

## **Power, empowerment and organisational communication**

### *ABSTRACT*

Power is an integral part of organisational life. Main schools of thought on the subject of power in an organisational setting consider power to be either a resource held by individuals and departments, or an inherent feature of organisational structure and society. While it is relatively easy to identify surface manifestations of power, the deep structures of power are much more difficult to analyse. Public relations literature focuses on power “held” by public relations practitioners and the power of public relations departments in their relations with other departments in an organisation, as well as the imbalances of power between the organisations and their respective publics. In the context of the increasing complexity of the organisational environment, this article suggests the application of organisational cybernetics to public relations theory, and it considers the role that organisational communication plays in releasing the productive power of employees and in designing effective organisations through the introduction of recursive organisational structures.

## INTRODUCTION

Power is an integral part of organisational life. Following the theoretical distinctions, manifestations of productive power and abusive power, power embedded in institutions, and power as a property of individuals and relationships can be observed in everyday life. Imbalances of power can be noted. Yet, identifying the sources, origins, intensity and even the consequences of power is not always possible.

There are many approaches to the concept of power. According to Barnes (2004), power in general refers to the individual or generalised capacity to achieve something. Sociologists view power either as an attribute of individuals (Dahl, 1957), which is manifested in the effects it has on other individuals, or as a structural feature of society. The former approach focuses on “power over”; the latter approach concentrates mainly but not exclusively on “power to”. Both approaches are however relevant to the analysis of power in organisations, as will be pointed out in this article.

Main schools of thought on the subject of power (e.g. Blau (1964), Foucault in Rabinow (1984) French & Raven (1956)) reflect socially constructed views and authors’ interpretations of the issues of power. One view considers power to be a resource, and this view tends to focus on the measurable effects of power. Another view regards power to be pervasive, and in an organisational context this means that power is embedded in organisational practices and structures, which are often inconspicuous and more difficult to challenge, thus being more powerful (Buchanan & Badham, 1999). Communication, in its numerous manifestations, ranging from the control of knowledge and information through forming personal alliances, to symbolism and management of meaning, is considered to be an important source of power in an organisation. Therefore it seems natural that power be examined in the context of the role that communication management function plays in organisations. *Communication management and public relations* will, in this article, be used as synonyms and will refer to a management function, which is concerned with managed communication on behalf of organisations with the aim of increasing organisational effectiveness by creating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders (Steyn & Puth, 2000).<sup>1</sup> *Organisational communication* refers to both formal and informal communication in an organisation.

Literature in the communication management field seems to focus on a rather narrow view of organisational power. Drawing on the *excellence* concept developed by Peters and Waterman (1982), Grunig (1992) as well as Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995) use the power-control perspective to explain the differences in the excellence achieved by public relations departments in different organisations. The power-control perspective holds that people with most power in organisations – the dominant coalition – dictate the actions and directions of the public relations departments. This approach views power as a personal or a departmental attribute, and is mostly concerned with increasing the power base of public relations departments or managers through greater participation of the communication practitioners in the decision-making process.

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<sup>1</sup> *Considering communication management and public relations management as synonymous concepts is in line with the views of some European scholars who do not recognise a conceptual dualism between communication and relationships (Vercic, 2000; Vercic, Van Ruler, Butschi and Flodin, 2001).*

Spicer (1997:137) accepts the role politics and power play as inevitable aspects of organisational life, and examines power in organisations not only within the context of individual and departmental sources of power relevant to public relations practice, but also, albeit without clear theoretical support, proposes a *collaborative advocacy* in dealing with the conflicting demands of the organisational stakeholders. This will be discussed later in the article.

Lack of theoretical justification of the purpose of public relations as a profession that goes beyond the effects of public relations and the specific tasks public relations practitioners are involved in, is one of the major points of criticism against the theory of public relations (Vercic et al, 2001). The reflexive paradigm of public relations (Holmstrom, 1996; Holmstrom, 2002) offers some new insight into the role of public relations in society. Examining the alternative approaches to power, especially from the perspective of the systems theory and postmodern theory, may shed some additional light on the role of internal communication management in organisations.

