Strategic Communication Futures: Paradigm and Practice in a Polycrisis World

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Abstract

This article responds to Nina Overton-de Klerk's intervention that offers a critical and transdisciplinary overview of the current state of the discipline of strategic communication, and of its future potentials. Our critical engagement originates within the context of Overton-de Klerk's intervention, published in the contemporary conjuncture of polycrisis. Our self-reflexive study examines the significance of the discipline in relation to the social and political economic concerns of the broader cultural and media studies paradigm. The interlinkages between these fields/disciplines are examined in interdisciplinary nodal relations rather than as separated modular conceptual units. The issue of disciplinary identity is then discussed within the contemporary South African research context. A key argument is that knowledge of the history of paradigms is necessary to make appropriate methodological choices in relation to the researcher's own position within the contending paradigms. Some suggestions are offered for the way ahead that involve transdisciplinary approaches rather than modular epistemological separations.

Keywords

Communication, critical management studies, cultural and media studies, disciplinary imagination, researcher position

INTRODUCTION

Nina Overton-de Klerk's (2023) wide-ranging overview reflects on the current state and future of the paradigm and practice of strategic communication. Her timely intervention is provocative towards new terrains in which strategic communication is taking place, with pragmatic recommendations offered. The outright takeaway from Overton-de Klerk's work is that the lexical understanding of strategic communication as a steady state cybernetic is now challenged by recent changes in global scenarios. These changes necessitate a shift from the demure process of communication to a more proactive stance readied for a world of dynamic crisis that includes destructive phenomena such as unpredictable climate change. This is a world in which the object of communication is no longer clear. More innovative approaches to rethinking strategic communication are needed that can account for global multipolarity and cultural plurality.

We thus read Overton-de Klerk's paper as a keen introspection of, first, the new norms of sensemaking occasioned by new global realities and, second, as an urgent call to action for a new concept of such sensemaking. Overton-de Klerk's insights in this direction demonstrate a keen commitment to embracing the urgent yet overdue task of rethinking strategic communication, where the most pressing issue is not

merely the crises in which such communication occurs but in reassessing the resulting interrelationships. It is for this reason that we join this effort in the spirit of professional collegiality from a cultural and media studies perspective. We re-assess the interrelationship between academia and its management, aiming to recuperate publication as a dialogue between scholars and policymakers and rescue our work from being administratively marginalised as mere 'productivity units.'

The common good is indicated in Overton-de Klerk's subsequent writings, but especially in *The Human Bridge: Racial Healing in South Africa* (Fuhr & De Klerk, 2024). In this work, the two authors demonstrate a new way of thinking about the post-apartheid crisis, one hinged on human consciousness as a vehicle towards post-racial nationhood. They also relocate the focus of communication from legislative and political processes initially prioritised post-1990s to cognitive-leaning self-motivated communication. Here is where the messages and their meanings – including behavioural change that allows for a less race-conscious post-apartheid South Africa – are relegated to the individual citizens nostalgically recalling the United Democratic Front's bygone days of non-racialism.

Thus, studying these works in relation to the authors' rapidly changing perspectives in communication studies casts a critical light on the paradigms that were in contestation globally and locally during the 1980s and 1990s. Their dialectical engagement within and between epistemological histories is key to their conceptual progress, which is evident in Overton-de Klerk's (2023) self-reflexive overview of strategic communication studies as it develops beyond the earlier narrow, functionalist and now outdated frame of public relations in South Africa.

The new scope contemplated by Overton-de Klerk, which has motivated our engagement in this article, is characterised by combinatorial rather than exclusionary thinking. The epistemological leap anticipated in new scoping can be extended conceptually towards contemporary global trends now at the forefront of reactive policies worldwide. Strategic communication of the future arises from networked global chaos: the aftermath of mass immigration to Europe and the USA, elusive protectionist economic policies, geo-political intimations of an intensely fragmentary world, and the rise of individual agency in government communication – as is the case with the X platform founder's very recent central role in US global communication policy and sectional corporate state dominance. The new strategic communication paradigm is thus tasked to be proactive against such eventualities in global information flow and the associated influences on communication practices. Likewise, the communication paradigm is now playing catch up with these unpredictable scenarios.

