Corporate communications from the CEO's perspective:
How top executives conceptualize and value strategic communication

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Abstract
Multilateral demands from different stakeholders, decreasing confidence in business, and the impacts of globalization are all shifting public opinion and strategic communication to the center of corporate management. This move is accelerating the institutionalization of the communication function. However, the professionals and departments in charge are only parts of a larger organizational game. The performance of corporate communications depends heavily on the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations that chief executive officers (CEOs) and other top executives hold towards communication and its contribution to organizational goals. However, little is known about this. Most knowledge on the view of top executives is based on qualitative interviews with leaders of organizations that are known to be at the forefront of strategic communication. The overall picture in business might be quite different. This paper aims to close this research gap. It is based on a quantitative survey of 602 CEOs and board members in the largest European country, Germany. The research questions address the perceptions and expectations of CEOs and executive board members concerning a) the relevance of public opinion and contribution of communication performance to organizational success, b) the communicative role of top executives and their interaction with professional communicators, c) the objectives and values of corporate communications, and d) the importance of various disciplines and instruments. The study identifies a traditional mindset towards communications: top executives focus on primary stakeholders (customers, employees) instead of secondary stakeholders (politicians, activists), they value mass media higher than social media, and they rate speaking more important than listening. Moreover, communication professionals are not always the first choice when CEOs and board members reflect on the topics at hand. This indicates that advanced visions of strategic communication developed in academia and practice have not yet arrived in many boardrooms. There is still a long way to go to establish communication excellence in business.

Introduction

The rising volume of information flows and new configurations of stakeholder networks in a globalized world have triggered the debate on reputation and public trust (Carroll, 2013; Klewes & Wreschniok, 2009), legitimacy (Cradden, 2005; Sandhu, 2012), and authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007) in the business world. These concepts are inevitably linked to communication. They are, at least partly, a result of communication activities by stakeholders or multipliers in the realms of mass media and social media. At the same time, organizations try to influence them by various means of strategic communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014).

A common and rarely questioned reasoning in academic textbooks and the professional literature argues that this changing environment leads to an increasing importance of corporate communications (Argenti, 2013; Cornelissen, 2011) and stronger institutionalization of the communication function (Gregory, Invernizzi, & Romenti, 2013). Surveys among communicators in various regions of the world support this view. They report a growing influence of communicators (Swerling, Thorson, & Tenderich, 2012; Zerfass et al., 2013) and advanced objectives for the communication function (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2013). However, empirical research also shows a rising gap between the perceived importance of communications and soft as well as hard indicators of its relevance in organizational settings. A large majority (87.0%) of the respondents from 43 countries interviewed for the 2013 edition of the European Communication Monitor, the largest annual study of the status quo of strategic communication worldwide, stated that communication has become more important for their organizations during the turbulent economic and political situation since the year before. However, only 61.6% agreed that the influence and status of their role as communication professionals have increased during the same period, while only 14.8% reported increased budgets for the communication department compared with other functions (Zerfass et al., 2013, pp. 90–98).

This gap is usually explained by a lack of power of communication departments and communication professionals. Researchers and professional associations alike argue that having a seat at the board table or being a member of the dominant coalition would solve the problem (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, pp. 140–182; Smudde & Courtright, 2010; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; EACD, 2013). As such, structural arrangements and better qualified, business-savvy communicators are necessary. However, others have criticized this view as simplistic. In fact, communication professionals are limited by a large number of organizational and relational constraints (Berger, 2005), which cannot be reduced to reporting lines or personal competencies. Previous editions of the study mentioned above showed that 59.9% of the highest-ranking communication managers in European organizations report directly to the chief executive officer (CEO) (Zerfass et al., 2011, p. 49). Nevertheless eight out of 10 communicators denounce a lack of understanding of communication practice within top management (Zerfass et al., 2012, p. 38), and linking business strategy and communication is named as the single most important strategic (unsolved) issue by European communication professionals (Zerfass et al., 2013, p. 84).

In order to explore the question at hand, this paper builds upon an alternative theoretical approach. It explains the distribution of responsibilities for communication in corporate settings and argues that the symbiotic relationship between CEOs and communication professionals can be analyzed by means of new sociological institutionalism. Along this line, it is important to understand the understandings, experiences, and expectations of top executives towards communication. This is the main research question. A literature review shows that empirical

insights into the viewpoints of CEOs and executive board members are rare. Until recently, only a few qualitative studies with small samples have added insights into the results of the Excellence Study (Grunig et al., 2002), which used quantitative and qualitative methods to research the topic. Some information can also be found in quantitative surveys of CEOs and their priorities in general. The knowledge at hand is used to construct more detailed research questions and hypotheses. Based on this, a quantitative survey is conducted to investigate the perceptions and expectations of top executives. The objects of the research are large, private-owned as well as listed corporations with distinct communication functions in the largest European country, Germany. The empirical research is based on responses from 602 CEOs and board members. This is, to our knowledge, the largest sample of top executives in a key economy interviewed about corporate communications until now. The results and interpretations based on descriptive and analytical statistics are presented. Although the survey, as any empirical study, has several limitations, the broad basis and specific viewpoint make a unique contribution to the body of knowledge.

Responsibilities and institutions for corporate communications

The gap between the rising importance of communication for corporations and the relatively slow advancement of professional communication functions can be explained by taking a closer look at the *distribution of communication responsibilities* in any organization. Communication demands from stakeholders and media reports usually address a whole entity, such as a specific company or brand. Organizations themselves are enacting their environments by interpreting markets and stakeholder settings and by defining visions and business models. As such, the core responsibility for communication as well as for all other strategic decisions and activities is located within the boardroom. Depending on the legal structure of a company, the CEO, president, managing director, or fellow members of the top executive group on the first level of the hierarchy are in charge of communications.

This means that "the CEO should be the person most involved with both developing the overall strategy for communications and delivering consistent messages to constituencies" (Argenti, 2013, p. 54). Some authors have claimed that the CEO should be the first communicator of any organization (Pincus, Rayfield, & DeBonis, 1991). This seems to be a naive understanding of the division of labor in modern organizations. Nevertheless, CEOs decide on the basic understanding and priorities of communication as well as on key structures and resources and they themselves communicate with important stakeholders.

Many top executives have a background in business administration, and so it can be assumed that their typical understanding of communication is the same as in this discipline. Most management scholars conceptualize communication in a traditional way as the *transmission of information* (Zerfass, 2009, pp. 27–31): companies transmit objective information via media to the relevant stakeholders; this stimulus leads to the transfer of meaning and it is intended to evoke desired reactions such as knowledge, attitude change, and behavior. Communication scholars propagate a contrasting view that accentuates the *construction of reality:* communication is a two-sided process, an interaction where perceptions and orientations are shaped subjectively, but meaning and reality are socially constructed.