This article will provide a brief overview of the concept of power, empowerment and views on the role of power in organisations. Public relations literature on power will be reviewed and, finally, communication function in organisations will be analysed from the systems theory perspective and specifically from the organisational cybernetics point of view.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF POWER**

The concept of power receives much attention in literature (Dahl 1957; Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck & Pennings, 1971; Morgan, 1986; Buchanan & Badham, 1999) and there is general agreement that power is an abstract feature, which is difficult to conceptualise and measure. Structuralist and functionalist views on the phenomenon of power concentrate on the effects, sources and imbalances of power in contrast to postmodern theory, which identifies paradoxes of power and focuses on the aspect of power “within” (Braynion, 2004).

In order to understand the ambiguity of power as a concept, the multiple views on power need to be revisited.

### **2.1 Power as an attribute**

Huczynski and Buchanan (2001:806) provide a distinction between three perspectives on power as an attribute: power as a characteristic of individuals; power as a characteristic of relationships; and, power as an embedded attribute of structures. Proponents of the first view assume that power is “owned” by an individual who exercises it in social and interpersonal situations. Pfifer (quoted in Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001:806) identifies structural and individual sources of power and a number of sources of individual power.

Examples of structural sources of individual power include:

- formal position and authority within the organisational structure;
- the ability to cultivate allies and supporters;

- access to and control over information and other resources; and
- the centrality of the unit or section to the business.

Examples of personal sources of power include:

- energy, endurance and personal stamina;
- sensitivity and ability to read and understand others; and
- willingness to engage in conflict and conformation.

The second perspective on power deals with the relationships between the power holder and others. In their widely cited work "The bases of social power", French and Raven (1956) identified five power bases: reward power, coercive power, referent power, legitimate power and expert power. French and Raven then propose that followers need to perceive the power holder as having access to rewards or sanctions and possessing expertise, charisma or social approval in order to influence others. Exercise of power depends on the beliefs and perceptions of the followers. The five bases of power are interrelated and complementary. Individuals can operate from several bases of power and can use different combinations of power bases at different times.

The notions of power as an attribute of individuals and power as the outcome of relationship perspectives view power as something that is used episodically to change the behaviour of others. Power defined as an ability of A to make B do something that B would not otherwise do (Dahl, 2004), encapsulates the common view of power as a capacity to affect the actions of others.

## **2.2 Pervasive power**

Power as an attribute of the structure perspective examines the elements or characteristics that can provide organisational departments with power. Power is so entwined in the organisational structure that it becomes part of organisational reality that is taken for granted. This taken-for-granted reality may include job descriptions, rules and procedures, budgets and rewards. As a consequence, power becomes so entrenched in the day-to-day life of an organisation that it is difficult to challenge or even to observe it. This type of power is pervasive and ever-present, which makes it more significant to the organisational life.

According to Lukes (quoted in Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001:811), power, whether overt or covert, is used to make others do what they would not otherwise do, or to define a reality for the members of the organisation. Power can be exercised to keep issues off the agenda, especially the grievances of those who are less powerful, or to prevent conflicts. Institutional power, though separated from the actions of specific individuals, can be used to control the individuals and to uphold the dominance of senior management.

Another stream of writing about power includes Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and bio-power (Buchanan & Badham, 1999:218). Foucault developed a concept of bio-power, which targets society as a whole and is achieved through discussions, writing and debate. The media play an important role in shaping people's perceptions of normality. On the other hand, disciplinary power

operates through the construction of social norms and organisational routines, and it targets both groups and individuals. This discipline is achieved through punishment, surveillance, coercion, assessment and even the allocation of physical space in offices and factories. Once the norms are internalised, the need for intervention diminishes (Buchanan & Badham, 1999:219). Foucault (in Rabinow, 2004) noted that many of these practices do not come from the intentional actions of individuals. Power is not a tool of domination but a natural order of things to which most people submit, because according to Hardy and Clegg (1996), without realising it, people themselves participate in creating that order. Foucault's notion of power also serves as a basis for discussion about freedom and the role of the modern liberal state (Barry, Osborne & Rose, 2004).