HYBRIDISATION

One of the foci of the Overton-de Klerk analysis relates to the work of Sonja Verwey. Verwey's talent was to hybridise her conceptual orbit, like bringing Michel Foucault into her analysis of strategic communication models, much as did the Australian affirmative application of Foucault's concept of governmentality (see Burchill et al., 1991) with regard to cultural policy research. This Foucauldian Australian policy paradigm was adopted in the mid-1990s in South Africa by the newly established Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (see Tomaselli, 2021). These adaptions, one of them read through the Freedom Charter and published in both English and Afrikaans as the official statement of an official conference on monuments, were an unexpected breakthrough at the time (Coetzee and van der Waal, 1988:489–501).

Hybridisation is also evident in the work of Dalien René Benecke and Sonja Verwey (2020) who draw in key scholars from within the broader cultural and media studies community, such as the humanistically inclined but diverse post-Marxist political economists Ernesto Laclau and Chantelle Mouffe (1985), whose agonistic framework acknowledged conflict as a positive force for social change. Also cited is Jurgen Habermas's (1991) argument that involuntary exposure to dissident ideas can contribute to discourses within public spheres. They also reference Nick Couldry et al.'s (2014) theory of the social aspects of digital infrastructures. While such hybridisation has an inherent risk, that is, the danger of half-baked compromises, Nothhaft and Overton-de Klerk (2025) discuss this problem in strategic communication. The Overton-de Klerk article thus draws on media studies while charting the commonalities, differences and contradictions between these contending and similar paradigms. Similarly, in compiling and editing

Making Sense of Research, Tomaselli (2018) offers an interdisciplinary understanding hailing both strategic communication and cultural and media scholars, showing where their respective preferred paradigms fit in, and how the very different disciplines, often in mortal epistemological combat, interact with, elaborate on and/or ignore each other. Such studies arise from the different and same historical conjunctures, paradigmatic trajectories and histories. These tensions always sit very uneasily – but potentially productively – in academic environments. The paradigmatic synergies can also deliver inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary traction, as is argued below.

We can start with cultural studies and Marxist communication studies, where strategic communication was seen to be an adjunct to what was known in the 1980s as administrative research, doing the work of capital in an antagonistic relation to the working and subaltern classes. For this critique, accounting was the study of money as power, power relations and power flows. Although at the micro level, of course, balancing a firm's books was the mandated technical professional objective. It was cultural and media studies that critically examined relations and modes of production, and its accounting practices, with a view to enabling their democratisation (see Lehman and Moore, 1992). Yet, 30 years later, in January 2021, 16 academics were targeted for redundancy by the University of Leicester School of Business because they had published articles in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, a journal launched by Hofstra University in 1990 where Lehman and Moore then worked. The Head of the College of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (a sociologist) stated that management research should not be informed by a sociological perspective. The journal editors issued a rejoinder protesting this as a risk to academic freedom.[1]

Comparably, accounting in the Soviet Union was a tightly controlled, centralised information-gathering state surveillance function geared to ensuring collectivist distributive compliance (Diakonoff, 1929). The move to defer accounting to the government while tapping into its process for governance and control is noteworthy, for it maintains the illusion of independence while advancing underhand control mechanisms. Diakonoff (1929:32) describes this scenario:

> There is little left to the accountant's imagination and understanding. Practically everything is predetermined and prescribed in the exhaustive instructions of controlling centers. He is told how to construct his balance-sheet, and even the correlation of accounts is being established in such a way as to preclude incorrect posting and errors in describing operations.

British cultural studies during the 1970s had evolved to questioning the anti-humanist, anti-democratic and compliance-led utterly repressive Stalinist state (see Connell & Hilton, 2016; Hall, 1980; Johnson, 1979). In this communist economy, low levels of bookkeeping mechanisation (Campbell, 1958) and perverse factory incentives resulted in inflation of statistics that masked systemic underproduction across all sectors. Soviet accountants tended to fudge the errors of incompetent planners whose work plan quotas rarely matched the needs of consumers and citizens (Diakonoff, 1929:33).[2] Of course, this also occurs with capitalism, a recent example being Boeing's elevated short-term shareholder value at the expense of necessary factory quality control and passenger and crew safety with regard to its accident-prone 737-800 Max (George, 2024).

