely cited model in the literature to date is Mitchell, Agle, and Wood's (1997) theory of stakeholder identification and salience. In an attempt to explain Freeman's (1994) principle of 'who and what really counts,' they proposed that stakeholder salience will be positively related to the 'cumulative number of stakeholder attributes – power, legitimacy, and urgency – perceived by managers to be present' (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 873). High, low, and moderate levels of stakeholder salience would then depend on the number of attributes thought to be present by managers. A subsequent study of Chief Executive Officers from 80 companies by Agle, Mitchell, and Sonnenfeld (1999) found empirical support for this typology, with urgency as the best predictor of executive response. Following the lead of Mitchell et al. (1997), several ensuing articles and books in the stakeholder literature sought to identify stakeholders based on various attributes and characteristics. Table 2 provides a summary of this research, showing both the salient attributes and resulting stakeholder identities.

It is this area of stakeholder identification and salience that draws the most attention and criticism in current stakeholder research (Laplume et al., 2008). Some claim that the area of stakeholder identification is under-theorised and under-researched (Stoney & Winstanley, 2001); others say that the lack of specificity around stakeholder identification is a severe barrier for further development of stakeholder theory and application (Dunham, Freeman, Liedtka, & Arnold, 2006). A communication perspective of

Table 2. Summary of stakeholder identification research.

Citation	Stakeholder attributes	Stakeholder identities
Brickson (2005)	Identity orientations	Individualistic, relational, and collectivist
Carroll (1989)	Moral legitimacy	Stakeholders identity based on moral obligations
Clarkson (1994)	Bearing of risk in an organisation	Legitimate and non-legitimate stakeholders
Clarkson (1995)	Claim, ownership rights, or interests in an organisation	Primary, public, and secondary stakeholders
Clarkson Centre for Business Ethics – Consensus Statement (University of Toronto)	Risk bearing in value creation	Intentional and consequential stakeholders
Friedman and Miles (2002, 2004)	Nature of contracts with organisations (explicit/implicit, recognised/unrecognised)	Compatible/incompatible stakeholders, necessary/contingent stakeholders
Frooman (1999)	Resource dependency	Direct/indirect influence pathway strategies and withholding/usage resource control strategies
Hill & Jones, 1992	Moral legitimacy	Stakeholder identities based on moral claims
Hitt, Harrison, and Ireland (2001)	Potential for value creation	Capital market, product market, and organisational stakeholders
Kaler (2002)	Moral obligations or ability to affect an organisation	Claimant, influencer, or combination stakeholders
Mitchell et al. (1997)	Power, legitimacy, and urgency	Dormant, discretionary, demanding, dominant, dangerous, dependent, definitive, and non-stakeholder
Preble (2005)	Contractual relationships	Primary/public stakeholders
Phillips (2003)	Legal and moral obligations	Normative/derivative stakeholders
Sedereviciute and Valentini (2011)	Positional power, content relevance, and discussion frequency/intensity	Based on member inter-connectivity and content shared
Whysall (2000)	Inputs contributed and costs incurred	Internal, marketplace, and external stakeholders

stakeholder identification and salience offers a way forward by rethinking the notion of identification in terms of relational association (versus classification) and also by recognising the contingent and discursive character of salient attributes (versus stable properties).

The primary understanding of identification across nearly all the stakeholder literature is that of classification and categorisation: identification *of*. This approach involves decisions by management to classify various stakeholders and the legitimacy of their claims on the firm. But a communication perspective suggests a different understanding of identification, namely a process of relational association: identification *with*. In this regard, identification is the perception of oneness or sense of belonging with another, where an organisation defines itself in terms of its relationality with others (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Identification relates to communication, as Cheney and Tompkins (1987) explain, because ‘the *process* of identification is conducted primarily with language, and the *product* of identification is expressed primarily with language’ (p. 11; emphasis added). Rather than merely classifying stakeholders in terms of various roles (employees, suppliers, etc.), identifying with stakeholders involves an ongoing process of association via shared interests and goals. This understanding of identification is rooted in Burke’s (1950) concept of *consubstantiation*, a process whereby individuals (or organisations) connect to elements in the social world to consider shared interests.