According to empirical studies, CEOs spend much of their time (up to 50%) on communication (Argenti, 2013, pp. 53–54; Will, Fleischmann, & Fritton, 2011, pp. 18–20). Their communication skills in interpersonal and small group settings as well as when facing the media and large audiences contribute to organizational success (Zerfass et al., 2013, pp. 16–18).

This also means that top executives will always have very direct experiences and perceptions of communication, which are not necessarily linked to the concepts and practices of communication professionals.

In large organizations, communication professionals and departments are needed to support top executives in their responsibility for corporate communications (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 16). From a theoretical point of view, they are *agents* working on behalf of their *principals* in top management (Zerfass et al., 2014). As such, corporate communications is "inescapably tied, by nature and by necessity, to top management, with public relations staff providing counsel and communication support" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006, p. 56). Communicators are specialized, on the one hand, at framing public debates and getting messages across (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 16), and, on the other hand, at monitoring public opinion and stakeholder interests, which allows them to inform decision-making processes (White & Dozier, 1992). This duality of outbound and inbound activities has been proven in empirical surveys of communication professionals. *Outbound activities* such as generating public attention, influencing customer preferences, motivating employees, and building up immaterial assets (reputation, brands, organizational culture) are usually more prevalent than *inbound activities* such as identifying opportunities and public concerns or managing relationships to adjust corporate strategies and secure room for maneuver (Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011).

From this point of view, the *understandings, experiences, and expectations of top executives in organizations* are key drivers of the explanation of corporate communication practices. New visions and role models cannot be put into action if CEOs, board members, leaders of business units and other functions (e.g. human resources, sales), and regional directors do not support such developments. As such, it is necessary to explain the complex interactions between organizations, society, and agency.

This can be done by applying *neo-institutional theories* (Greenwood et al., 2008; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Scott, 2001). New institutionalism offers rich opportunities to analyze the interfaces of organizations and communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Sandhu, 2009, 2012). Scott (2001) argues that organizational practices (e.g. corporate communications) are based on cognitive, normative, and regulative institutions. The *regulative pillar* includes rules, laws, and sanctions that constrain and regularize organizational behavior (Scott, 2001, p. 51). Formal arrangements such as a seat for the communication head on the board, reporting lines, or his/her involvement in certain decision-making processes are examples for this dimension. Empirical research shows that this is often influenced by the overarching strategies and structures of the company such as market focus (business-to-business (B2B), business-to-consumer (B2C)), international outreach, and situational/historical factors (Klewes & Zerfass, 2011). This also means that generalizing insights from various companies makes little sense – which is a strong argument against the idea that striving for membership in the dominant coalition is an appropriate and sufficient way to achieve communication excellence. The *normative pillar* refers to values and norms that influence behavior (Scott, 2001, p. 54). The third pillar, the *cultural-cognitive pillar,* "is the major distinguishing feature of neoinstitutionalism within sociology" (Scott, 2001, p. 57). It describes common scripts and shared beliefs that constitute social reality and that are taken for granted. All three pillars are related to each other as a product of the symbolic world (Sandhu, 2012, p. 100). More specifically, the regulative and normative pillars depend on the cultural-cognitive pillar. Rules and norms can only guide interactions in organizations if there is cognitive knowledge about those rules, sanctions, values, and expectations. At the same time, "soft" factors such as the basic understanding of concepts

(e.g. communication) and expectations of an organizational function (e.g. corporate communications) are typically not limited to single organizations, but part of shared visions in peer groups. CEOs and other top executives form a social class that differs from other managers (e.g. accountants, marketing experts, salespeople, IT staff, communication professionals) in various ways. While it is difficult to identify all the influencing factors (i.e. academic education, mentoring, networks, media use), sociologists have been able to show remarkable and consistent patterns in the mindsets of top managers (i.e. Buß, 2012).

These thoughts help focus the research at hand, which contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring the understandings, experiences, and expectations (cognitive institutions) of CEOs and board members in corporations. The main research question is thus:

> RQ: *What are the understandings, experiences, and expectations of top*
> *executives towards corporate communications?*

This broad question can be broken down into several more specified research questions, which are derived from the basic presuppositions discussed in this section:

> RQ1: *How important are public opinion, reputation, and communication*
> *performance for corporate success?*
> RQ2: *How do top executives conceptualize and perform communication*
> *personally, and how do they collaborate with communication*
> *departments?*
> RQ3: *What are the objectives of corporate communications, and how does*
> *corporate communications contribute to organizational success?*
> RQ4: *How do top executives rate the importance and performance of key*
> *disciplines and instruments in corporate communications?*

Empirical studies of communication from the CEO's perspective

In contrast to the large number of studies analyzing the status quo and future of strategic communication from the communicator's point of view (e.g. Berger & Meng, 2014; Zerfass et al., 2013, at an international level; and national surveys in many countries, i.e. Swerling et al., 2012), very little is known about the perspectives of top executives. A literature review shows that only a handful of dedicated studies have been published during the past 20 years and that most of these are limited to small-scale, qualitative designs – with two remarkable exceptions.

The first large-scale research on the perceptions of CEOs was part of the *Excellence Study in Communication Management and Public Relations* from 1991–1994 by the Grunigs and colleagues. It was based on a quantitative survey in 168 corporations and 159 other organizations, conducted in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Grunig et al., 2002). Additionally, a qualitative survey among 25 of the 327 organizations was carried out. The study identified shared expectations between top executives and communication managers as a key enabler of excellent communications (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995, p. 10). It also showed that CEOs value public relations because it can provide a "broad perspective both inside and outside of the organization" (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 115), which means that inbound activities contribute to organizational success (RQ3). However, the research framework was mainly oriented towards the structural dimensions of the interaction between CEOs and communicators (the regulative pillar in terms of neo-institutionalism), and thus the results do not cover the other questions posed above.

The second quantitative study of communication from the CEOs' perspective was conducted in Norway. *Leaders' Perceptions of Communication and Communication Managers* is

a survey of top managers in Norwegian companies of all sizes conducted in 2009 by Brønn. The study produced 1,343 responses (Brønn, 2014). However, owing to the structure of the Norwegian business sector with a majority of small companies, only 292 of the managers represented a company with a distinct communication department or function. Brønn (2014) reports a variety of insights into the perceptions of executives. For example, 86% of the respondents in companies with a communication department believe that reputation contributes to organizational success, while 59% confirm that communication and reputation are nowadays considered in strategic decision-making (p. 28) (RQ1). Moreover, leaders "understand that personal communication is very important for their organizations" (p. 16), which emphasizes the communicative role of CEOs themselves (RQ1). When asked about the importance of different communication disciplines, executives in organizations with communication departments ranked marketing/branding and consumer communication first followed by communication skills and internal communication (p. 29) (RQ4).

