



Reflections on the current state and future of strategic communication as paradigm and practice¹

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon disciplinary developments since the publication of the seminal article by Overton-de Klerk and Verwey in 2013 on emerging paradigm shifts in strategic communication. It also reflects upon the implications of several disruptive global events for these paradigm shifts since the untimely passing of Verwey in 2019. It is argued that the paradigm shifts, as they are currently framed, can lead to a continuing linearity dilemma and binary trap of either-or thinking. A prognosis for the future of strategic communication in paradigm and practice in five statements is provided. The author suggests that the time has come to move beyond postmodern thinking towards both-and thinking and embrace a more comprehensive approach of critical complexity, acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between the parts and the whole. Within a complexity framework, it is proposed that a reflective regeneration of strategic communication includes a scrutiny of new logics and lenses relevant in an African context, including Radical Reason and metamodernism, coupled with lateral, collaborative transdisciplinary responses to digital and other complexities facing humanity, also in the workplace.

Keywords

both-and thinking, critical complexity, global disruption, linearity dilemma, metamodernism, paradigm shifts, radical reason

INTRODUCTION

A decade has passed since the publication of the article *Towards an emerging paradigm of strategic communication: Core driving forces* (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). This publication appears to have been well-received and cited in the scholarly community. Since Verwey's sad passing in 2019, several disruptive events have rocked the world. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on disciplinary developments since this article and particularly, given these global disruptions, reflect upon what the future might hold for strategic communication as paradigm and practice.

Any oversights or omissions in this paper will be the author's alone. Additional perspectives or debates that might emanate from peers and the scholarly community in general will be welcomed.

The paper is structured as follows:

1. A summary of the status quo of strategic communication as discipline. This primarily focusses on key paradigm shifts in strategic communication as reviewed and recaptured between 2013-2021.
2. A reflection upon global disruption since 2020 and implications for the paradigm shifts.
3. A prognosis for the future of strategic communication in paradigm and practice in five statements.
4. Preliminary conclusions and implications for the paradigm and practice of strategic communication.

¹ This paper was first delivered as the keynote address at the Sonja Verwey Memorial Lecture at the University of Johannesburg on March 27, 2023. Appreciation is expressed to the reviewers for further valuable insights that have been incorporated into the article.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PARADIGM: THE STATUS QUO

Following the publication of the article identifying emerging paradigm shifts in strategic communication (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013), each of the authors individually, as well as other scholars and emerging researchers in strategic communication have published additional perspectives, all building on trends and shifts identified in the original article. Many of these contributions will be referred to in the paper.

The trends and shifts originally identified by Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013), as summarised in Figure 1, will be familiar to most scholars of strategic communication and do not require much further elaboration, except to show how they have evolved in the context of research conducted subsequently. These will be discussed in the next section.

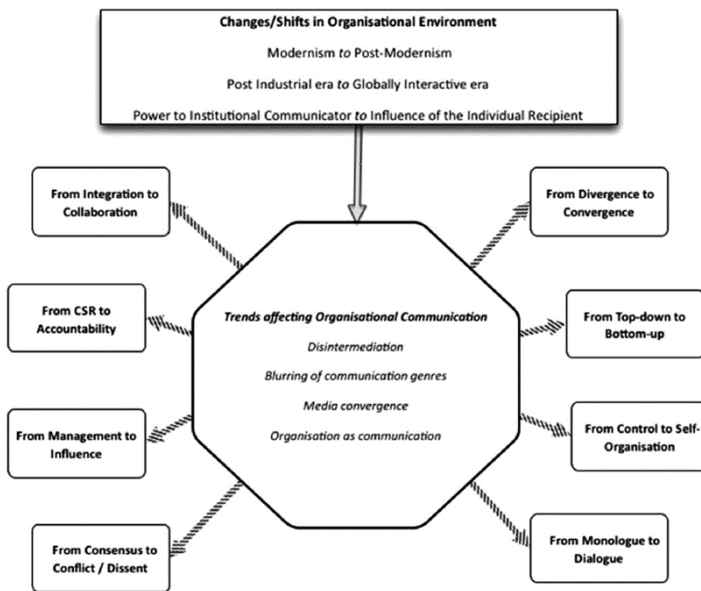


Figure 1: Core driving forces toward an emerging paradigm of strategic communication

Source: Overton-de Klerk & Verwey (2013: 368)

The 2013 shifts and trends have been reviewed and recaptured in two follow-up publications by Verwey, entitled *Paradigms, paradoxes and practice of public relations and communication* (Verwey, 2015) and particularly in one of the last chapters she co-authored, entitled *Paradigms, perspectives and paradoxes* (Verwey & Benecke, 2021). It is difficult to improve upon the elegance with which the emerging shifts in society and strategic communication were argued at the time, as represented in Figures 2 and 3.

In the next section, a brief overview of the essence of the main paradigm shifts in strategic communication as published in 2021 (Verwey & Benecke, 2021) will be provided, how they relate to the original shifts as identified in 2013 (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013) and how they were complemented by the work of other local and international scholars.

	Old paradigm	New paradigm
Technological base	Physical technology	Information technology
Economy	Capital based	Human-centred
Frontier of progress	Material growth	Sustainability
Organisations	Hierarchical	Networked
Relationships	Conflict	Collaboration

Figure 2: Shifts in society

Source: Verwey & Benecke (2021:7)
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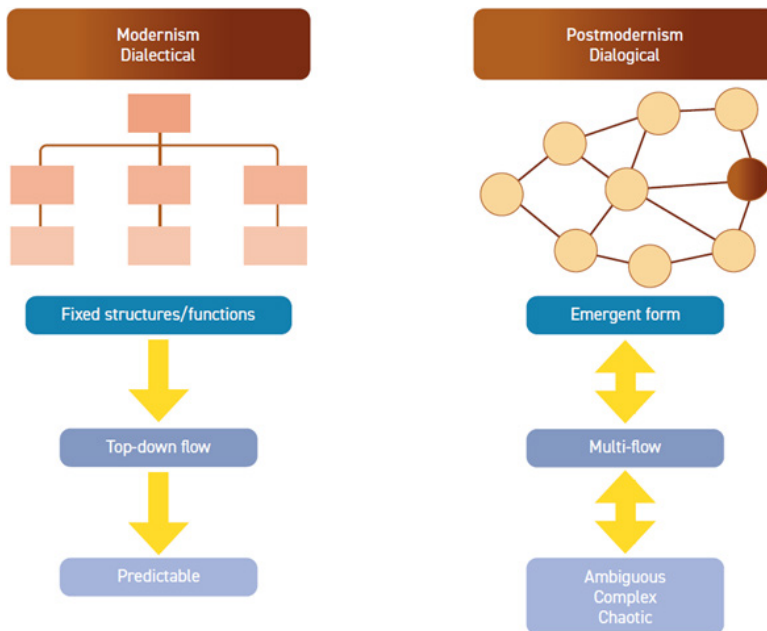