The critical management studies approach draws on similar historical materialist readings as did early cultural and media studies (see Goldman, 2021). Geoff Goldman's 2023 inaugural address on management studies and academic roaming, written in autoethnographic vein, for example, mentions Overton-de Klerk's work as one of his reference points. The Goldman Inaugural was contextualised in its journal of publication with two traumatic self-reflexive commentaries on the Middle East conflict, authored by a South African Israeli (Bethlehem, 2002) and a Palestinian (Jayyusi, 2002), in the *Critical Arts* Rapid Communication section. While Goldman does not mention the war, his lecture offers a prescient framework for considering management issues within these wider currents of contesting power blocs that are powered by various fractions of capital (whether legitimate or illegitimate, capitalist or socialist, familial or theocratic). His lecture draws attention to the issue of researcher position and subjectivity

in the relations that are being studied. He thus writes about how he roamed, found, but lacked fit with prevailing and dominant management theory. He later – with great relief – discovered that he did fit with the critical version, in which he is now a leading South African scholar.

Historically, strategic communication studies were the methodological backbone of South African Communication Association (Sacomm) conferences, now also complemented with the new frameworks devised by the Stellenbosch University South African Research Chair in Science Communication that, in its second cycle, focuses on communication for social justice. This Chair draws much more on cultural and media studies in mediating between the scientific and the popular issues-driven research that connects science and society. The Chair's first cycle (2015–2021) involved Science Communication Theory and Science Communication Practice. The project explored perceptions of theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues as impacted by public discourse, cultural and religious belief systems, and media and digital sources of information (see, for example, Weingart & Taubert, 2017).

How to retain the best (methodological) elements of the Verwey/Overton meshed approach that is negotiating these seeming schisms is the question for us today, one that requires the kinds of interparadigmatic synergies suggested by Overton-de Klerk. We are in the age of polycrisis, a term that has entered the corporate risk lexicon and is intensively debated at the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF). WEF inaugurated the term in The Global Risks Report (WEF, 2023:57), where it is defined as "a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part". Polycrisis then informs the rest of the discussions on natural resources crisis (conceptualised through parameters of control, competition, constraints and collaboration), and climate and cooperation. But the term is older, as the report acknowledges. Adam Tooze (2022) of Columbia University revitalised the term polycrisis when he applied it to reiterate how global economic crises aggregated with other global crises to comprise an even more disastrous event for humanity. He points us towards Jean-Claude Juncker (2016:1) who uses polycrisis to describe the then crisis in the European Union: "Our various challenges – from the security threats in our neighbourhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, and to the UK referendum – have not only arrived at the same time. They also feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people".

Tooze further inferences Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern's (1999) inauguration of the term in their book *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millenium*. Of polycrisis, they observe (1999:74):

> In fact, there are inter-retroactions between the different problems, crises, and threats. Such is also the case for the problems of health, population, the environment, lifestyle, civilization, and development. So it is also with the crisis of the future, which promotes virulent nationalisms, economic instability, and general balkanization, all of this through inter-retroactions. From a wider perspective, the crisis of the anthroposphere and that of the biosphere are mutually implicative, as are the crises of the past, present, and future.

In all these cases, polycrisis is underpinned by the occurrence of multiple simultaneous catastrophic events, both domestically and internationally, and with regard to environmental stress. This could result in possibly uncontrollable effects (Peregrine, 2023).