### **3. POWER IN ORGANISATIONS**

Many of the above faces of power are relevant to organisations. The most obvious source of power in organisations is derived from organisational design. As observed by early organisational theorists Weber and Fayol, formal authority, associated with the exercise of power through the application of formal rules and procedures is often a result of the office or a position held in an organisational hierarchy (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001; Hellriegel, Jackson, Slocum, Staude and Associates, 2004). Authority is translated into power through the consent of the subordinates. Use of organisational structures, rules and regulations leads to the distribution of power according to a hierarchy of authority. The size and status of the department often provides a good indication of its power. Rules, regulations and formal procedures also provide bases of power in organisations.

Hickson et al. (1971), via the concept of strategic contingencies, explained the differences in the relative power of different departments. Strategic contingencies, according to Huczynski and Buchanan (2005:809), "are events and activities, both outside and inside of the organisation that are essential for it to attain goals". Hickson et al. (1971) identified the following power sources that may enhance the department's ability to respond to contingencies: dependency creation, financial resource, centrality of activities, substitutability, and uncertainty reduction.

Individuals or groups able to influence decision-making processes can influence the affairs of the organisation. Control over knowledge and information can create dependency of others on those who have access to these resources. Monitoring and controlling organisational or departmental boundaries allow those in power to monitor changes occurring outside the department or the organisational unit and to prepare adequate responses. Boundary-spanning activities also help to define or interpret the reality in which one operates. Organisations try to reduce environmental and operational (internal) uncertainties. The better units or persons cope with overcoming uncertainty, the more powerful they are. The strength of symbolism and management of meaning lies in an ability to define the reality of others in such a way that one's interests can be advanced without resistance. Meaning can be created through images, language, symbols, stories, ceremonies, settings, appearances and styles of behaviour.

Power is an important factor explaining organisational relationships. It should be noted that power is a feature of management pertaining not only to organisations, but also to employees. As much

as authority is considered as flowing from top to bottom, lower-level employees also have considerable power. Their sources of power may stem from personal, structural or situational factors. Power of authority becomes effective only to the extent that it is legitimised from below (Pheby, 2004). Organisational design also highlights the paradox of power. While rules and regulations were created to control employees, they also give considerable power to the employees: for instance “work to rule” – when workers only do what is required by regulation, which has been used by British Rail, or the “go slow” method, used by South African workers as an alternative to going on strike, which allows employees to disrupt organisational activities without breaking any rules.

While it is relatively easy to identify surface manifestations of power, the deep structures of power are more elusive. In a situation where there are many sources of power, relations are in a state of dynamic balance: the power of each person may be counterbalanced by the power of other individuals or structures. For instance, a manager may feel powerless in the face of the forces of economy, of legislation or of the unions. It then follows that people are carriers of power relations embedded in the wider structure of society (Pheby, 2004). The aim of this article is to explore whether corporate communication management can play a role in releasing this power.

#### **4. POWER IN PUBLIC RELATIONS LITERATURE**

Public relations theory and literature have so far had limited interest regarding the concept of power. Power aspects in public relations were, though not always explicitly, addressed in a number of ways. Most authors focus on power from the perspective of it being a resource with the capacity to exert influence. Power is analysed as a desirable resource of departments or communication managers (Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig & Huang, 2000). Grunig (1992) discussed the power of communicators from the exchange theory perspective. The imbalances of power between an organisation and the stakeholders are also considered (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Power relations between an organisation and its environment as well as the political dimensions of organisational life are also debated (Spicer, 1997).

Analysing the models of public relations developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), it could be argued that out of four models<sup>2</sup>, three asymmetrical models clearly use public relations as a tool to increase organisational power in relationships with the publics or the stakeholders.

##### **4.1 Power perspective in public relations**

The so-called power perspective in public relations is concerned mainly with the ways of increasing the power of public relations and communications departments. The suggested solutions, in somewhat circular fashion, include the practitioner’s ability to “enact the managerial role” (Grunig, 1992) through increased participation in the decision-making role. However, the level at which communication manager decisions are made would depend on whether the communications

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<sup>2</sup> *The four models are: press agency, which focuses on creating favourable publicity or propaganda in order to manipulate public opinion; public information model where the organisation provides the public with accurate but selective information; two-way asymmetrical communication involving research into the public’s perspective on organisation-related issues and using the information thus obtained to persuade the public to accept the organisational point of view; the fourth model, two-way symmetrical communication model involves the use of research to manage the relationship and dialogue between the organisation and the public.*

practitioner is a manager or a technician (Dozier, 1992; Dozier & Broom 1995, Dozier et al., 1995; Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000).