Figure 3: Shifts in communication paradigms

Source: Verwey & Benecke (2021:13)
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Main paradigm shifts in strategic communication

- **From modernism to postmodernism.** The core driving forces of the emergent paradigm of strategic communication (2013) were identified against the backdrop of the underlying paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism. Verwey & Benecke (2021:14) describe this shift in essence as “the production of organisation rather than the organisation of production.” A modernist behavioural managerial paradigm regarded the management of communication as tactical and short-term and concerned with the realisation of organisational goals and pursuits. A postmodern paradigm, as represented in Figure 3, has replaced fixed hierarchies and promotes emerging structures through communication based on dialogue. Communication has thus moved from dialectical to dialogical, from fixed to emerging, from top-down to multidirectional, and from predictable to ambiguous within the chaotic contexts in which it operates. This shift is discussed again later.

- **From reflexive to reflective.** This shift, not described as such in the 2013 article, refers to the shift from a self-centred, mono-contextual (reflexive) view towards a poly-contextual (reflective) view and the ability to see the world through the eyes of others (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:16). However, to describe a reflexive worldview as 'self-centred', can be confusing, as reflexive scientific practice as described in transdisciplinary research (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023; Grunwald, 2004; Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016) means the opposite: namely the ability to reflect upon one's own view in the context of others and the ability to be critical of one's own assumptions. These two apparently contrasting notions of 'reflexive' therefore perhaps require further conceptual exploration.
- **From functional to co-creational.** This shift was described in the 2013 article as the shift from management to influence (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013:373). It essentially refers to a preoccupation with managerial and behavioural aspects of the organisation, which has been replaced by a growing concern with culture, communication, and a subjective interpretation of organisational life (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:17). The role of manager has thus evolved to that of a facilitator who crafts platforms for discourse and participation within and between the organisation and its stakeholders. This facilitator role has originally been pioneered by General Electric's Jack Welch and is currently finding expression in various Reverse Mentoring programmes by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, BNY Mellon, and Estée Lauder (Jordan & Sorrell, 2019).
- **From normative to critical.** This was described as the shift from consensus to dissent in the 2013 article (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013:372). In this instance, the role of management is no longer to control homogeneity but to steer through complexity. Normative strategy, typical of 'Excellence' symmetrical approaches developed by Grunig and others (Grunig, 2001; Grunig, J.E., Grunig, L. & Dozier, 2002), seeks compliance with business strategy developed by senior management and is communicated top-down (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:18). It is consensus-seeking. A critical view, on the other hand, is more self-reflective and interventionist and invites dissent or challenge (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:19). A good example of the critical approach can be found in the 'Radical Candor' approach developed by Kim Scott based on her experience in Silicon Valley (Scott, 2019).
- **From strategy to strategic/emergence.** This shift was originally described as the shift from control to self-organisation (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013:373). Whereas the modernist notion regarded strategy as a tool, closely related to managerial concepts such as decision-making, power, and control, strategy as emergence is a response to a VUCA environment (Baran & Woznyj, 2021) and the view of an organisation as a complex adaptive system constantly poised on the edge of chaos (Verwey & Benecke, 2021). Notably, at the same time, Meyer and Barker (2020:59-60) and Meyer (2021:16) argued that a metamodern approach is the most feasible and agile approach to deal with the intricacies of the current reality (riddled as it is with the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of VUCA). In a VUCA-context, strategy becomes a communicatively constituted construct that emerges from the interactions, meaning making and self-organisation of all stakeholders (Schoeneborn & Vasques, 2017; Verwey & Benecke, 2021). It is also relevant to note the following description by the late Paul Cilliers, a forerunner of the communication as constitutive of organisation (CCO) approach: "Meaning emerges through the mutual interaction (both constraining and enabling) amongst components in the system, not through some pre-defined essence. Thus, as subjects we are constituted through interactions with others (both human and non-human) around us. My state depends on the state of others" (Cilliers, 2011:151).
- **From agent to agency.** This shift refers to the role of professional communicators that has changed to one of active involvement and co-development of knowledge as opposed to being a passive agent responsible for the distribution of one type of knowledge, as determined by dominant leaders within the organisation. The changed role of the communication professional also alluded to in Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013:373), can be described as one of strategic

activism with the agency to produce, analyse and critique knowledge actively and independently. "Whereas the modernist agent legitimates managerial knowledge through general agreement, the postmodern agent ... has the opportunity to participate in discourse ... through encouragement of conflict and dissent ... As such, communication becomes an end in itself" (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:22). A critical but overlooked contribution to the shift towards agency has been made by the seminal work *The knowledge-creating company* and the SECI model developed by Japanese scholars Nonaka and Takeuchi (Nonaka, 2007; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). According to these scholars, the creation of new knowledge in an organisation depends on the tapping of tacit and often highly subjective knowledge, hunches and insights of employees, which explain the successes of companies like Honda, Canon, Sharp and others. Tacit and explicit knowledge is co-developed during a knowledge transition process of socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (SECI). Through the active participation (or co-creation) of employees as active agents, explicit and implicit knowledge can be creatively exchanged, combined and ultimately transformed, which is the key to innovation. The main role of managers in a knowledge-creating company is therefore to direct this process towards purposeful knowledge creation. Barker and Hanekom (2022) use this approach in the development of a theoretical framework which explains how consumer decision making can be enhanced by knowledge sharing and message co-creation on digital platforms.