This resurgence of polycrisis in different global epochs is not coincidental. The term anticipates a new way of thinking and approaching the world. It also makes crisis a mainstay framework for thinking about the planet as a whole. While such global distress with divergent sources of crisis is not experienced for the first time in the three periods marked by the above references, there is a significant benefit in paying attention to how this thinking begins to permeate the academe and to what end. The erstwhile separate approaches to theory of global ideas are now overshadowed by their aggregation with others. Not only that, but their tangential advantage gets shoved by other forces as intellectuals contemplate, without the capacity to figure out, which crisis precedes the other: is it politics, climate, religious extremism, economic downturns, wars, natural resources, violence, identity or health, and so on. Polycrisis thus extends the boundaries of disciplinary theory to allow for less rigid relations between disciplines (evacuating the

advantage of disciplinary precision on which many theories were developed). We are thinking of the complexity of expanding, for instance, Marxism, and making it agile enough to be incepted into, for instance, liberalism, as was the case with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the late 1970s and 1980s under the leadership of Richard Johnson and Stuart Hall. Their analysis of the relationship between domination and resistance offers a critique of both capitalism and communism in searching for a third humanistic way between the two extractive and socially exploitative systems.

Upon reflection, then, polycrisis has become a productive way of thinking and of approaching academic theory. It signals the end of theoretical singularity and the onset of a new horizon of multi-planar theory responsive to the nebulous context in which humans encounter nature today. In this case, the disciplinary cocoons are expanding and being engulfed, with indistinguishable frontiers becoming the norm. What was once a clear-cut task for the communication or media theorist is now incepted with combinatorial multi-disciplinary contexts. Polycrisis ushers the innings for new theory building that shifts from the familiar discipline-specific nomenclature. There is now a new direction towards a theory of theories that considers the umbrella of global crisis. The age of global theory, with its emphasis on cosmopolitan reasoning, radical globalism and modernity (see Browning, 2011) is a fitting example of this new approach to global thinking. It is foundational to our rethinking theory building against the backdrop of a polycrisis world, in this case, within strategic communication.

A VAGUE AND BAGGY MONSTER

Cultural and media studies has become what Raymond Williams (1989) called "a vague and baggy monster". Within each component, whether cultural and media studies, journalism, strategic communication or critical management studies, there are contesting strands, contradictions, oppositions and incompatibilities. These are what we need to address in exploring our subject positions, as did Goldman, with regard to whatever trajectories we are each negotiating. Such negotiation is what Overton-de Klerk (2023:4) is offering:

> ...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.

We now address several nodes that are important to the discussions that follow from this conclusion.

First is the prognosis that theories of the world can no longer be monologic in any disciplinary reasoning. The logic binding the parts and whole, which Overton-de Klerk mentions, is such that this relationship has become a priority, if not the kernel of all meaningful global thinking. In other words, the location of thought is now focused on the interlinkages where the complexity is to be found. The shift taking place is from modular to nodular, that is, from disciplinary compartments to interdisciplinary, multi-epochal and multi-temporal nodes as the new sites of thinking (Browning, 2011:82):

> The global does not merely locate points on a map of the present because the current idea of the world is defined in part by preceding notions of the world. The old and the new are not simply rivals jostling for a position of pre-eminence, but co-operative elements of an on-going enterprise of construction.

This is perhaps the sense that Overton-de Klerk (2023:4) talks about – "the reciprocal relationship between the parts and the whole" – now being interpreted here as an inference to a collaborative view of polycrisis.

Second, we also single out Overton-de Klerk's ideas of Radical Reason and metamodernism as a productively debatable idea to polycrisis thinking and its implications in rethinking strategic communication. Overton-de Klerk's extensive appraisal is that the discipline is now located at various interchanges. These are modernism/postmodernism, reflexive/reflective, functional/co-creational, normative/critical, strategy/strategic-emergence, agent/agency, and disciplinary/transdisciplinary (2023:6–8). She contrasts these trends with various facets of post-COVID crises in strategic communication (2023:9–11), thereby incepting her idea of radical reason, which interacts with radical global theory already proposed by Browning (2011:130) who terms it "a name to stand for all those who aim to achieve a radical change in the ways social practices across the globe are currently conducted". Browning calls this theory "an antagonism to current modes of globalisation, but not a rejection of the global in itself"(2011:130). Morphing this thinking to Overton-de Klerk's effort to re-formulate the binaries of pro-or-anti thinking into and–and framework (as evident in her quadrant of normative critical axis (2023:12)), we can argue that her approach to polycrisis thinking productively conjures a proximal correlation between disciplines, where theorising in one produces striations in the other. In challenging cross-disciplinary rigidities, she establishes a new lane for future theory and paradigm. The concern and observation are that this new framework has arrived before a critical mass of academy and industry professionals have been recruited. What to do about this imbalance is a matter we now must consider urgent, as it touches on both the lag in disciplinary education and the imbalance in thinking and application of strategic communication in the absence of such a balance.