Another cluster of studies is based on interviews with a small number of CEOs and top executives. This qualitative methodology is and was appropriate for entering the mostly unknown terrain of CEOs' attitudes towards corporate communications. At the same time, it has to be noted that some studies are implicitly biased because the interviewees were not sampled from a general group of companies, but deliberately chosen (i.e. because they or their communicators engage themselves in the future of strategic communication, or because they were interested in the subject in general). Nevertheless, this research has produced a wealth of insights that can guide broader studies.

Murray and White (2005) pioneered the field with a study of *CEOs' Views on Reputation Management.* They interviewed 14 deliberately chosen CEOs and chairpersons from leading corporations and associations in the United Kingdom. The answers revealed that respondents have a specific understanding of their own role as corporate speakers:

> "CEOs believe it is they who own the management of reputation, with help from their chairmen and boards. Public relations professionals were required to provide advice on how reputation can be managed and oversee various communication activities. All recognised that reputation is perhaps the most important single asset the company has." (p. 351)

This means that CEOs take personal responsibility for the management of corporate communications and value their own activities as high as, if not higher than, those of communication professionals supporting them (RQ1). The objectives of public relations are developing "profile and positioning" (p. 352) (outbound) as well as taking the "responsibility for the task of 'holistic listening' around the various key audiences and stakeholder groups" (p. 355) (inbound) (RQ3). Communication professionals contribute to corporate success through their "role as the communications radar for the organisation, ensuring that decision makers are aware of the views and sensitivities of stakeholders, thus enabling better board-level decision making" (p. 353). However, this was mainly wishful thinking at the time the study was conducted – most respondents lacked the necessary qualifications among many public relations professionals in Britain. As such, strategic communication was mainly seen as media relations (RQ4).

Sterne (2008) followed this path by analyzing the *Business Perceptions of Public Relations in New Zealand.* He used cluster sampling to identify 42 companies from the top 200 in the country. A total of 32 top executives (eight CEOs and 24 senior managers) agreed to

participate in semi-structured interviews in 2007. The research showed that corporate communications is "in the hands of a range of owners with their own philosophies" (p. 36), which underlines the relevance of top executives and their understanding for communication excellence. Many public relations practitioners were not considered to be qualified enough to support top management decision-making. Nevertheless, CEOs strongly supported the view that they needed communication to achieve a good reputation. Some even "believed they themselves were the only person who should speak for the organisation" (p. 37). This supports the rising relevance of public opinion and reputation for organizational decision-making as well as the perceived importance of the CEO's personal communication to corporate success (RQ1).

The Arthur W. Page Society (2007, 2013) has commissioned two subsequent, qualitative surveys among the CEOs of large companies in the United States and other undisclosed countries. The survey *The CEO View: Opportunities & Challenges for the Senior Communications Executive* was published as part of the "Authentic Enterprise" report (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007). Data were collected from 2006–2007 in phone interviews with the CEOs of 28 U.S. and three European corporations. All companies had an annual revenue of more than two billion US$. The sample was deliberately chosen: the communication heads of most companies were members of the Page Society, which tries to foster the strategic role of the communication function. The follow-up study is named *The CEO View: The Impact of Communications on Corporate Character in a 24x7 Digital World* (Arthur W. Page Society, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone in 2013 with the CEOs of 20 U.S. and international companies, whose communication heads are all members of the society. The majority of the corporations reported annual revenues of two billion US$ or more. The earlier study by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) showed that CEOs see a rising value of reputation for their businesses (p. 42). It is the CEO's job, as one interviewee phrased it, "to be a communications person for both the industry and the company" (p. 42). Public opinion plays a major role for corporate success and top executives as well as supporting communication professionals are in charge (RQ1). Those specialists, especially the heads of communications, are "more valuable than ever" (p. 40) and act as trusted advisers. This includes not only messaging and campaigning abilities, but also the function of a "crystal ball" (p. 44) – inbound activities of monitoring or anticipating stakeholder reactions and public opinion are drivers of corporate success (RQ3). The follow-up research by the Arthur W. Page Society (2013) supported some of these views and added new insights. The top executives interviewed claim that reputation matters even more (p. 6) (RQ1). They report that active listening has become a reality now (RQ3):

> "Whereas before they would issue releases, launch campaigns, etc., now they often task their communications people with finding new and better ways to listen to their stakeholders and take those views into account when formulating strategy." (p. 10)

When talking about the objectives and priorities of strategic communication, many CEOs focus on employees and internal communication (p. 11). Social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs are perceived to be as relevant as traditional media for public opinion building (RQ1).

Will et al. (2011) joined forces between academia and an executive search company to conduct the study *Communication from the CEO's perspective*. The authors invited the CEOs of the 40 largest listed and private-owned corporations in Germany to participate. They were able to

interview 11 CEOs personally in 2010. However, most of the top executives were interviewed along with their communication head, which might have induced a positive bias towards the function. Respondents stated that corporate communications is a critical success factor for organizational strategy and a core element of strategic management (p. 22). Companies adapt themselves and their decision-making routines to the rules of the media society (p. 31) (RQ1). Therefore, CEOs place high expectations on communication professionals, who they value as key advisers and business partners (pp. 27–28) (RQ2). Communication professionals have to act as organs as well as a relay to the environment – speaking out and listening are complementary ways to create organizational success (RQ3). Nevertheless, top executives feel that they are personally responsible for communication as well (RQ1). In fact, they use a large part of their own time (one-third on average) for all disciplines of corporate communications, ranging from internal and brand communication to investor relations (pp. 18–19). When asked about various platforms for communication, CEOs prefer traditional print media and public speaking. Audiovisual media are considered to be more risky and social media was not discussed at all (pp. 41–42). While the latter might be explained by the year when the study was conducted, the strong valuation of traditional media might be an indicator of the continuing importance of media relations in the communications portfolio (RQ4).

The last study identified in the communication literature was commissioned by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and authored by Shugoll (2012). *A View from the Top: Corporate Communication from the Perspective of Senior Executives* is based on telephone interviews conducted in 2011 with 20 CEOs, presidents, and managing directors in the United States. They represented large companies with annual revenues of one billion US$ or more. Respondents were purposefully sampled because they are "extremely involved in communicating with all key constituencies for their organization" (p. 49). As such, the study, like the ones by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007, 2013) and Murray and White (2005), is probably biased towards communication-savvy executives. Shugoll (2012) reported an increasing demand in communication (pp. 10–13) and the necessity for top executives to communicate at every level and with any stakeholders (pp. 17–18) (RQ1). Effective communications means sending messages as well as receiving them (p. 23) – an insight that shows a traditional understanding of communication as transmission (RQ2), while it also confirms the necessity of combining outbound and inbound activities (RQ3). Many of the CEOs interviewed stated that the communication head should have a seat on the board and that they value him/her as a strategic partner (RQ2). In terms of their own communication activities, top executives "believe that nothing can replace face-to-face communication and that constituents still crave personal interaction" (pp. 31, 44) (RQ2). Social media is rated as important, but also estimated as being burdensome. While active use needs careful thought, it is obvious that social media influence corporate reputation as much as mass media (p. 36) (RQ1).