- **From disciplinary to transdisciplinary.** The shift from a disciplinary towards a transdisciplinary research approach has been prompted by the argument that humanity requires an integrative holistic research approach that goes beyond single or multi-disciplinary approaches to engage with increasingly interlinked and wickedly complex problems of our time. While the shift towards a reflexive transdisciplinary approach is discussed in the 2021 chapter (Verwey & Benecke, 2021), it has not been identified as such in the 2013 article, although it is closely linked to the argument made then, throughout, for a multi-paradigmatic approach and boundary crossing (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013). The 2021 chapter also contains the notable yet arguable statement that a deeper understanding of relational dimensions and their complex interrelationships can only be achieved through qualitative and collaborative research. "...if the disciplinary preference for quantitative research methodology continues to endure, no rich description or understanding of complex interrelationships will be possible" (Verwey & Benecke, 2021:24). While this statement may confirm prevailing perceptions of communication research approaches as described by Tomaselli (2018a), it is questionable whether the encouragement of epistemological polarities between qualitative and quantitative research is necessary or desirable to deal with complexity, a point which is raised again later. The shift from disciplinary to transdisciplinary remains a critically important trend, into which much further contemplation and research have gone since, as is discussed later.

The reviewal and recapturing of key paradigm shifts in strategic communication reflecting the status quo (published in 2021), was completed shortly before Verwey's unexpected passing at the end of 2019. Shortly after, the world was catapulted into global disruption of an unprecedented scale by inter alia the Covid-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests, financial meltdowns, the Ukrainian war, climate change, as well as a period of great upheaval in South Africa due to rioting and looting, deepening inequality, general political instability and not least, the electricity crisis. Life increasingly seemed to be messy and chaotic indeed, and it appeared as if the world was finding itself in greater volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) than ever before.

Consequently, we now sadly find ourselves without the benefit of much-needed scholarly discourse with our late colleague about the implications of these disruptions for the shifts in strategic communication that have been identified and refined since 2013. Alas, the difficult task of embarking on the first solo step towards charting this terra incognita now has to be undertaken without the benefit of such mutually enriching engagement.

GLOBAL DISRUPTION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PARADIGM SHIFTS

Since the pandemic, and the further global disruptions over the past few years, the following observations have been made which, in the context of the predictions made by the paradigm shifts discussed above, can at best be described as confounding. Many of these observations have also been shared and debated since by other scholars across a variety of disciplines.

A return to controlled, top-down, normative communication

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it appears that a return to controlled, top-down, normative communication has unfortunately occurred, contrary to any tolerance for an open, bottom-up, critical dialogue as the emerging shifts in strategic communication foresaw. The voice of the World Health Organisation seemingly became the single most authoritative voice, while the narrative of the United Nations was described as 'war talk' (Cameron, 2021) as also confirmed by further research in several countries (De Rosa, Mannarini, de Montes, Holman, Lauri, Negura, Giacomozzi et al., 2021). Global consensus was reached about required behavioural changes such as extended lockdowns and compulsory vaccinations (Overton-de Klerk & Azionya, 2020). Despite a cacophony of voices in social media, any form of dissent was hardly tolerated, not even in science. In an insightful article entitled *How the pandemic has changed the norms of science*, Stanford Professor of Medicine John P.A. Ioannidis wrote at the time: "Many excellent scientists have had to silence themselves during this chaos ... well-intentioned scientists who were abused, smeared and threatened during the pandemic. I respect all of them and suffer for what they went through, regardless of whether their scientific positions agreed or disagreed with mine. Science remains the best thing that can happen to humans, provided it can be both tolerant and tolerated" (Ioannidis, 2021).

Suffice it to say that one was left wondering whether these developments due to the pandemic have not cancelled most, if not all, of the emerging paradigm shifts in strategic communication that have been identified so far. Instead, it felt as if we were straight-jacketed right back into a fixed, modernistic, single-paradigm world.

A return to authoritarian managerialism

A second confounding phenomenon observed in recent years, is an apparent return to authoritarian managerialism, in stark contrast with a critical approach allowing for co-creation and agency as the paradigm shifts predicted. This leaves one questioning to what extent we have truly been freed of the "iron cage of the Excellence study", something which troubled scholars like Verwey very much (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey 2013:365; Verwey & Benecke 2021:20).

One example is the BBC suspension of soccer hero Gary Lineker, because of his criticism (in an individual capacity) of the Tory government's proposed migration legislation. He was clearly not regarded as an agent with the agency to question or challenge, even though his opinion had nothing to do with his job as presenter of *Match of the Day* (Du Preez, 2023). Elon Musk's hiring and firing at Twitter appears to be another (unrepentant) example (Milmo, 2023).

Managerialism is "an ideology ... a set of beliefs and practices that promote authority, accountability, efficiency and scientific measurement" (Tomaselli & Caldwell, 2019:59). It is an extension of the neoliberal New Public Management (NPM) worldview that holds that political, economic and social issues can all be resolved through management, in the public sector as much as in the private sector (Tomaselli & Caldwell, 2019:59).

In higher education, managerialism appears to have become a hotly debated issue over the past years. In an action research study conducted at the coalface at the University of Kwazulu-Natal by Tomaselli and Caldwell (2019), it was found that managerialist practices within a NPM framework induced new levels of bureaucracy and compliance alien to academic tradition, as well as the silencing of robust academic inquiry in favour of stifling bureaucratic procedure, all of which, according to the authors, could have been countered by dialogical communication.

Jonathan Jansen and Adam Habib, both former vice-chancellors at South African universities, have complained about an increasingly corporatised environment and creeping managerialism in higher

education institutions (Jansen 2010; Jansen 2023; Seekings & Natrass, 2023). "In a university context, authoritarian managerialism refers to the shift in power from academics to non-academic (or sometimes formerly academic) managers, the substitution of managerial hierarchies in place of collegial deliberation and decision-making, the erosion of transparency, the promotion of a cult and brand around a leader, and the silencing of dissent" (Seekings & Natrass, 2023). Academics become "line managers" and their colleagues "subordinate human resources" (2023), while managers even attempt to censor Senate debates on grounds that the topics are "the sole and exclusive responsibility of managers" (Seekings & Natrass, 2023). There is reason to believe that this kind of authoritarian managerialism and attempted management influencing (even of supposedly independent academic assessments) in both public and private tertiary education is far more pervasive than is being reported whilst, as Tomaselli & Caldwell (2019:75) observe: "The steady publication of criticism of managerialism within and beyond tertiary institutions seems to indicate a groundswell of the salience of resistance."