With these two points – significance of nodes and a striated approach to theory – in mind, we thus attend to the matter of polycrisis thinking and its imperatives in higher education research. Our concern is how it can plug into the actual training on the nuts and bolts of doing research. Given the output pressures of the student funding system, our graduates may know only the single static textbook method or reified ahistoricised theory as they have applied it in their individual theses. They need to be exposed to the wider inventory and history of methods that could be applied to any single research question, from qualitative to quantitative, from modelling to less numerical, qualitative and/or hybrid applications. Further, instead of replicating these in facsimile science (see Muller, 2022), we should be adapting, improving and indigenising/recontextualising such techniques. Where to start, and how, is the big task.

On "where", we are not calling for an overhaul of university research training, but for approaches that would allow students to be actively engaged in producing new knowledge rather than just replicating it (as in facsimile science). On "how", our observation concerns the difficulties of doing research as inherently conceptual and procedural, and the consequences as sub-optimal awareness of how nodes across disciplines may be helpful in improved research awareness. The disparate approach that delinks thinking across disciplines also denies the research student an opportunity to see how they fit with other disciplines (and worldviews). A strategic communication researcher who does not fully connect with the techno–social horizons misses out on the benefits of the nodes connecting the two hybridising disciplines. This loss is, of course, conceptual, and is easily missed in casually assessing research from the rigid disciplinary concern or the structured thinking that decouples research from its possible cross-disciplinary intersections.

A breakthrough effort in this direction was registered by Kenenth Harrow (2022) whose work straddles cinema studies and quantum physics, a gigantic cross-disciplinary leap that demonstrates not only the viability of nodal thinking, but its necessity to expand knowledge horizons. The idea is not to theorise less of either discipline but to create an aggregate whole that may contribute more than the individual parts. The same can be said of strategic communication and other disciplines. Where polycrisis continues to influence global thought on formulating theories of the human world, a polytheoretical framework could be an advantageous consideration. The object is to recover the "how to" do research within the broader and baggy discourses that regularly float through academia onto which students fasten with little sense of epistemological derivation, historical context or terminological specificity. Our hypothesis, then, is that much more can be accomplished in research and society by productively harnessing this potential of conflicting disciplinary concerns.

THE BENEFITS OF HISTORY AND DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY

On epistemological derivation, diversity is a strength. The disciplinary history of the two authors of this analysis leans towards reverse conceptual trajectories: one from African cinema studies into studies of urbanism, while the other moved from quantitative urban analysis into qualitative cultural and media studies. The experiences of the first author as an undergraduate student merits a mention in this regard. As a former practising urban geographer, he had grappled with seemingly unrelated disciplines such as climatology, meteorology, surveying, hydrology, geomorphology, urban, economic, cultural and human geography, numerical methods and intuitive modular approaches. Until taught a nodal history and philosophy of science/geography course during the second year of study, the class had no idea why all these disciplines were located within a single department and discipline. Indeed, the discipline of urban geography soon thereafter imported cultural studies concepts into its domain (see Eyles and Smith, 1988; Harvey, 1989). Similarly, the co-author originates from the field of African cinema but ended up researching Africa's urbanism. This research brought together film studies and urban science, using semiotics to develop cultural theories of such cities (Mututa, 2021). Subsequently, his research fell within an engineering department under the African Centre for Cities and he developed further theory on how cinema studies may intersect with urban studies. This experimentation exemplifies the node-based approach to research, where points of connection are sought between traditionally disparate disciplines. We mention this convergence if only to underline our argument about the integral nature of social science of which the Overton-de Klerk prognosis is a contemporary exemplar.