The assumption in most of the previous stakeholder literature is that stakeholders 'exist' and then they need to be identified by managers. But an alternative way of thinking about this would be to think of stake-holding as emerging from a relational process of identification, where the legitimacy of stakes are established to the extent that firms and other constituencies identify with each other in relation to common targets. The notion of a stakeholder does not come into being apart from this process of identification; a constituent does not have a separate status as 'stakeholder' apart from identifying *with* a particular organisation, versus being identified *by* the organisation.

Some might argue that this relational approach to stakeholder identification is relatively unimportant (immaterial), since once stakeholder identities have emerged as are understood as fairly stable, they can be treated as having a separate status and existence by organisational actors – and thus no real explanatory power is lost. However, this ignores the contingency and social constructedness of stakeholder attributes. Forms of conversation among stakeholders actually construct – not merely represent – the realities of stakeholder relationships (Barge & Little, 2002); they do not exist apart from interaction. Thus, stakeholder salience is better understood as a discursive property of communication practice, not a stable property of managerial attribution. Rather than managers deciding whether a particular stakeholder (and its claims on the firm) is salient or not, organisational members can instead consider salient features of their relationships with stakeholders and the social construction of stakes that constitute these relationships. A communication perspective towards stakeholder relationships is less concerned with labelling and categorising different stakeholders versus assessing (by both scholars and practitioners) the quality of the relationships among stakeholders in terms of how salient properties emerge from certain patterns of interaction and association.

When a shift is made from identification *of* stakeholders to identification *with* stakeholders, several possibilities arise. First, the process of identification becomes decentred from the management of a focal organisation. This opens up the identification process to include the participation of multiple voices, which is an important aspect of organisational adaptation and landscape fit (Ashmos, Huonker, & McDaniel, 1998). Second, it creates an opportunity frame from which organisations can develop novel and creative solutions. Conceptualising stakeholder identification in terms of classification and categorisation implicitly puts organisations in a defensive frame where the goal is to mitigate the impact of stakeholder claims on organisational performance. But this narrows the possibility that firm–stakeholder relationships can result in new ideas that can be mutually beneficial for all parties involved. Finally, conceiving stakeholder identification as a communication process of association enables a shift away from homogenous role-based identities, which has received nearly 'unanimous adoption' in previous stakeholder literature (Wolfe & Putler, 2003, p. 66). Instead, stakeholder identification involves more attention to intra-group diversity (Winn, 2001) and the ways in which stakeholder identities shift in relation to changing organisational circumstances. Thus, a communication perspective towards stakeholder relationships entails the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Stakeholder relationships involve a relational process of identification whereby organisations discursively construct their identities in relation to common points of association with internal and external constituent groups.

Stakeholder communication research can examine the validity of this claim by investigating how stakeholder identities are embedded in certain relational practices, and how these identities compare to managerial classifications of stakeholder identification. Key questions for this line of research include how it is that various stakeholder groups come to have certain identities, what communication practices help sustain these identities, and how these identities evolve in relation to various stakeholder interactions. Managerial decision-making is certainly an important aspect of the identification process, but a communication perspective on stakeholder relationships goes beyond managerial interests to include the entire range of stakeholder interactions that could influence identification.