Organisational culture and sustainability increasingly at risk

Contrary to the shift towards a growing preoccupation with organisational culture and the crafting of platforms for discourse and knowledge-sharing of organisational stakeholders, organisational culture (along with sustainability) appears to be increasingly at risk. This seems to be largely a consequence of the pandemic and a remote working environment, but also of increasing managerialism. According to McKinsey, many post-pandemic organisations "have traded their long-term sustainability for short-term outcomes" (2020:3) instead of investing in human capital and "harnessing the passion, skills ... and creativity that people bring to work" (2020:7). This, in turn, has impacted heavily on organisational culture and customer service (Fuhr, 2020, 2021). The implications of global disruption for organisational culture and corporate sustainability are discussed at length by Overton-de Klerk & Muir (2022), indicating that environmental, social, and governance buzzwords (ESG), have largely become empty jargon playing second fiddle to narrow financial sustainability and profitability of shareholders, with far-reaching effects for organisational culture. Preliminary findings amongst sustainability experts (Muir, 2023) furthermore suggest that "an uncertain environment and lack of collective agenda pose significant challenges to sustainability" (Muir, 2023:225) and "a vote of no confidence in a timeous meeting of the SDG goals" (Muir, 2023:226). According to these experts, this is the result of fragmented approaches that prioritise short term financial and political gratification over the gradual distribution of economic, social and environmental benefits (shared value) in different sectors (Muir, 2023).

Culture-driven leadership appears to be in short supply.

Digital platform is king, leading to a new tension between freedom of speech and fake news

Aggravating the growing managerial clampdown, we see yet another beast rearing its head, perhaps more subtle in nature but even more invasive than the hierarchy of bosses. This is the digital world in which platforms are king, as the recent doctoral findings of Azionya (2022) indicate. These findings are echoed by the most recent work of seminal author Jürgen Habermas, who refers to the "platformisation of the public sphere" (2022:159). According to Azionya (2022), prosumers have developed advanced intelligence that relies on information gathered online from disparate sources to verify what is being presented to them by governments and the media, in which they have lost faith. Unregulated, unvetted posts of prosumers and lack of qualitative filtering, however, lead to structural changes and new power asymmetries. Habermas refers to these new power asymmetries as "echo chambers" of presumption (2022:159) which can be compared to Foucault's "regimes of truth" (1980:189), now evident in cancel culture and hashtag societies. In turn, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate the public from the private spheres and, most importantly, to detect fake news. This brings about a new tension between freedom of speech and fake news.

In retrospect, an article published in *Communicare* by Australian media scholar Tom O' Regan in 2018 (also the SACOMM keynote in 2016), is a historical benchmark as it clearly portended many of these issues. In this he states: "With social media platforms driving selective media consumption through their

algorithms, alternative views are being filtered out, leading to increasing polarisation" (O'Regan, 2018:6). Data are extracted and used in such a way that it gives rise to "platform capitalism" (O'Regan, 2018:8), where national media have become the losers, and multinational digital platforms the winners, with multiple implications for advertisers striving to sell their brands, as Azionya's research (2022) confirms. (In fact, in many cases the platform becomes the brand itself, like Amazon.)

The result is, O'Regan states, that it is no longer clear "where communication ends and media begins" (2018:10). From a communication viewpoint media is dissolving into a "broader and integrated communication world", while from a media viewpoint, "social media represents the mediatisation of interpersonal communication reorganising word-of-mouth and domesticating the social to an advertising- and marketer- supported media system" (O'Regan, 2018:11). This fluidity holds significant implications for social inclusion and accountability, while the news vacuum, overshadowed by personal, localised dynamics and misinformation on social media platforms, is growing at alarming speed. In turn, this makes the development of any regulatory framework a huge challenge (O'Regan, 2018).

The more critical challenge that O'Regan (2018:11) poses, is how this fluidity will play out in a new configuration of the communication and media discipline(s). In a local context, this challenge, according to Tomaselli, appears to have largely gone unanswered as these disciplines (cultural & media studies and communication sciences) seem to be marred by a duality and endless paradigm wars constantly fuelling "epistemological schizophrenia" (Tomaselli, 2018a:295; 2018b:21). If this is indeed the case, it contradicts the "blurring of communication genres" that the emerging paradigm shifts predicted (Overton-de Klerk and Verwey, 2013: 368). Bridging this divide now becomes critical, given that the challenges wrought by the media/communication fluidity have increased tenfold due to the global disruptions since, as well as the advent of 5IR (Noble, Mende, Grewal & Parasuraman, 2022). To the point of an almost grotesque McLuhanesque parody of the medium is the message is the medium is...

As scholars we need to recalibrate.

How to deal with these disruptions and seeming contradictions in the status quo, and respond to them in the future of Strategic Communication?

In reflecting on the paradigm shifts discussed in Section 1, the following critical observations are made, followed by a few statements which may assist towards a prognosis for the future.

The continuing linearity dilemma

Implicit in all the paradigm shifts identified in strategic communication so far is some form of linearity. In stating that we have moved from modern to postmodern, from functional to co-creational, from normative to critical, from strategy to strategic, and so forth, we presuppose that opposing poles exist at each end of a single continuum. Moreover, we assume that the shifts in strategic communication imply movement, and that we are therefore moving from one end of the continuum towards the other end, or between them (Figure 5). If such movement is expressed as *degree of extremes*, as in Figure 6 depicting Overton de Klerk & Verwey's emerging paradigm shifts (2013) in a multi-paradigm model (John, 2021:454), movement in one direction would imply less movement in the other, if viewed on one continuum. As in the more logical we are, the less creative, and vice versa. It also implies, at the same time, that a balance can be struck between the poles.