On the historical context, we should discuss history as a tradition of doing research. It is also a resource for supplying content to our contemporary inquiry. In the former, contemporary students must acquaint themselves with the "how" and "why" of research by looking back to how knowledge has been historically produced. This allows responsible and responsive research beyond the structured synchronic and fad-research culture where we cling to any new theme of the day as bogey for missing out (COVID-19 was a huge research terminology not so long ago, and now we are angling towards the Climate Change theme). The latter refers to earlier canonical scholarship in communication and other allied disciplines, which we use here to undergird our discussions. They are the intellectual foundation on which we may scion new ways of thinking. For this reason, they remain fundamental components of contemporary thought.

With regard to terminology, the problem is larger than the technicalities of discipline-specific research or even cross-disciplinary prospects. Terminology specifies our research; it allows us to organically fit within our respective – always hybridising – fields, hopefully now more nodal and modular in character. It is not a single term but a purview of orientated frameworks that allow us access to theories, methods and literature within the field of communication. It is imperative that postgraduate research students become acquainted with how these aspects are connected in research to guard against the culture of "fairy" research.

The crucial nodal question that was so effectively addressed in the first author's second year of study was, "What is geography?" The answer then was "The study of the organisation of space". That was the Eureka moment, as it is also in film studies that involve time–space relations of organisation of the film frame. That's when the class began to make sense of the discipline of geography as a whole and of their respective researcher positions within it, no matter the spread of sub-disciplines within the overall field that comprises environmental studies.

All disciplines have historically addressed the question of conceptual identity. Verwey (2015:16), for example, cites Karl Weick (1989) who argues in a generic vein that theory building best results from "multiple thought trials from various perspectives". His caveat is that this is impossible in a field lacking "disciplinary imagination" where evolutionary processes are analogous to artificial selection. Verwey observes that such a lack had afflicted earlier South African public relations and communication scholarship. C Wright Mills (1959) proposed "the sociological imagination" (thinking like sociologists) and David Harvey (1990) proposed "the geographical (space–time) imagination". The Birmingham School, for a long time headed by Stuart Hall, considered cultural and media studies to embrace the study of "the popular" as forms of resistance to determining hegemonies (whether capitalist or communist), as

serviced by positivist technical intellectuals doing "administrative research" (with its specific disciplinary imagination serving prevailing power structures). This approach, which focused on power relations, contrasted with the mid-1980s "Ferment in the Field" moment centred on the 1983 edition of *Journal of Communication*, then edited by George Gerbner when the critical and administrative paradigms squared off against each other. The value of historical interventions and the potentialities to map the contradictions and similarities between different paradigms gain due traction in Overton-de Klerk's work as she tries to reshape strategic communication studies into the unpredictable epoch that we are now entering.

The Overton-de Klerk overview offers a similar discussion about what we do, or think we are doing, with regard to the many variants that constitute "communication studies". She cites Tom O'Regan's (2018) South African Communication Association keynote, which, following one by Michael Morgan (2006), addressed such questions in Australia and the USA, respectively (O'Regan also contributed to the formation of early South African cultural policy). Both had bridged the divide between cultural and media studies on the one hand and corporate/strategic communication studies on the other, in a then rapidly globalising integral world.