In addition, Dozier et al. (1995:15) suggested that, in order to build excellent communication programmes, communication practitioners should forge partnerships with the organisation's dominant coalition – a group of people in organisations with power to set directions. Furthermore, these authors defined *departmental power* as the ability to influence members of the dominant coalitions (Dozier et al., 1995:73). The expertise of the communication practitioners and the organisational role played by the top communicator are the other factors affecting the performance of communication departments.

Similarly, Grunig (1992:489) claims that personal characteristics of communication practitioners and their education, gender and presence or lack of broad business expertise can also determine the organisational power of communication practitioners. She noted that often communication practitioners lack formal authority and rely on personal and situational sources of power. Numerous authors concluded that the power of communication departments and the role the top communication practitioner plays in an organisation affect the public relations model practised by the organisation.

#### **4.2 The influence of personal worldview on communication practice**

Grunig (1992:32) suggested that public relations is subject to subjective interpretations and that both the theory and practice of public relations depend on conscious or subconscious philosophical assumptions of practitioners and the worldviews of organisational management. Other theorists (Deathrage & Hazelton 1998; Dozier & Broom 1995; Dozier et al., 1995; Spicer 1997; White & Dozier 1992) attributed the way public relations operates in organisations to the worldviews of the organisation's management. Consequently, the dominant coalition has the power to choose arbitrarily the model of public relations practice (Grunig & Grunig 1992:302, Grunig & White 1992:447) that fits their worldview.

The worldview approach seems to be limited in that it does not take into account multiple factors influencing organisational design and organisational decision making. Furthermore, the worldview approach seems to overestimate the power of managers. Management theory suggests that managers can be influenced by various factors in their decision making, which include not only their personal beliefs, but also other factors, like current trends or environmental factors, as well as underlying structural factors.

#### **4.3 Public relations and organisational environment**

Communication management and public relations literature pay some attention to the role that communication practitioners play in the interaction between the organisation and the environment. Public relations practitioners as boundary spanners and public relations function should work towards the alignment of organisations with their environment. Spicer (1997:69) distinguished

between alignment as a means to achieve the organisational goals and alignment in order to seek some degree of control.

Ambiguity, uncertainty and the complexity of the environment influence the communication management function in organisations. White and Dozier (1992:106), as well as Spicer (1997), concluded that participation of communication managers in decision making increases with the level of organisational uncertainty and ambiguity about the environment. Lauzen and Dozier (quoted in Spicer, 1997) examined the relationships between external conditions and public relations function, and concluded that both the increased complexity of stakeholders and the degree of turbulence in the organisational environment led to an increased likelihood of public relations practitioners playing a management function. This could be equated with an increase in the communication practitioner's power. Spicer (1997:230) noted that communication practitioners engage both in reducing symbolic ambiguity and in intentionally creating ambiguous messages.

#### **4.4 Power in the relationship paradigm of public relations**

Grunig and Huang (2000:42) discuss the concept of control mutuality as a characteristic of relationships, which reflects "unavoidable asymmetry of power in organisation-public relationships". Control mutuality is defined as "the degree to which partners agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behavioural routines" (Stafford and Canary, quoted in Grunig & Huang, 2000:43). The concept seems best to reflect the relationships between an organisation and its external stakeholders. The argument here is that, despite unequal power, the parties should have a sense of control mutuality in order to achieve stability.

### **5. IN SEARCH OF PRODUCTIVE POWER**

The above overview of literature on power in communication management seems to focus on power "over", i.e. oppressive power, rather than power "to" or power "within" i.e. productive power. The role of the communication management function in an organisation should be considered in the context of theoretical assumptions that provide the link between management practice, power and communication management. The views discussed below are rooted in organisational cybernetics.