Figure 5: The continuing linearity dilemma

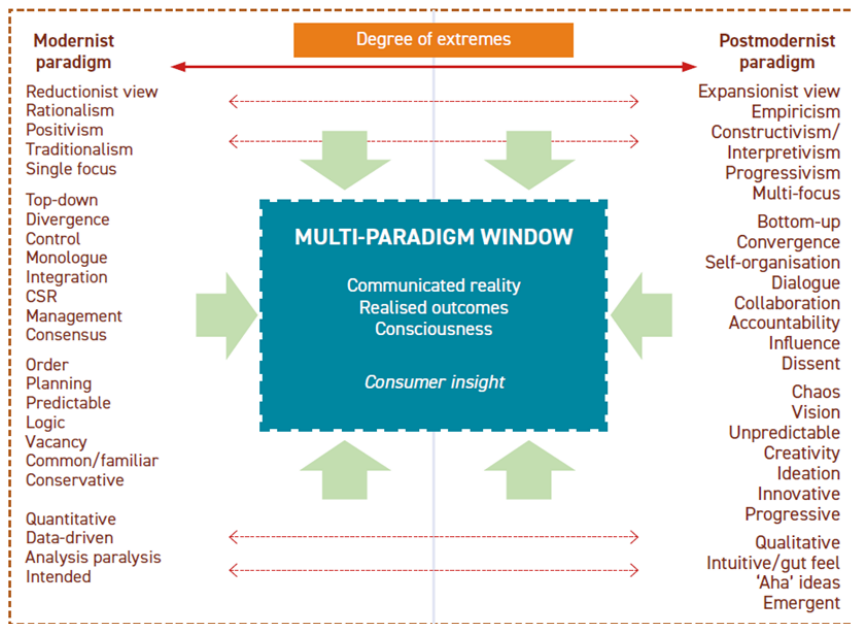


Figure 6: Degrees of extremes

Source: John, 2021:454
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A new perspective: What if it is not either/or, but and/and?

But, what if these shifts or degrees of extremes are not as clear-cut as we have anticipated? What if it does not denote **either/or** but only a movement or process towards a fuzzy, yet uncertain and yet undefined endpoint that might include both or more sides of the spectrum, in other words, **and/and**? Then it could look as follows (Figure 7):

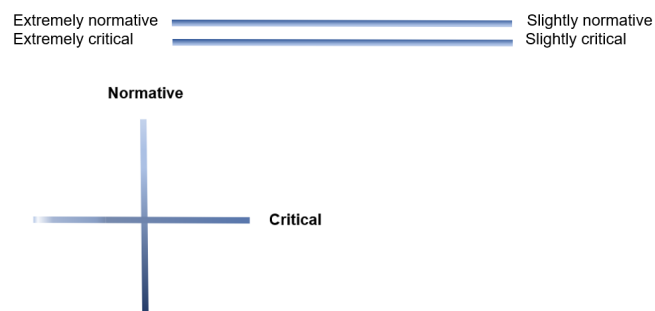


Figure 7: What is it is not **either/or** but **and/and**?

This new perspective suggests that we can display both qualities in equally high or low degrees, depending on the context, which can be depicted or plotted on different continuums or different dimensions. Such a perspective can thus also evolve into both-and thinking, as will be discussed in the following sections.

PROGNOSIS FOR THE FUTURE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN PARADIGM AND PRACTICE

Following on the above reflections and analyses, five statements are put forward for further consideration in contemplating future directions for the strategic communication paradigm and practice.

Statement 1: The strategic communication paradigm could make more explicit provision for non-linearity, contextuality, and ultimately, for complexity

While the notion of emergence is central to the current strategic communication paradigm, and while complexity thinking has a lot in common with poststructuralism and specifically Derrida's notion of *différence* (Cilliers, 2011:147), the concern is that how we frame our shifts may confine us too much and lead to a binary trap of **either-or**. For instance, the way in which the conclusion of the 2013 article on emerging paradigm shifts is framed, suggests a binary, linear approach which is assessed later under preliminary conclusions.

Furthermore, approaching global disruption through the lens of complexity thinking, may help us to understand that social interventions in response to such disruptions become complex, adaptive, self-transforming systems or sub-systems in themselves which produce different and "often unanticipated outcomes in the real world" (Pawson, 2021:2). It can also help us to understand that behaviour can take unexpected pathways and does not necessarily occur in a fixed, linear stimulus-response fashion.

Complex adaptive systems are made up of a variety of sub-systems, some of which may be linear and some nonlinear, depending on their nature and context. When dealing with complexity, we cannot escape paradoxes and contradictions. Yet complexity should not be confused with chaos. In contrast with reductionism, one of the seminal complexity theorists, Edward Morin, argues for "the need for a new paradigm of complexity capable of informing all theories" (1992:371). He furthermore states: "complexity requires that one tries to comprehend the relations between the whole and the parts. The knowledge of the parts is not enough, the knowledge of the whole as a whole is not enough ... The principle of disjunction, of separation (between objects, between disciplines, between notions, between subject and object of knowledge), should be substituted by a principle that maintains the distinction, but that tries to establish the relation" (Morin, 2007:10-11). From this argument, it becomes clear that complexity scholars like Morin and Cilliers do not equate critical complexity with chaos theory (nowadays associated with VUCA) and do not regard complexity as an argument for "a 'generality' which is naively holistic or vague" (Cilliers, 2011:143).

Statement 2: Developments in complexity thinking and complexity science indicate a clear move beyond postmodern thinking to embrace a more comprehensive approach of critical complexity.

A complex system can never be fully described from a neutral or objective position. We are confined by our language, as language is merely a tool (*Calculus Ratiocinator*) to describe complexity (Heidema & Labuschagne, 2006:38). According to Cilliers (2011:144) we have to 'frame' these descriptions. As a result, normative issues always influence how systems are approached and framed (2011:144). Denial of this normative element can make our approach unnecessarily restrictive, which is typical of some postmodern thinkers who reject empiricism.

Complexity thinking is not in conflict with or opposed to empiricism or the scientific replication of results as found in a positivist approach or quantitative methodology. The difference is that, unlike positivism, findings or facts are – from a complexity thinking perspective – not seen as absolute or fixed, but relative to the context in which they occur. They are contingent in both time and space, and the decisions we take as a result of the findings are always provisional (Cilliers, 2011:151). Complexity thinking broadens the scope and context of empiricism or positivism but does not replace it. Not only can

such replacement lead to a new absolutism in thinking (such as 'empiricism is dead') but it can, in itself, represent a linear and binary approach in conflict with the very principles of complex adaptive systems.

Instead of referring to a shift (which implies a fixed, linear departure point and destination), one could rather refer to an *emerging trend or movement* towards a significant open-ended transformation of the attributes of the system in the direction of a destination or end result that is not yet clear.

This does not imply that we discard past cognitive frameworks, but that we broaden our scope to add new perspectives that add more value. In this respect, two other related conceptual approaches very useful to incorporate into our mental models, are Radical Reason coupled with a transdisciplinary mindset, and a 'metamodern' approach.