COVID-19, however, wrecked the global supply chain between 2020 and 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine 2022 saw the withdrawal of Western firms from Russia. Then the Yemen-based Houthi attacked ships in the Red Sea from October 2023. These actions pre-empt us to rethink how to understand the world as integrating or fragmenting. The crisis is further complicated by other global policies, such as China's curtailing of its "foreignerization" policy and the fervent MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement. Even the European Union does not find it easy to step in to protect the hard-won gains of the Enlightenment, as it is dealing with its own internal problems, especially the chaos from the overwhelming influx of refugees from the Middle East, North Africa and Ukraine that is putting national cultural cohesion at risk. Polycrisis today means an imminent risk that globalisation may stall, the Cold War may return, authoritarianism may spread, and refugees and migrants may be exiled to their countries of origin. Rationality and reason are in danger of being replaced with isolationist, nationalist, anti-scientific, superstition-led, victimological conspiracy discourses. A further inexorable crisis is climate change, the unexpected speed with which it is now occurring and the curious incapacity of humans to mitigate the conditions of their own extinction, the tipping point being now upon us (McKay et al., 2022). For South Africa, the crisis has come in the form of de-industrialisation, which has resulted from the failure of our national, regional and city infrastructures, institutions and services since state capture.[3] As Overton-de Klerk in an email dated 26 February 2025 observes of the above paragraph:

> ... the pendulum (a key symbol in metamodern thinking) has swung again, ostensibly to the far right. However, in polycrisis and complexity, the movement between left and right and vice versa is too binary, too simplistic and predictable. In polycrisis, the movement of the pendulum resembles more the chaotic "dance" of the double pendulum. Which at some moment (a bifurcation point – or tipping point as you call it) can become stationary and swing in any direction, depending on the ability to seize the moment and come up with something new. Howard Nothhaft and I introduce the double pendulum and discuss the implications for strategic communication.

Under these kinds of extreme circumstance, the Overton-de Klerk article is a potential game changer in the overarching discussion about strategic communication studies through the periods of modernism, postmodernism and the subjective fragmented experiences of metamodernism. It is especially instrumental in combatting the rivalry between disciplinary paradigms in communication studies, much as has happened between theatre and medicine, or sensor technology and geographical navigation. Yet, even then, the unresolved challenge is alleviating communication complexities, such as hierarchical thinking, and its continued significance in the cross-disciplinary production of theory. This also has real-world implications in, among other environments, the corporate environments in which communication scholars operate.

COMPLIANCE

Many parts of the world (including businesses and universities) are regressing into top-down mechanisms of communication, stressed labour relations and sometimes brutal forms of governance. Compliance has become the driving principle in firms, organisations, universities and government departments. One aspect that needs to be added to such discussions is how communication has led to the corporatisation of individuals. This occurs when performance-reward parameters for each member of an organisation "privatises" their performance. For example, self-filled and signed performance contracting, subsequently collated in an overall performance sheet, converts what was once a private proposition into a metric. This implies one's corporate worth where employees are reduced to their job descriptions. In the USA today, this is being used as a reason for termination. This deprives the institution of much value in that an individual is discouraged from participating beyond doing their job "as per the description".

A classic local example was Overton-de Klerk's mention of Tomaselli and Marc Caldwell's (2019) analysis of the merged University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) that had authorised the managerialist technique of adversarial internal communication between 2004 and 2007. The practice of the director of Corporate Communication, previously an activist professor of sociology, had been "transformed" within a rapidly corporatising, massifying and economically stressed environment into an authoritarian management style that forgot the sage lessons of effective management theory. That populist-authoritarian (but not "popular") discourse had claimed "transformation" to justify coercive administrative change. But, in fact, it had the result of achieving the opposite: mass resistance (Chetty & Merrett, 2014).

The study of the UKZN corporate communication practice, commissioned from the office of the Vice Chancellor, thus had real consequences for real people and a real institution, then engaged in a kind of capital (the, if itself divided, UKZN executive)–labour (deans, academics, support, administrative and service staff) struggle, one that has since become unabashedly nationally criminal in practice (see, for example, Jansen, 2023). UKZN is recurringly buffeted by millions of rands in damage to its physical infrastructure. "What will I say to [our donors]"? about these continuing "acts of lunacy" was the current UKZN Vice Chancellor's anguished cry.[4] Failing consensual and mutually devised strategic communication and appropriate management can have catastrophic implications for decades to come.

Students can gain an integral understanding of what they are doing and where they fit in by drawing on the wider literature, while retaining the fidelity of the epistemologies that undergirded early strategic communication studies, simultaneously dynamising them and keeping them relevant during rapidly changing times, which was one of O'Regan's (2018) messages. They can come to appreciate how the very different disciplines represent and study different class-riven antagonistic public constituencies. What conceptual elements, then, fruitfully arise out of the different and same conjunctures, paradigmatic trajectories and contesting histories?