#### **5.1 Cybernetics**

Cybernetics as a discipline, which is concerned with processes of regulation, control and communication within systems, originated in the 1950s and is sometimes considered to be a subdiscipline of the General Systems Theory (GST). The term was coined by Weiner (1964), who published a work entitled *Cybernetics: control and communication in animal and machine*. Alternatively, both GST and cybernetics are viewed as part of larger theories such as complexity studies or the system sciences (Scott, 2004). In the 1970s a distinction was drawn between first-order cybernetics and second-order cybernetics. The former is the study of observed systems



while the latter is the study of observing systems (Scott, 2004). This distinction allowed them to incorporate the constructivist paradigm into cybernetics. First — order studies allow application of the research paradigms of the Natural Sciences, however these paradigms reflect the observer's second-order assumptions.

Cybernetics is multidisciplinary and is applied among others in the Social Sciences, Biology, Chemistry and Robotics. From this multidisciplinary tradition a new approach to dealing with issues of structure, adaptation and learning in organisations has developed under the name management cybernetics or organisational cybernetics (Schwaninger, 2001; Yolles, 2004).

## **5.2 The nature of complex organisations**

Organisations are complex systems of elements that cannot exist in isolation. In such circumstances, the success of organisations will depend on the decision-making process that takes the pressures of the environment into consideration. Complexity can be explained through the concept of variety, defined as "number of possible states of situation" (Ashby, quoted in Espejo, 2000). In reality, the number of possible states is incomprehensibly large; yet people in day-to-day situations deal with only a limited number of potential states because of the limitations of the possible states that each person can distinguish or imagine. As people learn or "invent" new distinctions and practices, their own complexity evolves.

Organisational effectiveness is seen as a measure of an ability, in the long term, to operate and survive complex and changing environments. This ability depends on organisational adaptability and change while maintaining stability in its behaviour (Yolles, 2000), which in turn depends on an organisational structure. Structure can be defined as interactions of various units and roles, as well as the relationships between these elements (Espejo, 1999).

The traditional model of top-down management is inappropriate for modern organisations. In the last two decades, the old functional structures of many large organisations have been transformed. Pheby (2004) argues that organisations are evolving towards recursive structures. *Recursive structures* are defined as autonomous units within autonomous units. This type of organisational structure allows organisations to survive in the long term or, in other words, to remain viable.

## **5.3 Empowerment**

In response to pressures such as the increasing complexity of the environment, globalisation, liberalisation and competition, modern organisations seek to be more efficient, flatter, and more flexible. Empowerment is often seen as a solution to these problems. There are numerous definitions of empowerment. According to Greasley, Bryman, Dainty, Price, Soetanto and King (2005), the term *empowerment* is linked to the concept of redistribution of power. Power is redistributed by transferring control so that the employees have the authority to make and implement their own decisions. It is a management-driven approach, which emphasises economic considerations such

as quality, flexibility and productivity (Wilkinson, 2001; Greasley et al., 2005). Numerous writers propagate the benefits to organisations, of empowerment ranging from improved performance (Edvardsson & Gustavsson, 2003), through nurturing creativity (Paul, Niehoff & Turnley, 2000) to a successful implementation of change (O'Brien, 2002).

Empowerment brings a range of psychological benefits to the employees. These include personal development, increased motivation, reduced ambiguity and an ability to control the environment, which may result in reduced strain on the employee and which will give a greater sense of job satisfaction, motivation, and organisational loyalty (Greasley et al., 2005).

#### **5.4 The elements of empowerment**

From the point of view of management practice, Johnson and Redmond (quoted in Ang, 2002) propose five steps of empowerment: informing, consulting, sharing, delegating and empowering. Similarly, Wilkinson (2001) identifies five dimensions of empowerment, namely information-sharing, upward problem-solving, task autonomy, attitudinal shaping and self-management. Thus a number of these dimensions are related to the internal communication with employees; particularly, information-sharing, upward problem-solving and attitudinal shaping lie in the internal communication domain.

#### **5.5 Communication and organisations**

Organisations are social systems and they operate within broader systems from which they receive energy and other resources. At the same time they are "operationally closed" through the connectivity of their components, which allows the organisations to differentiate from the environment. Social systems are produced through communication between the elements of the system. These elements constitute closed networks of interrelated people with identity and structure (Espejo, 1999).