Statement 3: Radical Reason offers a contemporary and contextually relevant approach to the paradigm of strategic communication

At the end of 2022, the internationally accredited *South African Journal of Science* devoted a special issue to Radical Reason. The theme of Radical Reason, prompted by the pandemic and protests around Black Lives Matter (and more recently exacerbated by the Ukrainian war, climate change, increasing inequality, and political instability), was conceptualised as "a deliberate attempt to engage with the history of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa and to invite discussion and debate about the future of the planet. It reaffirmed a commitment to the ideal of reason but looked, deliberately, to radically enlarge its logics" (Adams & Soudien 2022:1).

Against the background of the decolonisation movement across the world, Radical Reason (Adams & Soudien 2022:1) contends that:

1. the dominant scientific narrative shaped by the Global North is in crisis and has failed to address issues of global inequality satisfactorily.
2. the scientific discourse has become "over-determined by technology" and "the hubris of the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (Adams & Soudien 2022:1).
3. precisely at a time when the humanities and social sciences should be instrumental in facilitating understanding of profound changes affecting humanity such as the Covid-19 pandemic, they are largely unresponsive.

'Radicality' is defined as the requirement that the world uses its "faculties of 'reason' to rethink themselves, to turn inwards in reflection and take stock of where they are at" via continuing interrogation and renewal of the truths and methodologies of dominant forms of knowledge (Adams & Soudien 2022:2). However, Radical Reason does not imply that any dominant forms of knowledge should be discarded, or that any alternative lines of reasoning should escape scrutiny too. Rather, tolerance in contradiction is acknowledged, while an inclusive logic should be respected.

"In this provocation, a point of departure is that the methodologies and truths of dominant forms of knowledge require constant interrogation, supplementation and renewal. It is recognised, too, that excluded forms of knowledge do not by themselves, and, in and of themselves, resolve the difficulties of dominance or the problems which dominance has precipitated; they hold in themselves, simply by virtue of their human constructedness, contradiction. Critical, in this juncture, however, is the need to confront the ways in which dominance can function to exclude certain groups and people, how science can rationalize unethical practices in the name of objectivity, and, against this, to recover subordinated epistemes and to explore their fundamentals and their elaborations to see how they may elucidate alternative lines of thinking about the predicaments in which the world finds itself. Yet these alternative lines of thinking cannot escape critical scrutiny, too, and must themselves be subject to processes of reflective regeneration." (Adams & Soudien, 2022:2).

The aim of Radical Reason is therefore to acknowledge and affirm the diverse contributions of people all over the world, in particular African thought and knowledge. This could facilitate understanding of the complexities faced in South Africa, and in responding to the complexities facing all of humanity worldwide. This will require an undoing and decolonising of (Eurocentric) assumptions that (1) "the world is naturally ordered around white supremacy" (Adams & Soudien, 2022:2), and (2) that all of life "privilege

representations of a European imaginary” (Adams & Soudien, 2022:2).

A relevant example illustrating how the dominant scientific narrative shaped by the Global North can fail to address inequality amongst its very participants, has recently been published by *The Economist* (Irving, 2023) reporting on a new diversity crisis at Oxford University. Over the past years, Oxford University’s diversity policies have encouraged the granting of access to researchers from poorer and more diverse backgrounds, but seemingly remained stuck in outdated human resources and management approaches. These researchers are then hired on fixed-term contracts to assist in maintaining the university’s position as a top globally ranked research university. However, these fixed-term employees prove to be increasingly difficult to retain as, unlike other Oxford academics, they have no access to family money and are therefore unable to make ends meet on their monthly payments (Irving, 2023). The deepening hold of managerialism and the resultant limited accountability of the modern Western university is also discussed in the special issue on Radical Reason (De Sousa Santos, Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Sudien, 2022).

Radical reason can be regarded as an extension of a transdisciplinary approach and complexity thinking. According to one of its foremost proponents, Mamphele Ramphele, “we cannot control, or even completely figure out, the complex systems of the world: but we can dance with them,” a capacity that is naturally built into Africans (Ramphele, Vogel & Reddy, 2022:20). “Dance is an invitation to cross thresholds, and then greet and engage all parties. Dance is a tool that teaches us to first learn the beat and watch how the system behaves, before you jump in” (Ramphele et al., 2022:20).

Statement 4: A premium should be placed on multidimensional, collaborative transdisciplinary approaches, coupled with a Radical Reason mindset, in studying strategic communication in contexts of diversity and complexity

A continuing, evolving process of observing and reflecting upon knowledge itself, including its value and relevance to complex emerging contexts, is a hallmark of reflexive science (Grunwald, 2004; Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016). As discussed, Radical Reason makes a strong argument for reflexive science and embraces a transdisciplinary approach (Ramphele et al., 2022:20). Instead of a “linear model of innovation”, a transdisciplinary approach argues for a “lateral model”, in which the “transformative effect of research” across diverse sectors and disciplines is emphasised (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016:2).

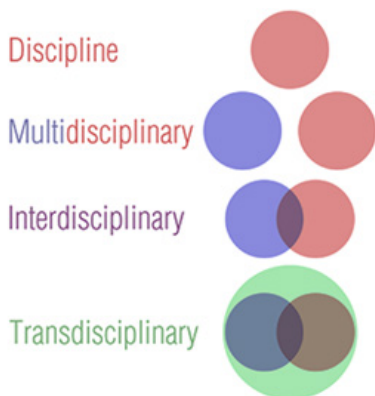


Figure 8: Transdisciplinarity as compared to disciplinarity, multi- and interdisciplinary.

Source: WordPress

As depicted in Figure 8, the transdisciplinary paradigm is “an attempt at formulating an integrative, holistic process of knowledge production that moves beyond a disciplinary, multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach” (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016:3). It is also in part a reaction against “the exacerbation of rational thought, which manifests itself through the predominance of reductionism and of a binary and linear logic” (Max-Neef, 2005). The emerging trend is thus the need for a “re-contextualisation” of science

and the "integration of knowledge paradigms that involve a multiplicity of stakeholders" (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016:2), including communities. In this respect, the adoption of transdisciplinary approaches in the research of many postgraduate students and emerging researchers in strategic communication is noted with pride, such as the work on transparadigmatic research by Seriani Morapeli (2016), and others.