As Overton-de Klerk observed in an email dated 22 October 2024 of an early draft of this response, "Epistemological diversity, the ability to oscillate AND come up with something new is so important to the future of the discipline". We do need to mesh the spatial, sociological and other imaginations into new configurations of analysis. Because the proposition anticipates a steep steer away from the teleological, we propose a related recoverable object of research, a "debriefing" of new and current postgraduate students. In debriefing, the task is to motivate organic enthusiasm for research as research and not just as administrative survival (Johann et al., 2024). Why do researchers approach the task the way they do?

Scholars do a good job when evaluating strategies for research and categorising the different types of researchers alongside their motivations. The emphasis is, understandably, on doing research as a measurable/measured clean activity while streamlining the effort towards the best career leverage. What this does not account for, and what is termed here as debriefing, is how to encourage research as a process that looks beyond the discrete modular outputs-as-products designed for eventual quantitative evaluation, that is, required units for a career, or as qualitative measurement, that is, citations. Instead, it could be researched as an intellectualisation process, as a way of expressing mental ideas without the pressure of instrumentalist productivity unit evaluation. We, of course, live in an academic world of measure frenzy; how many articles, what kind of journals, what other participations, etc. All of these are

important (and impatient), but they need to be balanced with the desire for proper mental development that does not derive inspiration from these measurements, but from availing its contents wholesomely.

Like with the Davos meeting, an intense discussion occurred at the 2023 Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Member Conference about the polycrises occurring in South Africa and how to mitigate them. The conference brochure defined a polycrisis as "... a nested set of globally interactive socio-economic, ecological and cultural-institutional crises that defy reduction to a single cause" (Swilling, 2013). The meeting concluded that the state was contributing to the crisis by failing to develop viable public–private partnerships and that scientists were largely unsuccessful in alerting the government to issues of pressing concern. A recurring comment was that of self-imposed extinction, compounded in the academic sector by author and institutional impatience with regard to overpublishing, oversupply of journals and common denominator outputs. One proposal was how to reorganise the publication environment such that academics could talk to professionals also.

IN CONCLUSION

We end with a quote that we lifted from a financial journalist. Tim Cohen's (2024) "After the Bell" column, where he cited Nobel economist Daniel Kahneman (2017): "... because we are not designed to know how little we know, we make assumptions to fill in the gaps and complete the picture, often wrongly". Kahneman's solution is to think slow but act fast and to recognise what we do not know. The discrepancy starts here: pressure as workload (which requires optimisation of individual performance for the common good), and pressure as demand. What does this have to do with our research? University research occurs within the corporate cultural space, including, among other forms, day-by-day communication and the resulting employee–employer relations. If our studies (like Soviet accounting) are just about ensuring political and administrative compliance and efficiency, primarily building corporate identity, then all we can do is measure in a passive administrative vein the days to our own self-imposed extinction. While many global accounting, auditing and consulting firms were extraordinarily complicit in South African state capture, properly and honestly applied financial oversight is a measure not only of compliance but of the corporate framework where innovation, growth and development occur. But even then, we end up measuring the measure rather than taking action to resolve the actual problem – the intensifying polycrises. However, if we dynamise our theories and practices as is called for by Overton-de-Klerk, then we can ensure optimal conditions for the planet's future.

1 See: https://eaa-online.org/arc/blog/2021/03/26/open-letter-editors-critical-perspectives-accounting/
2 See also: https://www.quora.com/How-did-Soviet-accounting-work
3 The Zondo Commission (2022) reports are available here: https://www.statecapture.org.za
4 Circular to staff and students issued by Prof. N Poku on 24 March 2024: "Communique from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor Addressing Recent Acts of Violence and Key Challenges facing UKZN." See also: Vice-chancellor summoned to answer donors on protest action as UKZN's braces for R30 million damages bill (iol.co.za)

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