Reputation and communication are also explored in a few global surveys on CEOs' perceptions and expectations in general. Obviously, those insights are limited as the studies are less focused. Nevertheless, they are a good starting point for building hypotheses, as they put corporate communications into a larger context.

The *Fifth Global CEO Study* by IBM (2012) asked 1,709 CEOs and top executives from 64 countries about their major challenges. According to the respondents, who were interviewed face-to-face in 2011 and 2012, their key focus is motivating employees and gaining customer insights (pp. 17–42). Communication can contribute to this both by outbound activities (building corporate culture) and by means of inbound listening (RQ3). While face-to-face and traditional

media are most relevant today, social media will take over soon (pp. 34–37). This means that both mass media and social media are important for reputation, while traditional measures of corporate communications (media relations) are prevailing at the moment (RQ1, RQ4).

A similar picture emerged from the *16th Annual Global CEO Survey* published by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2013). In total, 1,330 interviews with CEOs in 68 countries were conducted in late 2012 with a mixed-method approach – mainly face-to-face, but in some countries also via telephone, print, or online questionnaires. The most influential stakeholder groups are, from the CEOs' points of view, customers/clients, competitors, government/regulators, and employees. Fewer than 20% stated that local communities, mass media, users of social media, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have a significant influence on their business strategies (p. 22). On the other hand, customers/clients, employees, and social media users lead the list of those stakeholders with whom CEOs want to strengthen their engagement (p. 24). When translating this result into the realm of corporate communications, it can be assumed that mass media and social media have the same impact on corporate reputation today (RQ1), while motivating employees and consumer information are key goals and disciplines for corporate communications (RQ3, RQ4).

Research questions and hypotheses

Insights from the literature review can be used to construct hypotheses for each of the research questions developed above. Obviously, the qualitative status of most existing research makes it difficult to define concrete numbers. Thus, all hypotheses test either priorities (most important ratings by respondents) or approval by the majority (agreement by more than 50% of respondents). This builds a bridge to develop a quantitative survey instrument, which is necessary to gather data from a larger, non-selective sample of CEOs and other top executives.

As a reminder, the overall research question is:

RQ: *What are the understandings, experiences, and expectations of top executives towards corporate communications?*

Four more detailed research questions, which are based on the theoretical framework above, complement these hypotheses:

RQ1:   *How important are public opinion, reputation, and communication performance for corporate success?*

H1:   The majority of top executives agree that mass media and social media information influence corporate reputation.

H2:   Most top executives agree that impacts on public opinion are more relevant for corporate decision-making today compared with five years ago.

H3:   The contribution of top executives' personal communication performance to corporate success is valued higher than the contribution of professional communication by specialized departments or agencies.

RQ2:   *How do top executives conceptualize and perform communication personally, and with whom do they collaborate when developing communication strategies?*

H4:   Most top executives support a traditional understanding of communication, focusing on transmitting information from a sender to a receiver.

H5:   Face-to-face conversations with stakeholders are considered to be more important than media and social media skills for top executives.

H6: Communication managers and departments in an organization are the most important partners for top executives in the field of corporate communications.

RQ3: What are the objectives of corporate communications, and how does corporate communications contribute to organizational success?

H7: Motivating employees and building communicative assets (image, reputation, trust) are the two most important objectives of corporate communications for top executives.

H8: The majority of top executives value both outbound activities (speaking to stakeholders, influencing public opinion) and inbound efforts (listening to stakeholders, adjusting corporate behavior) as important for corporate success.

RQ4: How do top executives rate the importance and performance of key disciplines and instruments in corporate communications?

H9: Communicating with customers, suppliers, and dealers (marketing communication) is considered to be the most relevant and best-performing field of corporate communications by top executives.

H10: Top executives believe that media relations is the most relevant and best-performing instrument of corporate communications.

Methodology and sample

In order to answer these research questions, a quantitative survey among CEOs, managing directors, and executive board members – only at the top level of the organizational hierarchy – of German corporations was conducted in 2013. The most comprehensive address list of corporate executives in the country, called the *Hoppenstedt Manager Database*, was used to identify the population. The database provided only postal addresses. Therefore, all top executives were invited by the researchers with a letter that included a personal access code to an online questionnaire. Owing to the enormous financial and operational effort, it was not possible to send reminders.

The study was restricted to top managers working in large corporations, joint stock, or private owned, with an annual turnover of at least 50 million €, in 10 core industries: automobile and suppliers, financial industry, energy and primary goods, trade, industrial products, information technology and communication, consumer goods, media, pharmaceuticals, and transport and tourism.

The procedures for preparing, conducting, and evaluating the survey followed established rules of communication research. A questionnaire in German with 25 questions in four sections was constructed and pretested with 45 top managers. The data were collected anonymously by using a professional web-based software (EFS Enterprise Suite Survey) from January 24 until February 27, 2013. Only fully completed questionnaires were considered for the analysis. It was explicitly tested whether questionnaires were filled in by top executives themselves or handed over to their communication departments. Those replies were deleted and not evaluated. The adjusted data set was analyzed by using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS 21). Statistical tests were performed where appropriate. Significant results are marked in the text below. The questions and items reported were translated into English by the researchers.

The analysis is based on a sample of n = 602 respondents. All of them are top executives (CEOs, presidents, managing directors, full-time board members, etc.) in large corporations. The

annual turnover exceeded 250 million € in 52.8% of the organizations; 38.7% even report more than 500 million €. Companies mainly operating in the B2B field (41.5%) outweigh those focusing on B2C markets (17.3%), while 41.2% address both segments. Respondents were, on average, 50 years old (Mdn = 51) and had 20 years of leadership experience (Mdn = 18). The often-reported gender inequality in boardrooms, at least in large companies, also shows up in this study. 92.2% of the top executives were men and only 6.8% women. A large majority (80.1%) had an academic education and – rather typical of German executives in this age group – 15.1% hold a doctorate (Dr., Ph.D.). As suggested by general studies of the managerial elite, most respondents with an academic education have a background in business administration, management, or economics (62.0%), followed by engineering, mathematics, or information technology (18.1%), natural sciences or medicine (4.3%), and law (3.3%). Only 2.3% of those who made it to the boardroom studied communications or journalism.