Guided by the need for a research logic that transcends narrow disciplines, substantial ground has been gained by the transdisciplinary approach. A broader approach assists humanity to engage with increasingly complex and interlinked problems, including climate change, systemic unemployment, inequality, and more recently, pandemics. Similarly, former Newcastle University vice-chancellor and mathematical logician Chris Brink (2018, 2021) argues that no single science can solve these complex problems anymore as they can only be solved if science takes collective responsibility and adopts a collaborative and multidimensional approach by asking not only what it is good **at** (typical of linear disciplinary excellence approaches), but what it is good **for** (lateral, transdisciplinary and collaborative).

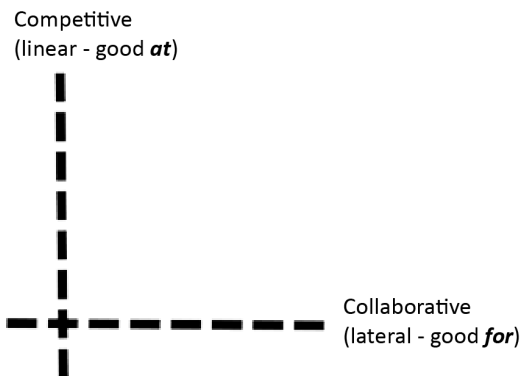


Figure 9: A multidimensional approach to research

Source: Own representation of Brink's approach (2018, 2021) adapted from Overton-de Klerk & Muir (2022).

Statement 5: Within a complexity framework and African context, metamodernism as an alternative paradigmatic lens warrants further exploration in the study of strategic communication

Over the last decade, academic interest in the notion of metamodernism has increased significantly. Whether metamodernism can be regarded as a paradigm or a movement can be debated in the academic community, but it certainly presents fresh food for thought and certainly appears to be compatible with complexity thinking.

Whilst the term 'metamodernism' has been in use since 1975, it has been the subject of academic engagement since 2010 (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Some of the most salient contributions on metamodernism have been made by Hanzi Freinacht, which is the pen name for the writings of political philosopher and sociologist Daniel Görtz and his co-author Emil Ejner Friis (Freinacht 2015, 2017, 2023). In 2021, American philosopher J.A.J. Storm published *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* as a novel method and revolutionary manifesto for critical scholarly research in the humanities, social sciences, and politics (Storm, 2021). In South Africa, Meyer and Barker have done important work in developing a metamodern model for stakeholder relationship management (Meyer & Barker, 2020), while Barker and Hanekom (2022) developed a metamodern interpretive theoretical framework to highlight the role of knowledge sharing and user generated content on digital platforms.

In contrast with modernism which had its beginnings with the scientific revolution in the 17th century, and postmodernism which arose in the last century as a critical perspective of science and knowledge, metamodernism offers a new alternative to postmodern skepticism, towards a more inclusive theory. It is also regarded as a philosophy that corresponds with the postindustrial, digitalised, global age in which new ways of both progress and knowledge can materialise (Storm, 2021). In their blog *Metamoderna*, Freinacht describes metamodernism as a worldview "which combines the modern faith in progress with

the postmodern critique. What you get then, is a view of reality in which people are on a long, complex developmental journey towards greater complexity and existential depth" (Metamoderna, 2023). "... the metamodernist stands in the smoking ruins of modernity's once almighty grand narrative of rational thought, demolished by the superior forces of postmodernity, left to be rebuilt by posterior generations. This is the great objective of Metamodernism, to erect a new grand narrative by combining all known knowledge and wisdom, well aware that it is a never-ending endeavor and that the only achievable synthesis is a proto-synthesis, forever subjected to critique and never without flaws." (Metamoderna, 2023).

According to Freinacht (2015), the "metamodernist gets no satisfaction from only describing the world, when actual explanations are just beyond the horizon. What is, is just as interesting as what *isn't*. The metamodern mind has the courage to be vulnerable by making mistakes and reach faulty conclusions."

This view closely corresponds with Cilliers and Nicolescu's seminal work on complexity and transdisciplinarity: "The world is at the same time knowable and unknowable. We cannot deal with reality in all its complexity. The irreducible mystery of the world coexists with the wonders discovered by reason" (2012:718).

A metamodern narrative is built by 'both-and' thinking. "It is not just taking the best from modernity and postmodernity, or finding a middle ground between these two poles, nor is it the ability to reach a compromise. No, it is the ability to synthesize apparent opposites and from theses and anti-theses construct new syntheses." (Freinacht, 2015). According to Freinacht (2015), this is how apparent paradoxes that modernists and postmodernists struggle to address satisfactorily, can be transcended. "Objective science or subjective hermeneutics? Both-and. Heritage or environment? Both-and. Biological determinism or cultural adaptation? Both-and. Matter or spirit? Both-and, baby-doll. Wholes or parts, wholeparts! Both positions bear seeds of truth, but only the metamodern mind knows how to construct feasible syntheses and understands the intimate relationship between both exterior and interior conditions, physical and social variables. That we are 100% biological animals and 100% culturally adapted beings, not 50/50."

Once again, this synthesis appears to be wholly in line with Morin's complexity approach which calls for a "manner of thinking capable of establishing a dynamic and generative feedback loop" between the whole and the parts (Morin, 1992:371). Not one **or** the other, but **both-and** are important. "Life is a cluster of emergent qualities resulting from the process of interaction and organization between the parts and the whole, a cluster which itself retroactively affects the parts, the interactions, and the partial and global processes that produced it" (Morin 1992:374). This view is interestingly echoed by neuroscientist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist in a recent interview entitled *Left-brain thinking will destroy civilisation*: "... relationships are primary. The things we notice only become what they are because of the relationships" (McGilchrist & Sayers, 2023).

Other key aspects of metamodernism that, according to Benecke and Phumo (2021), could be further explored in strategic communication within an African context include environmental responsiveness, the influence of human actions on the sustainability of natural resources; the inclusivity of the marginalised together with opportunities for individual recognition and holarchical organisational structures, which acknowledge both hierarchical and collaborative structures as units of analysis and the self-organising nature of structures.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

At this point, it is appropriate to return full circle to the 2013 article on emerging paradigm shifts, which concluded that "there is a need for a balanced, creative approach to both modernism and postmodernism ... (which) can be achieved through integral approaches aimed at reducing complexity" (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013:377). In view of the five statements discussed before, this conclusion now gives pause for reflection, in which the following needs to be conceded:

1. The conclusion implies a binary linear approach or 'shift', casting modernism and postmodernism along with all its accompanying shifts, at extreme ends of a spectrum or continuum.