The entanglement of material and symbolic resources

A second area where a communication perspective towards stakeholder relationships has important implications is with regard to the dichotomy between material and symbolic resources that prevails throughout stakeholder research. Previous stakeholder literature has long acknowledged a broad understanding of resource dependency in firm–stakeholder relationships (Kochan & Rubinstein, 2000; Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002), meaning that organisations depend on resources provided by stakeholders, and vice versa. In this literature, these resources are perceived as either material *or* symbolic, presuming an opposition between materiality and symbolism and thus confusing how these elements combine to constitute stakeholder relationships. Previous stakeholder literature tends to privilege the supposed material aspect of resources, usually implying some notion of financial capital, labour, or physical infrastructure, with less attention given to theorising so-called (and separate) symbolic resources. For example, Laplume, et al.’s (2008) extensive review of the stakeholder literature argues that a key area for future stakeholder research is the development of symbolic resources (e.g. legitimacy and reputation), investigating whether ‘symbolic management’ is adequate for firm performance or if ‘concrete’ actions through [material] resources are necessary for improved performance. Despite the call for increased attention to symbolism, a dichotomy between materiality and symbolism is still assumed. Yet is this dichotomy justified? After all, the symbolic dimensions of various resources must be embodied somewhere somehow, and the material dimensions of various resources are only meaningful to the extent they are animated or “brought to life” through certain beliefs, ideas, motivations, or feelings (Cooren, 2012).

In contrast, a communication perspective on stakeholder relationships provides the latitude to question the prevailing distinction that is made between material and symbolic resources, and to think instead of the relationship of between materiality and symbolism as one of *inextricable entanglement*. Ashcraft et al. (2009) express this idea in their recent efforts to ‘materialise’ organisational communication. They argue that ‘communication is the mechanism whereby the material and [symbolic] co-mingle and transform accordingly. In communication,

symbol becomes material; material becomes symbol; and neither stay the same as a result' (p. 34). This 'mutual constitution' (p. 31) of materiality and symbolism prevents overly structuralist or naively constructionist explanations of stakeholder relationships. Instead, the complexities of both material and symbolic are realised in communication – where symbolic dimensions are embodied and material dimensions are animated.

For example, when firms rely on investors to provide financial capital for their operations, or workers to provide physical labour, or repeat customers to provide legitimacy, material and symbolic resources are always co-present and should not be understood apart from each other – they are sociomaterial (Orlikowski, 2007). Things such as 'legitimacy' or 'reputation' always have a material dimension – they have to be materialised in some way in order to make a difference. Legitimacy or reputation must be embodied somehow somewhere if they are to have any sort of meaningful existence, such as in the way people talk about the organisation or the way it is described in the media. Likewise, supposedly material resources such as 'buildings' or 'labour' have no inherent meaning or value in themselves – they must be animated by various beliefs, feelings, traits, objectives, and the like. For them to even exist *as resources* (versus mere raw physical elements) already suggests the presence of symbolism, a material manifestation of a symbolic dimension that can be uncovered through a constitutive approach to communication. Legitimacy, reputation, labour, and buildings are always both material and symbolic – materiality and symbolicity are two constitutive aspects of their mode of existence, all of which is realised communicatively. The contribution of materiality and symbolism is not a consequence of their separate attributes or some sort of dialectical relationship between them. Rather, they operate as an integrated entity in a mutually constitutive relationship.

A communication perspective of stakeholder relationships eliminates a false dichotomy between material and symbolic resources, showing that in interaction, symbolic dimensions are embodied materially and material dimensions are animated symbolically (see Cooren, 2012). If stakeholder relationships entail resource-dependent associations, then theories of stakeholder relationships must account for the ways in which materiality *and* symbolism implicate each other in the way stakeholder relationships unfold. Current stakeholder thinking does not do this, but a communication perspective can provide such an explanation, demonstrating that communication is the way in which material and symbolic shape each other through a reciprocal process of mutual constitution. This is especially true at the boundaries of organisational relationships, as organisational members negotiate the extent of their stakeholder associations. An organisation's relationship with a particular supplier, for example, is not merely a sterile exchange of products and financial capital at the intersection of supply and demand, but rather a dynamic interplay among organisational boundary spanners who negotiate the sociomateriality of various resources in relation to each other. Decisions about various resources are shaped by what those decisions *mean* or *represent* to a firm, not simply what materials *are* or *do*. This leads to a second proposition for a communication perspective of stakeholder relationships:

Proposition 2: Stakeholder relationships consist of resource-dependent associations that are realized communicatively through the mutual constitution of materiality and

symbolism – in communication, symbolic dimensions are embodied materially and material dimensions are animated symbolically.