The sample included top executives with different responsibilities and formal connections to the communication function. This represents the reality of corporate communications and communication professionals, who usually interact with an inhomogeneous group of (internal) clients. Altogether, 29.7% of respondents stated that the corporate communications function and chief communication officer report directly to them. These are usually CEOs in charge of communications at the board level, which means they are directly responsible for key decisions regarding budgeting, staffing, and strategies for communications. A smaller group (14.1%) also acts as principals for communication professionals, but in another way: these top executives commission communication departments or agencies out of their functional budgets, namely as board members responsible for human resources or a specific business unit. A total of 41.5% of the top executives interviewed interact with communication professionals from time to time. Typically, these are board members involved in specific projects, such as the chief innovation officer who does not invest into formal communication, but in topics within his/her responsibility and is part of the internal and external coverage. Finally, 14.6% of respondents stated that they seldom or never interact with communication departments or agencies, which is an interesting result on its own in the information age.

Results

The empirical study showed that CEOs and executive board members value the importance of corporate communications and its contribution to organizational success. They take their own roles as corporate speakers and personal communicators very seriously, whereas the perceptions of the professional communication function and some instruments in use (especially social media) are less encouraging.

Across the whole study, the correlation analyses showed that the expectations, experiences, and understandings of top executives are influenced by a number of independent variables. It makes a difference whether respondents work closely together with communicators or not. The size of the company, measured in terms of annual turnover, also matters. Moreover, the main market segment (B2B or B2C), the endurance of respondents' managerial responsibility, and the amount of time they personally spend on corporate communications influenced some results.

Public opinion, reputation, and corporate success (RQ1; H1, H2, H3)

The first research question asked about the relevance of public opinion for corporate reputation (mediatization as an external influence on the organization) and on decision-making in corporations, namely whether organizations consider this internally.

Nearly every executive (96.2%) believes that mass media coverage influences corporate reputation, whereas only seven out of 10 respondents (71.9%) agree that social media has an impact (see Table 1). The relatively low assessment of the online sphere is also represented by the fact that 26.7% of top executives fully support the reputational impact of social media, while 66.1% fully agree to the same statement regarding mass media.

H1 was verified. The majority, which means more than 50% of the top executives surveyed, agree that both mass media and social media information influence corporate reputation. Nevertheless, mass media reporting was rated higher ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.65$) than social media discussions ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.03$).

Tab. 1: Relevance of public opinion for reputation and corporate decision-making.

	%	*M*	*SD*
Mass media coverage (TV, radio, print) influences corporate reputation	96.2	4.60	0.65
Discussions on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) influence corporate reputation	71.9	3.82	1.03
Impact on public opinion is kept in mind more strongly in corporate decision-making, compared with five years ago	70.4	3.79	0.99

n = 602 CEOs and board members.
Percentages: respondents supporting the statement positively or totally (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).
Means: approval for the statement on a five-point scale, ranging from "do not support at all" to "support totally".

Mediatization also influences how CEOs and other board members handle key issues. Altogether, 70.4% of respondents agree that public opinion and positive or negative effects that may arise are considered more intensively when making strategic decisions today. One quarter (23.1%) fully supports the statement and only 2.3% do not see such a development at all. The statistical analysis showed that public opinion is significantly more important for decision-making in B2C companies ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.95$) than in B2B companies ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.02$) (chi-square test; $p \leq .001$). Furthermore, there are highly significant differences concerning the importance of public opinion between larger companies with an annual turnover of at least 250 million € ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.91$) and those with a business volume between 50 and 250 million € per year ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.05$) (chi-square test, $p \leq .001$).

H2 was also verified. Most top executives (more than 50%) agree that impacts on public opinion are more relevant for corporate decision-making today compared with five years ago.

Incorporating public opinion in decision-making means that communication has an impact on the achievement of organizational goals. The CEOs and board members in the sample were asked to rate the contribution of professional corporate communications − managed by communication departments or agencies − to corporate success on a five-point scale ranging from very low to very high. Two-thirds of the top executives (64.6%, $M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.73$) reported a high or very high contribution. Consistent with the result above, top executives from

companies with an annual turnover of more than 250 million € shared this opinion to a significantly stronger degree (M = 3.80, SD = 0.65) than those from companies with a lower turnover (M = 3.58, SD = 0.79) (chi-square test, p ≤ .01). Thinking of the future, two-thirds (66.5%) of the CEOs and board members predicted a rising relevance of the communication function within the next three years compared with other functions in their company. A bright future for the profession seems to be ahead – but only at first glance. The study also asked, separately and in another part of the questionnaire, how top executives rate the contribution of personal communication performed by top management and leaders to corporate success, based on their experiences. Nearly nine out of 10 respondents (87.2%; M = 4.15, SD = 0.67) suggested a high or very high contribution (4 and 5 on a five-point scale). These values are clearly higher than the ratings for communication performed by professional teams.

H3 was confirmed. The empirical study approves the supposition based on insights from previous qualitative research: CEOs and board members value the contribution of personal communication performed by top executives to corporate success higher than the contribution of professional communication by specialized departments or agencies. The cognitive institutions prevalent among the CEOs and board members of large organizations are consistent in the way in which they condense an understanding of communication as a driver for success, which combines a support of strategic communication by professional means with an even higher-ranked belief in the necessity and power of executive communication.

Communication patterns of top executives (RQ2; H4, H5, H6)

How do CEOs and board members conceptualize communication themselves, and which skills are relevant for them and their peers in the top ranks of business? And with whom do they discuss matters of public opinion and strategic communication? The second research question addresses understandings, experiences, and expectations; as such, it is also linked to cognitive institutions.

The top executives in the survey were asked to assess two statements representing different comprehensions of communication. Respondents had to choose spontaneously and state which alternative represents their personal understanding most appropriately. Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) supported the statement "In communication processes, information is sent directly or via media in order to cause an effect on receivers". Another third (34.4%) preferred the alternative: "In communication processes, all those involved use signs and symbols that create meaning and social realities". Only younger CEOs and board members with shorter leadership tenures (up to 9 years) voted differently and ranked both statements almost equally, with a slight preference for the second view (47.1% compared with 52.9%).

Hence, H4 was confirmed. Most (more than 50% of) top executives support a traditional understanding of communication, focusing on transmitting information from a sender to a receiver, which is consistent with the educational background of most respondents in business administration and predominant conceptualization of communication in this discipline discussed above.

When asked about the importance of different capabilities for executives and leaders, almost all respondents (99.0%) rank face-to-face communication skills highest (see Table 2). Competencies linked to traditional media and platforms such as giving speeches at events and giving interviews to journalists are valued by more than half of top executives, while a clear minority of no more than 13.8% state that social media communication skills are important. This supports the results from the qualitative studies cited above and rebuts many optimistic views in

the communication profession and academia. Interestingly, three out of four (76.4%) claim that the ability to estimate and evaluate the achievements of corporate communications is an important part of a CEO's or top manager's qualifications. Being able to read and interpret data derived from applied communication research is an important asset for 50.8% of respondents. This represents a cognitive managerial mindset, which is comprehensible, as top executives are ultimately in charge. It is absolutely necessary for principals to understand the bigger picture, as this allows them to guide agents in communication departments and agencies who take care of the details.