2. The conclusion implies that a balance or compromise between modernism and postmodernism can be struck, as also noted by Meyer and Barker (2020). A non-linear complexity approach that oscillates like "a pendulum swinging between ... innumerable poles" (Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2010) would be preferable.
3. Complexity cannot be reduced. The relative complexity of a subsystem can be reduced, but the mystery of the world will always be irreducible.

It also leads to another concession, which is that we cannot impose any kind of 'wokeness' upon complexity. Because of complexity, we will always find ourselves in (non-arbitrary) hierarchies of some sort – systems within systems, smaller subsystems within larger systems, in which the wholes and the parts are recursively interlinked as observed by Morin (1992). Human beings are more complex than trees, frogs more complex than rocks, aeroplanes more complex than bicycles, and digital societies more complex than industrial societies. (Even about these degrees of complexity there are no finite answers yet.) As Cilliers (2011:144) observes, "the very structures which make meaning possible introduce distortion in the system of relationships. These structures ... can therefore not be final, but are in constant transformation, both through external intervention and by their own dynamics."

The point is that complexity exists. It is not possible to deal with reality in all its complexity, and we cannot subject what we don't know to what we know or what corresponds with our own experience. Nor to the language in which we frame those experiences. It is as important to respect what we don't know as what we know. Just because we don't know about it now, does not mean it doesn't exist. It must also be acknowledged that what we now regard as common knowledge, could have been regarded as mystery, complexity, or utter 'chaos' three centuries ago. By the same token, what is regarded as complexity now, may be common knowledge in 2323.

This paper could only touch the tip of the iceberg and has paid more attention to the paradigm than practice of strategic communication. In paving the journey forward, some implications for practice will be identified below, subject to further exploration and refinement, followed by a short conclusion for the paradigm.

Implications for practice

- **Both-and** applies in practice too, and context matters. While it may be easy enough for managers to encourage bottom-up agency and dialogue when things are stable, the very same managers may revert to authoritarian managerialism when they, or their employees, perceive things to be uncertain. (This may also be the reason why populist leaders have such a following during times of disruption or uncertainty.)
- At the same time, complex-adaptive systems imply resilience and anti-fragility. Continue steering through complexity, pushing beyond the hierarchy of bosses, investing in human capital, and being intentional about culture. As Peter Drucker famously remarked, 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' and remains the most sustainable advantage for companies going forward into the future (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023; McKinsey, 2020). In the spirit of Radical Reason, however, it should be noted that imported culture and communication programmes developed in the Global North and Silicon Valley need to be contextualised and adapted within an Afrocentric environment.
- Reflect anew upon the meaning of sustainability, by asking, for instance, whether the United Nations sustainable development goals for 2030 are still remotely achievable. In line with a complexity approach, it may be more realistic to redefine sustainability as "the ability to live with complexity" (Overton-de Klerk & Muir, 2022:382) and, instead of trying to suppress complexity in the workplace "we should learn to live with it and concentrate upon managing, minimising and balancing risks" (Pawson, 2020:17).
- Understand that digital sustainability and digital governance will become the defining competitive differentiators of our time. As Azionya (2022) observes, a deep take has become essential to equip ourselves with the tools to not only understand, but to master digital complexity, 4IR

technology (and now 5IR human-machine collaborations), chatbots, and digital humans, and how to manage risk and advantages. How harmonious human-machine collaborations in 5IR will turn out to be and whether it will improve greater societal well-being remains an open question as “the ethical and humane use of technology will become paramount” (Noble et al., 2022:206). At the same time, businesses will have to invest in collaborative, transdisciplinary research to overcome digital inequality and other wicked challenges by asking themselves not only what they are good **at**, but good **for**. Every business should be questioning themselves as to how they respond to these challenges, with whom they collaborate, and what evidence they can show for their efforts. This should apply across communication and media disciplines too, particularly when genres are becoming increasingly blurred due to greater fluidity – especially of technological boundaries. There is much truth in Tomaselli’s remark: “We are all in the house together” (2018a:313). Relationships are indeed primary.

- In addition, a form of ‘guard railing’ (democratically sensitive gatekeeping or filtering) may need to be explored as safeguard against fake news and communication hegemony of new platform hierarchies and networks, particularly as trust in all information sources is exceptionally low (Edelman, 2021). While the concept of gatekeeping is often seen to be contrary to freedom of speech and often confused with censorship, the right to reliable and factually accurate information, and the practice of vetting source credibility, are also entrenched in democracies. It may even call for “a new centrality of public relations” to fill the vacuum created by the loss of journalism’s gatekeeping and quality control functions (O’Regan, 2018:12).
- Finally, bear in mind that loss of trust coincides with a gradual implosion of governments and big business worldwide who struggle with sustainability, particularly as a result of the pandemic. This has led to a new emerging trend towards collaboration with ecosystems and communities that have increasingly transformed into self-organising, autonomous subsystems exerting far more power than before (Putnam & Garrett, 2020). According to Interbrand, this trend is also very evident in branding aimed at communities as the new consumer constituencies (Ricca, 2020).

Conclusions for the paradigm

Embrace complexity thinking as overarching lens. Subject the emerging paradigm of strategic communication to reflective regeneration in the spirit of radical reason, with a transdisciplinary mindset. Broaden the scope and include more logics and lenses, including metamodernism. Subject all new logics to reflective regeneration, as by the very nature of their human construction and framing they too will hold contradiction and cannot escape critical scrutiny. By the same token, do not discard what we know, what we have, or what works. Do not discard empirical findings or quantitative methodologies simply because they belong to a modernist worldview. Assess their validity relationally and contextually and decide where and when they apply, as conflicting truths can co-exist. Continue building on emergence (already captured in our current paradigm), as emergence towards open-ended outcomes is very much part of complexity thinking. At the same time, do not box emergence into postmodernism alone. Move beyond boxes, labels, siloes and paradigm wars. Move from singular, disciplinary, linear approaches towards collaborative, lateral and transformative open-ended solutions. As and when the context dictates, focus on the parts, the whole, the wholes within wholes, **and** their reciprocal relationship to one another – the ‘wholeparts’ – perhaps as new unit of analysis. Always remembering that things become what they are because of the relationships.

Above all, leave space for irreducible mystery.

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