This means that stakeholder communication research should investigate the co-presence of materiality and symbolism in the resource-dependencies that compose stakeholder relationships. This could involve demonstrating how presumed symbolic resources (such as legitimacy or reputation) only exist to the extent they are materialised in interaction. Additionally, this line of research could reveal how seemingly material resources (such as physical infrastructure or communication technologies) are in fact animated by various ideas, beliefs, emotions, and motivations, which can be uncovered by investigating their communicative constitution (and not privilege their taken-for-granted materiality).

Political production of meaning

A final implication of a communication perspective includes the ways in which political interests are involved in the formation and development of stakeholder relationships. The notion of stakeholder power is widely accepted as a key attribute of stakeholder salience in previous stakeholder literature (i.e. Agle et al., 1999; Mitchell et al., 1997), but previous stakeholder research does very little to theorise power itself. Power is almost universally understood in terms of resource dependence, meaning that stakeholder power involves the ability to provide/withhold key resources to/from other organisations. Yet little research shows how or why it is that power is attributed to certain resources and not others, or how power is constituted in stakeholder relationships.²

In contrast, a communication perspective recognises that power relations are produced and reproduced discursively, and that communication is the process by which certain power relationships are realised. As Deetz and Mumby (1990) explain, ‘Power is most successfully exercised when an individual or group has the ability to frame discursive and non-discursive practices within a system of meanings that is commensurate with that individual’s or group’s own interests’ (p. 32). The implication for stakeholder relationships is that attributions of power should be understood in terms of the social processes that produce contingent and intersubjective meanings, and the political interests that are included (or excluded) in decision-making. With its origins in strategic management, the stakeholder literature overwhelmingly locates the ability to frame discursive practices in stakeholder relationships at the level of management, which privileges certain interests over others. However, the social processes by which power is produced and attributed should not be accepted uncritically, but rather opened up to investigate how it is that stakeholders come to know and experience other stakeholders as powerful, and how these processes produce (versus merely transmit) meaning.

This idea is rooted in the Foucault (1972) argument that there is power *in* knowledge, not just power *of* knowledge. In organisational contexts, the issue is the arbitrary privileging of certain managerial interests that distorts decisions and suppresses meaningful conflicts (Deetz, 1992). The question for stakeholder thinking is who is making decisions about attributions of power among other stakeholders, and how these

decisions serve to further constitute the firm. A communication perspective theorises power in terms of stakeholder participation in the discursive construction of meaning and attributions of power. Accordingly, the following proposition is offered:

Proposition 3: Attributions of stakeholder power are produced discursively within ongoing and contested representational practices and are a function of the participatory processes involved in stakeholder relationships.

Thus, the power dynamics in stakeholder relationships can be assessed as a matter of participation in the discursive processes of meaning production, not simply in the managerial designation of power as a stakeholder attribute. Stakeholder communication research should question the way attributions of power are embedded within participatory (or exclusionary) processes. Additionally, stakeholder communication research can ask whether various stakeholder interests are substantively included in strategic decisions among stakeholders (versus merely expressed in meetings or forums), and what processes of meaning construction shape the power dynamics between stakeholders.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to develop a communication perspective towards stakeholder relationships, taking seriously the constitutive effects of language and human interaction in the ongoing social construction of various connections between and among organisations. To that end, the article provided a critical review of the stakeholder communication literature in order to demonstrate the need for an alternative conception of communication to underwrite future stakeholder communication research. In order to advance thinking about stakeholder communication, we do not just need more investigations of isolated communication phenomena (though that is valuable), but rather a perspective where stakeholder relationships are explained in distinctly communicative terms (cf. Kuhn, 2012).