H5 was thus verified. CEOs and board members consider face-to-face conversations with stakeholders to be more important ($M = 4.74$) for themselves and their peers compared with media skills such as interacting with journalists ($M = 3.63$) and social media competencies ($M = 2.50$).

Tab. 2: Important communication skills for top executives.

Skill	%	M	SD
Talking with employees, customers, suppliers, politicians, etc.	99.0	4.74	0.48
Estimating the success of communication activities	76.4	3.91	0.76
Giving public speeches	76.9	3.89	0.77
Giving interviews and talking to journalists	62.0	3.63	0.87
Analyzing the results of opinion and media research	50.8	3.42	0.90
Writing texts for brochures, letters, etc.	28.1	2.88	1.01
Communicating on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Xing, etc.)	13.8	2.50	0.91

n = 602 CEOs and board members.
Percentages: respondents rating the item as important or very important (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).
Means: importance on a five-point scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important".

Top executives see themselves at the center of strategic communication. Nevertheless, both theoretical considerations and the literature review showed that they need support from others to master the challenges of a 24/7 information flow and the dynamics of real-time opinion building in global settings. Respondents were asked with whom they exchange views on public opinion building and strategies for corporate communications. Multiple answers were possible. Unexpectedly, communication departments or professionals working in the company are only addressed by 63.5% of CEOs and board members. This is a quite moderate proportion for specialized agents who are − or should be − designated to support their principals in general management. The most relevant advisors and partners for top executives are peers on the board or in functional divisions of the company (mentioned by 86.7%). Following third are business partners in other companies (49.8%), which are more important than industry associations (38.4%) and external communication advisers or agencies (28.7%) and a number of other choices. However, communication professionals are valued higher by CEOs and board members who interact with the communication function more intensively. The statistical analysis proved a very significant difference (chi-square test, p ≤ .001) between top executives with the

communication head as direct report and those who their use own budgets to commission communication departments compared with respondents who collaborate with professionals on projects seldom or never. For example, 73.0% of the respondents responsible for the corporate communications function collaborate with the department in the situations at hand, and 36.3% out of this subgroup talk to external communication advisers.

Nevertheless, H6, which stated that communication managers and departments in the organization are the most important partners for top executives in the field of corporate communications, was rejected. Obviously, the expectations of top executives do not reflect the self-perception of many communication professionals, who see themselves as the sole and most important counselors for management. This idea is – until now – not a widespread part of cognitive institutions in modern corporations.

Objectives of corporate communications and leverages of success (RQ3; H7, H8)

The third research question investigated the goals that can be achieved by corporate communications from two perspectives. First, top executives were asked to rate the importance of a number of typical communication objectives. The list was derived from a longitudinal survey of communication professionals (Bentele et al., 2012). Furthermore, it was tested whether outbound and inbound goals, which were identified as differing but complementary ways in which to foster organizational success, were acknowledged by respondents. Both parts of the question try to identify institutionalized cognitive patterns.

Tab. 3: Objectives of corporate communications.

Objective	%	*M*	*SD*
Informing and motivating employees	95.0	4.53	0.61
Conveying corporate trust	96.1	4.48	0.60
Building and preserving a positive image	95.5	4.46	0.61
Informing objectively	84.2	4.13	0.73
Creating transparency about corporate policies and strategies	72.8	3.87	0.82
Keep the company out of negative headlines	70.4	3.86	0.96
Standardizing corporate design	69.7	3.83	0.86
Gaining trust from journalists	56.2	3.50	0.95
Fostering dialogues with stakeholder groups	51.5	3.48	0.83
Exploring trends and developments in society	51.5	3.46	0.91
Influencing journalists	29.9	2.95	0.97

n = 602 CEOs and board members.
Percentages: respondents rating the item as important or very important (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).
Means: importance on a five-point scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important".

Table 3 shows the mindsets of CEOs and board members regarding the objectives of corporate communications. Informing and motivating employees received the strongest support (*M* = 4.53, *SD* = 0.61) on a five-point scale followed by fostering corporate trust (*M* = 4.48, *SD* = 0.60) and supporting a positive image (*M* = 4.48, *SD* = 0.61). Most respondents (more than 95%) stated that those three aspects are important. The objectives that focus on listening, namely

creating opportunities for dialogues with stakeholder groups ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.83$) and capturing trends and issues in society ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.91$), were rated as less important. The same was true for the goals related to journalists and the mass media. CEOs and board members think that gaining trust from journalists ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.61$) is more important than influencing them ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.97$).

H7 was verified by the data. Motivating employees and building communicative assets (image, reputation, trust) are the two most important objectives of corporate communications for top executives.

The literature review unveiled a common motive: communication contributes to corporate success by messaging, by supporting operational activities, by building up reputation, brands, and cultures (outbound activities), and by monitoring public opinion, identifying issues, and outside perspectives, which can help adjust strategies and secure room for maneuver (inbound activities). The survey tested whether the cognitive mindsets of CEOs and board members reflect this duality, or whether one of both perspectives is prevalent.

Tab. 4: Contribution of corporate communications to organizational success.

	%	M	SD
Facilitate business processes (motivate employees, inform customers and suppliers, generate public attention)	94.2	4.37	0.62
Build immaterial assets (corporate culture, brands, reputation)	90.8	4.34	0.68
Adjust organizational strategies (identify opportunities, integrate public concerns)	71.1	3.83	0.80
Secure room for maneuver (manage relationships, manage crises)	81.2	4.02	0.72

n = 602 CEOs and board members.
Percentages: respondents rating the item as important or very important (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).
Means: importance on a five-point scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important".

Overall, the first assumption was confirmed. All four leverages presented in Table 4 are rated as important by a clear majority. However, the traditional understanding of communication as transmission is dominant. Conveying information to stakeholders and building communicative assets such as reputation and brands is important for nine out of 10 top executives. Inbound means are valued as less important for corporate success. In total, 81.2% of CEOs and board members state that communication supports success by managing relationships and gaining legitimacy, while 71.1% see a value in listening activities that help adjust to corporate strategies.

H8 was verified. The majority of top executives – more than 50% – value both outbound activities (speaking to stakeholders, influencing public opinion) and inbound efforts (listening to stakeholders, adjusting corporate behavior) as important for corporate success.