Interactions of the elements within the system are, to a large extent, the outcome of a self-organisation process. Espejo (2004) asserts that social systems "emerge from self-organising processes among interacting participants, experiencing stretching demands from the environment in which they realize relations". However, unlike other systems, human beings have the capability of interfering purposely with the self-organisation process (Espejo, 2004). Social systems have communication, which is a useful tool in shaping the system and creating desirable organisations. Communication allows the system to achieve cohesion and it enables coordinating the actions of people. Communication also allows the developing of the organisation's identity. *Identity* comprises of the set of relationships within the network, but it is independent of the particular individuals (Espejo, 1999).

Institutional responses to the environment require the creation and articulation of new meanings and a great deal of organisational learning. Over time, through experience and trial and error, people learn that, in dealing with complexity, some strategies are more successful than other

strategies. This can be described as an evolutionary approach. But there are also advantages in being pro-active in shaping organisations and institutions: the “right” design of organisational processes may lead to facilitation of social learning and to tasks being accomplished in a shorter time.

Thus, flexible, complex organisations should develop rich communication systems that go beyond information exchange. Such rich communication is fundamentally different from traditional linear top-down, upwards or even two-way symmetrical communication concepts, because it calls for multidimensional, non-linear organisational communication. This type of communication should increase the cohesion of the organisation and improve organisational ability to deal with complexity.

### **5.6 Managing complex organisations**

Organisations are complex adaptive systems, and managing such systems is a challenge. Environmental variety is more complex than the organisation’s management can comprehend or reflect on. Management needs to have a capacity to counter the variety of possible undesirable states of the situation with the variety of responses that the organisations or its management can produce. Part of the variety is absorbed by self-organisation and self-regulation within the organisation. Part of the variety – not directly impacting the organisation – is ignored; the rest has to be absorbed by management (Espejo, Schuhmann, Schwaninger & Bilello, 2004). If the complexity is too high, management uses tools called *amplifiers* (from the system to the environment, for example delegation or commitment) and *attenuators* (from the environment to the system, for example procedures).

In an organisational setting an individual alone cannot deal with the total number of possible states as their capabilities are limited by their individual experiences and abilities. This often leaves managers with a feeling of anxiety and of losing control over the organisation. In order to manage complex organisations effectively, management should develop recursive, autonomous organisational structures, consisting of smaller autonomous systems each having self-regulatory and self-organising characteristics. This however does not mean the end of control hierarchies, as these seem to be a “universal inventions of social evolution” (Schuhmann, 2004).

Responding to a complex environment increases the complexity of organisations. The complexity of organisations depends on the complexity of their elements, their functional differentiation and the richness of their connectivity (Espejo, 2004). The latter aspect can only be achieved through improved communication networks between different elements in an organisation. The tools of empowerment, namely information-sharing and upwards problem-solving, and task autonomy, provide excellent opportunities to improve organisational problem-solving not because management has more information, but rather because they are excellent tools for reducing the level of complexity with which managers need to deal.

### **5.7 Empowerment through communication**

Pheby (2004:4) suggests that organisations need to develop a cooperative culture, breaking boundaries and developing powerful alliances with the internal and external stakeholders. This can be achieved by implementing the Viable System Model (Espejo et al., 2004) to organisations. The model, which is based on the creation of autonomous units within autonomous units through processes of adaptation and cohesion, assumes that these processes emerge from the five systemic functions of *policy*, *intelligence*, *cohesion*, *coordination* and *implementation* (Espejo, 2004). *Policy* is an outcome of managing interactions of intelligence and cohesion resources. The *intelligence* function refers to consideration of the impact of an outside environment. The *cohesion* function focuses on the organisational current and operational environment, and balances the organisational cohesion and local autonomy of the elements. The *coordination* function deals with primary activities of the organisation. The *implementation* function produces the organisation's meaning. The power of this model entails that "anyone recurrently contributing through various interactions to the creation and production of meaning, however distant or close it might be, constitutes as a role or roles in one or more of these five systemic functions" (Espejo, 2004).