This involves focusing on what stakeholder relationships are and what stakeholder relationships do – all at the nexus of discursivity, relationality, and materiality. To that end, three propositions are offered for a communication perspective of stakeholder relationships regarding (1) stakeholder identification and salience, (2) the entanglement of material and symbolic resources, and (3) the political production of meaning. As organisations become sites of increasing participation and conflict over fundamental meanings (Deetz, 1992), communication theories of message transmission and information exchange are less valuable. A communication perspective helps explain stakeholder relationships as dynamic sites of organisational constitution where negotiation and meaning construction shape how organisational realities are known and experienced.

In their extensive review of the last 25 years of stakeholder research, Laplume et al. (2008) claim that stakeholder thinking would benefit from including additional theoretical perspectives. A constitutive approach to communication is one such theoretical perspective that provides a broad foundation from which to advance stakeholder thinking. Constitutive communication enables the development of a distinct perspective of stakeholder relationships, with important implications for stakeholder thinking. First,

a communication perspective of stakeholder relationships shifts the unit of analysis from focal firms or stakeholder networks to the discursive and relational sociomaterial *processes* of relationship constitution. A communication perspective does not take the existence of organisations or networks as given, but rather suggests that firms and networks are achieved and only exist meaningfully in communication. Therefore, stakeholder relationships could be studied in terms of the instances of sociomaterial engagement when stakeholders produce and negotiate the meanings that constitute their relationships, not just the economic factors that give rise to stakeholder relationships or the structural parameters of those relationships.

Second, a communication perspective of stakeholder relationships goes beyond simply acknowledging *that* stakeholders interact to examining interaction *per se*, what Taylor and Van Every (2000) refer to as the conversational modality of communication. This brings needed attention to how stakeholders sociomaterially co-construct the social worlds that constitute their relationships, not just the antecedent conditions or outcomes of their associations. If stakeholder relationships literally exist in the interactions between stakeholders, then it is critically important to understand how certain patterns of interaction influence the emergence of certain properties (i.e. trust, legitimacy, collective identity, etc.) that are valuable for stakeholder relationships – these properties exhibit a relational ontology (Benjamin, 2015) that cannot be understood apart from communicative constitution.

Finally, a communication perspective opens up the development of stakeholder relationships to include alternative voices beyond narrow managerial interests. The locus of stakeholder identification, for example, no longer privileges managerial decisions (though these still play an important role) because there are additional voices that participate in the process of identifying with other organisational constituents and affected parties. A communication perspective towards stakeholder relationships recognises that multiple voices do (and should) participate in the constitution of stakeholder relationships, even though some of these voices have not been acknowledged in the past. When we accept the notion that communication has the power to create the organisational realities of stakeholder relationships (not merely express or transmit pre-existing realities), we are in a much better position to understand the dynamic sociomaterial process of organisational constitution. A communication perspective directs attention away from limited conceptions of stakeholder relationships, instead seeing stakeholder relationships as constituted in and by communication at the nexus of materiality, discursivity, and (stakeholder) relationality. In doing so, it opens the way to greater alignment between the stakeholder and organisational communication literatures.

Notes

1. Even recent stakeholder thinking that challenges the corporate-centric assumptions of most previous stakeholder research in favour of decentering the conception of a focal firm (e.g. Friedman & Miles, 2002), recognises the simultaneous influence of multiple interdependent stakeholders (e.g. Rowley, 1997), and questions the idea of homogeneous stakeholder interests within role-based groups (e.g. Winn, 2001; Wolfe & Putler, 2003) is still very much concerned with relationships between stakeholders and how these relationships are managed.
2. Mitchell et al. (1997) do acknowledge that stakeholder attributes (such as power) are socially constructed, but they do little to explain *how* it is that power is socially constructed

or the implications of this process. They also provide a discussion of Etzioni's (1964) concept of normative power, which involves power based on symbolic resources. But again, there is little discussion of *how* these symbolic resources come to constitute power.

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