Disciplines and instruments of corporate communications (RQ4; H9, H10)

Corporate communications addresses a broad set of stakeholders and involves multiple instruments, platforms, and channels. In an ideal world, the significance of stakeholders for

corporate strategy and the effectiveness of various lines of action would be used to divide limited budgets and resources. In practice, the preconceptions of decision-makers and usages of the trade play a major role. While communication professionals are traditionally geared towards journalists, policymakers, and communities, CEOs might feel more familiar with the needs of shareholders, customers, and employees. This is quite natural: top executives are responsible for keeping the company alive and prosperous. Thus, they focus on primary stakeholders, those "without whose continuing participation the company cannot survive as a going concern" (Clarkson, 1995, p. 106), and less so on secondary stakeholders, who are neither engaged in transactions nor needed to exist. At the same time, the qualitative research identified in the literature review suggests that CEOs and board members value media relations higher than social media communications. The fourth research question focused on these topics. Respondents were asked to rate the relevance of the key disciplines and instruments of corporate communications for their company. In another part of the questionnaire, they were asked to value the performance of their companies and respective communication departments or agencies in the same fields. This design allowed us to evaluate the perceived significance of disciplines and instruments as well as the gap between the relevance and performance for each item.

Table 5 shows how CEOs and board members value different communication disciplines. Internal communication with employees and leaders is considered to be the most important discipline of corporate communications (rated as relevant by 95.5%), followed by marketing and customer communication (90.4%) and financial communication (60.6%). All those disciplines address primary stakeholders at the core of the business cycle; they are needed to finance, produce, and sell products or services. In contrast to many discussions among professional communicators and those in public relations research, communication with stakeholders in the political realm (34.2%) and society (27.7%) is valued as less relevant. However, both disciplines are evaluated more positively by top executives representing companies with an annual turnover of more than 250 million € ($M = 3.16 / 3.00$, $SD = 1.01 / 0.94$) compared with companies with a lower turnover ($M = 2.86 / 2.77$, $SD = 1.08 / 0.95$) (highly significant correlation, chi-square test, $p \leq .001$).

Interestingly, top executives are less satisfied with the effectiveness of communication in the most important field, internal communication ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.82$). The study shows a gap of almost one scale point (0.94) between relevance and performance. The best-performing disciplines, according to CEOs and board members, are marketing communication ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.74$) and financial communication ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.07$). Only one-quarter of respondents (25.7%) state that the specialists in charge deliver a high performance when communicating with society.

H9 was thus rejected. Communicating with customers, suppliers, and dealers (marketing communication) is considered to be the best-performing discipline by top executives. However, it is no longer considered to be the most relevant field of corporate communications. Internal communications has entered pole position in the boardroom.

Tab. 5: Relevance and performance of key communication disciplines.

	Relevance			Performance			Divergence
Discipline	%	*M*	*SD*	%	*M*	*SD*	Δ *M*
Internal communication (with employees, managers)	95.7	4.54	0.61	58.8	3.60	0.82	0.94
Marketing communication (with customers, resellers, suppliers, etc.)	90.4	4.35	0.77	68.1	3.72	0.74	0.63
Financial communication (with investors, banks, owners)	60.6	3.63	1.04	64.8	3.64	1.07	-0.01
Political communication (with the government, authorities, parties)	34.2	3.02	1.05	31.9	2.94	1.05	0.08
Communication with society (NGOs, critics, local communities, universities, associations, etc.)	27.7	2.89	0.95	25.7	2.90	0.94	-0.01

n = 602 CEOs and board members.
Percentages: respondents rating the relevance as important or very important (4 or 5 on a five-point scale); respondents rating the performance as high or very high (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).
Means: relevance on a five-point scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important"; performance on a five-point scale, ranging from "very low" to "very high".

A traditional picture emerged when the CEOs and board members in the study were asked to assess the relevance of various communication instruments or platforms as well as the corresponding performance of their communication departments or agencies (see Table 6). Almost three out of four believe that press and media relations (73.9%) are relevant for their companies, with advertising and sales promotion (61.8%) and live communications such as events and trade fairs following (60.2%). Less than half of respondents rate corporate media (47.7%) and online communication including the social web (46.7%) as relevant for their organizations. The list of precedence is the same as that for the question about the performance of communication departments and agencies when using those instruments. However, there is always a gap between the mean relevance and mean performance, which means that communication professionals do not match the expectations of their principals regarding quality and effectiveness. For example, only 28.7% of CEOs and board members believe that their organizations have a strong performance in social media.

Again, it was tested whether the independent variables affect the results. Large companies with an annual turnover of more than 250 million € rate the relevance of media relations higher (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = 0.79) than companies with a lower business volume (*M* = 3.71, *SD* = 1.02) (highly significant correlation, chi-square test, p ≤ .001). This can be explained by the stronger public exposure for larger companies due to news factors such as prominence (Kepplinger, 2008).

H10 was thus confirmed. Top executives believe that media relations is the most relevant and best-performing instrument for corporate communications. Social media, web applications, and other means of online communication are rated lowest.

Tab. 6: Instruments and platforms of corporate communications.

Instrument/Platform	Relevance			Performance			Divergence
	%	*M*	*SD*	%	*M*	*SD*	Δ *M*
Press and media relations	73.9	3.92	0.93	57.0	3.53	0.98	0.93
Advertising, sales promotion	61.8	3.64	0.98	49.2	3.37	0.97	0.27
Live communication (events, trade fairs)	60.2	3.59	1.02	49.6	3.36	1.05	0.23
Corporate media (customer and employee magazines)	47.7	3.32	1.04	40.2	3.05	1.13	0.27
Online communication (internet, social media)	46.7	3.28	1.02	28.7	2.84	1.05	0.44

n = 602 CEOs and board members.
Percentages: respondents rating the relevance as important or very important (4 or 5 on a five-point scale);
rating the performance high or very high (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).
Means: relevance on a five-point scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important";
performance on a five-point scale, ranging from "very low" to "very high".

Discussion

This empirical study of 602 CEOs and executive board members of large corporations confirmed most insights from previous qualitative research in various regions of the world. This means that there are shared understandings, expectations, and experiences of top executives, which can be conceptualized as cognitive institutions in business. The cognitive patterns of principals cause opportunities and constraints for agents such as communication professionals, departments, and agencies (Zerfass et al., 2014). Overlapping perceptions might facilitate the influence and quality of corporate communications. Rivaling perceptions can be a cause of misunderstandings and poor performance.

At first sight, the results give a positive outlook for strategic communication as an integral part of corporate management. Top executives have a clear understanding of mediatization as a threat and opportunity for organizations. They see how mass media and social media influence public opinion and corporate reputation. They have incorporated this knowledge into internal routines and they think of possible consequences when making decisions. Consequently, CEOs and board members highly value corporate communications and its contribution to overall goals. Two-thirds of respondents (66.5%, $M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.80$) even predict an increasing importance of corporate communications until 2015, because social media is having a rising impact (approved by 85.3%, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.76$) and stakeholder groups are becoming more critical and active (73.7%, $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.96$).