From the perspective of public relations, aspects discussed above refer mainly to *internal communication*. According to Kitchen and Daly (2002), there are not many definitions of internal communication and it is mainly discussed under the terms *employee communication*, *organisational communication* and *corporate* or *business communication*. Internal communication is crucial to organisational existence; however, interactions with the external environment are also essential if an organisation is to remain relevant (Espejo, 1999).

It can be argued that the increasing significance of the communication management function in an organisation arises from the fact that the amplification and attenuation tools need to be used by management of complex organisations in order to produce adequate responses to variety. Effective communication systems in an organisation allow the organisation to cope with variety, though not through tighter controls. On the other hand, they do allow the system to achieve greater autonomy so that it can be more effective at absorbing variety.

Despite the fact that dysfunctional and even oppressive systems exist, there is a growing perception that creating participative, inclusive organisations, where power is shared, increases the learning potential and capabilities of organisations, thereby creating more flexible social systems.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Contemporary public relations theory exploits the existing conceptualisations of the nature of power to a limited extent only. It pays attention mainly to episodic power and to imbalances of power. The productive power approach, although it offers numerous possibilities, is largely ignored by public relations theory. The cybernetic view of society and organisations offers an opportunity to explain the rise of the organisational communication function in organisations as a result of a need to improve the effectiveness of organisations.

While systems theory has been applied to public relations, organisational cybernetics is particularly relevant to the organisational communication theory because it focuses on the structuring of organisations and on management and the role of developing a closed network of relationships within an organisation as a way of improving organisations and their efficiency. The lynchpin of this approach is recognition of the fact that in complex environments, organisations need to increase their ability to deal with such complexity by creating autonomous structures within autonomous structures, thus allowing the variety to be absorbed through empowered organisational divisions, departments and people. Communication plays a pivotal role in maintaining the organisation's existence. Kitchen and Daly (2002) point out that internal communication is so interlinked with organisational structure, environment, power and culture that it is not only an important variable towards achieving organisational success, but also an antecedent to organisational existence. Internal or organisational communication is also essential because of the paradox of recursive structures, which become more complex in order to respond to the complexity of the environment; yet, at the same time, such structures should remain cohesive in order for the organisation to remain an organisation.

It is not easy to provide empirical proof of the effectiveness of the recursive organisations; nevertheless a number of authors cite the application of the theory to management practice (Schwaninger, 2001; Bula, 2004; Schuhman, 2004). In addition, the overview of management approaches popular in recent decades – some calling for stronger organisational cultures; others proposing participation or empowerment – indicates that even though different authors use different theoretical platforms (if any), the emergence of these approaches that call for greater cohesion, autonomy and empowerment is a reflection of successful learnt strategies, which indirectly support the postulates of organisational cybernetics.

The growing complexity of the organisations emanates from the situation where various specialised functional subsystems have to deal with the growing complexity of the environment. For instance, today there are numerous specialisations within the public relations function: corporate communication, public affairs, media relations, etc. Organisational communication can be seen as powerful attenuation and amplification tools, which assist management in reducing the requirements of increasing complexity placed on individual managers. Communication is a necessary condition for maintaining cohesion of recursive organisations (or social systems), and it plays a pivotal role in releasing productive power in organisations.

This article subscribes to the view that, in an organisational setting, power is not a limited resource, which would mean that more power to some individuals or groups deprives others of power. Power is a complex phenomenon that can be viewed through the micro- and macro lenses. The main assumption of such an approach is the view of power as a pervasive feature of organisations and society. The concept of power embedded in the system and structure – power that is productive rather than oppressive and power that increases the chances of the long-term viability of the organisation – helps one to understand the changing nature of the organisation. It also helps to conceptualise the growing role of public relations and communication management in modern organisations.

The aim of the article is not to argue that power, as a resource of individuals or departments in an organisation, does not exist, because this type of power, as often noted in practice, is an inherent feature of organisational life. The aim is to draw attention to the possibility of the existence of productive power. As there is an ongoing discussion among Public Relations academics about the role, function and competencies of public relations in modern organisations and society, this article is a contribution to the debate and an invitation to further inquiry into the purpose, scope and legitimacy of Public Relations and Communication Management as a profession and as an academic discipline.

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