However, this is not reflected in top executives' mindsets of communication in general, namely corporate communications and the communication function in organizations. This

mindset is traditional and not shaped by ideas such as dialogue, stakeholder integration, or interactivity, which can be assumed if social media and active audiences are named as drivers in the field. On the contrary, most CEOs and executive board members view communication as a transmission of 'objective' meaning. They think that their own communication performance is more relevant than professional communication by specialized departments or agencies. This is a traditional problem: many believe in being able to judge and perform communication, as this is a basic human competence, and a reflection on the differences between communication at the individual level (micro), in organizational settings (meso), and in societies or large-scale networks of institutional actors (macro) is often missing.

More specifically, an analysis of the results across the different research questions unveils four key elements of the prevalent top executive mindset. First, *CEOs and board member focus on primary stakeholders (customers, employees) instead of secondary stakeholders (politicians, activists).* This is apparent in the valuation of communication disciplines, where activities aimed at employees, customers, resellers, suppliers, and investors are clearly rated higher than communicating with governments, authorities, political parties, NGOs, and critical stakeholders. Likewise, informing and motivating employees is a much more important objective of corporate communications than goals linked to society at large, including journalists as gatekeepers and relays. Similar preferences are visible in the answers on communication skills for top executives. Concepts such as corporate social responsibility (Ihlen et al., 2011) and global stakeholder governance (Muzi Falconi et al., 2014) promoted by communication researchers and practitioners are less prevalent in the mindsets of CEOs. This might change in the future, as the executives interviewed have already confirmed the rising relevance of public opinion and critical stakeholders.

Second, *top executives are still geared towards traditional mass media and less convinced of social media.* Social media is clearly identified as a trend in the public sphere. Nevertheless, CEOs and board executives believe that mass media coverage has a much stronger impact on corporate reputation. They rarely value professional online communication, namely the use of the Internet and social media by communication departments or agencies. It is the least important and least effective corporate communications instrument from the executives' view. In addition, communicating on social media is the least important field of communication skills for top executives. Again, this might reflect the dynamics of Internet development and the caution described in some qualitative studies of CEOs discussed before. However, it also shows that the online-savvy boardroom is a myth in most corporations. Some qualitative studies, such as the one commissioned by the Arthur W. Page Society (2013), might be too optimistic, probably because of the strong focus on companies with leading-edge communications.

Third, *top executives rate speaking as more important than listening in corporate communications.* Most respondents understand that communication helps reach organizational goals by facilitating business processes, by building immaterial assets (outbound), and by securing room for maneuver and adjusting corporate strategies (inbound). However, the first, more traditional goal receives more support. Moreover, the objectives of corporate communications aimed at informing others as well as building image and trust are valued more importantly than listening activities or dialogues, such as exploring trends and developments in society and fostering dialogue with stakeholders. On a personal level, only every second CEO and top executive interviewed (50.8%) believes that analyzing the results of opinion and media research is an important skill.

Fourth, *communication professionals are not always first choice when CEOs and executive board members reflect on public opinion and strategic communication.* Peers at the top hierarchical level of the company as well as leaders of functional divisions are mentioned most often as counterparts and sounding boards in the survey. Further, opportunities to be asked and to advise rise with a direct reporting line. This shows that structural arrangements (regulative institutions), which have long been discussed, are still relevant, but they are not the only way in which to gain influence and power.

In spite of the many future-oriented conceptions in academia and in the professional world, a traditional view of corporate communications is institutionalized in the business world – even in large corporations with dedicated and professional communication departments. Studies of the institutionalization of strategic communication based on large-scale surveys of communication professionals in Europe have produced similar results: an overall strategic orientation is evolving, but outbound is still prevailing over inbound, and media relations holds the pole position (Moreno et al., 2010; Verhoeven et al., 2011).

There is clearly a need for stronger alignment between principles and agents in corporate communications. Understanding each other's mindsets and cognitive institutions prevalent in the boardroom and in the communication department is a first step (Zerfass et al., 2014). Developing business knowledge among communicators and a broader view of communication among top executives, leaders at large, and students of business administration is another aspect. In the end, each company has to create suitable conditions to master the challenge. A set of organizational values, beliefs, and procedures (normative, cognitive, and regulative institutions) is needed. These are needed to link communication to business strategies, set measurable targets, and evaluate communication activities in order to gain competitive advantage. The ongoing debate on these issues (Likely & Watson, 2013) has to be put into a broader context and this can be reinterpreted from the point of view of neo-institutionalism.

Limitations and further research

The research reported here has, like any study, several limitations. While the survey was able to identify the average perceptions and experiences of CEOs and executive board members, it does not make any statements about the situation in specific companies. Standard deviations indicate that different pictures might emerge in some organizations, which is important to know for communication professionals interpreting the results. Nevertheless, this study provides an insight into the overarching cognitive institutions, some of which are influenced by independent variables at the level of organizations (size, market focus) or individuals (leadership tenure). The empirical findings are restricted to the sample conducted in Germany. This is the largest European country and fourth-largest economy in the world with highly developed systems of corporations and corporate communications. While it can be assumed that there will be many similarities in other Western countries and businesses, the specific system of corporate governance (Schwalbach, 2001) as well as cultural differences may lead to differing results in other regions. Corporate communications might be valued differently by top executives in various industries because of differences in public exposure, stakeholder settings, and quests for legitimization. The analysis confirmed some differences between B2B and B2C companies. However, the sample did not allow for a detailed analysis of industry factors. It also has to be noted that this survey used a comprehensive and solid database. This is rather advanced compared with most of the small-scale qualitative studies and quantitative CEO studies reviewed above, which rely on deliberately chosen participants, snowball sampling, or similar approaches.

Nevertheless, the results of this study do not claim to be representative, as the distribution of participants in the sample of top executives might not reflect the overall characteristics in German corporations regarding gender, age, industry sectors, and so on.

The theoretical considerations and empirical data presented should be used as a starting point for further research on the views of top executives and on the institutionalization of corporate communications in a broader sense. Additional methods such as focus groups with top executives and action research might be applied. In a globalized world, it would be interesting to research the diverging mindsets of CEOs and board members on communication in various countries and cultures – either within the same setting of one global company or across different industries. Obviously, the dynamics of the information age ask for a replication of the study to research the development of cognitive institutions (i.e. regarding social media and inbound communication) over a period of time.

Broadening the view and leaving the narrow focus on communication professionals and practices, which is typical of a large part of public relations research, helps cross disciplines and conduct research that matters for practice. CEOs, presidents, managing directors, and other executives are the most important stakeholders for communicators of all. They have to be part of the ongoing journey towards a comprehensive and strategic view of corporate communications.

Acknowledgements

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